

## The 17 Most Important Scales in Jazz

Here is a list of the 17 most important scales for jazz improvisation and the harmonic contexts in which they can be used for improvisation. While we do not want to sound like we are playing scales when we improvise, it is nevertheless very important to know what notes are consonant with each chord.

Chord/scale theory is important because it helps people understand which scale(s) are consonant with a particular chord.

Edit: This article used to contain 16 scales, but we added Locrian #2. Both Locrian and Locrian #2 are useful for half-diminished chords (min7b5).

You still have to study the language and vocabulary of jazz in order to know how to appropriately apply these scales in your improvisation!

It is really a lifetime of study trying to continually absorb this information into your playing in musically satisfying ways, and yet these concepts can be learned rather quickly. You can easily digest this information intellectually, but then spend the next ten or more years learning how to apply these concepts!

Note: We have included a chord example for each scale. As much as possible, we tried to keep everything related to C major to show where these scales can be used in relation to the Cmajor/Aminor key center. This is an imperfect system but hopefully it will be instructive.

I have also linked some of these concept to a corresponding Chord Workout play along to help you in your quest to apply these scales to your improvising! Happy practicing!

### #1-7 The Medieval Church Modes

1. Ionian (Major scale) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 – Cmaj7

The major scale is consonant over major chords. For example, a C major scale corresponds with a C major chord.

2. Dorian Minor scale 1 2 b3 4 5 6 b7 8 – Dmin7

The dorian minor scale as a b3, natural 6, and b7. It is the most commonly used minor scale for improvisation in jazz music. It works over any ii chord, but it can also be used for other minor chords, such as the iii chord and the vi chord.

3. Phrygian Minor scale 1 b2 b3 4 5 b6 b7 8 – Emin7 or G7(b9)sus

Of the five types of minor scales (Dorian, Phrygian, Aeolian/Natural Minor, Harmonic Minor, and Melodic Minor), the Phrygian mode is arguably one of the two least common minor scales for jazz

improvisation, along with harmonic minor. Even though dorian, melodic minor, and even aeolian are probably more common, the Phrygian mode is still useful in at least two contexts:

The Phrygian scale works over a iii chord (Emin7 in the key of C works with E Phrygian)

Phrygian minor can also be used over a V7 chord if the V7 chord is suspended and has a b9. For instance, in a G7(b9)sus to Cmin7 progression, a G Phrygian (same key center as Eb major, 3 flats) works well. This context is discussed in much further detail in the Jazz Piano Book and The Jazz Theory Book by Mark Levine.

#### 4. Lydian Major 1 2 3 #4 5 6 7 8 – Fmaj7 or Cmaj7(#4)

The Lydian Mode works well over any maj7#4, maj7b5, or maj7#11 chord. The most obvious example is as IV chord (e.g. F major in the key of C), but the lydian mode can also work well over a I chord. The Lydian scale is the brightest of all the church modes, and has a distinct, modern flavor over a I chord due to the non-diatonic (in the context of a I chord) #4 chord tone.

#### 5. Mixolydian (Dominant) 1 2 3 4 5 6 b7 8 – G7

The Mixolydian mode is the most basic scale for improvising over a V7 chord. You can also use the altered scale, the half-whole diminished scale, whole-tone, or even Phrygian over a V7 chord, but each different scale implies different alterations, and different scales will work better in different musical contexts. Often there is more than one acceptable choice for improvising over a V7 chord.

#### 6. Aeolian (Natural Minor) 1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7 8 – Amin7 (Dorian is more common)

It seems that natural minor should be the preferred choice for minor chords, but most players default to using Dorian over a minor chord due to the relative consonance of the natural 6 from the Dorian scale versus the relative dissonance of the b6 from the Natural Minor scale. You can choose to use Dorian over a vi chord, although Natural Minor is usually an acceptable choice also for a vi chord or a minor i chord.

#### 7. Locrian (Half-Diminished) 1 b2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7 8 – Bmin7(b5)

The exotic locrian scale is the darkest, most dissonant mode of the major scale. It works well over a half-diminished chord (also known as a min7(b5) chord). When approaching a half-diminished chord, some players like to sharpen the b2 from the Locrian mode to a natural 2, which gives you Locrian #2 (see scale #17).

#### 7.5 Locrian #2 – 1 2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7 8 – Bmin7(b5)

Scales #8 and #9 are two variations upon the diminished scale.

#### 8. Half-Whole Diminished (Dominant-Diminished) 1 b2 b3 3 #4 5 6 b7 8 – G13(b9)

Because diminished scales are symmetrical, there are only three diminished scales, and each can be started in eight different places! ALL diminished scales are made up of alternating half-steps and whole-steps,

but you can start with either a half-step or a whole-step. For more information on diminished scales, you can visit my other article on the Secrets of the Diminished Scale, or learn some diminished licks.

The half-whole diminished scale can be referred to as dominant diminished because it works well over a dominant 13(b9) chord. The half-whole diminished is made up of the intervals HWHWHWHW (H=half-step, W=whole-step)

9. Half-Whole Diminished (Diminished-diminished) 1 2 b3 4 #4 #5 6 7 8 – C#dim7

If you start a diminished scale with a whole-step, it become WHWHWHWH. This mode of the diminished scale works well over a diminished chord.

10. Altered Scale 1 b2 b3 3 #4 b6 b7 8 – G7(#9b13) or G7alt, A7(#9b13) or A7alt

The altered scale is actually the 7th mode of melodic minor. It works great over an altered chord (7#9b13, or 7alt, which implies 7(b9#9#11b13) (that's way too long, which is why we shorten it to 7alt). This scale has many names, including "Super-Locrian," "Diminished-Whole-Tone" or even the "Dim-Wit" scale! I prefer the term "Altered" for 3 reasons: it's shorter, less intimidating for inexperienced players, and most importantly it reminds us that we need ALL of the 4 possibly alterations to a dominant chord: b9, #9, #11, and b13. You can thus spell the scale: 1,b9,#9,3,#11,b13,8

Vibraphonist Gary Burton likes to remind us that the altered scale has a hidden note, the natural 5th, that is also consonant with this scale. Though the natural 5th isn't in technically in the 7th mode of melodic minor, remember that the natural 5th works also when improvising with an altered scale over an altered dominant chord!

11. Whole-Tone Scale 1 2 3 #4 b6 b7 8 – G7b13

The whole-tone scale only has 6 notes (the 7th note would be the doubled root in the top octave). It is entirely made up of whole-steps: WWWWWW.

This scale implies a natural 9, a #11, a b13, and of course a b7. It works well over a 7b13 chord as long as there is a NATURAL 9 and not a b9 or #9.

12. Blues Scale 1 b3 4 #4/b5 5 b7 8 and Minor Penatonic (minus #4/b5) – C7

The blues scale is one of the first scales that many jazz musicians are taught. While I have some reservations about this scale, and I have made up the "Mixo-Dorian Blues Scale" as a viable alternative, it is nevertheless an important, ubiquitous scale for soloing over the blues.

13. Lydian Dominant 1 2 3 #4 5 6 b7 8 – D7#11 or F7#11

Lydian implies a #4. Dominant implies a b7. If you put them together, you have the fourth mode of the melodic minor scale! This scale works well over a dominant II7 or a dominant IV7 chord, a bII7 tritone sub, or any 13(#11) chord. It works great over the second chord in Take the A-Train, although many players choose to use whole-tone ideas instead of lydian-dominant.

## #14-16 Are Bebop Scales with a Chromatic Passing Tones

If you add an extra chromatic passing tone to a major, dorian, or mixolydian scale, you get a bebop scale! While bebop musicians technically put the chromatic notes in other places and it sounded just fine in recordings, jazz theorists have codified the bebop scales into something more concrete, placing the chromatic passing tone between 6 and 5 (major bebop scales) and 8 and b7 (dominant and minor bebop scales). The bebop scales are primarily descending scales, and so I've listed the numbers backwards to reflect the descending nature of these scales.

## 14. Major Bebop 8 7 6 b6 5 4 3 2 1 – Cmaj7

You can use the major bebop scale with any major chord. The chromatic passing tone is placed between 6 and 5. With any of these bebop scales, the idea is to use the chromatic note as a chromatic passing tone, and not to stop on the chromatic note for too long.

## 15. Minor Bebop 8 7 b7 6 5 4 b3 2 1 – Amin7, Dmin7, or Emin7

The minor bebop scale has a chromatic between 8 and b7. It works well over a minor chord. Remember to use the chromaticism in the scale when improvising, and to use the natural 7th as a passing tone.

## 16. Mixolydian Bebop 8 7 b7 6 5 4 3 2 1 – G7

The mixolydian bebop scale is the quintessential bebop scale. It has a chromatic passing tone between 8 and b7, and it works the best over an unaltered dominant chord.

## 17. Locrian #2 1 2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7 8 – Bmin7(b5)

If you start with a locrian scale and then raise the b2 to a natural 2, this new scale is called the "Locrian #2" (that's "sharp" 2, not "number" 2) mode. The locrian #2 scale is the 6th mode of melodic minor harmony. Both locrian and locrian #2 can be used with half-diminished chords.

I hope that these 17 scales will help you in your quest to become a better improviser! Don't forget to follow the links and use the chord progression workout play alongs! They are very helpful.

-Camden Hughes

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