

The Other Blues: Minor Blues Progressions And Common Use Scales

Section 1: Common Minor Blues Chord Progressions

In this first section we will take a look at the most common chords progressions used when playing a minor blues. These progressions will start off rather simply, with what is referred to as the “basic” minor blues, and will consequently get more and more complex until reaching a point of chordal saturation.

Example 1

The first example lays out the chords to what is considered the most common progression played over a minor blues. These are the changes that one would play if a minor blues were called at a jam session, or if they were playing with a band for the first time. These chords are a great way to get a band on a common ground before adding substitutions of various kinds. The progression only contains four different chords the I (Cm7), the IV (Fm7), the II (Dm7b5) and the V (G7alt).

Example 1 musical notation showing a 12-bar progression in 4/4 time. The chords are: Cm7 (bars 1-4), Fm7 (bars 5-8), Cm7 (bars 9-12), Dm7b5 (bars 9-10), G7alt (bars 11-12), and Cm7 (bars 13-14).

Example 2

In the next progression we will insert a common substitution over the II chord in bars 9 and 12. Instead of playing the Dm7b5 chord each time the II chord comes around, we will play its tri-tone sub, Ab7, instead. The Ab7 chord contains the three most important notes of the Dm7b5 chord, F (3rd/13th), Ab (5th/R) and the C (7th,3rd). The Ab7 chord also resolves smoothly down by a half-step to the G7alt chord that follows it each time it is played. This progression is often intertwined with example 1 without much distinction between the two. Since Ab7 and Dm7b5 are so closely related the only real audible difference between these two progressions is the bass movement in bars 9-10 and 12.

Example 2: A 12-measure progression in 4/4 time. The first measure is Cm7. The second measure is Fm7. The third measure is Cm7. The fourth measure is A[♭]7 and G⁷alt. The fifth measure is Cm7. The sixth measure is A[♭]7 and G⁷alt.

Example 3

With this example we will insert our first “secondary” dominant chords. A secondary dominant chord is one that is not found within the tonic key, C minor, but one that temporarily tonicizes a chord found in the progression, in this case the Fm7 chord in bar five. The two added chords in bar four, Gm7b5-C7alt, are a ii-V7 progression in the key of F minor. These chords allow for a smooth transition between the I chord, Cm7, and the IV chord, Fm7, by temporarily cadencing in that key.

Example 3: A 12-measure progression in 4/4 time. The first measure is Cm7. The second measure is Fm7. The third measure is Cm7. The fourth measure is Gm⁷b⁵ and C⁷alt. The fifth measure is Fm7. The sixth measure is Cm7. The seventh measure is A[♭]7 and G⁷alt. The eighth measure is Cm7. The ninth measure is A[♭]7 and G⁷alt.

Example 4

In this example we will now add a “turnaround” progression in the second bar. A turnaround progression is any series of chords that takes the listener from one chord, Cm7 in this case, and turning it around back to itself using a series of chords, Dm7b5-G7alt in this case. These chords help to add harmonic diversity to the first three bars of the minor blues, which are normally just a long Cm7 chord. They allow an improviser or composer to have more movement with their lines/chords, while not stepping too far away from the tonic key.

Chord progression for Example 4:

- Bar 1: Cm7
- Bar 2: Cm7
- Bar 3: Cm7
- Bar 4: Dm^{7b5}
- Bar 5: G^{7alt}
- Bar 6: Cm7
- Bar 7: Cm7
- Bar 8: Cm7
- Bar 9: Gm^{7b5}
- Bar 10: C^{7alt}
- Bar 11: C^{7alt}
- Bar 12: C^{7alt}

Example 5

Now we will add a bIII^{maj7} chord in between the I and II chords in bars 1 and 12. The Eb^{maj7} chord is the relative major of C minor, so allows for a smooth connection of the I and II chords. These four chords, I^{m7}-bIII^{maj7}-II^{m7b5}-V^{7alt}, are one of the most common minor key turnarounds found within the jazz idiom.

Chord progression for Example 5:

- Bar 1: Cm7
- Bar 2: Cm7
- Bar 3: Cm7
- Bar 4: Eb^{maj7}
- Bar 5: Dm^{7b5}
- Bar 6: G^{7alt}
- Bar 7: Cm7
- Bar 8: Cm7
- Bar 9: Cm7
- Bar 10: Gm^{7b5}
- Bar 11: C^{7alt}
- Bar 12: C^{7alt}

Example 6

Now that we have focused our turnaround substitutions on the tonic key, we can start to turnaround to secondary keys/chords. In this example the “target” chord of the new turnaround is the Ab⁷ chord found in bar nine. The previous two bars, Cm⁷-F⁷/Bbm⁷-Eb⁷, act as a iii-VI/ii-V progression that resolves when it reaches the Ab⁷ chord in bar nine. With this turnaround added to our progression there are now four turnarounds being used with our chorus, bars 1-3, 4-5, 7-9, and 11-1. So without stepping outside of the main chords in our original progression we are now able to create movement in almost every bar of the progression, simply by inserting turnarounds.

Cm7 Ebmaj7 Dm7b5 G7alt Cm7 Gm7b5 C7alt
 5 Fm7 Cm7 F7 Bbm7 Eb7
 9 Ab7 G7alt Cm7 Ebmaj7 Dm7b5 G7alt

Example 7

Now that we have subbed as many turnarounds as we can, we will now start to alter these turnarounds to give ourselves several options when blowing/comping through the progression. We will start by adding tri-tone subs into the tonic turnarounds in bars 1-3 and 11-12. Here we start by subbing the Dm7b5 with its tri-tone Ab7, and the G7alt chord with its tri-tone Db7 chord. Since the Ebmaj7 is already a fifth away from Ab7, we can simply make it a dominant chord, Eb7, which will now start a series of three dominant chords that move through the cycle of fourths before resolving by half-step to the Cm7 chords in bars 3 and 1.

Cm7 Eb7 Ab7 Db7 Cm7 Gm7b5 C7alt
 5 Fm7 Cm7 F7 Bbm7 Eb7
 9 Ab7 Db7 Cm7 Eb7 Ab7 Db7

Example 8

We will now apply the tri-tone substitution concept to the turnaround in bars 4-5 and 7-9. In bar four the C7alt is subbed by a Gb7 chord, which resolves down by half-step to the Fm7 chord in bar five. In bar seven the F7 chord is subbed by its tri-tone to become B7 and the Eb7 chord in bar eight is replaced by an A7 chord. The use of the tri-tone subs can sometimes become monotonous because of the continuous half-step movement occurring during each cadence. In order to avoid this, one can alternate between using

the standard turnarounds and the tri-tone turnarounds in each chorus of improvising/comping.

Chord progression for Example 9:

- Staff 1: Cm7 Eb7 Ab7 Db7 Cm7 Gm7b5 Gb7
- Staff 2 (starting at bar 5): Fm7 Cm7 B7 Bbm7 A7
- Staff 3 (starting at bar 9): Ab7 Db7 Cm7 Eb7 Ab7 Db7

Example 9

We can now add tri-tone subs to the ii chords of each of the turnarounds, which produce “cycle” progressions. A cycle progression is one where the roots of each chord moves by a fourth to the next chord, for example the Eb7-Ab7-Db7 chords in bars one and two. The cycle progression in bars seven and eight starts on an F#7 chord, then moves through B7-E7-A7 before resolving by half-step to the Ab7 chord in bar nine. For the last two bars, 11-12, the tonic chord, Cm7, is replaced by a Bb7 which allows for a four chord cycle progression, Bb7-Eb7-Ab7-Db7, to occur. Since the last two bars will resolve to the tonic chord in bar one, it is not always necessary to state the tonic chord, Cm7, in bar 11 of the progression, since it will be stated two bars later when the progression resets itself.

Chord progression for Example 10:

- Staff 1: Cm7 Eb7 Ab7 Db7 Cm7 Db7 Gb7
- Staff 2 (starting at bar 5): Fm7 F#7 B7 E7 A7
- Staff 3 (starting at bar 9): Ab7 Db7 Bb7 Eb7 Ab7 Db7

Example 10

In the next example we will stretch out our cycle progression so that it stretches the length of the first four bars before it resolves into the Fm7 chord in bar five. All eight chords move by a fourth to the next chord before the Gb7 chord resolves down by half-step to the Fm7 chord. This progression can be heard in the playing of McCoy Tyner and other Hard Bop players of that era. Since the first chord of the progression is now a G7 chord, the last two bars must be altered to cadence into the new key. Here we use the Cm7 chord which moves down by a tone to the Bb7 chord, which moves down by another tone to Ab7, which becomes the tri-tone of G7, and resolves by half-step back to the top of the form.

Chord progression for Example 10:

- Bar 1: G7
- Bar 2: C7
- Bar 3: F7
- Bar 4: B^b7
- Bar 5: E^b7
- Bar 6: A^b7
- Bar 7: D^b7
- Bar 8: G^b7
- Bar 9: Fm7
- Bar 10: F[#]7
- Bar 11: B7
- Bar 12: E7
- Bar 13: A7
- Bar 14: A^b7
- Bar 15: D^b7
- Bar 16: Cm7
- Bar 17: B^b7
- Bar 18: A^b7

Example 11

In this progression every chord found with the cycle progression in the first four bars of the previous example is replaced by its tri-tone sub. So the progression now begins on Db7 and moves by fourths until it resolves from the C7alt to the Fm7 chord in bar five. As well, a Cm7 chord has been added to the beginning of bar seven to remind the listener of the tonic key, since the first four bars do not contain this chord anymore. Also notice how smoothly the Cm7 chord moves down in the B7 chord in the second half of bar seven, before moving by fourths and resolving by half-step to the Ab7 in bar nine.

Chord progression for Example 11:

- Bar 1: D^b7
- Bar 2: G^b7
- Bar 3: B7
- Bar 4: E7
- Bar 5: A7
- Bar 6: D7
- Bar 7: G7
- Bar 8: C7^{alt}
- Bar 9: Fm7
- Bar 10: Cm7
- Bar 11: B7
- Bar 12: E7
- Bar 13: A7
- Bar 14: A^b7
- Bar 15: D^b7
- Bar 16: Cm7
- Bar 17: B^b7
- Bar 18: A^b7

Section 2: Scales for Improvisation

Now that we have looked at many different chord substitutions that one can use of the standard minor blues chord progression, we can examine some basic scales to use over these chords. These scales are not meant to be a conclusive summary of all the scales one can use over these chords. Instead they are merely a starting point to allow us to outline the different chords found in the standard minor blues chord progression, without moving ones hands all over the neck.

Example 12

This example contains a common fingering for the C melodic minor scale, R 2 b3 4 5 6 7, and for our purposes will be used over the Cm7 chord found in bars 1-3 of the basic minor blues progression. Though some instructional books advise us to use the Dorian mode over m7 chords within a jazz context, the melodic minor scale is preferred by many jazz musicians when outlying a tonic minor chord. Since the scale contains a raised seventh, there is always a touch of the V7, G7, chord heard within this scale, which allows us to have a sense of tension and release within our lines without using subs or alternative scales/modes.

The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time with a Cm7 chord symbol above it. The scale is written in treble clef. The notes are C, D, E-flat, F, G, A, B-flat. Below the staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with two strings (T and B) and fret numbers 8, 10, 11, 8, 10, 7, 9, 10, 7, 8, 10, 8, 10, 7, 8, 10.

Example 13

The following scale can be used to outline the C7alt chord found in bar four of the minor blues progression. This scale is often referred to as the “altered” scale, as it outlines all of the alterations that a dominant seventh chord can take, R b9 #9 3 b5 #5 b7. Since the altered scale is built off of the seventh mode of the melodic minor scale, we can simply take the C melodic minor scale from the first example and shift it up by one fret to Db, which outlines the C altered scale. This allows us to play the first four bars of a minor blues while only moving our fretting hand up by one fret.

The last scale we will examine is the C melodic minor scale starting on the third fret of the fifth string, which is in the same position as the G altered scale listed above. This scale can be used for the Cm7 chord in bar 11 as it is in close proximity to the G altered scale which allows for a smooth transition between these two bars.

Cm7

T
A
B

3 5 6 3 5 2 4 5

3 4 6 3 5 7

Section 3: Short List of Common Minor Blues Tunes

- Birk's Works – Dizzy Gillespie
- Mr. P.C. – John Coltrane
- Interplay – Bill Evans
- Israel- John Carisi
- Stolen Moments – Oliver Nelson

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