

# The '50s Progression

As of October 3, 2021

The '50s progression (also known as "Heart and Soul" chords, "doo-wop progression," and "ice cream changes") is a chord progression and turnaround used in Western popular music. As this name implies, it was common in the 1950s and early 1960s and is particularly associated with doo-wop. However, the progression has been seen since the 17th century and in recent decades.

The origin of the term "ice cream changes" is unknown. There are a couple of potential sources. Musician Hank Green (with his brother John of the Vlogbrothers) said on a [YouTube video](#) that this progression is called "ice cream changes" because this progression is smooth and sweet and everybody likes it. Another potential source was session guitarist Mike Aquino who was quoted in *Songwriting for Dummies* as saying that the '50s era songs were often heard in ice cream parlors. There may be other undiscovered sources.

The first song thought to use the progression in popular music may have been "Blue Moon," written in 1933 by Richard Rodgers, and first released, with lyrics by Lorenz Hart, in 1934. However, it was used the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the opening of J. S. Bach's cantata "Wachet Auf" and was used frequently by Mozart according to the Wikipedia article, ['50s Progression](#).

The progression, represented in Roman numeral analysis, is **I–vi–IV–V**; in Nashville Notation, it is 1-6m-4-5. In the key of C major, the chord progression is C–Am–F–G.

Based on the I-IV-V progression, the vi chord is used as a means to prolong the Tonic (I) chord, as the vi (Submediant) is commonly used as a substitute for the Tonic chord (in the key of C, the C chord and the Am chord<sup>1</sup>), and to ease the voice leading of the bass line. In a I–vi–IV–V–I progression (without any chordal inversions) the bass voice descends in major or minor thirds from the I chord to the vi chord to the IV chord; in the key of C, one descent is C-A-F. And if the G chord is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion, the bass descent extends another third to D.

Chord	Notes		
C	C	E	G
Am	A	C	E
F	F	A	C
G	G	B	D
C	C	E	G

The number of shared notes in these chords make it easy to harmonize the melody with other voices as well. As we can see, the C note occurs in all three chords, and the A, E and G notes occur in two chords each.

---

1 These chords differ by only one note. The C Chord: C E G; the Am Chord: A C E. The Am7 has all 4 notes (A C E G) providing an additional means of prolonging the Tonic.

When any part of the progression is used as a pickup, the progression can appear, for example, as VI-V-I-vi, etc. However, many songs will ordinarily end on the Tonic (I), which can help to correctly identify the progression. We see this in the Beatles' "Tell Me Why," where the song begins with a V pickup chord making the progression appear to be V-I-vi-VI. Interestingly, both verses end on the V chord creating a half cadence. The Outro cures the "hanging" V cadence with an unusual sequence of Bm B $\flat$  Asus4 D (vi VI $\flat$  V I), concluding with an authentic cadence and a nice descending bass run.

The '50s Progression can be identified by the sequence of chords. But while it's easy to identify a song in the key of C or G, songs in E $\flat$  or A $\flat$  are not quite as easy to identify.<sup>2</sup> The table below helps to identify those progressions.

## Chords in the I iv IV V Progression in 12 Keys

I	vi	IV	V		I	vi	IV	V7
A $\flat$	Fm	D $\flat$	E $\flat$		A $\flat$	Fm	D $\flat$	E $\flat$ 7
A	F#m	D	E		A	F#m	D	E7
B $\flat$	Gm	E $\flat$	F		B $\flat$	Gm	E $\flat$	F7
B	G#m	E	F#		B	G#m	E	F#7
C	Am	F	G		C	Am	F	G7
D $\flat$	B $\flat$ m	G $\flat$	A $\flat$		D $\flat$	B $\flat$ m	G $\flat$	A $\flat$ 7
D	Bm	G	A		D	Bm	G	A7
E $\flat$	Cm	A $\flat$	B $\flat$		E $\flat$	Cm	A $\flat$	B $\flat$ 7
E	C#m	A	B		E	C#m	A	B7
F	Dm	B $\flat$	C		F	Dm	B $\flat$	C7
G $\flat$	E $\flat$ m	C $\flat$	D $\flat$		G $\flat$	E $\flat$ m	C $\flat$	D $\flat$ 7
G	Em	C	D		G	Em	C	D7

A very large number of songs use this progression; a partial list is posted below.

## The I-vi-ii-V Variation

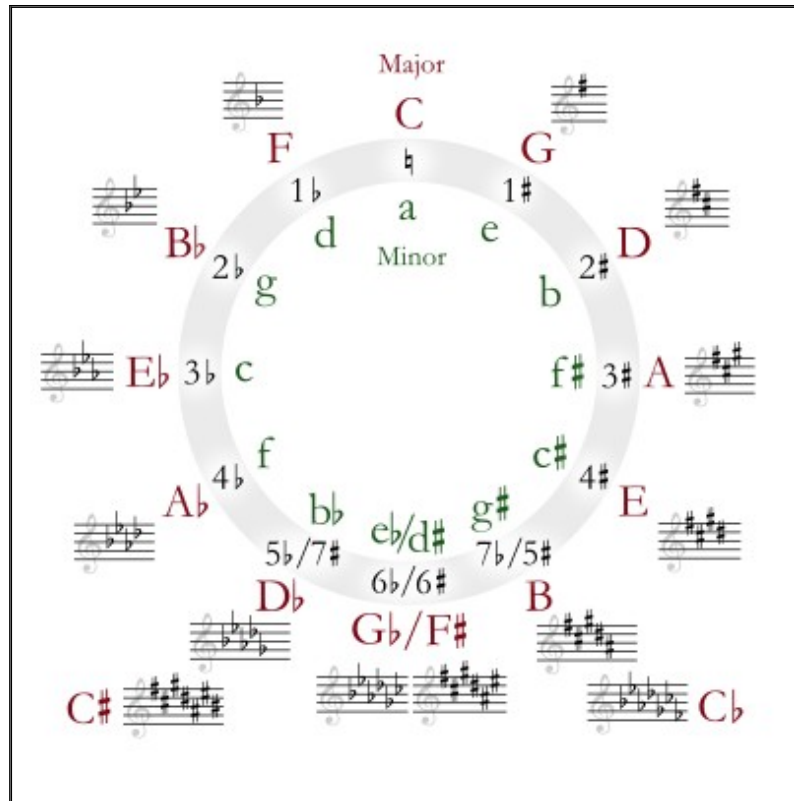
The '50s Progression can be represented I vi IV V (1 6m 4 5) but a common substitution for the IV is the ii (supertonic), creating the **I-vi-ii-V** (1 6m 2 5) progression (in the key of C, Dm substituted for F<sup>3</sup>). One strength of this progression is that it is contained in the diatonic Circle of Fourths<sup>4</sup>, which

2 The Penguins performed "Earth Angel" in the key of A $\flat$  but the Crew Cuts hit the charts in the key of E $\flat$ .

3 These chords differ by only one note. The F Chord: F A C; the Dm Chord: D F A. The Dm7 contains all 4 notes: D F A C.

4 The Circle of Fifths read counterclockwise: C F B $\flat$  E $\flat$  A $\flat$  D $\flat$  F# B E A D G. See next page. (I find that the repeated B-E-A-D sequence is a helpful mnemonic.)

can be represented in Roman Numeral notation as I-IV-vii<sup>o</sup>-iii-vi-ii-V-I, also referred to as the “Circle Progression.” There are numerous examples of this variation including “Tell Me Why,” “Earth Angel,” “Book of Love,” “Return To Sender,” “Sh-boom,” and “Lollipop.”



Use of the Dominant 7 is frequently seen in the V chord, and not infrequently with the minor chords, ii and vi, i.e., C-Am7-Dm-G7. And, when all of the chords are converted to the Major Dominant 7<sup>th</sup> form, the song can take on a "rag-time" feeling, as, for example, in 1927 by Jack Yellen and Milton Ager, "Ain't She Sweet"<sup>5</sup>:

C        E7   A7                    D7    G7   C  
Now I ask you very confidentially, Ain't she nice?

Other popular songs using the “rag-time” form include Howard & Emerson's "Hello! Ma Baby" (1899), Ray Henderson's "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue" (1925), Bernie and Pinkard's "Sweet Georgia Brown" (1925), and Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant" (1967) (I-VI7-II7-V7).

The table below shows the I vi ii V progression in 12 keys.

<sup>5</sup> Note the addition of the iii chord here

## Chords in the I vi ii V Progression in 12 Keys

I	vi	ii	V		I	vi	ii	V7
A $\flat$	Fm	B $\flat$ m	E $\flat$		A $\flat$	Fm	B $\flat$ m	E $\flat$ 7
A	F $\sharp$ m	Bm	E		A	F $\sharp$ m	Bm	E7
B $\flat$	Gm	Cm	F		B $\flat$	Gm	Cm	F7
B	G $\sharp$ m	C $\sharp$ m	F $\sharp$		B	G $\sharp$ m	C $\sharp$ m	F $\sharp$ 7
C	Am	Dm	G		C	Am	Dm	G7
D $\flat$	B $\flat$ m	E $\flat$ m	A $\flat$		D $\flat$	B $\flat$ m	E $\flat$ m	A $\flat$ 7
D	Bm	Em	A		D	Bm	Em	A7
E $\flat$	Cm	Fm	B $\flat$		E $\flat$	Cm	Fm	B $\flat$ 7
E	C $\sharp$ m	F $\sharp$ m	B		E	C $\sharp$ m	F $\sharp$ m	B7
F	Dm	Gm	C		F	Dm	Gm	C7
G $\flat$	E $\flat$ m	A $\flat$ m	D $\flat$		G $\flat$	E $\flat$ m	A $\flat$ m	D $\flat$ 7
G	Em	Am	D		G	Em	Am	D7

The I vi ii V progression is said to be a popular progression in Jazz, often using major chords with dominant seventh rather than the minor form of the chords, and is included in the “rhythm changes” found in Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm.”

### Other Variations

#### The "Stand by Me" Variation

This variation extends the four-chord progression by adding the Tonic (I) at the end, thus: I vi IV V I. In the key of C, this would be C Am F G C. The progression then repeats

#### The Repeated I-vi Progression

Another common variation of the I vi IV V progression is to repeat the I–vi progression several times and then follow with a single IV–V or ii–V progression. The song “Dream Lover” is an example with a progression of I vi I vi | I vi I vi | I vi ii V.

#### The I-IV-vi-I Variation

A fifth variation is swapping the vi and the IV chords to create a **I-IV-vi-I** progression as seen in “More Than A Feeling” by Boston. Likewise substituting the parallel minor of the IV can create a **I-vi-iv-V** as in “Sleep Walk” by Santo & Johnny. Numerous other chord variations can be made.

In addition, the rhythm of the progression can also be changed to modify the "sound" by modifying the number of beats for each chord (2, 4, or 8). The time signature could also be changed, changing a swing in 4/4 to a waltz in ¾.

**Sources:**

- ['50s progression](#), Wikipedia
- [50s Progression](#), Songlive
- Austin, D.; Peterik, J.; Lynn, C. (2020). *Songwriting For Dummies*. Wiley. ISBNs: 9781119675662, 1119675669.
- [Cadence](#), Wikipedia
- [Cadences in Music Theory: The 4 Types Explained](#), MusicNotes Now
- [Circle of fifths](#), Wikipedia
- [Circle progression](#), Wikipedia.
- [Degree \(music\)](#), Wikipedia
- [Doo-Wop Progression](#), TV Tropes. Also contains a lengthy list of recorded examples.
- [ii-V-I Progression](#), Wikipedia
- [Ragtime progression](#), Wikipedia
- [Rhythm changes](#) and [I Got Rhythm](#), Wikipedia
- [The "50s doo-wop" progression](#), Open Music Theory
- [The 50s Progression](#), Hank Green (YouTube video)
- [vi-ii-V-I \(I-vi-ii-V\)](#) Wikipedia
- [Year 8 Music - Rock and roll & The Ice Cream Progression](#), Martin Thomas Buckingham.

## Examples in popular music

Wikipedia is the source for this partial list of 122 recorded songs containing the ['50s progression](#). The list does not include songs containing the progression for very short, irrelevant sections of the songs, nor does it include remade recordings of songs by other artists. Accessed Sept. 22, 2021.

Song Name	Artist	Year	Progression
"A Teenager in Love"	Dion and the Belmonts; Doc Pomus, Mort Shuman (writers)	1959	I-vi-IV-V
"Angel Baby"	<a href="#">Rosie and the Originals</a>	1960	I-vi-IV-V
"All I Have to Do Is Dream"	<a href="#">The Everly Brothers</a>	1958	I-vi-IV-V
"Baby"	<a href="#">Justin Bieber</a>	2010	I-vi-IV-V
"Baby Doll"	<a href="#">The Buttertones</a>	2016	I-vi-IV-V
"Bad Girl"	<a href="#">The Detroit Cobras</a>	1996	I-vi-IV-V
"Baby, I'm an Anarchist!"	<a href="#">Against Me!</a>	2002	I-vi-IV-V
"Beautiful Girls"	<a href="#">Sean Kingston</a>	2007	I-vi-IV-V

Song Name	Artist	Year	Progression
"Beyond the Sea"	Jack Lawrence and Charles Trenet	1946	I-vi-IV-V
"Bleeding Love"	Leona Lewis	2007	I-vi-IV-V
"Blue Moon"	The Marcells	1961	I-vi-IV-V
"Brave as a Noun"	Andrew Jackson Jihad	2007	I-vi-IV-V
"Bristol Stomp"	The Dovells	1961	I-vi-IV-V
"Brokenhearted"	Karmin	2012	I-vi-IV-V
"Burberry Headband"	Lil Mosey	2018	I-vi-IV-V
"Capital Radio"	The Clash	1977	I-vi-IV-V
" <u>Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)</u> "	Darlene Love	1963	I-vi-IV-V
"Chain Gang"	Sam Cooke	1960	I-vi-IV-V
"Close Your Eyes"	Meghan Trainor	2014	I-vi-IV-V
" <u>Complicated (Avril Lavigne song)</u> "	Avril Lavigne	2002	I-vi-IV-V (verses)
"Coney Island Baby"	The Excellents	1962	I-vi-IV-V
"Cradle Rock"	The Heartbreakers (Ray Collins/Frank Zappa)	1963	I-vi-IV-V
"Crocodile Rock"	Elton John	1972	I-vi-IV-V
"Da Doo", "Dentist"	Little Shop of Horrors (musical) Original Broadway Cast	1982	I-vi-IV-V
"Dance with Me Tonight"	Olly Murs	2011	I-vi-IV-V
"Dear Future Husband"	Meghan Trainor	2015	I-vi-IV-V
"Donna"	Ritchie Valens	1958	I-vi-IV-V
"Don't Dream It's Over"	Crowded House	1986	IV-V-I-vi
"Don't Say Your Love Is Killing Me"	Erasure	1997	I-vi-IV-V
"Double Shot (Of My Baby's Love)"	The Swingin' Medallions	1966	I-vi-IV-V
"Duke of Earl"	Gene Chandler	1962	I-vi-IV-V
"Dura"	Daddy Yankee	2018	I-vi-IV-V
"D'yer Mak'er"	Led Zeppelin	1973	I-vi-IV-V
"Earth Angel"	The Penguins	1954	I-vi-IV-V
"Endless Mine"	Sega	1994	I-vi-IV-V
"Enola Gay"	Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark	1980	I-vi-IV-V
"Epiphany"	BTS	2018	I-vi-IV-V
"Eternal Flame"	The Bangles/Atomic Kitten	1989/ 2001	I-vi-IV-V
"Every Breath You Take"	The Police	1983	I-vi-IV-V
"Eyes of Blue"	Paul Carrack	1995	I-vi-IV-V
"Eyes on Me"	Faye Wong	1999	I-vi-IV-V

<b>Song Name</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Progression</b>
"Flightless Bird, American Mouth"	Iron & Wine	2007	I-vi-IV-V
"For Your Precious Love"	Jerry Butler	1958	I-vi-IV-V
"Friday"	Rebecca Black	2011	I-vi-IV-V
"Give a Little Love"	Bay City Rollers	1975	I-vi-IV-V
"Go Cry On Somebody Else's Shoulder"	The Mothers of Invention	1966	I-vi-IV-V
"Girl on Fire"	Alicia Keys	2011	I-vi-IV-V
"God Is in the Rhythm"	King Gizzard & the Lizard Wizard	2015	I-vi-IV-V
"Happiness Is a Warm Gun"	The Beatles	1968	I-vi-IV-V
"Heart and Soul"	Larry Clinton feat. Bea Wain	1938	I-vi-IV-V
"I'll Make Love to You"	Boyz II Men	1994	I-vi-IV-V
"I'm Not Edward Cullen"	Hank Green	2009	I-vi-IV-V
"I'm the One"	DJ Khaled	2017	I-vi-IV-V
"I'm Waiting for the Day"	The Beach Boys	1966	I-vi-IV-V
"I Always Knew"	The Vaccines	2012	I-vi-IV-V
"I Love You Too Much"	<i>The Book of Life</i> (soundtrack)	2014	I-vi-IV-V
"In the Aeroplane Over the Sea"	Neutral Milk Hotel	1998	I-vi-IV-V
"In The Shape Of A Heart"	Jackson Browne	1986	I-vi-IV-V
"In the Still Of the Night"	The Five Satins	1956	I-vi-IV-V
"I Wanna Be With You"	The Raspberries	1974	I-vi-IV-V
"I Will Always Love You"	Dolly Parton / Whitney Houston	1974 / 1992	I-vi-IV-V
"Jesus of Suburbia"	Green Day	2005	I-vi-IV-V
"Joey"	Concrete Blonde	1990	I-vi-IV-V
"Just One Look"	Doris Troy	1963	I-vi-IV-V
"Just Like a Pill"	Pink	2002	I-vi-IV-V
"Just the Way You Are"	Bruno Mars	2010	I-vi-IV-V
"Kimberly"	Patti Smith	1975	I-vi-IV-V
"Last Kiss"	Wayne Cochran	1961	I-vi-IV-V
"Looking for an Echo"	Kenny Vance / Ol' 55	1975/ 1976	I-vi-IV-V
"Lollipop"	Ronald & Ruby	1958	I-vi-IV-V
"Lonely This Christmas"	Mud	1974	I-vi-IV-V
"Lovable"	Sam Cooke	1956	I-vi-IV-V
"Love Hurts"	The Everly Brothers	1960	I-vi-IV-V
"Making Love Out Of Nothing At All"	Air Supply	1982	I-vi-IV-V
"Mama I'm A Big Girl Now"	Hairspray Original Broadway Cast	2002	I-vi-IV-V

Song Name	Artist	Year	Progression
"Mandy"	Barry Manilow	1974	I-vi-IV-V
"Marathon"	Tennis	2011	I-vi-IV-V
"Marvin Gaye"	Charlie Puth and Meghan Trainor	2015	I-vi-IV-V
"Me!"	Taylor Swift ft. Brendon Urie	2019	I-vi-IV-V
"Messin' Around"	Pitbull	2016	I-vi-IV-V
"Don't Dream It, Be It"	The Rocky Horror Picture Show	1975	I-vi-IV-V
"Hangin' Out with Jim"	GG Allin	1988	I-vi-IV-V
"Million Reasons"	Lady Gaga	2016	I-vi-IV-V
"Monster Mash"	BoB,y Pickett	1962	I-vi-IV-V
"No Hay Pedo"	Banda Los Recoditos	2014	I-vi-IV-V
"Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now"	Starship	1987	I-vi-IV-V
"Octopus's Garden"	The Beatles	1969	I-vi-IV-V
"Oh True Love"	Everly Brothers	1960	I-vi-IV-V
"BoB,y Brown"	Frank Zappa	1979	I-vi-IV-V
"Hang Fire"	The Rolling Stones	1981	I-vi-IV-V
"Saturday Night"	The Misfits	1999	I-vi-IV-V
"Oliver's Army"	Elvis Costello	1979	I-vi-IV-V
"Perfect"	Ed Sheeran	2017	I-vi-IV-V
"Please Mr. Postman"	The Marvelettes	1961	I-vi-IV-V
"Pretty Little Angel Eyes"	Curtis Lee	1961	I-vi-IV-V
"Red Cadillac and a Black Moustache"	Warren Smith	1957	I-vi-IV-V
"Rinky Dink"	Dave "Baby" Cortez/ Booker T & the MGs	1962	I-vi-IV-V
"Runaround Sue"	Dion	1961	I-vi-IV-V
"Stand by Me"	Ben E. King	1961	I-vi-IV-V
"Telephone Line"	Electric Light Orchestra	1976	I-vi-IV-V
"Tell Me Why"	The Beatles	1964	I-vi-IV-V
"The Man Comes Around"	Johnny Cash	2002	I-vi-IV-V
"The Thin Ice"	Pink Floyd	1979	I-vi-IV-V
"This Boy"	The Beatles	1963	I-vi-IV-V
"This is Me"	Keala Settle	2018	I-vi-IV-V
"This Magic Moment" <sup>[33]</sup>	The Drifters	1960	I-vi-IV-V
"Those Magic Changes"	Sha Na Na	1978	I-vi-IV-V
"(Tired Of) Toein' The Line"	Rocky Burnette	1980	I-vi-IV-V
"Total Eclipse of the Heart"	Bonnie Tyler	1983	I-vi-IV-V
"Twistin' the Night Away"	Sam Cooke	1962	I-vi-IV-V
"Mr. Bass Man"	Johnny Cymbal	1961	I-vi-IV-V
"True Blue"	Madonna	1986	I-vi-IV-V



<b>Song Name</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Progression</b>
"Unchained Melody"	The Righteous Brothers	1955	I-vi-iv-V
"We Almost Had A Baby"	Emmy the Great	2009	I-vi-IV-V
"We Are Young"	Fun ft. Janelle Monáe	2011	I-vi-IV-V
"We Go Together"	John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John	1972	I-vi-IV-V
"Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"	Pete Seeger	1955	I-vi-IV-V
"Who Put the Bomp (in the Bomp, Bomp, Bomp)"	Barry Mann	1961	I-vi-IV-V
"Why Do Fools Fall in Love"	Frankie Lymon & The Teenagers	1956	I-vi-IV-V
"You Don't Own Me"	Lesley Gore	1963	I-vi-IV-V
"Your Reality"	Dan Salvato	2017	I-vi-IV-V