

# The Secret Jazz Scale

By  
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Having started my musical career as a classically trained percussionist, I was truly a classical musical snob. If it wasn't music by a dead composer, it wasn't serious or legitimate. My ideal of creativity was playing the sheet of music that was given to me perfectly, every time without interpretation or at least interpreted the way the composer or the conductor intended. Even though I was aware of harmony, I never really heard the chords that I do today as a jazz artist. I was too busy technically executing the written music and couldn't really appreciate what I was hearing and didn't really take the time to listen to the rich harmonies of the orchestra.

Later when I became involved in jazz as a mallet player and was more involved with pitches and 4-mallet harmonic context, did I appreciate what I wasn't hearing and what I missed all those years. Believe it or not, the orchestra uses the same harmonies as my jazz ensemble. Now I'm hearing that the string section might be playing the 3rd while the brass section has the 5th and 7th and the bass section is playing the roots of the chords. My orchestral training concentrated more on execution of the notes to be in sync with the orchestra and correct dynamics to blend, which is given in the music and can be controlled and adjusted by the conductor. The bottom line is that all music is virtually the same; just a series of melodic notes supported by related harmonic pitches in a rhythmical time frame-work. Perhaps the instruments are different, but the same 12 notes are there.

Through the years, as a contemporary jazz performer/clinician, I have presented numerous lectures and workshops at colleges and universities for students, educators, both classical and jazz and have come to realize that my findings are not unique. The classical approach toward music is concentrated more on the polished execution of the literal page of music where as the improvisationalist is more enlightened toward harmony and dissonance/resolution which is totally on the fly-unrehearsed and varies from tune to tune, night to night, musician to musician.

Presenting a clinic at a Music Educators Convention several years ago, I opened by playing a solo tune with a great deal of reharmonization and improvisation. After the clinic, a band director came to me with a serious concerned face and asked the question, he said "Jerry, I love and appreciate your music, however when

someone improvises, do they really know what they are doing or are they just randomly playing notes?" At first I thought he was joking only later to realize that he was serious. He attended a known classical school and really had no understanding as to what is involved in improvisation. Many classical musicians, and myself included at the time, cringe at the thought of playing something spontaneous, unrehearsed and worse, not written. Improvising something can be a total nightmare for these musicians.

Jazz musicians aren't born with this special skill to improvise, these are learned behaviors that require harmonic understanding and ear training. I actually had a college music student come to me after a clinic telling me that he is ready and if I could teach him the secret scale that us contemporary jazz improvising musicians use. I did give him the scale - chromatic (but keep it a secret). Music is like a language, we are trying to say something or convey a thought. If you never heard any language, you would have no vocabulary to communicate. If you never heard jazz music, you would also not have the vocabulary, the feel, the entire concept would be foreign. As with all music, proper dissonance resolution creates the special moods or conversation if you will that we are trying to impose. A strong melody line supported by creative harmonies is the same with all music whether written or improvised. Our degree of dissonance or consonance creates our moods. Again, an awareness of intervalic relationships in music is important which is obtained by listening and analyzing. The improvising musician forms his music spontaneously based upon his mood which is determined by all these mentioned musical factors. Again, the key is spontaneous, on the fly, which imposes the fear to those who don't know.

There is a saying, "You don't know what you don't know" and further more, "you don't know that you don't know it". Translated, without an understanding of harmony and scales, an untrained musician is uninhibited and has total freedom to explore. As the musician studies, it becomes clear that there are wrong notes, incorrect scales, disjunct rhythms and now that freedom disappears and one enters the era of knowledge and understanding which can be intimidating. There is a chance for a wrong note and an embarrassing situation. Oh my!

In music schools we analyze melodies and harmonies and get good at seeing the relationship between the melodic note and the chord of the moment. This melody note could be a chord tone or tension. It becomes important to see these relationships and fast. Our harmonic analysis helps us determine the most logical scale (or mode) to utilize in forming our improvisation. Again, our scale

choice is a starting point for our improvisation and in addition to getting the theoretically correct notes, it also tells you the out of scale notes that can be used to create dissonance and musical coloration. Scales in general are not very musical and in most musical situations scales will not be played as a complete scale, first note to the last, but broken scale passages. It is however important to know all your scales without hesitation. This knowledge is important to be able to hear the various degrees and understand the relationships between them and be able to hear logical resolutions. Once one gets to the point where scales are completely subconscious, it is not necessary to practice them for scales tend to hinder melodic development. A way to practice scales at this point is to basically noodle within the scale tones and create melodies. This melodic approach to scale practice is much more musical and again only should occur after one is totally knowledgeable of all the scales. While playing these scale melodies, pay attention to intervallic relationships and logical resolutions. Guess what? - this is basic improvisation.

The more one understands harmonies, the more interesting and challenging the improvisation gets. You will start to see patterns where chords such as D7(b13) tend to resolve to a minor chord such as G-7. The b13 of the D7 chord is the b3 of the G-7 which is its characteristic note. By emphasizing a mixolydian b9 b13 scale we are in essence setting up to hear a minor tonality.

Knowledge of guide tones is very important to bring out the intended chord sound and target the characteristic notes of the given harmony. Guide tones are generally the 3rd and 7th of chords. These guide tones when played outline the basic intended chord sound with only two notes. When improvising our broken melody scales, we want to try to target some of these guide tones from chord to chord to allow our melodies to incorporate into the given chord. This all sounds very complicated however, with time and analysis and listening, it falls into place and gives a framework for a lifetime of great and constantly challenging improvisations.

From performance to performance as our moods change, so will our improvisations. Sometimes it will be fantastic and the next performance of the same tunes might not be as memorable depending again on our moods, fellow musicians, ability to focus, the audience, the acoustics or PA system. Many factors influence these spontaneous improvisations which is what makes it a challenge and enjoyable to perform. It changes every time. Sometimes God whispers in your ear and sometimes he is busy doing something else. Be patient and prepare to adjust for those more

distracting difficult performances. The more we perform, the more consistent our overall performance becomes and the more we perform with the same musicians, the more we get to understand each other's abilities. As with any relationship, the more time you spend together, you get to know each others moods and develop similar conversation topics and knowledge. This is the same with jazz improvisation. A general observation is that there are very few musical situations where everything is perfect. A true professional makes the adjustments and hopefully can not let the situation affect his performance. Remember, those that are there to hear you generally support you and are probably not aware of the distraction you might be encountering. The show goes on; sometimes, it is very difficult to clear your mind of the BAD VIBE. Also, it's times like this that the years of practice and musical knowledge come in to play.