

Web Feature PRL.1

John Lee Hooker (1917–2001), “Boogie Chillun”

If you listen to this blues for its harmonic variety, you wouldn't hear much, and, in fact, you would miss what was most important about this song. Here there is only one chord, heard over and over on the guitar.

Western “classical” music (such as Robert Schumann's “Arabeske,” featured in the Prelude chapter), and much jazz and popular music, tends to use **goal-directed** harmony; it moves—sometimes directly and sometimes with many detours along the way—toward a goal, a “home” chord that represents a point of stability. This is one reason why the closing chords of a symphonic work such as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony seem to ring with such finality.

How is our experience of the chord change enhanced if we don't get the second chord right away? Consider the famous Beatles “ahhhh” moment from the Beatles's version of “Twist and Shout” (which you can hear at [1:24–1:36] into the Beatles's recording of the song, if you have access to it). The pause on the stacked chord here sets up a kind of delayed gratification—the “payoff” of going to the second chord is held back, but sooner or later you will arrive there and it will usually be very satisfying when you do. (Beethoven knew this as well and exploited the same kind of delayed resolution in his music.)

Back to our John Lee Hooker example, though: what if the “resolution” never comes? Hooker's use of this chord has a different connotation than it would in the “classical” realm; rather than setting up a tension that needs to be resolved to a “home” chord, it *is* the home chord. One starts to look for some sort of development elsewhere. The emphasis shifts to the groove (the “percussion” you hear is Hooker's tapping foot), and the way it provides support for Hooker's story line.

“Boogie Chillun” is a good illustration of what the writer Amiri Baraka called “the changing same.” You can hear it in funk music as well as the trance-like patterns of African drumming and the open-ended vamps of John Coltrane's version of “My Favorite Things.” In this music, we could argue that time is not represented so much as an arrow shooting toward a goal, but more like a loop. The groove could go on for any length of time, and it could begin or end at any point. This kind of conception of time obviously impacts what may be done with harmony in a song. Some composers will shift back and forth, seemingly effortlessly, between the two styles (goal-directed and cyclic) in their music. Some shift back and forth within a single song.