

FOUR CHORD-CHANGE BEHAVIORS

When the chord changes under a held or repeated melody note, one of four things happens to its emotional quality

The chord is moving. The melody note is staying. This is one of the most powerful moments in any song — a single note whose emotional meaning transforms as the harmony shifts underneath it. These four behaviors describe every possibility.

STAY SWEET

Zone stays in 1 or improves

Z1 → Z1

The note was a chord tone in the previous chord and remains a chord tone in the new chord. Both chords share this note — it stays stable and warm through the change. **No emotional shift** — the harmony moves but the note is carried along safely.

EXAMPLE

SO held through C → G
change. SO is the 5th of C and the root of G. Zone stays **Zone 1** throughout.

Use it: For stability at chord changes — keeps energy calm. Great for chorus sections that need to feel settled and confident.

TURN TENSE

Zone worsens or becomes more active

Z1 → Z2/4

The note was grounded, but the new chord makes it a non-chord tone or an unstable degree without harmonic support. **Sudden forward pull** — a comfortable note becomes searching at the chord change.

EXAMPLE

MI held through C → G7
. MI is a chord tone of C (**Z1**). Over G7 it's a non-chord tone. Shifts to **Zone 4** .

Use it: To create sudden emotional urgency at a chord change. Extremely effective in pre-choruses and builds.

FLOAT FREE

Tension releases, note becomes supported

Z3/4 → Z1

The note was tense or floating outside the chord, but the new chord **claims it as a chord tone**. Suddenly the tension is released — the note that was searching finds harmonic support. This is the "ahhh" moment of harmonic resolution.

EXAMPLE

FA held through C → F
. FA is a non-chord tone over C (**Z4**). Over F major, FA is the root! Shifts to **Zone 2** .

Use it: For release of tension at chord changes. Letting the chord "arrive under" a tense melody note creates a beautiful harmonic exhale.

SINK DEEPER

Tension escalates at the change

Z2 → Z4

The note was already tense, and the chord change makes it worse — it loses harmonic support and its instability becomes raw. **Tension compounds** — each chord change makes the note feel more stranded and urgent.

EXAMPLE

TI held through G → Dm . TI is chord tone of G (**Z2**). Over Dm it's not in the chord at all — shifts to **Zone 4** . More bitter.

Use it: For escalating drama in bridge sections. But needs resolution — a melody that keeps sinking deeper needs a strong Zone 1 arrival to release.

CHORD CHANGE PILLAR NOTES

How to choose the melody note that anchors each chord section — and what effect each choice creates

A **pillar note** is the melody note you deliberately place at a chord change — the note that anchors the new chord section. Every chord change in a song is an opportunity to choose: do you resolve, create forward motion, or escalate tension?

HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR PILLAR NOTES — 3 RULES

1
SMOOTH HANDOFF

Choose a note that **IS in the incoming chord** for a smooth, supported landing at the change. The listener feels the chord change happen without friction.

2
FORWARD MOTION

Choose an **unstable chord tone** (the 7th of a dominant chord, the 3rd of a tense chord) for grounded tension with forward pull. The chord catches the note but it still wants to move.

3
MAXIMUM CLARITY

Choose the **root of the new chord** for maximum clarity and a decisive arrival. Strongest resolution — makes the chord change unmistakable and confident.

PILLAR NOTE TABLE — COMMON CHORDS IN C MAJOR

CHORD	STRONG PILLAR NOTE	EMOTIONAL EFFECT	WEAK PILLAR NOTE	EMOTIONAL EFFECT
C	DO (root)	Grounded anchor — "we've arrived"	TI	Restless even at rest — pulls away from the chord
G7	SO or TI	Irresistible pull toward home — dominant tension	FA	Extreme tension — FA over G7 is the loudest alarm bell in the key
Am	LA (root)	Dark, bittersweet arrival — minor tonic feeling	DO	Floats above the minor — unstable, searching quality
F	FA (root) or DO	Warm, spacious arrival — F is the "breath" chord	TI	Bittersweet friction — TI clashes with the subdominant

VOICE LEADING TIP — STEPWISE PILLAR NOTES

DO → TI → LA → SO

Pillar notes that move by **step** (or half-step) between chord changes create smooth, singable lines that feel inevitable. This descending stepwise motion (DO → TI → LA → SO) is one of the most common patterns in pop and soul — it gives the melody a natural gravitational flow even as the chords shift underneath.