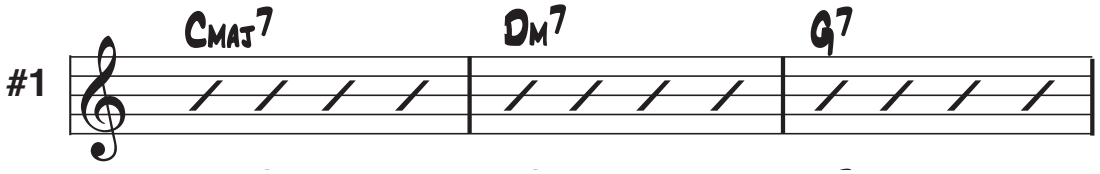
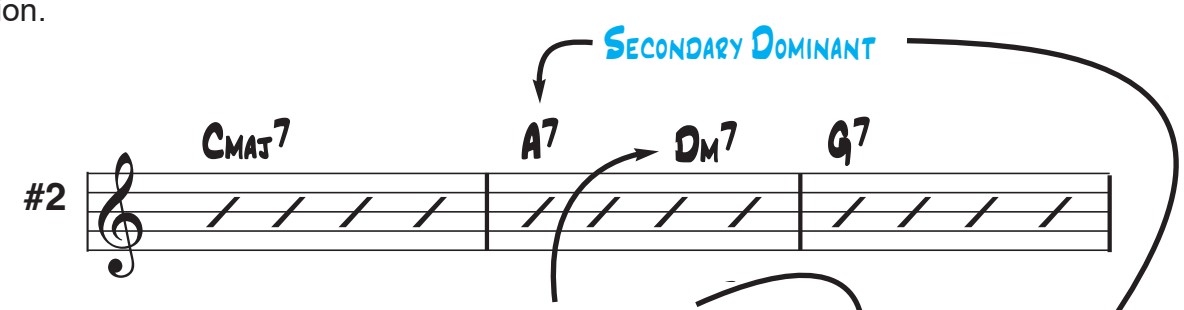
Secondary Dominants

Composers and improvisors often add extra chords to their progressions to create more harmonic movement in their compositions or solos. Chords know as *secondary dominant* chords are among the most popular type of chords for doing this. They are called secondary because they are used in addition to the primary dominant chord that belongs to the key the music is in. All dominant chords have a special tension about them that is relieved or shifted by the following chord.

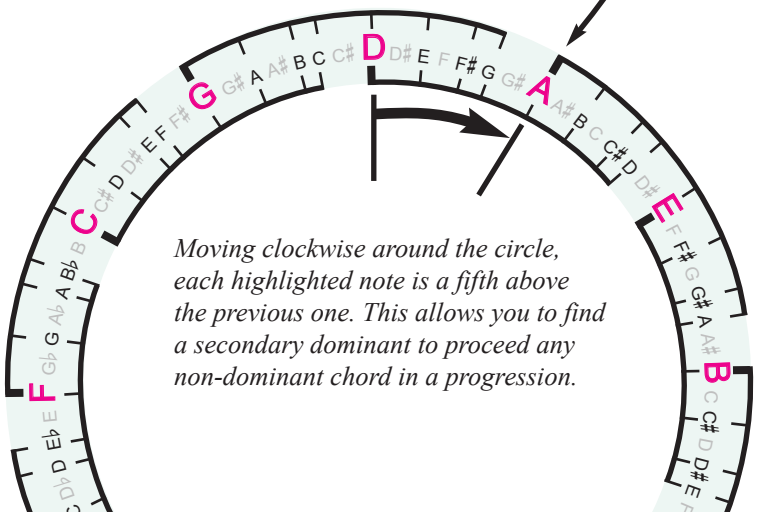
You can create this tonal movement by inserting the right dominant chord in front of any existing chord. Not just any dominant chord will do. The dominant chord's root needs to be a fifth above the root of the chord that follows. In the example below, line #1 shows a I-ii-V chord progression. Each chord takes up one measure.



In line #2 a secondary dominant chord (A7) is inserted before the Dm7. Notice that the root of the A7 is a fifth above the root of the Dm7. Harmonically, going from A7 to a D chord creates tonal movement even though Dm7 is not the tonic chord of the progression.



The Circle of Fifths show the root of the secondary dominant chord that can proceed any chord.

The resulting chord will not belong to the original key but its harmonic relationship with the following chord makes it work.

You can even put a secondary dominant chord in front of a primary dominant. It all depends on what kind of movement you want to create.