

I would like to offer my thoughts on the diminished scale. For musicians who might be interested, it was such a gift for me to discover the diminished scale when I was learning to play jazz. Call it serendipity! Mastering this scale and how it can be creatively used was a major step in my efforts to learn how to improvise.

Most musicians at one point or another are taught the basic scales and encouraged to play then repeatedly in order to develop the technical ability and facility to play classical music. For illustration (in the key of C), those scales would normally include:

C - Major



C - Pure Minor



C - Melodic Minor



C - Harmonic Minor



C - Chromatic



C - Whole Tone



There are so many types of scales in Western music. Classical music training rarely introduces musicians to the diversity of scales which exist and which can be employed. In blues, it is characteristic that the 3rd, 7th, and sometimes the 5th notes are flatted. In the C major scale, that would be E^b, B^b, and sometimes G^b. There are a variety of scales that can be used in jazz and blues. I found the diminished scale to be extremely useful, as it contains the three flatted notes I just outlined. What is important to realize is that the symmetrical structure of the diminished scale is very simple based on a series of alternating half steps and whole steps. So for example, if you begin with C and alternate half steps and whole steps you have a C diminished scale:

C – Diminished



If you begin with F or G you would have:

F – Diminished



G – Diminished



If you start on an A^b, B or D, you will find that you use the same notes as the F – Diminished. If you start on a B^b, D^b or E, you will find that you use the same notes as the G – Diminished. And so, there are only 3 diminished scales to learn each one alternating half steps and whole steps and each rich with color, including the most distinctive and penetrating notes in jazz and blues.

When improvising off of a chord, it is quite common to use notes extracted from a diminished scale. Of course playing the notes in the diminished scale is an option. Playing patterns of these notes repeatedly is an effective technique in improvising. Creativity in improvising can be facilitated if a player is facile with what opportunities the diminished scale presents.

Here are some examples of “patterns” (based solely on the C – Diminished Scale) that I have found useful in improvising. They’re fun!

