

Jazz Scales! The 3 You Need to practice and How You apply them to Jazz Chords



Jazz Scales can seem like a million options that you all need to learn in all positions and all chords, but there is a way to approach this that is a little easier than trying to learn all jazz scales in all modes. After all the Dorian mode is not as important as the Major or Minor key.

My Approach to Jazz Scales – Learn from the songs you play

This PDF serves as a companion to the video with an overview of the scales and the progressions. I am going to take a practical look at the chord progressions you will encounter and what scales over what chords you are going to need. I am also going to discuss how you apply the scales to the chords and practice in a more general way towards being able to use a scale over any of its diatonic chords.

Hope you like it!

The Basic Major Cadence

In the key of C major, the basic cadence in Jazz is a II V I: **Dm7 G7 Cmaj7**

Where the roman numeral tells you which degree of the scale the chord is found on.

For a Major Scale you want to focus on

- Learn the scale
- Diatonic Arpeggios
- Targeting Chord tones
- For all Diatonic chords

The Diatonic Chords of C major:

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Cmaj7	Dm7	Em7	Fmaj7	G7	Am7	Bø

The Minor Cadence

In the minor key there are more scales involved.

The minor II V I in the key of A would be **Bø E7(b9) Am6**

IIø V I

Bø E7(b9) Am6

Bø - C major scale

E7(b9) - A harmonic minor

Am6 - A melodic minor

Secondary Dominants and Cadences

A secondary dominant is a dominant chord in a chord progression that is not the dominant of the key, but instead resolves to another diatonic chord in the progression.

From the material above you already know what to play over a secondary dominant.

The dominant resolves to a chord in the key, and that chord is either a major or a minor chord. Therefore, you know if the sound used is taking a major scale or a harmonic minor scale.

Examples:

In the key of C major:

I [V] IV
Cmaj7 C7 Fmaj7

Here the C7 is resolving to a major chord (F major) and you would treat it as a dominant in F major using that scale to improvise over it.

I [V] II
Cmaj7 A7 Dm7

The A7 is a secondary dominant resolving to Dm7, a minor chord. Therefore, you improvise over it as if it is an A7 in the key of D minor. That means that you use D harmonic minor on it.

D harmonic minor:

I II bIII IV V bVI VII
DmMaj7 Eø Fmaj7(#5) Gm7 A7 Bbmaj7 C#dim

Similar to secondary dominants you can also have complete cadences. These are analyzed like this:

I [II V] III
Cmaj7 F#ø B7 Em7

In the above example the entire II V is a secondary cadence to Em7

IVm and Minor Subdominant Chords

The Subdominant chords are not what defines tonal harmony, but maybe they are what I find the most beautiful, mostly because there are so many different options available.

One very common version is the minor subdominant chord. These are often some type of IVm chord, so in C major that would be an Fm.

Fm6 - F melodic minor

FmMaj - F melodic minor

Fm7 Bb7 - Eb major (Turning IVm chords into a II V progression)

Diminished Chords – Dominant and Subdominant variations

Diminished chords seem mysterious to many people, but once we get over the fact that there might be more than one function for the same type of chord it is not as difficult.

Dominant Diminished

An example of a very common (secondary) dominant diminished chord in C major could be :

I [VII] II

Cmaj7 C#dim Dm7

Here the C#dim is working as an A7(b), and the scale you would use over it is the same scale you would use over the A7: D harmonic minor.

Subdominant Diminished

Probably the most common subdominant diminished in Jazz is the one found on the bIII of the scale:

I [#IV]₂ II

Cmaj7 Ebdim Dm7

In this case the Ebdim is an inversion of the #IV dim and it is resolving down to a subdominant chord (here Dm7).

The scale you would use on it would be E harmonic minor

C major: C D E F G A B C

Ebdim: Eb F# A C

Altering C major to fit the diminished chord:

C D# E F# G A B C = E harmonic minor: E F# G A B C D# E

You can check out more on diminished chords here: [Secret to play over Diminished Chords](#)

Tritone Substitution

In C major:

II sub[V] I

Dm7 Db7 Cmaj7.

Here Db7 is the tritone substitution of G7.

Tritone substitution comes from exploiting the fact that two dominants share the same core interval (and notes)

G7: G B D F and Db7 Db F Ab B (Cb actually Cb enharmonically correct)

So, the 3rd and 7th of these two chords are the same note: F and B, and since they form the core of the sound for the chord you can exchange one for the other.

In the example above I am substituting G7 with Db7.

Db7 will in this case be played as a Lydian dominant, which is the same note set as Ab melodic minor:

Db7 Lydian b7: Db Eb F G Ab Bb B Db = Ab melodic minor: Ab Bb B Db Eb F G Ab

In this context I am again writing B instead of the enharmonically correct Cb, because we are using it in a C major context.

Backdoor Dominant

A common variation of a minor subdominant is the Backdoor dominant:

IV bVII I

Fmaj7 Bb7 Cmaj7

The Bb7 functions as a IVm chord here and the basic progression could be understood as subdominant – minor subdominant – tonic.

The scale you would use (and what you come across in the melody of a Jazz Standard) is again a Lydian dominant, so Bb Lydian b7. This is of course the same set of notes as F melodic minor, so again a connection to the minor subdominant.

Double Diminished #IV

This chord has by far the hippest name of all the chords in the video. Another common name for it is German Augmented 6th chord, but I tend to stick with the double diminished name because I find that it describes the sound of the chord better.

And example of a Double Diminished #IV in C could be:

IV #IVDD₃ I (Here #IVDD₃ means #IV double dim with the 3rd in the bass)

Fmaj7 Ab7 Cmaj7

The way to understand the double diminished explanation is:

#IV diminished in C is **F# A C Eb**

A double diminished chord would then be **F# Ab C Eb** (double dim means lowering the 3rd twice)

When you come across this chord then usually it will have the 3rd in the bass, which would be: Ab C Eb F#, and this enharmonically spells out an Ab7

This is not a very common chord, but the Jazz Standard Out Of Nowhere has a good example. In some harmonizations of My Romance and My Foolish Heart you will have it as well.

The scale associated with this chord is usually the Lydian b7 scale, so in the case of Ab7: Ab Lydian Dominant (same note set as Eb melodic minor)

Common Dominant Sounds that are not strictly diatonic

There are two versions of dominants that are very common but that do require a little analysis:

II V I

Dm7 G7(b9) Cmaj7

Here the V is borrowed from C minor, and the scale used is C harmonic minor.

II V I

Dm7 G7alt Cmaj7

The G7alt is a dominant from the altered scale. G altered is the same set of notes as Ab melodic minor. Notice how G7alt and the tritone substitute Db takes the same note both coming from Ab melodic minor.

Summing up

What you need to know and work on:

What we need:

Major scale - all diatonic chords

Harmonic minor (Dom7th and Dim chords)

Melodic minor (Tonic minor, Lydian b7 and alt)

What to work on:

- The Scales

- The Diatonic Chords

Basic concept to solo over Fmaj7 in C Major (or any other diatonic chord in a scale)

- Use C major scale

- Emphasize the notes of the Fmaj7 arpeggio

A very general but very powerful goal to work towards:

Work on being able to bring out any set of notes in any scale.

An essential and very powerful skill when playing Jazz

It makes a lot of sense to also check out another video on this topic that discusses some of this harmony.

You can do that here:

[Secret to play over Diminished Chords](#)

[The 10 Types Of Difficult Chords In A Jazz Standard](#)

<https://jenslarsen.nl/why-you-want-to-think-in-functional-harmony/>