

Retrogression Special Lesson

What is in this lesson for me?

There is an **enormous** amount of potential value in this lesson.
It's written for many different levels of guitar player, which means:

- 1) anyone (yes, even you!) can benefit hugely from going through it
- 2) it will last you many years to come (as you get more advanced you'll be able to re-visit it and go through it again using your new skills)

How should I use this lesson?

This lesson is going to examine a great song writing device that you'll find in many songs. There are 4 parts:

1. Listening
2. Playing
3. Composing
4. Improvising

Choose whichever of these interest you most and dive in at the level that makes sense to you – you don't need to do everything!!

Practise the content at home, and then we'll work together on it in future lessons.

I'd highly recommend that you complete the Listening part – learning to listen critically to music is a vital skill for any musician to develop. You may not be able to answer all parts yet, but just fill in the ones you can.

FAQs

"It's too hard (or easy)".

Yes, some of this lesson will be too hard (or easy) for you at this stage. That's fine – your job is to pick a level to work at that is "playable but challenging". Figuring this out alone is worth the effort of attempting the work presented here, as it will benefit you in any other material you ever learn.

"But I hate Procol Harum and/or Led Zeppelin".

The value in this lesson has nothing to do with either of these artists, or even the songs we're looking at. It's about developing your musical skills using their songs as vehicles to help you do this. You'd even learn a huge amount by trying to write down what it is specifically that you don't like about these artists/songs... 😊

OK, ready? Dive in!

Retrogression?!

Retrogression is the use of a descending diatonic bass line.

This use of the bass line drives the feeling of the song, creating an emotional response for most people somewhere between melancholy and depression (!)

Retrogression has been used to great effect in all styles of music, some examples being:

- Many Beatles songs (eg While My Guitar Gently Weeps, Dear Prudence, Something, Penny Lane etc).
- When A Man Loves A Woman – Percy Sledge
- Signed, Sealed, Delivered – Stevie Wonder
- I Want You Back – Jackson 5
- My Baby Just Cares For Me – Nina Simone
- Pachelbel's Canon – Johann Pachelbel
- White Room – Cream
- Can't Find My Way Home – Blind Faith
- Stairway to Heaven – Led Zeppelin
- Air on a G String – Bach
- Dido's Lament – Purcell
- And many more...

We're going to look at two classic examples in this lesson:

- **Whiter Shade of Pale** – Procol Harum
- **Babe I'm Gonna Leave You** – Led Zeppelin

Example of Retrogression principle

If we're in the key of C major, the notes would be:

C D E F G A B C

Play these notes ascending (the C major scale):

C

3 0 2 3 0 2 0 1

In this case, a descending **diatonic** bass line (meaning the notes only come from the scale) could be as below (the example uses all the notes from the scale, played backwards...)

Try recording a C chord and then playing this bass line slowly over it. Notice how effective it is!

C

3 2 0 3 1 0 0 3

(Note, you don't have to use all the notes of the scale to create the bass line...)

1. Listening

➤ **Do this analysis for one or both songs.**

What style is the music in?

What is the subject matter (listen to the lyrics)?

How is this subject matter conveyed musically? What's the emotion you feel?

What instruments are used (incl vocals) and when do they come in?

What's the structure of the song (verse/chorus etc)?

What's the underlying rhythm (number of beats per bar, underlying rhythms etc)?

Is there a "hook"? What is it?

What do the drums do (can you write out the kick/snare/hi-hat rhythm)?

Describe what the bass does (in general terms – eg rhythm used).

Describe what the guitar does (in general terms – eg rhythm used).

2. Playing

- **Choose one (or both) songs to play. If you don't have the original songs, find the original versions on YouTube.**

Level 1

Using the basic chord chart for the song, play through the song/s using what you know already from the following list:

- Open chords
 - 3 string chords
 - 4 string chords
 - full open chords
- Barre chords
 - E-shape barres only
 - A-shape barres only
 - Mix of E-shape and A-shape barres

Level 2

- Triads
 - Close-voiced
 - Open-voiced
- 7th chords (extend the major and minor chords from the song into 7ths)
- 9th chords (extend the major and minor chords from the song into 9ths)

Level 3

Play the song using the full TAB given – work through it carefully and practice till you can play it up to speed with the song.

Level 4

Work through the solos for Babe I'm Gonna Leave You.
Bonus – transcribe the organ solo from Whiter Shade of Pale.

Resources on webpage

Video – basic picking on Babe I'm Gonna Leave, strum through Whiter Shade

Charts – full charts and basic chord progressions

Chord charts

Solo for Babe I'm Gonna Leave You

3. Composing

Step 1 – bass line

Choose a key to write in and write a short, descending diatonic bass line.

Step 2 - chords

Choose chords from the key to go with this bass line (these could be triads, 7ths or beyond!)

Step 3 – rhythm guitar

Decide on a rhythmic/rhythm guitar approach (eg time signature, arpeggiated/strummed chords etc).

Step 4 - melody

Write a melody (using notes from the key) to go over the bassline/chord progression.

Step 5 – lyrics

You could write lyrics...

- 1) come up with subject matter that fits with the music you've written
- 2) write a title for your song
- 3) write a chorus that includes the title of your song in it
- 4) write a verse that tells the story of your song

4. Improvising

- **Choose the main part of one of the songs for this.**

Step 1

Record the chord progression.

Step 2

Improvise over the chords using

- A minor pentatonic (any/all shapes)
- C major scale (any/all shapes)

Step 3

Practise specific approaches using each of these scales:

- 1. Target the descending bass notes** in your improvising – build your solo round the bassline (you could even sketch out a solo on paper if that's easier). Note that you can play those bass notes in any octave – they don't have to be low.
- 2. Playing from the melody.** Transcribe the melody that's sung over the chord progression (by ear) and improvise from it.
- 3. Chord tone soloing**
 - Targeting notes in each chord.
 - Playing major/minor arpeggios over the chords (you could even just use the chord progression as a means to really get these arpeggios under your fingers).
 - Extend the chords to 7ths and play 7th chord arpeggios – try and play them as continuous quavers.