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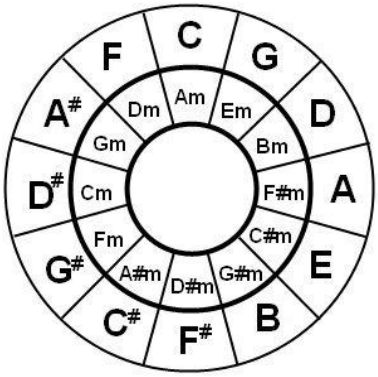
LESSON 6:

The Circle of Fifths

This sounds mystical, perhaps even the work of the devil, but it's not. It's a bit of elemental music theory which I wish somebody had introduced to me when I was still a youth and had my looks.

I've already introduced the main chords in any key, the root chord, the dominant chord, the subdominant chord, and the relative minor. Every key has this structure, and as we go round the various keys we encounter old friends. G, which is the subdominant note in the key of D is the dominant note in the key C. Likewise C is the dominant note in the key of F, but the subdominant note in the key of G. This is useful because most songs have chords tied together in these tight little groups. It can be illustrated in a simple table solemnly known as the Circle of Fifths: -

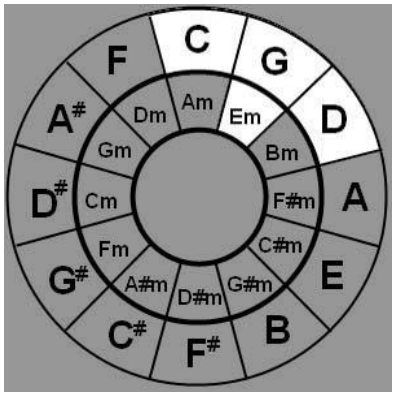


Find the chords in the key of C in this diagram and you will see that they are grouped together. The dominant chord G is to the right of C and the subdominant chord F is to the left. The relative minor chord Am is on the inside.

If you pick out any note in this circle you can see at a glance what the structure of that key looks like.

For example, looking at Key of A, the root note is A, the dominant note if E, the subdominant note is D, and the relative minor is F#m.

This is useful if you want to sing a song in another key. You choose your new key and select the relevant chords from around it.



If we highlight a given key, then the circle of fifths makes a lot of sense. Any song in any particular key is highly likely to have two or more of the highlighted chords. It may have many more chords, and some songs like 'A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square" can have as many as fourteen different chords, but usually the songs are based round three chords, the root chord, the dominant chord, and the subdominant chord.

A good exercise is to pick three adjacent chords and nurdle with them, and work at building up some muscle memory.