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How music theory can create a worship moment. Guest post by Jon Nicol.

By [Guest Blogger](#) | January 15, 2015

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Have you ever gotten to that place in a worship song where you just wanted to linger for a moment? It might be as a song ends, or during an interlude within the song, but the arrangement you're using doesn't seem to give you that.

That's because many of the worship songs we use in our service come from recordings that are arranged to sell CDs and downloads on iTunes.

These arrangements are more for listening than participating.

And even when a recording includes an extended time of repeats, response, or spontaneous worship, it still might not fit what would work in your church.

So how do you create the space to just linger in the moment?

Create Space

There are a lot of ways to do that, but I want to give you one technique that you can use to create an extended moment. And just like the title says, it requires a little music theory.

I call it "The Lingerin' Four Chord."

To make sure we're all know what the Four Chord is, let's take a crash course in the chord number system. (*Hang with me here, because even if you don't know a stitch of the music theory, I can walk you through it.*)

Crash Course In Theory

In every major key there is an identical pattern of naturally occurring major and minor chords. The pattern is easiest to understand in the key of C, since there are no sharps or flats.

First, the naturally occurring notes in the key of C are:

C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	B ^o
1	2m	3m	4	5	6m	7 ^o
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii ^o

If we build the naturally occurring triad on each of these notes, we will see our patterns of chords.

(If you're near a keyboard, this is easy. Just start with the scale tone and skip a white key to add the third of the chord. Then skip another white key to play the fifth.)

Here's what the C triad looks like on the piano.

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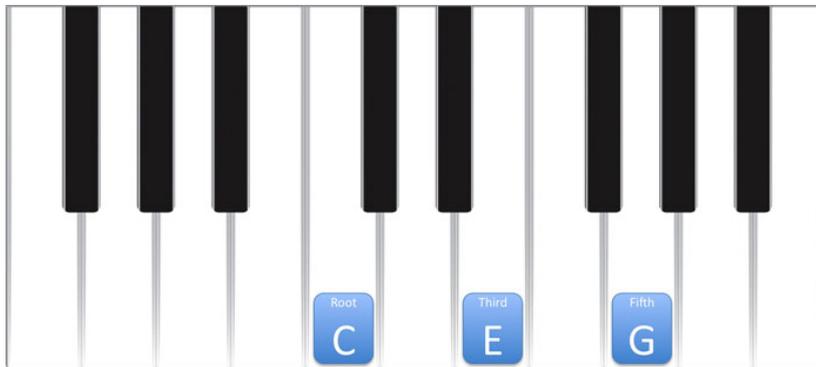
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C Major Triad

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If you do this pattern for every scale tone, you will build out all the naturally occurring triads, or basic three-note chords. Since this is just a crash course, I'm just going to tell you *WHAT* kind of chords these three notes form rather than explain *WHY* they are like that.

So the naturally occurring chords/triads in the key of C are:

C, E, G = C major

D, F, A = D minor

E, G, B = E minor

F, A, C = F major

G, B, D = G major

A, C, E = A minor

B, D, F = B diminished

Applying The Numbers

Now here's where the numbers come in. We apply the scale numbers to the chords with one distinction. When we're talking about intervals, we refer to them as the degree they are away from the root: second, third, fourth, fifth, etc..

When we refer to the chord, we simply call it by the scale number, not the interval degree: One, Two, Three, Four, Five, etc.

So the C chord is called the One, or One Major. The D chord is called the Two, or Two Minor, and so on. In traditional music theory, this is designated with Roman Number—uppercase for major, lowercase for minor: C = I, Dm = ii, etc.

But a system that's gained popularity in modern music is referred to as **Nashville Numbers**." Instead of messing around with Roman numerals, the session players in Nashville use our more accessible Arabic numbers to form their own shorthand to create charts* based on the chord numbers of the song. 1, 2m, 3m, 4, 5, etc.

So here are the chord numbers with both the Nashville Numbers and the traditional Roman numerals:

G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#°
1	2m	3m	4	5	6m	7°
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°

And so since we originally started talking about "The Lingering Four Chord", we can see that the Four in the key of C is F.

You might be thinking, "Holy cow, Nicol, why didn't you just lead with that?!"

Yeah, that probably would have been easier. But it's helpful to know how to figure out what the Four Chord is in any key.

Any Key

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So let's look at the Key of G and figure out what the Four Chord is for that. Here are the notes in the G scale:

G, A, B, C, D, E, F#

Now, since we've already learned our pattern, we don't need to go through the pain of building out the triads. We simply apply the pattern of major and minor chords that we saw above in the key of C.

Here's that pattern again:

major, minor, minor, major, major, minor, diminished

This pattern occurs in EVERY major key when you're building diatonic (in the key) triads. So here's that pattern in the key of G:

G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F# ^o
1	2m	3m	4	5	6m	7 ^o
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii ^o

So our Four Chord in the key of G is C.

OK, enough theory. If you're still with me, you're either A) a tenacious learner or B) already a theory geek (and are picking apart my explanation).

Why The Four Chord?

Each chord in a key has a unique function and a feel. When it comes to the three major chords in a key, the One Chord feels final—it's home base. The Five Chord feels like it wants to move back to the One Chord. Add the dominant seventh to it and it's begging to go back to the One.

But the Four Chord feels neither final nor like it urgently needs to get anywhere. And that's what makes it perfect to linger in a moment.

Here I Am To Linger

One song that does this is *Here I Am to Worship*. In the key of E, the chorus ends on an A, which is the Four Chord. As you're singing and playing that, you can hang out there for a while and the song doesn't feel done. But it also isn't dying to be resolved.

You can just *linger*.

And pray. Or exhort. Or read scripture. Or whatever you feel the Lord calling you to do in that moment.

But even if this isn't neatly arranged into a song like it is in *Here I Am to Worship*, you can just replace the final One Chord with the Four Chord to extend out the ending. You can also use it internally if there's a certain part of the song you want to hang out on before moving on.

Less Is More

Here's something to keep in mind. When you're creating these lingering moments, it's best to move to one instrument like acoustic guitar or piano/keys. A lot of musicians tend to overplay in these moments. You can teach your musicians to play during these times, but they need to grasp the concept of ambience and "less is more."

Another thing to keep in mind is that you may not want to hang out on the Four Chord for too long. After lingering on the Four for a bit, you can begin to move to other chords in the key. Just feel it out.

And this is another reason to drop it to just one instrument. You can freely move from chord to the next without worrying if the team is following you.

So as you're planning your songs and segues for this upcoming Sunday, look at using the Four Chord as a way to create a moment where people can linger in worship. And if you're interested in more ways to segues between songs, check out this post:

[Segues: The On and Off Ramps In Worship](#)

**With the Nashville Number System, there's a whole unofficial charting system for songs. But for right now, we're just worried about the chord numbers.*

Jon Nicol is a worship pastor in Lexington, Ohio. He coaches and trains worship leaders and teams at WorshipTeamCoach.com. Connect with him on Twitter: [@jonnicol](https://twitter.com/jonnicol)



Musicademy's [Playing By Ear in Worship DVDs and Downloads](#) (currently at a great SALE price) are a crash course in music theory for contemporary musicians. They cover the above and more besides. All guaranteed to improve your musicianship.

Other posts you may find helpful

[Playing by ear part 1](#)

[Playing by ear part 2 – Nashville Numbering explained](#)

[What chord comes next in a song?](#)

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Ian Newington

Jan 25, 2015

Very simple and very powerful. As Arthur commented, Jon Nicol is always good value. I need to try this more often.

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Jon Nicol from Facebook

Jan 15, 2015

Keith, the simple approach is just go up 4 notes from the root note (and start counting with the root). So in the key of C: 1=C, 2=D, 3=E, 4=F. F the 4 chord is F. In E, it's 1=E, 2=F#, 3=G#, 4=A. A is the 4. I definitely went into a little deep. B whether you really understand the theory or not, it doesn't matter. It's really about knowing the right chord to hang out on. When in doubt, trust your ear. :)

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Sonya Bedford from Facebook

Jan 15, 2015

It's made to sound more complicated than it is. Don't worry lol

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Keith Parry from Facebook

Jan 15, 2015

I must admit I'm lost!!!

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Arthur Davis from Facebook

Jan 15, 2015

Mr Nicol is always good value! Thanks for doing this guest post.

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Aaron Tungate from Facebook

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 Jan 15, 2015

Alex Bedford Steve Graham Keith Parry interesting

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