

hey, welcome to 12tone! despite plenty of inner turmoil, it's hard to deny the success of The Police: starting with their second album, Regatta De Blanc, they managed an incredibly impressive streak of five consecutive #1 albums on the UK charts, with many of their hits crossing the pond to the US as well. they've also had a lot of #1 singles, including Walking On The Moon, Every Breath You Take, and Don't Stand So Close To Me, and looking through the list I'm noticing a weirdly strong connection between how well the song did and how long its name was, but setting that aside, today I want to look at their very first #1 hit, Message In A Bottle.

it starts like this: (bang) and the first thing I want to highlight is the chord shapes, because they're a little unusual. if they were normal triads, it'd sound something like this (bang) with a root, a fifth, and then a really high third, but instead they've taken these top notes and lowered them all, hiding the chords' qualities and giving the whole thing a bit of an unsettled sound. it's a great use of a technique called quintal harmony, where chords are built from stacks of 5ths instead of the usual stacks of 3rds. still, though, they behave pretty much like normal chords here, so for the rest of the video I'm just gonna pretend the progression is this: (bang)

this confused me for a while, because when I listen to the song, none of these sound like the I chord, and I think that's because none of them are. here, check out the second phrase of the melody: (bang) do you hear how that D# at the end is pulling up with all of its might? that's because it's what's called a leading tone, and it wants to resolve to the root of the key, E. the rest of the melody reinforces that: it's basically just walking back and forth between the root and the 3rd, two of the strongest notes in that key.

so then what's going on with the chords? well, I think it's a variation of this classic progression, (bang) often called the Doo-Wop Changes. this is, like, the definitive example of functional harmony, which as we've mentioned before is the idea that different chords in a key have different functions, or jobs to do. these first two chords have tonic function, which means they provide a sense of rest. they're like home base. then we go to this chord, which has subdominant function, meaning it adds some instability and takes you away from home, then this chord has dominant function, which means it points you back. this predictable cycle of tension and release has been used for centuries, but it was especially common in the pop music of the 50s and 60s.

the Police do it a little differently, though: they start here (bang) and when we're on the dominant chord, expecting a resolution back to I, they go to F# minor instead, which has subdominant function again. this subverts your expectation, adding dissonance when you were expecting a chance to rest, and then it jumps to the C# minor and starts over without ever actually playing the E. I think there's something really poignant about the fact that, in this song about a castaway, even the chords can't seem to find their way home.

from there, we move into the first half of the prechorus: (bang) and it seems like we've changed keys. we're in A major now, and the progression couldn't be simpler: we've got tonic,

subdominant, and dominant, all in order. we've even got a I chord this time, but there's still something sneaky going on here: we've also got an E chord. it's the home chord we were looking for earlier, and it even shows up right as the vocals sing "to the world", but it's not actually the I chord anymore. it's kinda like a mirage: it's the home we were trying to find, but when we get there, it's not really home at all.

we've also switched from the complex sound of quintal harmony to just straight-up power chords, which are chords with just two notes: a root and a 5th. ok, I guess technically that's still quintal, but it's also a very common rock sound, as basically the simplest form of harmony. what exactly it symbolizes here is up for debate, but I like to look at it as representing the more optimistic, idealistic message of this part of the song. it's a single-minded determination to reach out and send that SOS, and the harmony simplifies itself to match.

next we get this (bang) and the melody's sitting on A the whole time so it's safe to say we're still in that key, but again, we've lost the I chord. instead we have the VI^{mi} and the IV, which is like the beginning of the verse progression, but in the prechorus's key. this is the "I hope that someone gets my" bit, and moving away from the root again helps emphasize that desperation: even the fake home we constructed in the first half of the prechorus is fading away.

finally, we get to the chorus (bang) which is a bit ambiguous. we could probably still analyze this in the key of A, but when I listen to the song, the note in the melody that feels most like the root is this E here, so I think we've switched back to the verse key. in fact, these are the first two chords of the verse progression, just sustained for longer and decorated a bit differently. this A chord is especially interesting: it incorporates an F#, making it what's called a major 6 chord, a fairly common substitute for a standard major triad in jazz. it just adds a little extra color, but again, I think this song uses chord complexity to represent despair, so seeing such a rich sound doesn't bode well for the fate of that bottle.

the bass also does something interesting: it starts on A to match the chord, then halfway through the bar it walks down to G#. this kind of implies a weak resolution back to the I chord (bang) and the melody follows along, but the guitar doesn't. technically it's still sustaining that A chord from before, but that's quieted down enough that I wouldn't necessarily analyze the two together, so I think this is best viewed as sort of a ghost chord: there's kind of an E major here, but also kind of not. draw whatever metaphor you want from that.

anyway, at the end of the chorus we get this (bang) where that G# walks down to an F#, and this chord should be familiar as the final chord of the verse progression which, again, interrupts our journey back to the I chord. it hangs on that for a bit to get us good and lost again, then we go back into the verse.

but before we wrap up, there's one last thing I want to address: melodic range. in most songs, the vocalist sings the verses fairly low, then they jump up high for the chorus, but here it's backwards. the verses are high, bombastic affairs, while the choruses settle down into the lower

part of Sting's range. and the dynamics of the whole piece follow suit: The verses have this driving, syncopated rhythm, while in the choruses the main guitar part is just playing whole notes. so why? well, again, there's a couple metaphors we could draw, but my favorite is that the verses take place on the island, where the narrator's actively doing stuff, but the choruses take place on the open ocean, and there's nothing to do there but wait for that bottle to be found. there's a certain helplessness to that, and dropping the intensity of the vocals captures that feeling pretty well.

and that's pretty much it. we run through those sections a couple times, then end by looping the verse progression until it fades out without ever making it home. it's a fascinating piece of harmonic storytelling, using fairly limited tools to sculpt a narrative you can easily follow without even listening to the words. in the end, it's just trying to get home, and who can't relate to that?

anyway, thanks for watching, and thanks to Patreon patron Hector Bonte for suggesting this song! if you'd like to see your favorite song analyzed, just head on over to Patreon and pledge at any level. you can also join our mailing list to find out about new episodes, like, share, comment, subscribe, and above all, keep on rockin'.

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