

Double-Tonic Complexes in Rock Music

Proposal for SMT 2017

Many rock songs have a puzzling feature: despite ostensibly simple harmonic structures, it is not entirely clear what key they are in. The standard analytical response to these situations is to claim *ambiguity* or *competition* among the possible key centers and frame a narrative interpretation around this ambiguity (e.g., Doll 2011 & forthcoming, Chapter 6; Schultz 2012). However, the assumption of monotonicity in the rock repertoire bears examination, especially the notion that the absence of a single pitch center implies conflict. Might rock tonality allow for multiple tonal centers to exist not in conflict but as equal members of a governing tonal structure?

In this paper, I propose that some seemingly ambiguous rock songs exhibit the theoretical structure known as the “double-tonic complex” (DTC). I do not mean just “tonal pairing”—the alternation of two equally weighted keys—but a true Robert Bailey-style double tonic: a four-note sonority built from the union of two third-related triads acting as prolonged tonic. The DTC has proven controversial in 19th-century scholarship since Bailey’s original analyses (1978, 1985); Matthew BaileyShea (2007) has even claimed that a prolonged DTC is “arguably impossible” in 19th-century music.

But rock music’s particularities provide a ripe environment for DTCs. Two features especially make this so: rock’s frequent employment of seventh chords as stable harmonies, and the common use of Aeolian modality for pieces with a minor tonic. I investigate three possible deployments of DTCs in rock songs:

- 1) A surface intertwining of two relative keys such that both tonics act *simultaneously* as gravitational centers. For instance, in Hall & Oates’s “Private Eyes,” C major and A minor are literally superimposed in the chorus (Example 1a), and the four-note DTC

- chord A-C-E-G appears at important formal moments. The cadence involves an unconventional progression exhibiting semitonal voice leading into the DTC (Example 1b).
- 2) Multi-section works in which each of the two keys is central for portions but neither emerges as the global tonic. Theorists have interpreted the tonal juxtaposition of A and C in the Beatles' *Abbey Road* medley to reflect some sort of struggle in the text (Gauldin 1990, Everett 1995). In a DTC interpretation, however, there is no struggle; A and C are merely local representatives of the DTC, equal in status and in service of a cohesive tonal whole (Example 2).
 - 3) Songs with looped chord progressions that do not settle on a particular tonic. The absence of tonic confirmation allows for a more abstract DTC, in which a listener can go back and forth between hearing one or the other tonic—or neither, or both. Sarah MacLachlan's "Building a Mystery" exemplifies this situation with a common looped progression (Example 3).

As theorists are just beginning to study rock tonality on its own terms (Spicer 2016, Nobile 2016), it is important to allow that monotonicity is not necessarily always in play. The double-tonic complex is only one possible alternative—applying only to relative-key pairings—but it perhaps provides a window into rock's idiosyncratic tonal system.

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EXAMPLES

Example 1a. Daryl Hall and John Oates, "Private Eyes" (1981): The chorus combines C major and A minor into a double-tonic complex

CHORUS

Upper voices project C major

21
8
Pri-vate eyes, they're wat-ching you. They see your e - v'ry ___ move Pri-vate eyes,

Full DTC occurs at the beginning of the chorus

Bass line is centered on A

Example 1b. The chorus cadences with semitonal voice leading to the four-note DTC chord, and the verse begins with an incomplete DTC in the form of a C-major triad.

END OF CHORUS

A \flat → G

E \flat → E \natural

C → C

B \flat → A

Semitonal voice leading into DTC

30
8
you wat-ching you You play with words

VERSE

Verse begins with same riff as end of chorus, but with C bass note instead of A. C major is incomplete DTC.

Example 2. The Beatles, medley from *Abbey Road* (1969), reduction.
A double-tonic complex is prolonged throughout the entire medley.

The image displays a musical score reduction of the Beatles medley from *Abbey Road* (1969), focusing on the harmonic structure of double-tonic complexes (DTC). The score is divided into two main sections: the first section covers "You never give me your money" through "Polythene Pam", and the second section covers "Golden Slumbers" through "The End".

Section 1: "You never give me your money" to "Polythene Pam"

- "You never give me your money":** Labeled as a "full DTC". The harmonic structure is based on the C-major triad, which is noted as an "incomplete DTC".
- "out of college, money spent":** Labeled as an "A-major triad: incomplete DTC with modal mixture".
- "one sweet dream":** Labeled as an "A-major triad: incomplete DTC with modal mixture".
- "all good children go to heaven":** Labeled as an "A-major triad: incomplete DTC with modal mixture".
- Sun King:** Labeled as "V → V".
- "here comes the Sun...":** Labeled as a "full DTC".
- "...King!":** Labeled as a "full DTC".
- Mean Mr. Mustard:** Labeled as a "full DTC".
- Polythene Pam:** Labeled as a "full DTC".
- Bathroom Window:** Labeled as a "full DTC".
- "oh yeah!":** Labeled as a "full DTC".

Section 2: "Golden Slumbers" to "The End"

- Golden Slumbers:** Labeled as a "full DTC".
- "golden slumbers fill your eyes":** Labeled as a "full DTC".
- Carry that Weight:** Labeled as a "climactic statement of full DTC".
- recap of "You Never Give Me Your Money":** Labeled as a "full DTC".
- "boy, you're gonna carry that weight":** Labeled as a "full DTC".
- The End:** Labeled as a "full DTC".

Summary of DTC Types:

- full DTC
- C-major triad: incomplete DTC
- A-major triad: incomplete DTC with modal mixture
- Alternation of C- and A-major triads = full DTC with mixture
- four different kinds of tonic within DTC

Example 3. Sarah MacLachlan, “Building a Mystery” (1997): B minor and D major are both potential tonics: could it be *both* in an abstract DTC?

Doll 2011: verse is in B minor, chorus is in D major

Koozin 2008: whole song is in D major with “competing modal/linear pattern around B minor.”

VERSE

Chord loop: vi-IV-I-V in D
or i-♭VI-♭III-♭VII in B minor

The prechorus sets up a chorus in either D major or B minor

PRECHORUS

G	A
D: IV	V
b: ♭VI	♭VII
S	→ D

The chorus goes back to chord loop and does not settle on either B minor or D major.

CHORUS

Hypermetrical emphasis on B minor

Rhetorical emphasis on D major with title lyric