

## JAZZ IMPROVISATION IN 5 MINUTES

Plus a little practice! Use this cheat sheet if you love jazz improvisation but have only limited time for study.

### HARMONY

You can get away with learning only 2 scales – the major scale and the “altered scale”. The altered scale is a characteristic sound of modern jazz, often used on “dominant 7th” chords – chords that start on the 5<sup>th</sup> note of a major key. For example, C dominant 7th (written as **C7**) starts on the 5<sup>th</sup> note of F major, so the notes in a C7 chord are taken from the key of F major: C, E, G and Bb. In classical music and early jazz, notes played over a C7 chord are from the key of F major. The C altered scale is an alternative set of notes to play over C7 that sounds more dissonant and “jazzy”.

The chord notes which give C7 its distinctive character are the E and Bb - since all chords based on C include a C, and many other chords based on C include a G. It just so happens that these 2 characteristic notes are also the characteristic notes of the chord a “tritone” (3 tones) away, Gb7: Gb, **Bb**, Db and **E**. Gb7 starts on the 5<sup>th</sup> note of B major, so in principle, you could replace any C7 chord with Gb7 and play notes from the key of B major. The only problem is that B major does not include C itself! So the C “altered scale” is B major but starting on C and leaving out the B: C, Db, Eb, E, Gb, Ab and Bb. Jazz musicians learn the altered scales so well that they can play them without thinking.

Also, many chord sequences in jazz are of the form “2-5-1” (or in Roman numerals, “II-V-I”), which means a minor chord starting on the 2<sup>nd</sup> note of a key, then a dominant chord on the 5<sup>th</sup> note, then the key chord on the 1<sup>st</sup> note – for example, Dm G7 C or Dmb5 G7b9 Cm. With this in mind, here is how to use the major and altered scales with different chords:

- IIm-V7-I: major scale of the key
- IImb5-V7b9-Im: major scale of the key a minor third above
- 7 with alterations such as b5, +5, b9, +11, ... (or just to make a V7 sound jazzy): altered scale
- m7b5 (also known as “semi-diminished”) when not part of a 2-5-1: altered scale of a tone above  
*The theory here is debatable, but this scale has the best harmonies and no clanger notes with the chord*
- o (diminished): if you don’t know the “diminished scale”, you can use the altered scale of a semitone below  
*Again the theory here is debatable, but by adding this note as a root you get an altered V7*

### MELODY

Melodic shapes in jazz often outline inversions of arpeggios constructed from the current chord or its scale notes. For example, you might play an A7 arpeggio over C7b9 or Bbmaj7 arpeggio over C9.

To make it more interesting, approach the notes in a roundabout way – for example, play a semitone above a chord note, then approach it from the tone then the semitone below (i.e., instead of G play G#-F-F#-G).

Your main focus, though, should not be on such tricks but on improvising good tunes. A good melody works almost whatever chord the rest of the band are playing, and jazz solos often include notes that just shouldn’t work – Charlie Parker would play B against a C7 chord if it made for a better melody.

### RHYTHM

Emphasize notes that come between the beats (i.e., on the “ands”), unless you’re playing traditional jazz.

Start and finish your phrases anywhere but the first note of the bar. In particular, try to anticipate changes in harmony or section by starting a phrase in the bar before (this is fundamental to blues phrasing).

Every now and then, do exactly the opposite of the advice above to provide the listener with a satisfying sense of resolution.

### TIMBRE

African languages use timbre for stress, just as European languages use pitch. A great jazz soloist can play a major scale on the beats and leave you wanting more! Imagine you’re singing, and try to make your “sound” unique, interesting and moving.