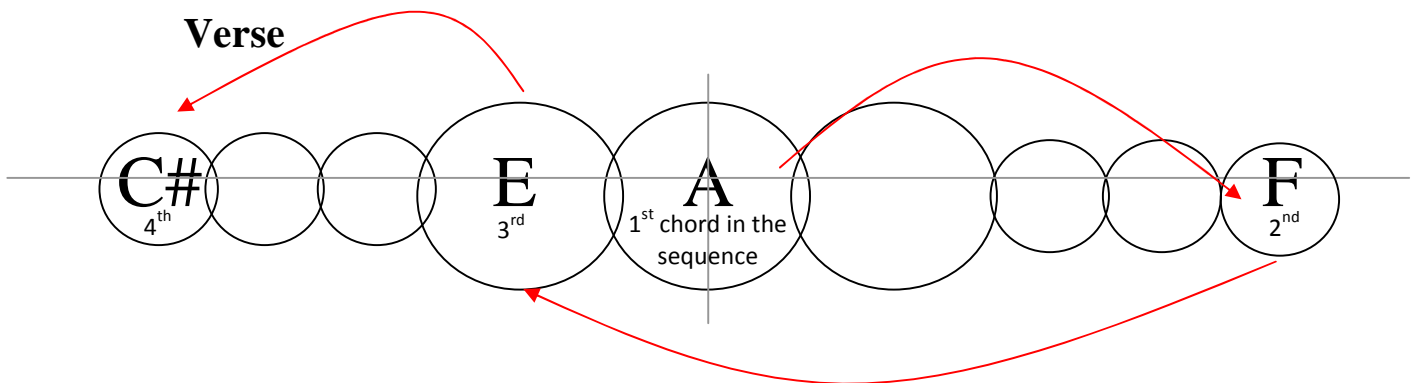


Track: WUTHERING HEIGHTS
Writer: KATE BUSH
Artist: KATE BUSH
Year: 1978
UK Chart: 1

History and context: "Wuthering Heights is an improvement on Bronte's original", said Guardian Arts Critic David McAllister. Bush's song was based on Emily Bronte's book of the same name and the song pretty much tells the same story as the book, only in a much shorter amount of time and at a much higher pitch. Teenager Kate Bush was discovered by David Gilmour of 'Pink Floyd', who recommended her to EMI. 'Wuthering Heights' itself was allegedly written in one sitting at the piano on March 5th 1977, under the light of a full moon, although this has never been independently confirmed by the singer herself. The song wrapped keyboards, strings and guitars around a lead vocal delivered in a sustained, child-like soprano by the song's 18-year-old composer. EMI had spent two years preparing her for the limelight, paying for her to have dance lessons with Lindsay Kemp, who also famously mentored Bowie in the art of mime. Engineer Jon Kelly - who went on to work with Paul McCartney, Tori Amos, 'The Beautiful South' and plenty of others - was a rookie when he did the session for the album 'The Kick Inside' which including 'Wuthering Heights'. Bush re-recorded her vocal late one night, doing two or three takes from which producer Andrew Powell chose the best. "There was no compiling," Kelly confirmed. "It was a complete performance. We started the mix at around midnight and finished at about five or six that morning." Bush's label, EMI, wanted to release an alternative track as her first single, believing Wuthering Heights sounded 'too odd' and fearing radio stations wouldn't play it. Kate insisted they release Wuthering Heights and her label boss agreed to this, believing the song would flop, proving he knew how to do his job better than she did. The Music press dismissed the song as a novelty but it became an enormous commercial success spending four weeks at number 1. From then on she chose which songs got released. The song most definitely is strange, but its success proves that the legendary reticence of record labels to promote what they consider to be weird songs can be misplaced. 'Wuthering Heights' was successful, as was 'Bohemian Rhapsody', another song that the same record company was jittery about releasing due to its strangeness and its length.

The song: the verse chord sequence strays between unrelated major chords from unrelated key centres (A, F, E and C#) without a minor chord in sight. The individual chords aren't strange, but the context is. We don't tend to realise to what extent the safety, comfort and tradition of the relationship between major and minor chords *and* the relationship between chords from a common key centre are natural to us, until we are confronted with a song which begins with a series of purely major chords with no minor chords to soften the experience.



This shows how music can sound strange when perfectly normal chords are used out of context in a strange way. Familiarity and ‘normality’ in music is usually caused by a combination of major and minor chords and by chords existing mostly within a key centre. ‘Wuthering Heights’ was not radical or extreme in terms of the chords used; it was simply odd in terms of *where* the chords fell; *the sequence is everything*. Most of the chords in the verse are unrelated to each other but the first and second chord (and the third and fourth chord) contains one common note, which makes the changes dramatic but not completely alien. One thing worth noting is that the chords of A to F (the first two chords of the verse) and the E to C# (the second two) represent the exact harmonic maneuver that happens at the beginning of the song ‘Goldfinger’, which was also described at the time as being dramatic and strange. Goldfinger’s strangeness is made more acute by virtue of the rich maj3rd being on top of the chord voicings, italicizing the disorienting out-of-key-centre maneuver between the F and Db chords (below).

Extra drama and dissonance created by the repetition of the first phrase by muted trumpet

Solo muted trumpet

Low brass

Violins

Low strings

The verse of ‘Wuthering Heights’ is in A and the chorus is in Db. Seemingly these keys are miles apart but by virtue of the bridge, the link between A and Db is made to sound perfectly normal. The Ab chord is pivotal (highlighted below in the red box) in linking the verse with the bridge. Its use in bar 9 effectively lets the piece exhale and pause, before linking beautifully from the Ab to the Ebm.

piano

8va

A / F / E / C# / A / F / E / C# /

7

Db Ab

A / F / E / C# / Ab / Ebm / Fsus4 / Ebm / Fsus4 / Ebm /

Enharmonic crossover; where the C# chord now functions as a Db

The bridge has a mesmerising meandering feel by virtue of the Ebm to Fsus4 turnaround. When we listen to the song and hear the Fsus4 for an entire bar just prior to the chorus, the move to the Gb for the start of the chorus seems like an exciting lift. Because we're used to hearing this in 'Wuthering Heights' it's hard to conceive how strange the move from Fsus4 to Gb actually is. It sounds natural to us because we're used to the song but when it was being composed it would have seemed odd. This would have been one of the many things the record label was worried about, although they probably wouldn't have known why. A credit to the supreme creative skill of Ms Bush is that she lifted the song in this precise way.

The verse

If we look at the chord grid below, for convenience back in the safe territory of C, we can appreciate how barren and empty the chords look when they simply feature a selection of major chords spread across the harmonic spectrum with no minor chords for company. The black chords are the ones used in 'Wuthering Heights' and the grey ones are the ones not chosen.

F# B E A D G C F Bb Eb Ab Db Gb

If we tried writing a complex, creative and engaging song choosing only from the chords laying horizontally along the centre of the grid, whatever we write will run out of creative space if we don't engage the minor chords, unless we introduce a sense of abstraction into it by placing some of the chords far apart, thereby losing a sense of key. In this sense the odds are even; it doesn't miss minor chords because it's not attempting to be 'normal' in the first place.

Looking briefly at the relationship between the four chords in the verse; when two chords are played one after the other, there are three factors at work: the first chord, the second chord, and the silent bit in the middle – the sonority between the chords - the sound of the relationship, the sound of the expectation of the listener. Before we look at the chords again, remember roots & fifths are structural components of a chord, whereas major and minor thirds are defining, descriptive and emotive intervals, creating colour.

Clean

Root note (A) becomes the rich major 3rd of next chord

The 'A' rings through (root to major 3rd)

Clean

Chromatic

Chromatic shift – no notes common to both chords

Mild, distant effect

Chromatic / Parallel

Mildly Dissonant

3rd of E chord becomes 5th of second chord. G# rings through (major 3rd to 5th)

The root of the 1st chord (E) rises to the E# (the major 3rd) of the C# chord

Mildly Dissonant

Why?

The ghost of the E clashes with the subsequent E#, which is the 3rd of the C# chord

The keys of the verse (A) and the Chorus (Db) are closer than you think:

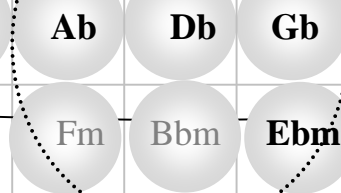
The A key and Db / C# key = C# common note

What was the maj3rd of the A chord becomes the enharmonic root of the Db chord

The Chorus

The chorus (in Db) is harmonically fairly normal in comparison to the rest of the song, apart from the fact that it starts on the 'chord IV' (the Gb) which means the phrase doesn't really settle or make perfect sense until it arrives at the Db; only then does the chorus 'stack up'. Until that point we are still guessing.

The black bold chords are the ones used; the grey ones are the others that are available but not used.



The chorus stays completely within the traditional 'normal' key-centre style of writing. However, rhythmically it has tension. Because the feel is such a slow 4 beat (almost a '1/4' feel) we can easily miss the complex nature of the phrase. We have a 4/4 bar followed by 3/4, followed by 2/4, followed by 3/4, then the whole thing is repeated. Obviously mathematically the whole thing can technically be written with just three bars of 4/4 but this isn't done because each of those time changes are 'felt'. They are real and the feel they create is part of the success of the song, not just some accidental technicality.

13

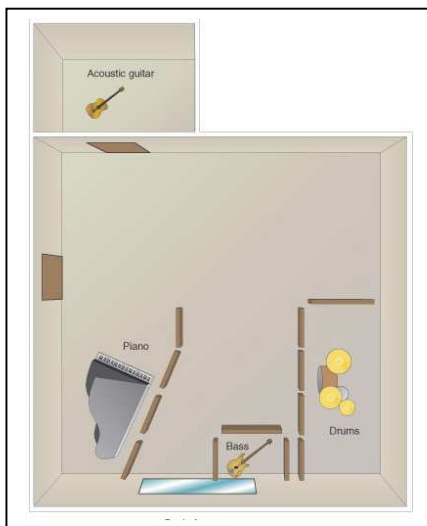
So it could be said that the verse to 'Wuthering Heights' contains harmonic abstraction but in terms of physical structure, timing, rhythm and pulse is quite normal, whereas the chorus is the opposite; it is harmonically quite normal, staying safely within the inner key centre, whilst the oddities are within the pulse, the time signatures and the rhythmic and structural 'feel'.

The sessions and the arrangement

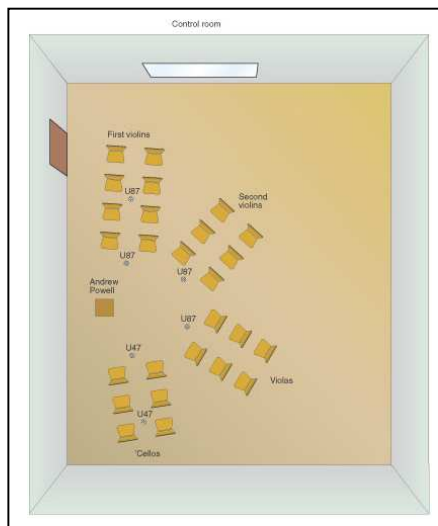
Producer Andrew Powell and engineer Jon Kelly were heavily involved in the session to record 'Wuthering Heights'. The rhythm section consisted of Kate Bush playing a Bösendorfer grand piano, Stuart Elliott on drums, Andrew Powell on bass and Ian Bairnson on a six-string acoustic. In terms of the micing, Kelly adhered pretty closely to his mentor Geoff Emmerick's favoured choices. Kelly said, "Geoff used to say to me 'the microphone is like a camera lens. Imagine it's taking a picture.'"

"Kate always recorded live vocals, and they were fantastic. She was imitating this witch, the mad lady from the Yorkshire Moors, and she was very theatrical about it. She was such a mesmerising performer — she threw her heart and soul into everything she did." said Kelly. Andrew Powell hired a celeste and played the chime-like arpeggios that double with the piano motif during the song's intro and the sections preceding the chorus. The strings were recorded in AIR's Studio One — eight first violins, six second violins, six violas and six cellos.

The rhythm section session



The string session



Kelly said, "I love the fact that performance was our main concern back then, and that everything had a distinctly human feel," adding "These days, that whole album would be approached differently — it might end up with a *Logic* sequencer somewhere — but in the final analysis Kate's talent would shine through anything. It would shine through an old dustbin lid and a rubber band."

The ultimate accolade with 'Wuthering Heights' is that it has rarely been covered. Pat Benatar recorded a 1980 but beyond that people wisely leave it alone. Occasionally ill-advised covers bands may try to cover it but few succeed, such is the distinctive musicality and production.

