

# The 16 Most Important Scales in Jazz

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## THE 16 MOST IMPORTANT *Scales in Jazz*



Here is a list of the 16 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 will be consonant with each chord, which is why chord/scale theory is so important. 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! It all comes down to good, solid practicing.

Speaking of practicing, make sure you've signed up to receive our free [“Ultimate Jazz Guide to Practicing”](#) if you want to make sure you are working on the right things. It will just take a minute to sign up, we'll send it to you, and you can continue on.

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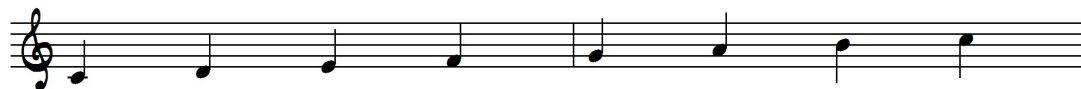
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I have also linked some of these concepts to a corresponding Chord Workout play along to help you in your quest to apply these scales to your improvising.

## #1-7 The Medieval Church Modes

### 1. Ionian or 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 the harmonic minor. Even though Dorian, melodic minor, and even Aeolian are probably more common, the Phrygian mode is still used in at least two contexts:

- The Phrygian scale works over a iii chord (Emin7 in the key of C works with E Phrygian)
- The 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#11)



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## 5. Mixolydian or 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 or Natural Minor 1-2-b3-4-5-b6-b7-8 (Amin7)



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 or Half Diminished 1-b2-b3-4-b5-b6-b7-8 (Bmin7b5)



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. If you raise the b2 to a natural 2, this new scale is called the “Locrian #2” (that’s “sharp” 2, not “number” 2) mode, which is actually the 6th mode of melodic minor harmony. This scale is 12b34b5b6b78, and the natural 2 differs from the Locrian mode. If you keep the b2 of the Locrian scale, this is the 7th mode of the major scale.

It’s useful to place Locrian and Locrian #2 into the same category of scale, as they can both be used to navigate a half-category:

### 7.5 Locrian #2 1-2-b3-4-b5-b6-b7-8 (Bmin7b5)

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## 8. Half-Whole Diminished or Dominant Diminished 1-b2-b3-3-#4-5-6-b7-8 (C13b9)



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 check out [this lesson](#).

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. Whole-Half Diminished 1-2-b3-4-#4-#5-6-7-8 (Cdim7)



If you start a diminished scale with a whole-step, it becomes WHWHWHWH. This mode of the diminished scale works well over a [diminished chord](#).

## 10. Altered Scale 1-b2-b3-3-#4-b6-b7-8 [C7(#9b13) or C7alt, C7(#9b13) or C7alt]



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). This scale has many names, including “Super-Locrian,” “Diminished-Whole-Tone” or even the “Dim-Wit” scale.

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 possible 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 tone, 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!

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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 Pentatonic (minus #4/b5) (A7)



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 (C7#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 Bebop Scales

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 backward to reflect the descending nature of these scales.

## 14. Major Bebop 8-7-6-b6-5-4-3-2-1 (Cmaj7)

Added "Passing Tone"

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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 (Cmin7)

C Minor Be-Bop Scale with Natural 3rd - Same as F Dominant 7th Bebop  
Cm<sup>7</sup> (F7)

Added "Passing Tone"

C "Natural Minor" or "Aeolian" Be-Bop Scale  
Cm<sup>7(b6)</sup>

Added "Passing Tone"

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)

Added "Passing Tone"

G<sup>7</sup>

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](#).

I hope that these 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.

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