GENERAL

ted greene modern chord progressions

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Introduction

When you think of modern chord progressions, the first images that often come to mind are the soaring hooks of pop anthems, the gritty riffs of rock, or the lush voicings of contemporary jazz. Yet beneath those surface sounds lies a deep, systematic understanding of harmony that has shaped the way musicians write and play today. One of the most influential voices in this realm is Ted Greene, a guitarist, educator, and author whose work on chord theory and voice leading has become a cornerstone for songwriters across genres. This article explores how Ted Greene's insights have redefined modern chord progressions, offers practical examples of his techniques, and provides actionable steps for incorporating his ideas into your own compositions.

Understanding Ted Greene's Approach to Modern Chord Progressions

Who Is Ted Greene?

Born in 1944, Ted Greene was a virtuoso guitarist known for his mastery of chordal harmony. His seminal book, **"Chord Chemistry,"**published in 1974, remains a definitive guide for guitarists and composers alike. Greene's philosophy centers on the idea that chords are not static entities but dynamic, evolving structures that can be reshaped through voice leading, substitution, and modal exploration.

The Core Principles of His Theory

- Voice Leading Over Functional Harmony: Greene emphasized smooth transitions between chord tones, treating each note as a voice that should move the smallest possible distance.
- Modal Interchange: Borrowing chords from parallel modes allows for unexpected color while retaining a sense of coherence.
- Secondary Dominants & Chromatic Approaches: These techniques add tension and release, making progressions feel alive.
- Non Traditional Tensions: Greene introduced chords that incorporate added 9ths, 11ths, and 13ths, creating richer harmonic palettes.

Key Modern Chord Progressions Influenced by Ted Greene

Progression 1: The Lydian Dominant Sequence

One of Greene's favorite progressions involves moving from a tonic chord to a Lydian dominant, then resolving to a secondary dominant before returning home. In the key of C, this might look like:

1. Cmaj7
2. F#7 (Lydian dominant of B)
3. B7 (secondary dominant of Em)
4. Em
5. A7 (secondary dominant of Dm)
6. Dm
7. G7 (dominant of C)
8. Cmaj7

This sequence showcases how modal interchange (F#7) and secondary dominants (B7, A7) create a forward driving narrative while still sounding fresh.

Progression 2: The Modal Interchange Mix

Another signature Greene progression blends chords from parallel modes to produce an adventurous feel. In G major, you might use:

1. Gmaj7
2. Bm7 (from G major)
3. Am7 (borrowed from G minor)
4. D7 (dominant of G)
5. Em7 (from G major)
6. Cmaj7 (borrowed from C major, the relative major of A minor)
7. Gmaj7

The inclusion of Am7 and Cmaj7 introduces modal color that keeps the listener engaged.

Progression 3: The Chromatic Approach

Greene's love for chromaticism shines in progressions that use half step motion between chord roots. In A minor, try:

1. Am7
2. Bm7&m5 (half step up)
3. Cmaj7 (half step up)
4. D7 (dominant of G)
5. Em7 (half step up)
6. Fmaj7 (half step up)
7. G7 (dominant of C)
8. Am7

Each half step step adds tension, and the resolution back to Am7 feels both satisfying and surprising.

How to Apply Ted Greene's Ideas in Your Own Writing

Step by Step Guide

1. Start with a Root Progression: Choose a simple I–V–vi–IV pattern in your key.
2. Introduce Voice Leading: Replace one or two chord tones with a neighboring note that moves by a step.
3. Experiment with Modal Interchange: Borrow a chord from a parallel mode (e.g., add a bVII or iv).
4. Add Secondary Dominants: Insert a V/V or V/vi to create tension before resolving.
5. Incorporate Tensions: Add 9ths, 11ths, or 13ths to enrich the chord voicings.
6. Polish the Flow: Ensure each chord transition follows smooth voice leading.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Over Complicating: Adding too many tensions can make a progression sound cluttered.
- Ignoring Root Movement: Sudden leaps without voice leading can feel jarring.
- Forgetting Function: Even when borrowing chords, maintain a sense of harmonic direction.
- Neglecting Texture: The way you voice chords on the instrument matters; consider open strings and resonant positions.

Practical Exercises and Resources

Exercise 1: Build a Progression in C Major

Using the principles above, create a four bar progression that starts with Cmaj7, incorporates a secondary dominant, and resolves to G7 before returning to Cmaj7. Record yourself playing it and listen for voice leading smoothness.

Exercise 2: Experiment with Suspended Chords

Take a familiar progression (I–IV–V–I) and replace the IV with a sus4 or sus2. Notice how the suspension adds a suspended feel that resolves back to the original chord.

Additional Resources

- Chord Chemistry by Ted Greene – the definitive guide.
- Online video lessons on voice leading and modal interchange.
- Chord progression generators that allow custom voicings.
- Transcription of popular songs that use Greene's techniques.

Conclusion

Ted Greene's legacy is not just a collection of chord charts; it is a philosophy that encourages musicians to think of harmony as a living, breathing entity. By mastering voice leading, embracing modal interchange, and daring to incorporate chromatic motion, songwriters can craft progressions that feel both familiar and fresh. Whether you're writing pop, rock, jazz, or experimental music, the tools Greene offers are universal. Start experimenting today, and let the modern chord progressions you create carry the spirit of his groundbreaking work into the next generation of music.

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