
Writing for Analysis 1

draft due: by email 8am Sept.15

final due: on paper, at the start of class Sept.24

How does harmonic function in the 12-bar blues compare with harmonic function in the basic phrase of Common Practice Era music?

To answer this question, complete the following:

1. Analysis

You have already learned about three types of harmonic function in the basic phrase of Common Practice Era music: tonic, predominant, and dominant. Your first task will be to summarize these functions using the chart below, or something similar:

| harmonic function | RN of associated harmonies | description of function (adjectives that suggest its 'feel') | syntax (where does it happen in the basic phrase?) |
|-------------------|----------------------------|--|--|
| tonic | | | |
| predominant | | | |
| dominant | | | |

Now, compare these functions with that of the 12-bar blues. First, consider the 12-bar blues in the abstract. The 12-bar blues has two elements:

(1) a lyric structure that divides into 3 phrases: 4+4+4, with the first two phrases repeating the same line and the third phrase different

(2) a harmonic structure that also divides into 4+4+4:

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| I I I I | |
| IV IV I I | |
| V IV I (V7) | (V7 is used only if the structure is repeated) |

Now, consider the 12-bar blues in specific examples (recordings of all of these songs are posted on Moodle):¹

Robert Johnson, “Dead Shrimp Blues”: 12-bar blues in lyrics and harmonic structure

| | | |
|----|--|------|
| I | I woke up this morning and all my shrimp was dead and gone | |
| IV | | I |
| | I woke up this morning all my shrimp was dead and gone | |
| V | IV | I V7 |
| | I was thinkin’ about you baby, why you hear me weep and moan | |

Big Mama Thornton, “Hound Dog”: 12-bar blues in lyrics and harmonic structure

| | | |
|----|---|---|
| | I | |
| | You ain’t nothing but a hound dog, snooping round my door | |
| IV | | I |
| | You ain’t nothing but a hound dog, snooping round my door | |
| V | IV | I |
| | You can wag your tail but I ain’t gonna feed you no more | |

James Brown, “I Got You (I Feel Good)”: 12-bar blues in lyrics and harmonic structure

| | | |
|----|--------------------------------------|---|
| | I | |
| | I feel good, I knew that I would now | |
| IV | | I |
| | I feel good, I knew that I would now | |
| V | IV | I |
| | So good, so good, I got you | |

¹ If you have other examples of the 12-bar blues that you would like to substitute, you may: just clear it with Dr. Attas first.

Michael Jackson, “Black or White”: modified lyric structure but 12-bar blues in harmonies

I
 I took my baby on a Saturday date, boy is that girl with you, yes we’re one
 and the same
 IV I I
 Now I believe in miracles and a miracle has happened tonight
 V IV I
 But if you’re thinking about my baby it don’t matter if you’re black or white

You might choose to complete this chart in order to summarize your ideas on harmonic function in the 12-bar blues.

| harmonic function | RN of associated harmonies | description of function (adjectives that suggest its ‘feel’) | syntax (where does it happen in the basic phrase?) |
|-------------------|----------------------------|--|--|
| tonic | | | |
| predominant | | | |
| dominant | | | |
| other functions? | | | |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|

2. Writing

Your paper should include an introduction, a summary of harmonic function in the basic phrase, and your own ideas about how the 12-bar blues in popular music is similar or different, using your analytical work for inspiration and examples. You must cite at least *three* specific musical examples to support your argument.

Word count reminder: no fewer than 200, no more than 250
(see the WA rubric for more requirements)