The ii V I Progression and Variations

Before you dive into taking these chords to the fretboard, take a minute to understand the theory behind these changes.

You don't have to understand the theory to play jazz chords, or to play jazz in general, but it does help in the learning process.

If the material in this chapter is beyond you right now, not a problem.

Read through this chapter, then move on to playing the chords in this eBook.

From there, the theory will begin to make sense as you take the chords to the fretboard.

As well, you can return to this chapter as you develop your playing skills to refresh and reinforce these music theory concepts.

ii V I Progression

To begin, you look at the most famous of all jazz progressions, the ii V I.

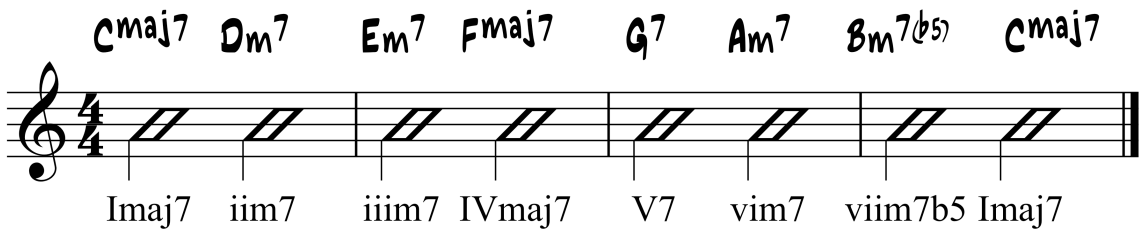
The ii V I is built by looking at a diatonic key, such as C major, and then taking out the 2nd, 5th, and 1st chords to build the progression.

Here are the diatonic chords in the key of C major.

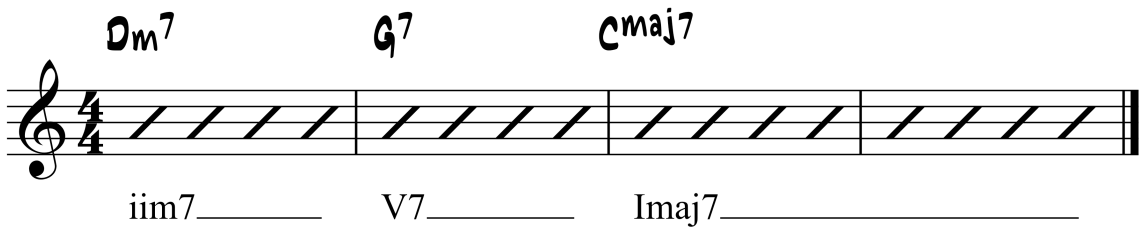
From here, you extract the Dm7-G7-Cmaj7 chords, and voila, instant ii V I changes.

The order for chords in a diatonic key is always the same, so it's worth memorizing in your studies.

Imaj7-iim7-iiim7-IVmaj7-V7-vim7-viim7b5



When you extract those three chords, you're left with a ii V I progression, as you can see in this example.



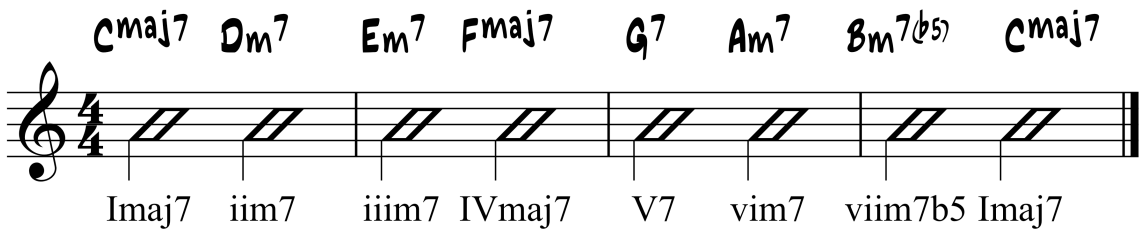
ii V I IV Progression

You also work on the ii V I IV progression in this eBook.

This progression is built the same way as the ii V I changes, but you just add the IV chord at the end.

To build this progression, you begin the same way as before, by looking at the seven diatonic chords, here in C major.

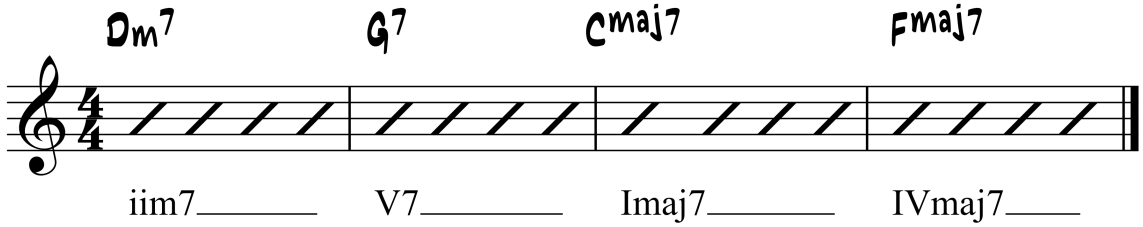
From there, you extract the 2nd, 5th, 1st, and 4th chords to build this new progression.



When you take the ii V I IV chords out of the diatonic key, you're left with these changes.

You can hear this progression in the first four bars of Autumn Leaves, or in bars 2-5 in All the Things You Are, among many other tunes.

Because it's used in many jazz standards, you focus a lot of your attention in this eBook on this ii V I variation.



ii V I VI Progression

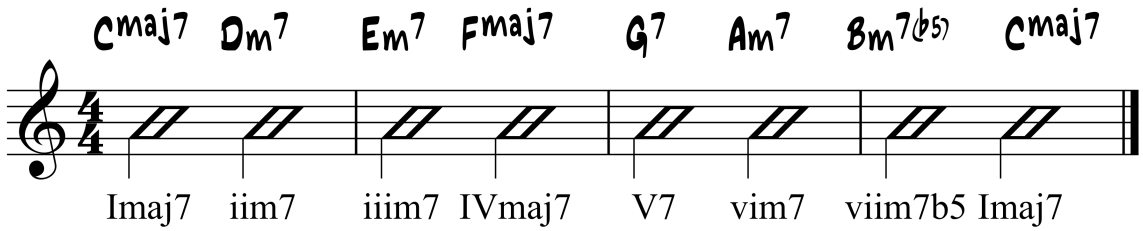
The last variation you see on the ii V I progression contains the chords ii V I VI.

This is the trickiest progression to understand and get onto the fretboard, mostly because of the VI7b9.

To help you understand this progression, here's a breakdown of the ii V I VI progression, starting with the major system that it comes from.

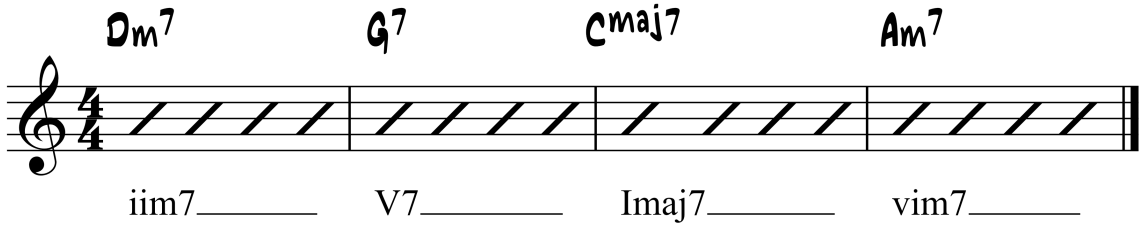
Here are the chords in the key of C major, which contain the chords ii V I vi.

The first step to building this progression, is to take those chords out of the key and build that ii V I vi progression.



If you take purely diatonic chords from the major scale system, you end up with a ii V I vi progression, as you see here.

While this progression is diatonic and functional, it's missing the tension and release that's essential in a jazz situation.



To create a deeper sense of tension and release, you often replace the vim7 with a VI7b9 chord.

You see this in chord charts, but you can also do it yourself as a comper.

If you see Am7 for example in the key of C, you can replace it with A7b9, and most of the time it works out just fine.

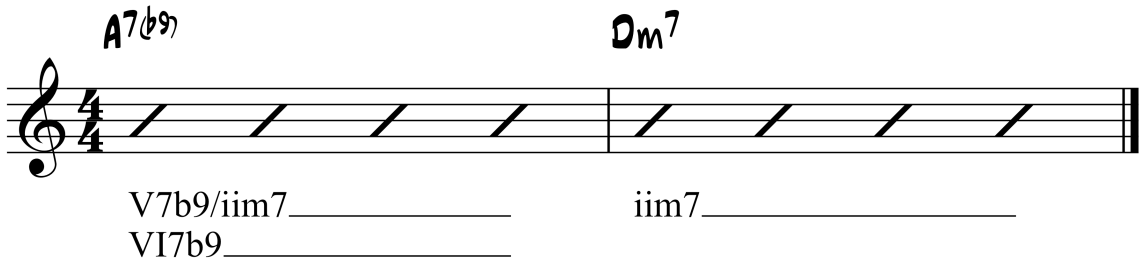
The reason for this is that VI7b9 is the V7b9 chord of iim7; A7b9 is the V7b9 of Dm7, iim7.

This creates a stronger pull from the VI chord to the ii chord compared to the vi to ii movement.

Here's how that looks on paper.

If it's confusing at this point as to why and where you use this 7b9 chord, not to worry.

Just work on the examples in this eBook and the theory will become clearer as you apply these chords to your playing.



The last item to discuss with regards to the VI7b9 chord is how you play it on the guitar.

To avoid playing large five-note chords, as you see in the first bar below, you replace 7b9 chords with four-note dim7 shapes.

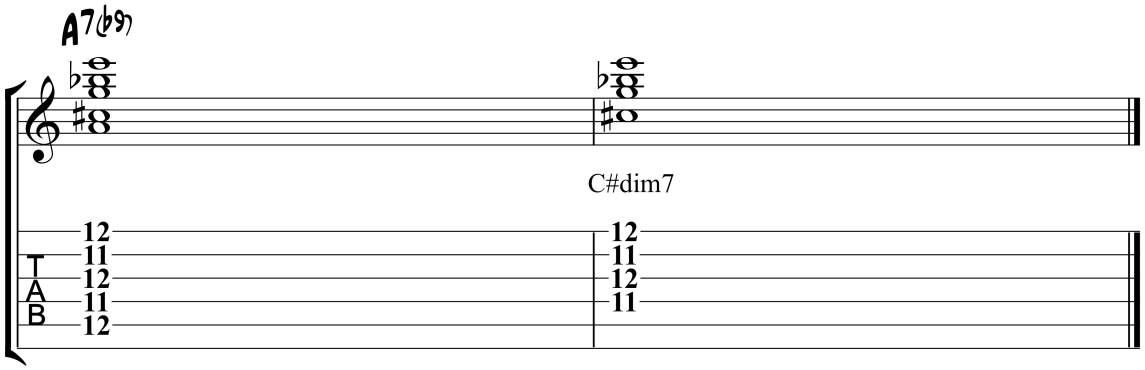
If you remove the root note of any 7b9 chord, you're left with a dim7 chord from the 3rd.

This means that over A7b9 you play C#dim7, as C# is the third of A7b9.

Because the inversions for any dim7 chord are the same shape, you can play C#dim7, Edim7, Gdim7, and Bbdim7, over an A7b9 chord.

This translates to being able to play a dim7 chord from the b9, 3, 5, and b7 of any dominant chord you're comping over.

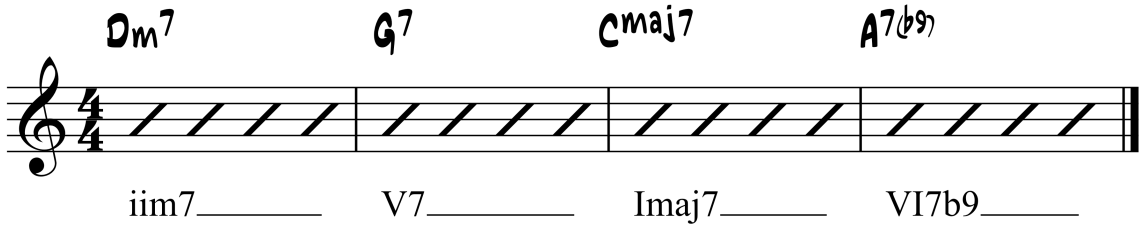
If this sounds like a lot of theory, not to worry, this concept will come into focus as you work through the examples in this eBook.



Here's the final product, the ii V I VI progression, with the A7b9 chord in bar 4.

When you see this progression throughout this eBook, the C#dim7, or any inversion of that chord, is used in place of A7b9.

This translates to a #Idim7 chord replacing VI7b9 to keep things to four notes or less with your chord shapes.



Short vs. Long ii V I Progressions

As you work through the progressions in this eBook, you find there are two types, short and long progressions.

Short progressions are two-bars, and long progressions are four-bars for any of the ii V I variations you work on.

When working on any progression in this eBook, it's important to work on both lengths over the backing tracks.

This means that if an example is written over a long ii V I progression, you also practice it over the short ii V I progression.

That gives you the fullest understanding of how to apply these chord shapes to your comping over jazz tunes.

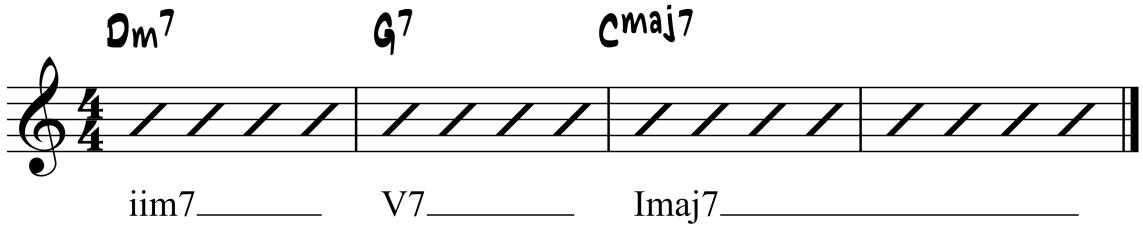
Here's a quick outline of the various short and long progressions found in this eBook, and that you should practice in the woodshed.

ii V I Progressions

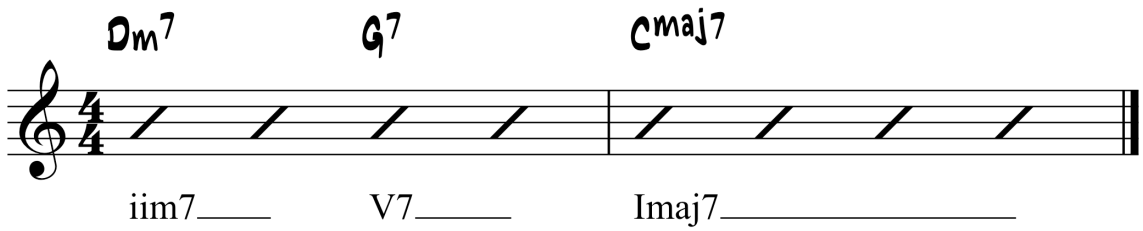
To begin, here are the long and short versions of the ii V I progression.

The long version has one chord per bar in bars 1-2, then one chord over two bars in bars 3-4.

The whole progression is four bars long, but you can also find a 3-bar version, with the last bar removed, in jazz standards.



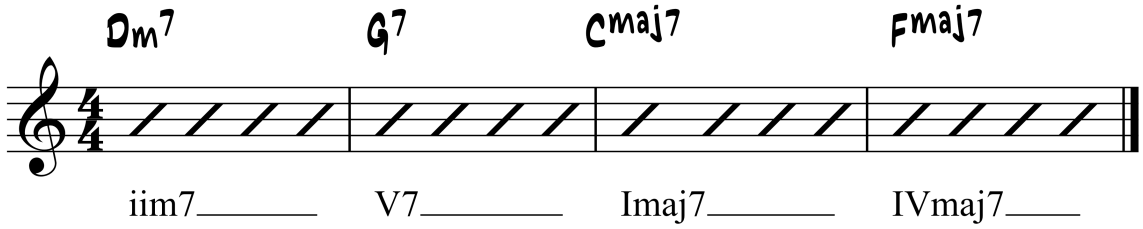
Here's the short version of the ii V I progression, which is two-bars long and has two chords in the first bar and one in the second bar.



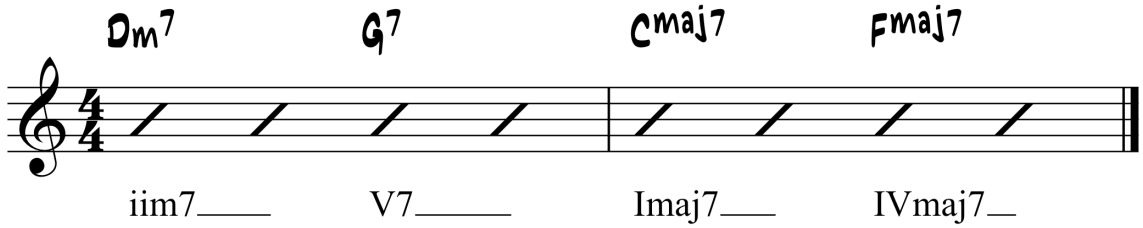
ii V I IV Progressions

You can also play long and short versions of the ii V I IV progression, which you can see here.

The long version has one chord per bar and is four bars long.



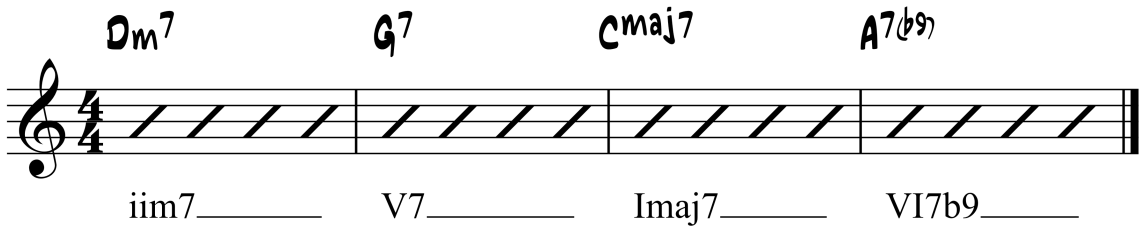
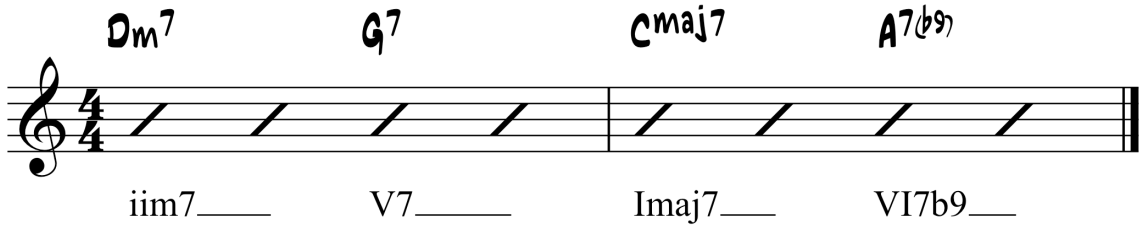
Here's the short version of the ii V I IV progression to visualize and be able to recognize as you dig into comping over jazz standards.



ii V I VI Progressions

You can also play long and short versions of the ii V I VI chord progression, which you see here.

The long version features one chord per bar and is four-bars long as you run through the ii V I VI changes.



Here's the ii V I VI progression over two bars to check out and be able to recognize as you move forward in your playing.