MTO 23.3 Examples: Richards, Tonal Ambiguity in Popular Music’s Axis Progressions

(Note: audio, video, and other interactive examples are only available online)
http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.17.23.3/mto.17.23.3.richards.php
Example 1. The Four Forms of Axis Progressions

Example 2a. Overall Frequencies of Songs with the C-form, a-form, F-form, or G-form of Axis Progressions in the Billboard Year-End Hot 100 Corpus, 1990–2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Axis Progression</th>
<th># of Songs in Corpus</th>
<th>% Frequency (of 2715 songs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C-form</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-form</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-form</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-form</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example 2b. Annual Frequencies of Songs with the C-form, a-form, and F-form of Axis Progressions in the Billboard Year-End Hot 100 Corpus, 1990–2016
**Example 3.** Doll’s Types of Information for Determining Tonal Center and Function

From Doll 2017
1. Schema
2. Meter (stresses in meter or hypermeter)
3. Phrasing (first and last positions in a phrase)
4. Repetition (of chords or notes)
5. Texture (highest/lowest notes, title-carrying lyrics)
6. Scale
7. Duration
8. Pedal
9. Arpeggiation
10. Penultima (chord before an “anchor”)
11. Loudness
12. Parallel (similar progressions in other parts of song or other songs)
13. Expression (meaning of lyrics)

**Example 4.** Means of Emphasizing Potential Tonic-Triad Notes in Axis Progressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harmonic Emphasis</td>
<td>• Arpeggiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Dissonance resolution (through contrapuntal melodic figures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Pedal point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Melodic-harmonic divorce (with tonic-triad notes in melody)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Emphasis</td>
<td>• Beginning or end position in a vocal phrase, section, or song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Stresses in meter, hypermeter, and grammar (in lyrics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Emphasis</td>
<td>• Note repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Long duration (relatively)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Melodic high and low points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Change in texture, timbre, or melodic style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Loudness stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual Emphasis</td>
<td>• Tonality in other sections of the song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Parallels between sections or between different songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The major-mode bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetic Emphasis</td>
<td>• Meaning of lyrics or other vocal utterances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example 5. Red Hot Chili Peppers, “Don’t Forget Me,” Verses 1 and 2

VERSE 1

Voice

Emphasized Aeolian-Tonic Notes

I'm an ocean in your bedroom, make you feel warm, make you want to re-assume.

VERSE 2

I'm a dance hall, dirty break beat, make the snow fall up from underneath your feet.

VERSE 3

now we know, it all for sure.

VERSE 4

Not alone, I'll be there, tell me when you want to go.
Example 6. Beyoncé, “If I Were a Boy,” Verse 1

If I were a boy, even just for a day,
I'd roll outta bed in the morning and throw on what I wanted then go.
Example 7. A Great Big World, “Say Something,” Verse 1

Say something, I'm giving up on you.

I'll be the one if you want me to.
Example 8. The Offspring, “Self Esteem,” Verse 1

I wrote her off for the tenth time today,
I practiced all the things I would say...

When she came over,
I lost my nerve,
I took her back and made her dessert...

Example 9. Sia, “Cheap Thrills,” Verse 1

Come on, come on, turn the radio on,
it's Friday night and I won't be long, gotta

do my hair, put my makeup on,
it's Friday night and I won't be long til I
Example 10. Sia, “Never Give Up,” Verse 1

1

\[ F#m \quad D \quad A \quad E \]

Voice

Emphasized
Aeolian-Tonic
Notes

I've battled demons that won't let me sleep,

2

\[ F#m \quad D \quad A \quad E \]

called to the sea but she abandoned me, but I won't

Voice

Emphasized Acolian-Tonic Notes

Emphasized Major-Tonic Notes

1

Gm

Eb

Just gonna stand there and watch me burn, well, that’s alright

2

Bb

F/A

Gm

because I like the way it hurts, Just gonna stand there and hear me cry,

Eb

Bb

F/A

Gm

well, that’s alright because I love the way you lie, I love the way you lie,
Example 13. Joan Osborne, “One of Us,” End of Prechorus and Beginning of Chorus

Example 15. Rihanna, “Umbrella,” Beginning of First Chorus

Because when the sun shines, we shine together, told you I'll be here forever, said I'd always be your friend, took an oath, I'm a stick it out to the end.
Example 16. Rihanna, “Umbrella,” End of Bridge and Beginning of Third Chorus

So go on and let the rain pour, I'll be all you need and more because

when the sun shines, we shine together. Told you I'll be here forever

er, said I'd always be your friend took an oath. I'm a stick it out to the end.
Example 17. Madonna, “Like a Prayer,” Intro

Example 18. Madonna, “Like a Prayer,” First Chorus
Example 19. Madonna, “Like a Prayer,” First Verse

(VERSE)
F/A  Bb/D  C/D  Bb/D

Voice

Bass Line

Emphasized Major-Tonic Notes

Emphasized Aeolian-Tonic Notes

CHORUS (elided)

you know I’ll take you there. I hear your voice,

Bass Guitar

Bass Line of Synth Organ

(Contextually)

F/C  C  Dm

it’s like an angel sighing.
Example 20. Sarah McLachlan, “Building a Mystery,” Verse 1

You come out at night
that's when the energy comes and the

dark side's light_ and the vampires roam.
You strut your rasta wear and your

suicide poem_ and a cross from a faith_ that died before Jesus came._

1

Voice

Emphasized
Major-Tonic
Notes

Emphasized
Aeolian-Tonic
Notes

You live in a church where you sleep with voodoo dolls and you
(F♯ representing F♯)

2

Bm G D A

won't give up the search for the ghosts in the halls. You wear sandals in the snow and a

3

Bm G

4

D A Bm G D A

smile that won't wash away. Can you look out the window without your shadow getting in the way?

**Verses:**

1. You woke up screaming aloud, a prayer from your secret god. You

2. Feed off our fears and hold back your tears, ah. You give us a tantrum and a

3. Know-it-all grin just when you need one when the evening's thin.