

The Altered Scale: Stepping Out on Dominant Chords

The seventh mode of the melodic minor scale, also known as the altered scale, is a very useful sound to have under ones fingers when improvising in a jazz context. The melodic minor scale itself is built off of the major scale, R M2 M3 P4 P5 M6 M7, with the only difference being that the third is minor, R M2 m3 P4 P5 M6 M7. So if we were playing a C melodic minor scale the notes would be C D Eb F G A B and C. The altered scale is a mode built off of the seventh degree of the scale, in the key of C that would be B. This mode produces a chord that has a b9, #9, b5 and #5. In other words if you saw a B7 chord with any or all of those alterations, i.e. B7b9, B7#5, B7#9b5 etc, you could apply the altered scale to outline those chords.

Though this is a common way to think about the altered scale, a melodic minor scale one half step (one fret) above the root of the chord, I believe there is an easier way to go about applying this sound to a dominant chord. Since the chord being played is a 7th chord why not think about the altered scale as a 7th chord as well? In doing so, we will think of the altered scale as a 7(#11) chord a tri-tone away from the root of the altered chord. For example if we have a C7alt chord we would play an F#7(#11) scale or arpeggio, which comes from Db melodic minor anyway. The F# chord contains the same notes as the Db melodic minor scale, but it is easier to think about because it uses the same chord quality, 7th, as the chord we are hearing.

To get the sound of this in our ears try playing the following voicing's over a C7alt chord, or a C bass note if you can. If you have a piano or keyboard handy you can hold down a C with the sustain pedal, or if you use Band in a Box you can have a C7alt chord vamping and then play these voicing's over top of it.

Example 1

Example 1

	F#7/C	F#7(#11)/C	F#13(#11)/C	F#9/C	F#9(#11)/C	F#9/C	F#13/C
T	11	11	11	9	9	9	11
A	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
B	11	10	10	9	9	9	9
	9	9	9	9	9	9	9

One of the best parts of this approach is that you don't have to learn anything new, for the most part, as some or all of these voicing's should be familiar to you. All you need to do is take material that you already know and apply it in a different light and you have the "altered" sound. If you notice, all of these chords are based around the F# on the ninth fret of the fifth string. This is because the arpeggio, scale and licks we will examine in this article are based out of that chord shape. This method was used by Joe Pass, among others, as a way to make his transitions between chords and lines smoother. Because he always had a scale and/or line built out of a chord fingering, he was never more than a fret away from a chord or line at any given time.

Now that we have several altered chords under our fingers let's take a look at the arpeggio and scale that is built from this position. Again if you can have a C or C7alt chord sounding as you play these examples it will help get the altered sound into your ears as well as your fingers.

Example 2

Example 2

The musical notation for Example 2 consists of two systems. The first system shows an arpeggio for the F#7(b9)/C chord. The notes are C#, D#, E#, F#, G#, A#, and B. The second system shows a scale starting on C# and moving up and then down. The notes are C#, D#, E#, F#, G#, A#, B, C#, B, A, G, F, E, D, C#. The notation includes a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The arpeggio is shown in the first system, and the scale is shown in the second system. The scale is a half-step above the natural C major scale, starting on C#.

As far as fingerings go, I prefer to play this arpeggio and scale starting on my middle finger. That way all of the notes fit within four frets and there is no reaching or stretching involved when playing the arpeggio and scale. Once you have the arpeggio and scale under your fingers try putting on a C7alt, or Gm7b5 C7alt, vamp and improvising using these fingerings. The best way to learn any musical concept is to quickly learn a fingering for it and then apply it right away. One thing I always tell my students is that if you can recite it then you have learned it, but if you can manipulate it then you have internalized it.

Now that we've learned the scale and arpeggio in this position let's take a look at some classic licks and pattern that come from this fingering. The first example contains licks that are built from the top part of the scale, and all of them are descending in nature. These licks come from all over the jazz guitar tradition, they are patterns that have been used by almost every famous player over the years and have become so ingrained into the genre that they have become a water mark for younger and beginning players. These are the types of licks that older more experienced musicians listen for to see if a younger player is really "cutting" it, or just "faking" it.

Example 3

Example 3

The image displays three systems of musical notation for guitar licks over a C7alt chord in 4/4 time. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with notes and a guitar tablature staff with fret numbers. The first system shows two measures of a lick. The second system shows three measures of a lick. The third system shows two measures of a lick. The notes in the treble clef staff are: System 1: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. System 2: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. System 3: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The tablature staff for each system shows the corresponding fret numbers for each note.

Once you have a few of these ideas under your fingers then try and put them into your improvisations. Start by soloing with the arpeggio and scale from the second example and once in a while play one of these licks. Another exercise you can do is take one of these licks and treat it as a scale. Improvise over a C7alt chord and use the notes of one of the licks as the basis for your ideas. You can change rhythms, take notes out, add new notes in, and apply many other interpretations to the lick. This way you will be taking command of the lick and not just repeating it note for note in your solos. One of the biggest problems I find with younger students is that they become “line” players. Where they are performing licks one after the other, note for note in their solos. Instead what we should be doing with these licks is internalizing them and manipulating them so that people can hear the jazz vocabulary in our playing, but not necessarily the licks verbatim.

Now let’s look at some patterns that are built off of the middle area of the scale. You can apply the same exercises to these patterns as you did to the last ones, and even start to combine licks from examples three and four if you feel comfortable enough with them already.

Example 4

Example 4

Example 4 shows two systems of C7alt scale runs in 4/4 time. Each system includes a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a guitar TAB staff with fret numbers. The first system consists of two measures, and the second system consists of four measures.

Now let's look at some ascending licks that are built off of the lower part of the scale.

Example 5

Example 5

Example 5 shows two systems of ascending licks for C7alt in 4/4 time. Each system includes a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a guitar TAB staff with fret numbers. The first system consists of two measures, and the second system consists of four measures.

Now that we have learned shorter licks built off of the three areas of the scale, let's try combining them to form longer lines that cover all three areas. You can do this one of two ways, the first is to play them all in eighth notes, like in the examples below, to create four or five bar phrases. The other way is to "double-time" the licks, this is where you play all of the notes as sixteenth notes. This way you play the same amount of notes but in a shorter amount of time. This approach was commonly used by Sonny Rollins on his recordings in the late 1950's, especially his Saxophone Colossus album.

Example 6

Example 6

The image shows two systems of musical notation for guitar. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with fret numbers for the thumb (T), index (A), and middle (B) fingers. The first system is labeled 'C7alt' and shows an ascending melodic line. The second system is also labeled 'C7alt' and shows a descending melodic line. The fret numbers are as follows:

System 1 (Ascending):
T: 8 11 12 11 9 8
A: 9 11 10 11 8 11
B: 9 11 10 11 8 11

System 2 (Descending):
T: 12 10 11 10 9 11 8 9
A: 9 10 8 11 12 10 11 10
B: 9 11 11 8 10 11 10

These are only two ways, one ascending and one descending, to combine those licks to make new and longer ideas. There are several ways to work these licks further to create new and fresh lines, the first being to write out your own ideas that combine all three areas of the scale. The second way is to learn a couple of licks from each area of the scale and try improvising longer lines on the spot. That may take some time so don't get discouraged if it doesn't come right away, stick to it as having this ability will really pay off in the long run.

Now that we've worked through some licks and patterns over the altered scale it's time to apply it to a "real life" situation, so let's take this scale and use it over a blues. The blues is a great "test drive" model for any jazz concept because the form and chords are usually quite familiar to us and there are several key changes, but nothing too fancy. Also in this the basic blues form there are three 7th chords in which we can apply the altered scale to.

A quick side note: Some teachers feel that the altered scale should only be used in certain contexts, such as dominant chords that resolve to a tonic chord, or a dominant chord in a minor key. I have found that in the common practice, through studying jazz records dating from the 1940's until today, players of all backgrounds and eras use the altered scale over any and all dominant seventh chords. Feel free to take this scale and play it over any 7th chord you come across. You may find that it works better in some situations than others in your own playing, but you'll never know unless you try!

In the following example I have written a solo over a C blues chord progression using the altered scale. For the purposes of this lesson I have used it on every chord in the form, but in your own practice and performance feel free to use it as little or much as you want. Again try writing out your own solos over a blues using the altered scale, and if you are comfortable enough with the sound try improvising over the blues in different keys using only the altered sound for each chord. Lastly I have written the 7(#11) substitute chord in brackets next to each sounding chord for easy reference.

Example 7

Example 7

The image displays three musical examples of altered scale fingerings on the guitar neck, each with a treble clef staff and a guitar staff showing fret numbers for strings T, A, and B.

Example 1: Labeled $C^7 (F\#7(\#11))$. The treble clef staff shows a scale starting on F# in the 4th position. The guitar staff shows fret numbers: T (11, 12, 11, 9, 8), A (9, 9, 10), B (8, 10, 11, 8, 11, 10, 9, 11, 8, 11, 8, 9, 10, 11, 10, 9, 8, 11, 9).

Example 2: Labeled $F^7 (B^7(\#11))$ and $C^7 (F\#7(\#11))$. The treble clef staff shows a scale starting on B in the 4th position. The guitar staff shows fret numbers: T (2, 4, 1, 4, 1, 2), A (3, 2, 2, 1, 4), B (8, 9, 8, 11, 9, 8, 11, 9, 8, 11, 9, 8).

Example 3: Labeled $Dm^7 (D^b7(\#11))$, G^7 , $C^7 (F\#7(\#11))$, $Dm^7 (D^b7(\#11))$, and G^7 . The treble clef staff shows a scale starting on D in the 4th position. The guitar staff shows fret numbers: T (6, 7, 3, 7, 4), A (4), B (4, 5, 3, 5, 6, 3, 5, 3, 10, 9, 8, 11, 11, 8, 5, 4, 3, 6, 6, 3).

Now that you have the altered scale worked out in one position on the neck, try taking it into other positions. Below I have included some of my other favorite fingerings for this scale. You can use these as a starting point then try and find some fingerings of your own that you like to use when you play the altered scale. Remember, the most important part of learning to play any jazz concept is to go out and play it. So don't get too bogged down in making sure each fingering is perfect before you apply it. Learn the licks above or fingerings below quickly and dive right into playing them, besides that's the fun part!

Example 8

Example 8

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a C7alt F#7(#11) scale. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The first system shows the scale in two measures, with a guitar fretboard diagram below it. The fretboard diagram has two lines labeled 'T' (top) and 'B' (bottom). The first measure has fret numbers 2, 4, 1, 3, 4, 1, 2, 4. The second measure has fret numbers 1, 3, 1, 2, 4, 5, 2, 4. The second system also shows the scale in two measures, with a guitar fretboard diagram below it. The first measure has fret numbers 4, 6, 3, 5, 6, 4, 5, 7. The second measure has fret numbers 4, 6. The third system shows the scale in two measures, with a guitar fretboard diagram below it. The first measure has fret numbers 11, 13, 11, 13, 14, 11, 12, 14. The second measure has fret numbers 11, 13, 11, 13, 14, 11, 12, 14.

The last thing that you can do with these scale fingerings, once you are comfortable applying them to altered chords, is to play them over top of different 7th chords to produce different sounds. For example, we can play the F#7(#11) scale over top of a C7 chord to produce the altered sound, like we did above. But, if we play the F#7(#11) scale over a plain F#7 chord we can produce a Lydian Dominant sound, a Mixolydian scale with a raised 4th. Also if we play the F#7(#11) scale over top of an Ab7, G#7, chord we get an Ab7(b13) sound.

So just by learning the scales and licks mentioned above in one key, you can now play those same exact notes and sound two other chords. This is the beauty of the melodic minor system, it is much more flexible than the major scale and its related modes, especially when applied to dominant chords. So one exercise you can try is take the first lick from Example 3, then put on Band in a Box with 2 bars of C7, 2 bars of F#7 and 2 bars of Ab7 to hear how the exact same lick will work over three different chords. Once you can do this, the possibilities are endless!

One of the biggest things to keep in mind when you learn any concept, idea, lick, voicing, pattern etc. is that you should never learn it in one position or for one situation. Players like Jim Hall and Ed Bickert have made careers by taking a handful of ideas and playing them in a million and one situations to produce remarkable improvisations. So always look for new and hip ways to apply what you already know, you'll be surprised how far you can go with what you already have.

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