CHAPTER 11

IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII BLUES - ROCK IIIIIIIIIIIIIII

Essential Concepts / Skills covered in chapter 11



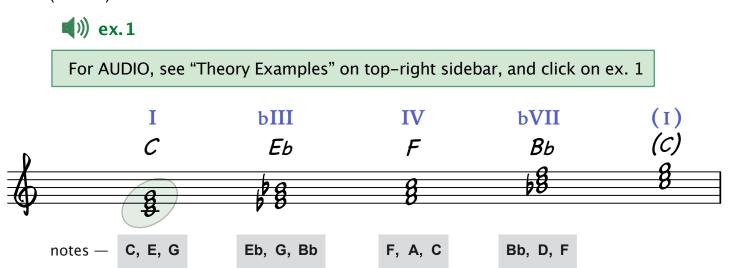
- Defining blues-rock tonality with basic chords
 I, bIII, IV, bVII
- The 1, b3, 4 bass line
- Adding the bVI chord
- Signature riffs
- Songwriting devices for creating focal points
- Ear training with I, bIII, IV, bVII, and added bVI

You will recall from earlier chapters in Volume I that our centuries-old tradition of Western European music theory is based on a major / minor tonal system. We discussed the major key and minor key in some detail, and also looked at chapters covering mixolydian and dorian tonalities. Mixolydian was described as being a different shading of the major sound, since it retains the crucial <u>natural 3rd</u> degree (E note in C major) that gives the scale an overall major flavor. Likewise, dorian was described as having a minor quality, due to the <u>flat 3rd</u> degree (Eb) in the dorian scale.

In Chapter Four we discussed blues music as an outlier, not fitting exactly in either major or minor, but somewhere in-between. In terms of chords, blues songs usually use the diatonic I, IV, and V triads (C, F, and G) from the major key. However, these chords are sometimes present as dominant 7ths (C7, F7, or G 7) which can muddy the waters in terms of theory. The C7 chord introduces the non-diatonic scale tone of Bb (b7 in relation to C), and the F7 contains a non-diatonic Eb (b3 in relation to C).

Further complicating the theoretical analysis, blues usually features minor-flavored notes in the vocal melodies and instrumental riffs — once again, the b3 and b7 notes (Eb and Bb). These notes are occasionally at odds with the chords, especially when an Eb melody note clashes with the E note inside a C major triad. Of course, adding to the minor/major confusion are the "blue notes," bent on the guitar or voice to a place somewhere inbetween Eb and E.

This chapter will discuss a unique set of chords — <u>I, bIII, IV, and bVII</u> — used in many blues-rock songs (C, Eb, F, and Bb in the key of C). Written with a key signature of C major below, the accidentals (sharps or flats) inside these chords highlight the notes from the parallel C minor scale (Eb and Bb notes). However, this group of chords does not have an overall minor tonality because the all-important I chord is a major triad with a natural 3rd note (E note).

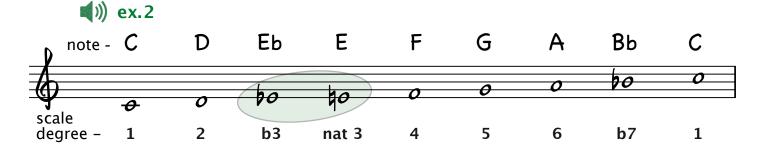


Here we have the **mixing of major and minor** solely in the chord accompaniment, without the addition of melody or riffs. This is not unlike the two chord vamp I7 - IV7 (C7 - F7) heard earlier in the blues chapter. You will recall that when these vamp chords bounced back and forth, there was an alternation between the b3 and natural 3 degrees of the key inside the chord voicings.

If the four chords above were used in a specific way, so that 90% of the time there was a major sound (I or IV) and the bIII or bVII were only used sporadically (10% of the time), then we would label the bIII and bVII as **modal interchange** chords borrowed from parallel minor — existing in an otherwise major environment as brief minor diversions from the main key. However, this is not the case. In blues-rock songs the mixture of major and

minor flavor in the four chords is nearly equal in terms of both time and frequency (just like the alternating C7 - F7 vamp). Rather than calling some of these chords "borrowed" from another tonality, we will give this group of chords their own category ("blues-rock") as discussed in this chapter. (Much more will be said about modal interchange later in Chapter Thirteen.)

Taking all the notes present in the four chords, the resulting scale would be the following:



With its major / minor ambiguity around the 3rd degree, this scale does not match any standard scale in traditional music theory. The closest match would probably be the C dorian scale, with an added natural 3rd. Fortunately, improvisors can usually just make due with the minor pentatonic scale over all these chord changes, in keeping with the blues style.

WRITTEN EXERCISE

To familiarize yourself with the blues rock chords in different keys, complete **Exercise 11.1** (see "Textbook Contents"/ "Volume 2"/ "Written Exercises").

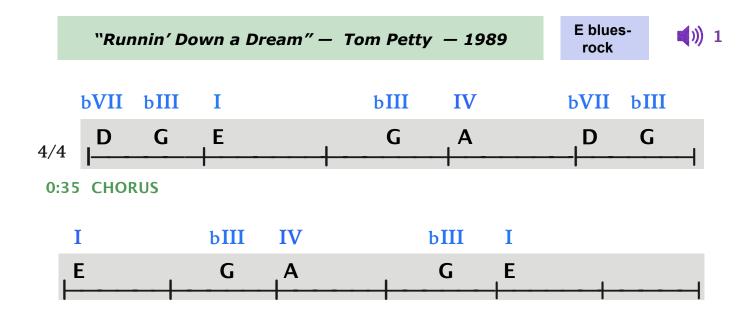
Common Chord Progressions

I, bIII, IV, bVII

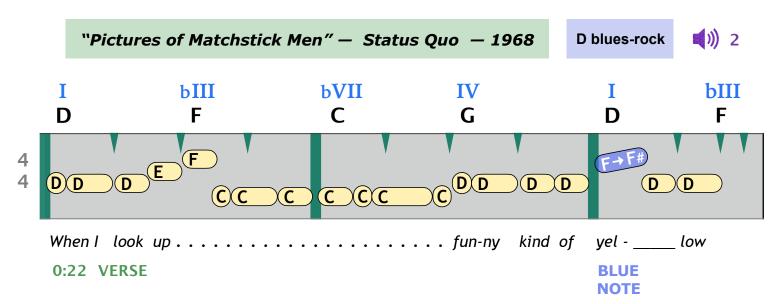
Our first example from Tom Petty uses all four of the main blues-rock chords - I, bIII, IV, and bVII. START LISTENING AT **0:35**

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For AUDIO, see the "Song Examples" playlist in the right sidebar, and click on track 1 song title. To navigate within the audio track, slide the progress bar forward to the desired starting point.



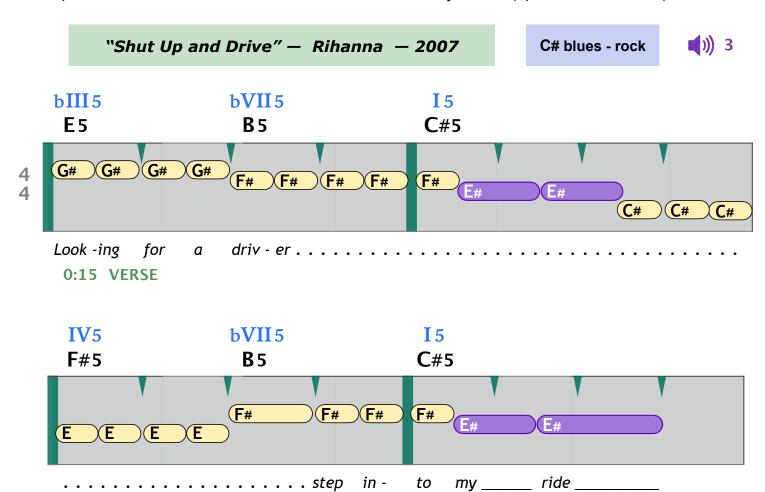
The 1968 song "Pictures of Matchstick Men" also features the four blues-rock chords, repeating the sequence I - bIII - bVII - IV. The minor / major mixing of blues is found not only in the chords, but also in the vocal melody, as shown below. Notice that the vocalist sings an F note (b3) in bar one, but then sings a "blue" 3rd (b3 bent up to nat 3) on the word "yellow." START LISTENING AT **0:22**



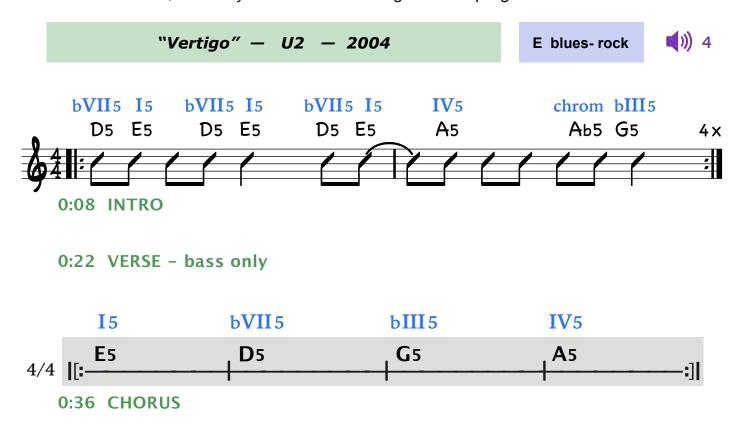
In the next example by Rihanna, the chords in the song are not full triads, but two-note "<u>power chords.</u>" consisting of <u>root and 5th notes only</u>. These chords are written with the number 5 in the chord symbols, as shown below.

Power chords are not that unusual in pop & rock, and a few of the songs in previous chapters may have used them in part of the piece. Without a 3rd degree, these chords are technically not major or minor, but the context in which they are used (surrounding chords, melody notes, vocal harmonies, bass lines, repeated riffs, etc.) usually will define their function.

For example, in the Rihanna song, the I5 chord (C#5) standing alone would be "neutral" (neither major or minor). However, the main melody note sung over the I5 chord is clearly an E# (natural 3rd of the key, shown in purple). This suggests that if the I5 was expanded to a three-note chord, it would be a C# major triad (spelled C#, E#, G#).

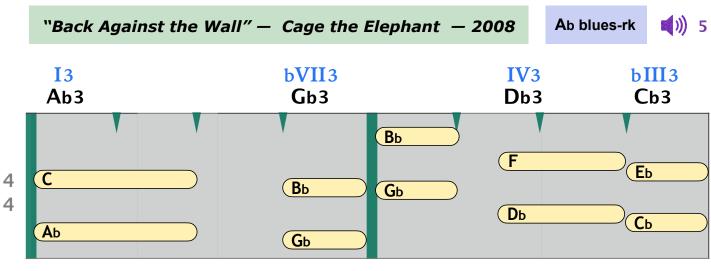


U2's 2004 song "Vertigo" offers another example of incomplete chords, featuring power chords on the intro and the chorus (shown below). During the verse, the sound is even more minimal, with only bass notes outlining the intro progression:



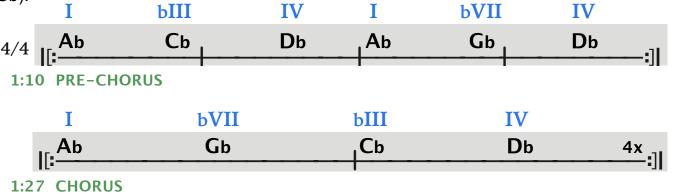
Like the previous Rihanna song, the I5 chord is neutral, but the melody suggests a major sound for the I. This is due to the long, prominent G# melody note (nat 3 of the key) that Bono sings on the word "you" at the end of the chorus (listen during the second line with the rhythm notes). Also note the brief chromatic passing chord linking the IV5 and bIII5 chords on the second line.

Our next example has three different sequences of the blues-rock chords in the key of Ab. The verse starts with the progression shown below. Notice that the chords are once again incomplete, with only two notes each. However, they are not standard power chords with root and 5th. Instead, they have the <u>root and natural 3rd</u> notes for each chord. These type of chords are written with a 3 in the chord symbol. For example, **Ab3** has only Ab and C notes, **Gb3** has only Gb and Bb notes, etc. This time there is no question that the incomplete I chord has a major sound, with the natural 3rd very prominent as the highest voice.



0:00 INTRO & VERSE

The song then continues with a different chord sequence in the pre-chorus, and yet another sequence in the chorus, all using the four basic chords of blues-rock (Ab, Cb, Db, Gb).

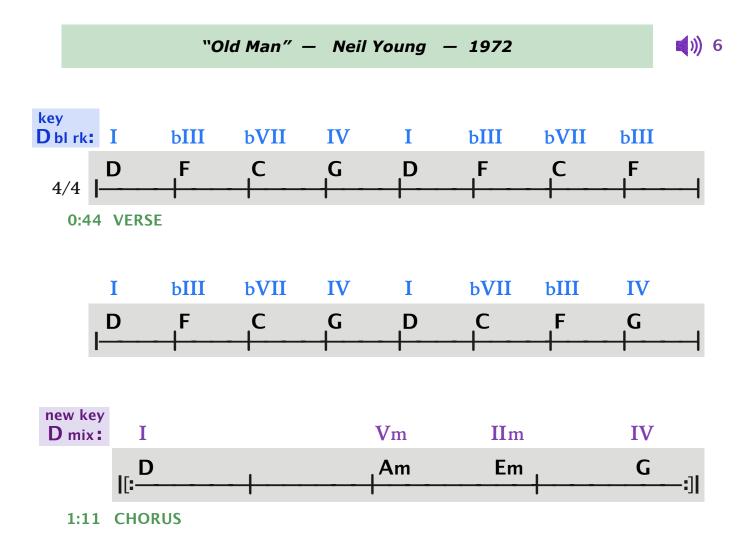


Additional songs with I, bIII, IV, bVII CHORDS

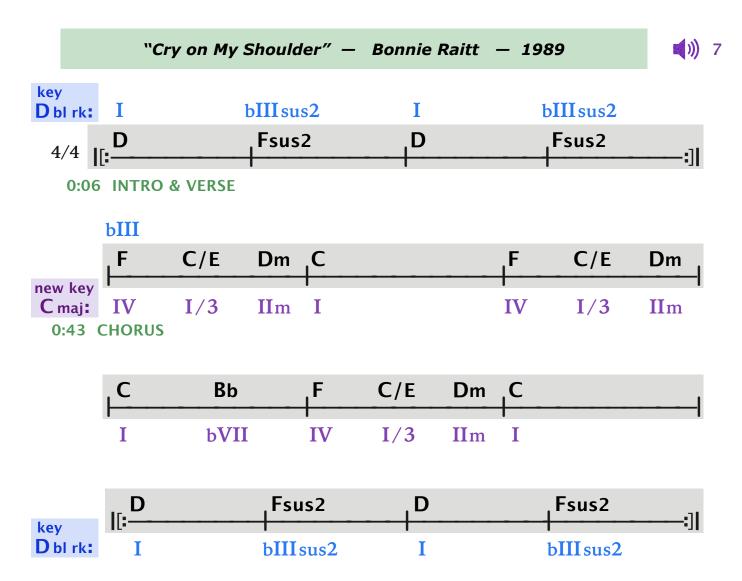
1975	Sweet Emotion	Aerosmith	A blues rock
1976	Slow Ride	Foghat	A blues rock
1995	December	Collective Soul	G blues rock
1999	Fly Away	Lenny Kravitz	A blues rock
2007	Sunshine Girl	Britt Nicole	G blues rock
2008	Ain't No Rest for the Wicked	Cage the Elephant	G blues rock
2008	Sweet About Me	Gabriella Cilmi	C# blues rock

BLUES ROCK VERSE ONLY

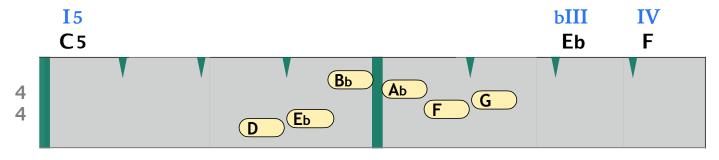
Some songs have a verse with blues-rock tonality, but then modulate in the chorus to another key. Neil Young's "Old Man" starts with a blues-rock verse in D, then shifts to **parallel D mixolydian** for the chorus. Thanks to the disappearance of the blll chord and the strong natural 3rd in the chorus melody, this modulation sounds somewhat uplifting as we move into the chorus.



The next example by Bonnie Raitt moves from a D blues-rock verse into a <u>C major</u> <u>chorus</u>. However, the modulation is fairly short, as the key returns to D blues-rock after only six bars.

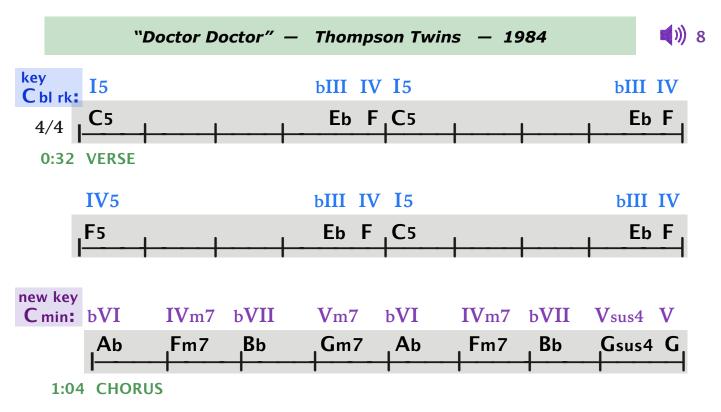


The following song from The Thompson Twins starts with a blues-rock verse, then shifts to a **parallel minor** chorus. The ambiguity of major vs. minor is once again present in the verse, where a strong natural 3rd note (E note in key of C) is heard in the verse melody. This clashes with the b3 notes (Eb notes) found in the bIII chords. There are also Eb notes contained in occasional dorian riffs like the one scored below:



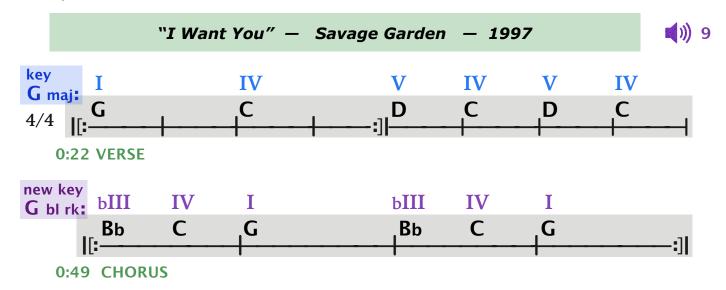
0:37 DORIAN RIFF in VERSE

When the chorus enters, the natural 3rd disappears in the melody, replaced by prominent b3 notes, which removes the blues-rock ambiguity. Here are the chords for the verse and chorus. START LISTENING AT **0:32**

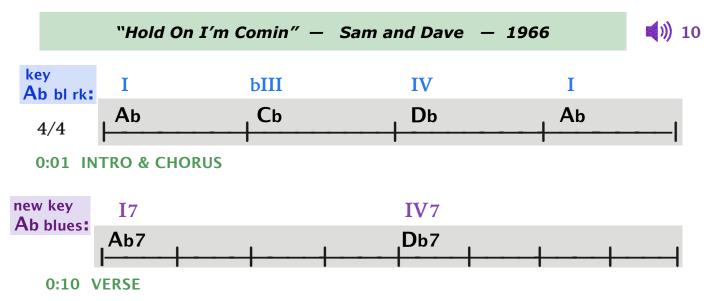


BLUES ROCK CHORUS ONLY

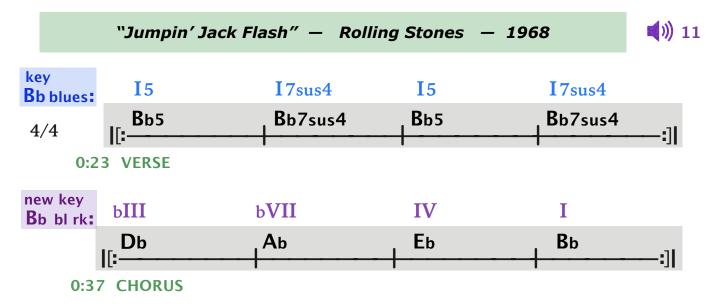
There are other examples of modulation where the blues-rock tonality is used in the **chorus**, instead of the verse. The following song from Savage Garden starts with a verse in G major, then modulates to G blues-rock for the chorus. START LISTENING AT **0:22**



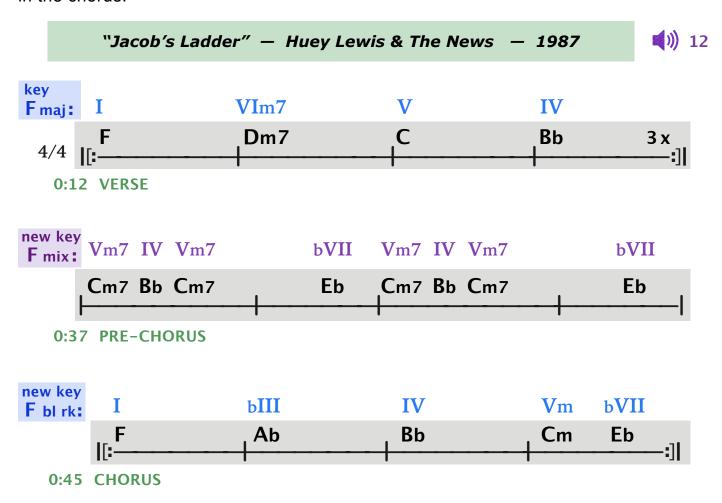
The next classic from Sam & Dave is an example of the fine line between the regular blues of Chapter Four and the tonality of this chapter — blues-rock. One could argue that it's all just blues. However, to be a little more precise, we are labeling the intro and chorus of Sam & Dave's "Hold On I'm Comin" as blues-rock because they contain a **prominent blll** chord along with the usual I and IV of the blues. In contrast, the verse uses only the classic I7 - IV7 blues chords.



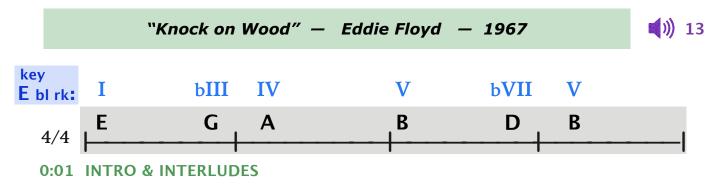
The Rolling Stones "Jumpin' Jack Flash" also has a bluesy verse and a blues-rock chorus. The verse features a power chord I 5 and lots of b3/nat 3 blue notes in Mick Jagger's singing. When the chorus is introduced there is a subtle shift to a blues-rock progression, with the entrance of the **blll** and **bVII** chords. START LISTENING AT **0:23**

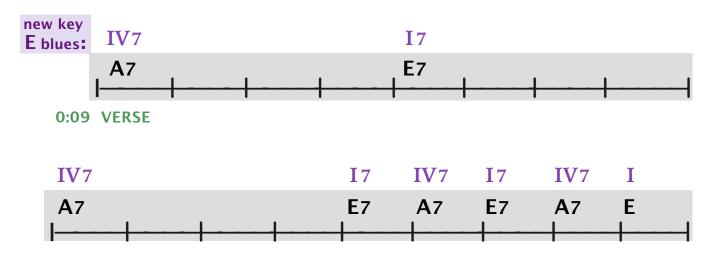


The next example gradually becomes bluesy, starting with an F major verse, then introducing a Vm7 chord in the mixolydian pre-chorus, followed by full-blown blues-rock in the chorus.



This 1967 song by Eddie Floyd adds a <u>V (major) chord</u> during the blues-rock intro and interludes.





Additional songs with BLUES-ROCK CHORUS

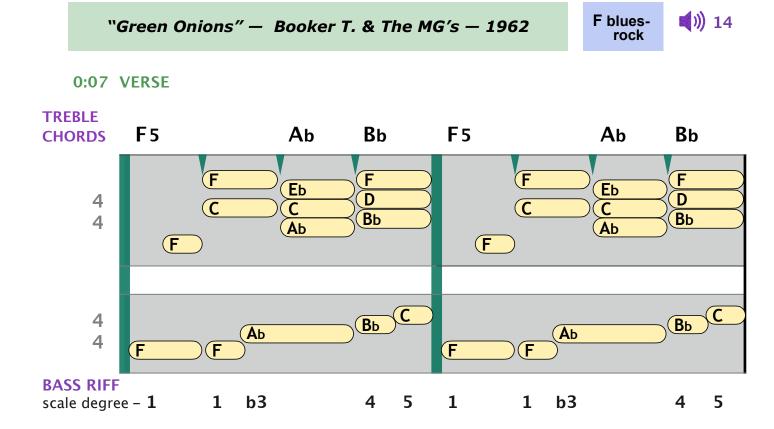
1970	No Time	Guess Who	D mixo ver, blues rck chor
1987	Wanted Dead or Alive	Bon Jovi	D min int, bl rk ver & chor
1991	Mysterious Ways	U2	Bb maj ver, blues rck chor
1998	Full Forever	Goo Goo Dolls	A maj ver, blues rock chor
2019	Shine a Little Light	Black Keys	Db dor ver, blues rock chr

EAR TRAINING EXERCISES

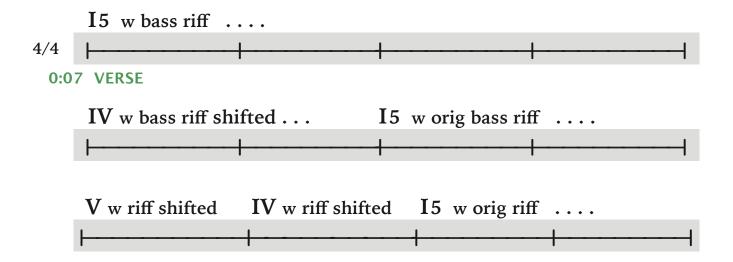
For additional practice hearing chord progressions in the blues rock tonality, go to **Exercises 11.1e -11.6e** (see "Textbook Contents"/ "Volume 2"/ "Ear Training Exercises").

BASS 1, b3, 4

Several rock songs feature a prominent <u>repeating bass riff</u> using the 1, b3, and 4 notes of the key. One of the most famous is Booker T. & The MG's 1962 hit "Green Onions." The opening bars are scored out below, showing the bass line and the treble note chord voicings above.

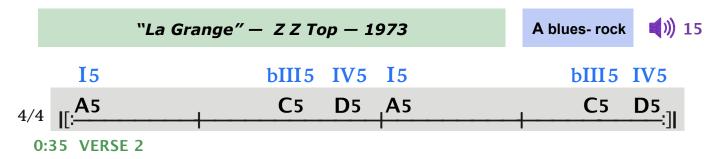


As you can see, the I chord (F5) is a neutral power chord. In previous songs with a I5 chord, like "Shut Up and Drive," and "Vertigo," the melody helped direct our ears to hear a major sound on the I. In Green Onions, there is no vocal melody, and the instrumental melody is based completely on the minor pentatonic scale. Given this context, we might assume that the I would be fleshed out as a minor triad (Fm). However, the form is clearly the 12-bar blues form, as the bass riff shifts up to the IV and V chords at the appropriate time in the form (shown below):



Because almost all 12-bar blues use major I, IV, V chords, our ears are conditioned to also accept a major I on this song (especially after hearing all the previous songs in this chapter). So ultimately we must say that the I chord is ambiguous. Some listeners will think an Fm would sound better as the I chord, others prefer an F major.

Z Z Top's "La Grange" is another example of the blues-rock 1, b3, 4 bass riff with an ambiguous I. All chords in the song are power chords in the key of A (A5 - C5 - D5). Although the progression does not shift to follow the 12-bar blues form, it does make one modulation at **1:11** up three half steps, before returning to the original key. Once again the melody is based on the minor pentatonic scale. START LISTENING AT **0:35**

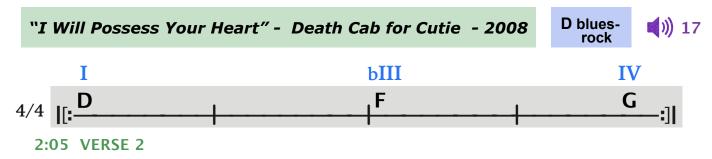


The next example by Canned Heat also features all power chords, but this time the bluesy vocal melody hints at a major tonality with occasional natural 3rds. Listen at **0:43** and **0:50** for <u>blue notes</u> in the phrase "but I'm out on the road again." On the word "out" the singer quickly bends a b3 up to a <u>natural 3</u>. This happens several times throughout the piece, suggesting that the droning I5 chord could easily be played as a I major triad.

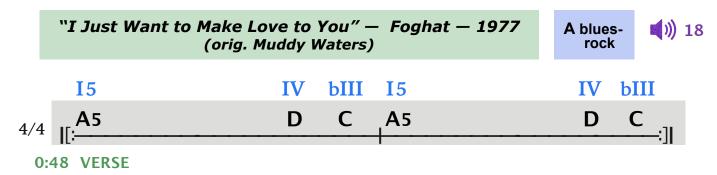




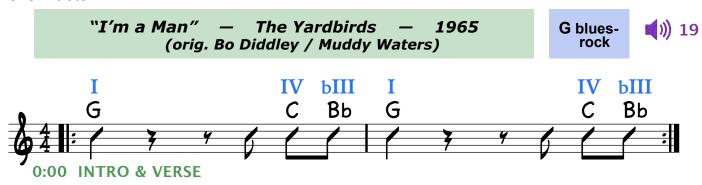
This Death Cab for Cutie song offers the ascending 1, b3, 4 sequence in slow motion, with the I and bIII chords getting almost two bars each. START LISTENING AT **2:05**



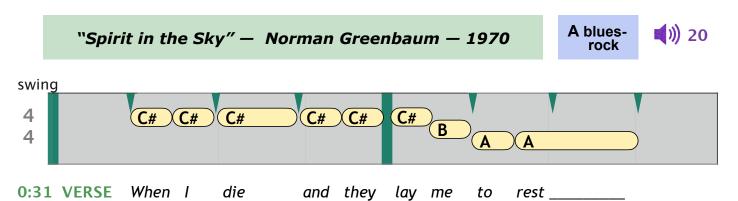
Foghat's 1977 remake of Muddy Waters' "I Just Want to Make Love to You" returns to the faster harmonic rhythm, but instead of ascending from b3 to 4, the bass **descends** from 4 to b3. START LISTENING AT **0:48**



The Yardbirds' "I'm a Man" has the same descent from 4 to b3, but cranks the tempo even faster.



On the next example, the bass riff alternates between ascending and descending versions of the 1, b3, 4 bass. However, as you can see from the brief score below, the vocal melody of the verse features prominent <u>natural</u> 3rds (C# notes in key of A). This sets up yet another bluesy clash between b3 notes in the accompaniment and natural 3rds in the voice (much like earlier examples "Shut Up and Drive," "Vertigo," and "Doctor, Doctor").



Maxi Priest used a sample of the "Green Onions" groove for the backing track of his 1996 hit "That Girl." This time there are no 12-bar changes to the IV or V and the **vocal melody is clearly minor**, suggesting that the I 5 could be a minor chord.



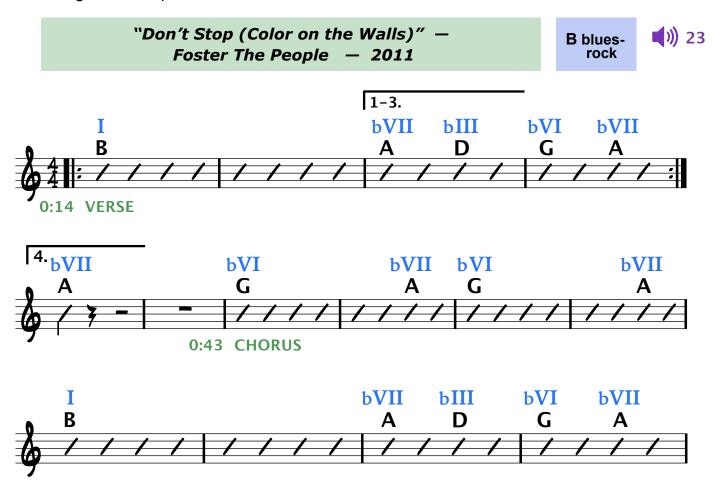
Our final example of the 1, b3, 4 bass riff comes from the Allman Brothers. Their remake of the blues song "Trouble No More" contains clear <u>minor pentatonic riffs and melody</u>, suggesting that the I chord could be minor.

"Trouble No More" — Allman Brothers Band — 1971 (orig. Sleepy John Estes / Muddy Waters) A bluesrock

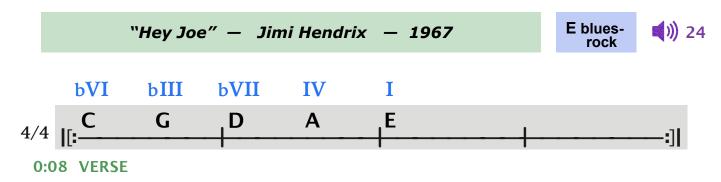


BLUES ROCK with bVI

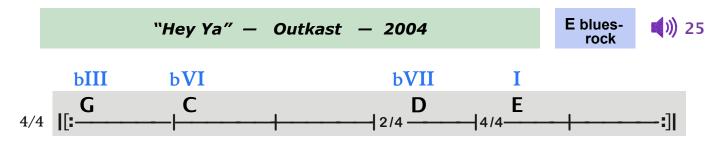
The **bVI chord** can sometimes be added to the four blues-rock chords mentioned earlier (I, bIII, IV, and bVII), depending on the song. This song by Foster The People provides a good example of the bVI addition.



The 1967 classic "Hey Joe" offers a different arrangement of the blues-rock chords, this time starting with the bVI.



Outkast's 2004 hit "Hey Ya" features a similar sequence without the IV chord.



Additional BLUES-ROCK songs with ADDED bVI CHORD

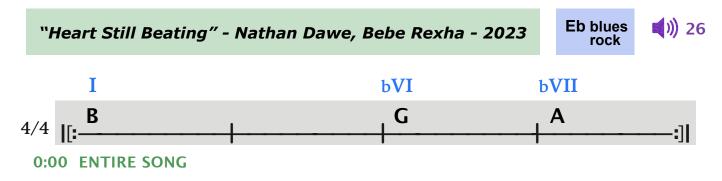
1965	Liar Liar	Castaways	C blues rock
1967	Gimme Some Lovin	Spencer Davis Group	G blues rock
1967	Steppin' Stone	Monkees	E blues rock
1989	Love Shack	B-52's	C blues rock
1994	Welcome to Paradise	Green Day	Eb blues rock
2012	I'm Not Alright	Shinedown	D blues rock (chorus)
2018	Future	Revivalists	C blues rock

STAIR-STEP PROGRESSION with MAJOR I (bVI, bVII, I)

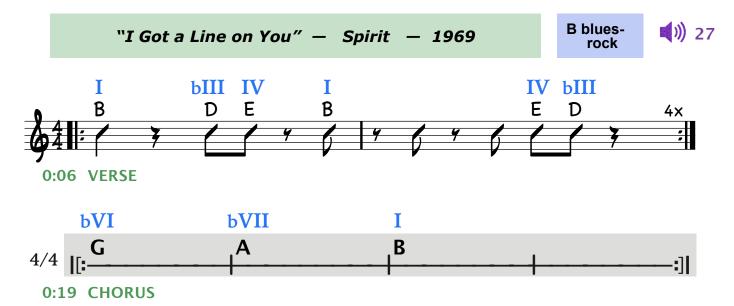
You will recall that the stair-step progression discussed in Chapters Three and Six is usually in a minor key with a Im tonic chord. However, there are several songs that feature the stair-step sequence with a **major** I chord. If we were ascending to I in the key of C, this would be Ab - Bb - C. While these songs may not necessarily sound like blues or rock, this creates the same type of major/minor ambiguity found in the previous blues-rock songs. For example, in the key of C, the natural 3rd of the I chord (E note) clashes with the 5th note (Eb) of the bVI chord.

In terms of modal interchange, it could be argued that the Ab and Bb are borrowed chords from the parallel C minor key. However, quite often the bVI - bVII - I sequence is repeated numerous times - perhaps throughout an entire verse or even an entire song. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, if the chords are used fairly equally in terms of duration, then it becomes harder to tell which chords should be considered borrowed ("outside"), and what should be considered the primary tonality. For now we will include the repeated stair-step with major I in this chapter, and discuss clearer modal interchange chords in Chapter Thirteen.

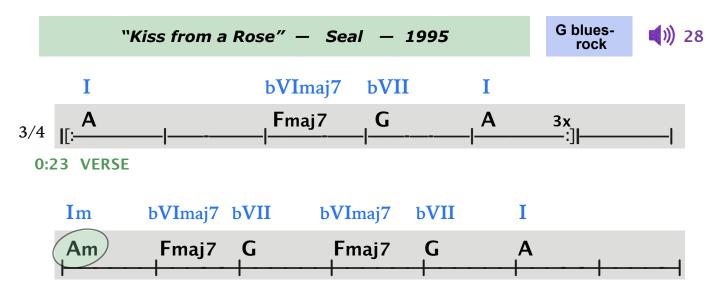
Our first song example features the 4-bar sequence shown below, repeated throughout the entire recording.



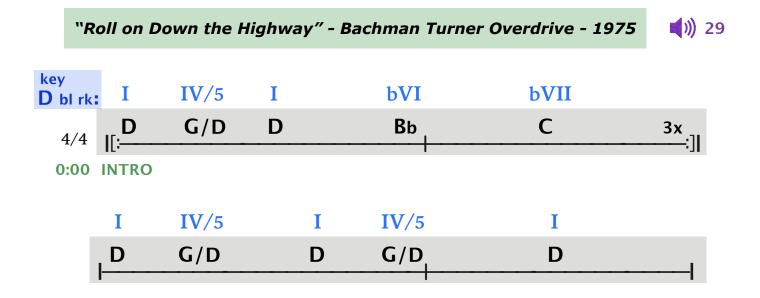
On our next song "I Got a Line on You," the <u>1, b3, 4 bass riff</u> mentioned earlier is used in both ascending and descending variations. This is followed by the stair-step to I progression in the chorus.

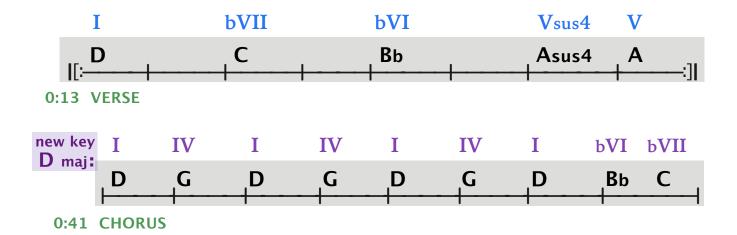


The next example features the <u>maj7</u> version of the bVI chord. Virtually the entire song is built from the three stair-step chords, with one brief exception. Midway through the verse there is one bar where the I dips to <u>Im</u> (circled below). Although the chorus is not shown, it continues in a similar fashion to the verse. START LISTENING AT **0:23**



Our last example in this section features a blues-rock intro and verse, and an uplifting modulation to **parallel major** for the chorus. The stair-step bVI - bVII - I sequence is heard 3 times in the intro. Then the descending stair-step to V progression, discussed previously in Chapter Six, is used in the verse. However, you will note that this version of the descending stair-step also has the altered I chord of blues-rock (**I major** instead of Im).





WRITTEN EXERCISE

To memorize the stair step progression with major I chord in some other common keys, complete **Exercise 11.2** (see "Textbook Contents"/ "Volume 2"/ "Written Exercises").

Additional STAIR-STEP songs with MAJOR I CHORD

1973	We're an American Band	Grand Funk Railroad	D blues rock
1986	Something About You	Level 42	E blues rock (chorus)
1997	Do You Know	Robyn	Eb blues rock
2003	U & Me = Love	Jewel	C blues rock
2003	Waiting for Love	Pink	A blues rock (verse)
2014	The World Might Not Live Through the Night	Atmosphere	F# blues rock

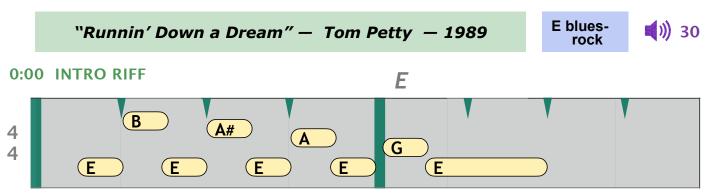
EAR TRAINING EXERCISES

For additional practice hearing the bVI chord in the blues rock tonality, go to **Exercises 11.7e -11.9e** (see "Textbook Contents"/ "Volume 2"/ "Ear Training Exercises").

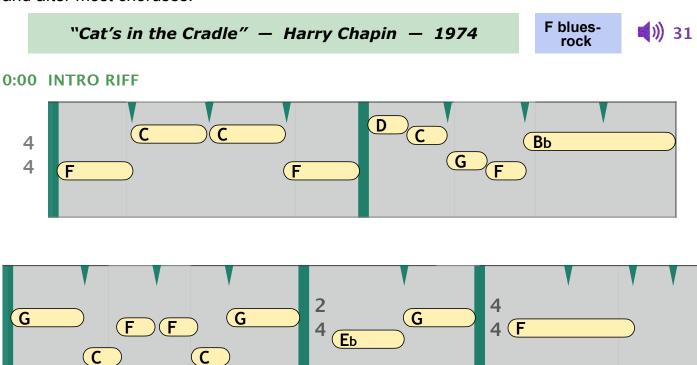
Signature Riffs

MELODIC FUNCTION

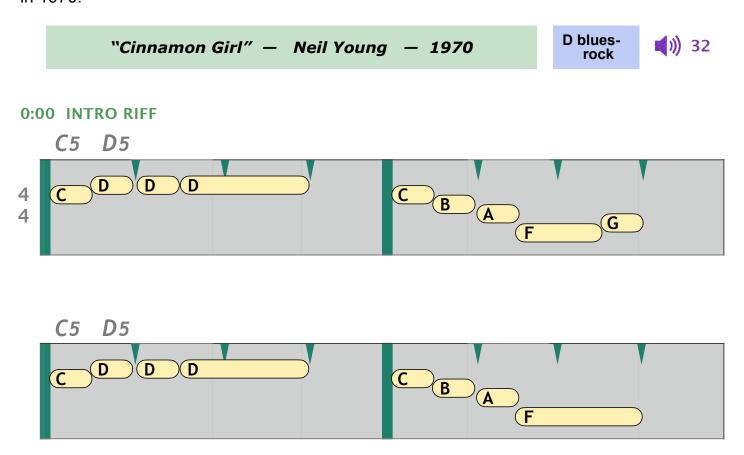
As with the other tonalities covered in the first eight chapters (major, minor, blues, mixolydian, and dorian), blues-rock songs have their share of memorable instrumental riffs. "Runnin' Down a Dream," heard earlier in the chapter, features the signature guitar riff shown below. Like many blues riffs, it is based on the **minor pentatonic scale** with an added **#4** degree (in this case an A# note). On the last bar, notice once again the characteristic clashing of the b3 (G note in the riff) with the natural 3rd in the harmony (G# note in the accompanying E chord).



Here's another song in blues-rock tonality with a signature riff heard during the intro and after most choruses.



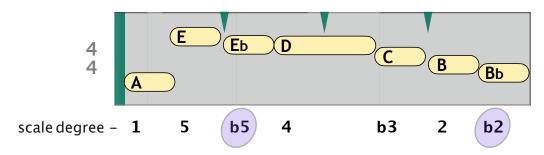
Our next example is the intro guitar riff from Neil Young's "Cinnamon Girl," recorded in 1970.



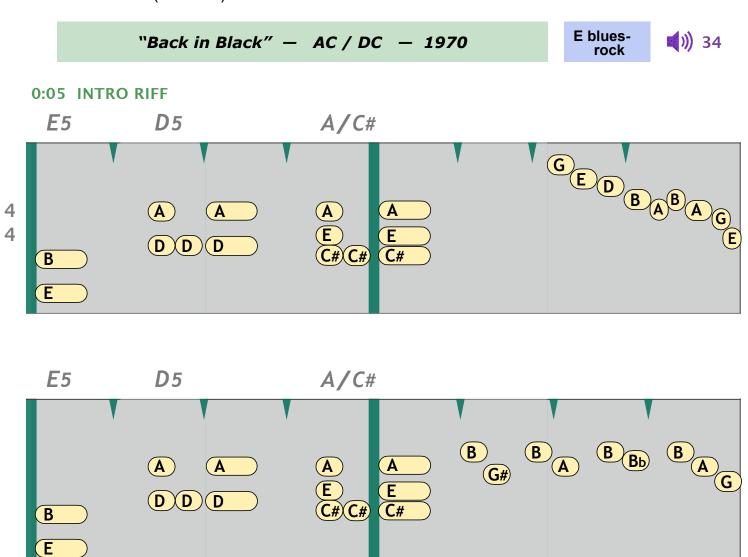
HARMONIC FUNCTION

The following blues-rock song by Deep Purple features a prominent harmonic function riff in the chorus. The riff is based on an **A minor** scale to start, with chromatic passing tones between the 5th and 4th degrees, and also between the 2nd degree and tonic (see purple highlights below.) Midway through the chorus, the riff is **transposed to E minor** for the remainder of the chorus. START LISTENING AT 0:52

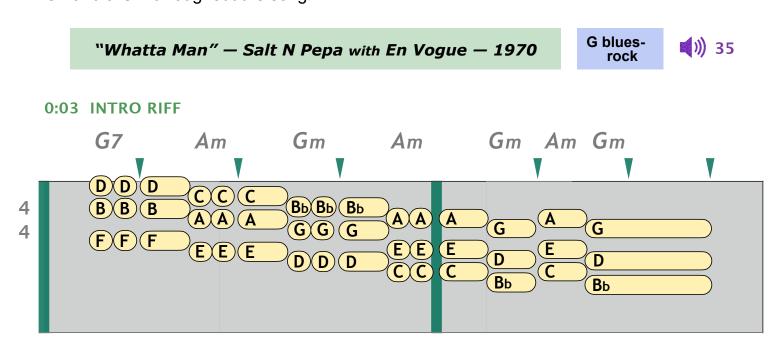
0:52 CHORUS RIFF (Am)



AC / DC's classic riff on "Back in Black" has both the b3 note (G note in key of E), and natural 3rd (G# note).



The descending guitar sequence on the 1970 hit "Whatta Man," scored below, could be considered a chord progression but we'll call it a riff and include it here. Whatever you call it, the repeating sequence clearly belongs in this chapter on blues-rock. It has the characteristic **b3 / natural 3 ambiguity** of the blues, with the I chord alternating between a G7 and a Gm throughout the song.



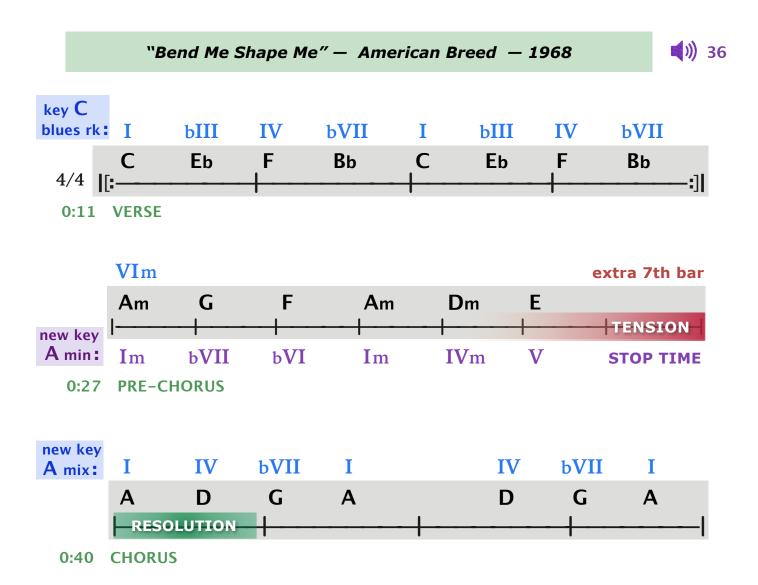
Songwriting Focal Points

V to I Tension - Resolution, Blues Rock Tonality

As with the previous tonalities we have discussed in Volume 1 (major, minor, mixo, and dorian), the blues rock tonality can have focal points created by the **tension V** moving to the **resolving I** chord. This is illustrated on the following 1968 hit "Bend Me Shape Me" by the American Breed (composed by Scott English and Larry Weiss).

On this song, be listening for two additional focal point devices that were discussed in previous chapters:

- Brief STOP TIME one beat before chorus / title phrase.
- UPLIFTING MODULATION, <u>A minor</u> pre-chorus to <u>A mixo</u> chorus



Extension of Form

You probably noticed that the pre-chorus was extended with an extra measure. In pop and rock, song sections like verses and choruses are typically 8, 12, or 16 bars long. The length is almost always an even number of measures, since these sections are usually made up of several smaller 2, 4, or 8 bar phrases. When a phrase or section is extended with an extra bar or two like this 7-bar pre-chorus, it can create extra tension — especially if the V chord is present.