KENZO PRODUCTIONS:

SECONDARY DOMINANTS

An Intermediate Piano & Production Guide

INTERMEDIATE GUIDE

A short guide by Kenzo Productions

Let's Talk About Secondary Dominants

If you've been playing for a while, you've probably noticed that some chord progressions just sound more interesting than others. Not flashier, necessarily — just more alive. There's often a reason for that, and more often than you'd expect, the reason is a secondary dominant.

This isn't a beginner topic, and I'm not going to treat it like one. But I am going to walk you through it properly, the same way I'd explain it sitting next to you at the piano. By the end of this, you'll understand exactly what a secondary dominant is, how to find one in any key, and why producers reach for them constantly, even outside of "traditional" music theory contexts.

What Is a Secondary Dominant?

Let's start with something you already know. In the key of C major, the 5 chord is G. And the 5 chord has a job: it wants to pull back to the 1 chord. That pull is what we call "dominant" motion. G7 resolving to C is one of the strongest, most familiar sounds in all of music.

Here's the idea that unlocks everything else: every chord in a key can have its own 5 chord, if you treat it, just for a moment, as if it were the home chord. That borrowed 5 chord is a secondary dominant. You're not leaving the key. You're just briefly pointing at a different chord and giving it the same kind of pull that G7 gives to C.

So instead of just moving from one chord to the next, you insert a chord whose entire job is to make the next chord feel inevitable. That's the whole concept. Everything else in this guide is really just showing you how to build that feeling on purpose.

How to Find One

This part is genuinely simple once it clicks, so let's slow down and do it step by step.

1. **Pick the chord you want to target. Any chord in your key except the 1 chord will work.**
2. **Go up a fifth from that chord's root note. That note becomes the root of your secondary dominant.**
3. **Build a dominant 7 chord on that note (root, third, fifth, flat seventh).**
4. **Play it right before your target chord. That's it — you've just used a secondary dominant.**

Let's make this concrete. Say you're in C major and you want to target the 5 chord, which is G. Go up a fifth from G, and you land on D. Build a dominant 7 chord on D — that's D7. Play D7, then resolve to G. You've just used the secondary dominant of the 5 chord, sometimes written as "5 of 5," because it's the 5 chord of the 5 chord.

The name sounds more complicated than the sound. Play G major, then D7, then G major again, and you'll hear it immediately: that D7 isn't just a random chord, it's pulling hard toward G in a way a plain D minor chord never would.

A Few More Examples in C Major

Once you've got the pattern, you can build a secondary dominant for almost any chord in the key. Here are a few worth knowing by ear, not just on paper:

Target chord	Secondary dominant	Resolves to
6 chord (A minor)	E7	A minor
2 chord (D minor)	A7	D minor
4 chord (F major)	C7	F major
3 chord (E minor)	B7	E minor

Notice something interesting in that third row. The plain 1 chord in C major is C major, not C7. But the secondary dominant of F borrows C7 instead — the same root, but with that flat seventh added, which is what gives it the pull. That one note is doing all the work.

WORTH NOTING

Every one of these secondary dominant chords contains at least one note that doesn't belong to the original key. That's not a mistake — it's the entire point. That outside note is what creates the tension your ear wants resolved.

Why They're Used

There are a few honest reasons composers and producers reach for these so often. The first is tension and release. A secondary dominant creates a small moment of "where is this going," and when it resolves, the target chord feels more satisfying than if you'd just walked straight to it. You're manufacturing anticipation on purpose.

The second reason is colour. A progression built only from the plain chords in a key can start to feel safe, even a little static, especially if it repeats for a while. Dropping in one secondary dominant adds a note that doesn't belong to the scale, which immediately makes the ear perk up without derailing the whole progression.

The third reason is smoother movement between chords. Because a secondary dominant shares notes with both the chord before it and the chord it resolves to, it often works as a kind of bridge, making the whole progression feel more connected rather than like a series of separate blocks.

How This Shows Up in Production

You don't need to be writing a jazz chart for this to matter. Secondary dominants are all over neo-soul, RnB, gospel-influenced chord work, and a huge amount of the soul and funk material that gets sampled in hip-hop, trap and drill production. If you've ever chopped a soul sample and felt like one chord in the loop just hit different, there's a decent chance a secondary dominant is exactly what you were reacting to.

Practically, here's how I'd use this in a session. Take a simple loop — four chords, all diatonic, nothing outside the key. Pick one chord in that loop and swap it for its secondary dominant right before the chord it naturally leads to. You don't need to touch anything else. That one substitution is often enough to take a loop from "fine" to "that's the one," because you've added a moment of pull without changing the overall mood or key of the track.

TRY THIS

Open a loop you've already made. Find a spot where you move into the 5, 6, 2 or 4 chord. Replace the chord right before it with its secondary dominant, using the table above as a reference. Listen back and notice how much more that moment pulls you forward.

Why It Sounds So Good

This comes down to something quite human, not just theoretical. Our ears are constantly predicting what comes next based on everything we've heard before. When you introduce a note that sits outside the key, you briefly break that prediction. The listener doesn't consciously clock the theory, they just feel a small pull, a slight lean forward. When the chord resolves the way their ear expects, that lean gets released, and the release feels good.

That's really the entire emotional engine behind a secondary dominant. It's a controlled, deliberate moment of "almost somewhere else," followed by the satisfaction of landing exactly where it needed to. Used sparingly, it's one of the most reliable ways to make a progression feel like it's going somewhere, rather than just sitting in place.

Where to Go From Here

Don't try to force one into every progression you write. Start by finding a piece of music you already like and see if you can spot a secondary dominant by ear, using what you now know about the shape of that pull. Then try writing one into something of your own, using the steps above. Once it's in your hands and your ear, you'll start hearing it everywhere, and reaching for it naturally when a progression needs that little extra lift.