

# Approaching Altered Sounds By Scott Mercer

I have found that students like to play from tonal centers, exploring the diatonic sounds against the chords with fairly “hit and miss” results. Generic patterns can help with this by plugging in the right notes with the correct metric placement. There are so many formulae for getting altered sounds that it can be overwhelming. With some tonic based resources, I think students might get better results and feel more free to explore altered sounds. Thanks to Jimmy Bruno for the idea that we can introduce one or two of the alterations at a time, focusing on the *sound* of the concept rather than creating a multi-octave music theory/digital dexterity exercise.

We can use a one-octave major scale as a resource to introduce the “outside” sounds.

Lets first look at the addition of 2 notes that alter the V chord with a  $b9$  and  $\#9$ .

You can see that these notes are a  $b6^{th}$  and  $b7^{th}$  scale degree, but we keep the natural  $7^{th}$  scale degree while deleting the natural  $6^{th}$ . Playing up to the natural  $7^{th}$  scale degree will imply the sound of the altered V on the top part of this derivative scale.

C Major



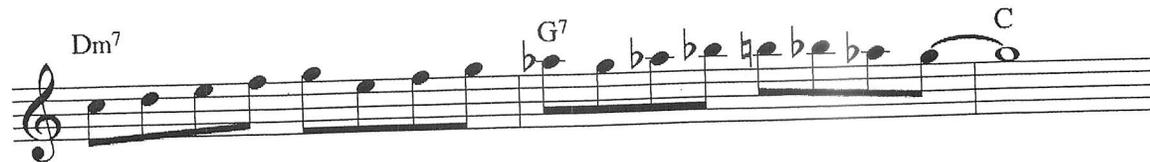
C major with V7 $b9/\#9$



There are many ways to look at this altered scale segment – a mode of melodic minor, diminished scale, part natural/part harmonic minor – all of these are terms that we should save for the theory classroom. The goal here is to get students to find good sounds. I suppose it is obvious that the upper three notes of the one-octave C major scale have been lowered by a half step, and this may help students find the notes in multiple keys.

### Putting it into context – ii – V – I

For the Dm7 (ii) chord we can focus on the lower half of the scale and create a line that moves toward the upper half when the G7 (V) chord arrives.



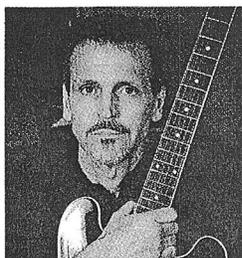
The beginning of these phrases feature a generic treatment with a diatonic passage from the root of the key, then play into the sound of the altered tones. Keep in mind that three of the first four notes of the key are in the Dm7 chord. Encourage creativity by varying the starting note and its metric placement as students become comfortable with the sound. Of course, there is no rule dictating we arrive at the  $A^b$  note on beat one of the V chord, but this is a good way to get the sound in their ear. Students will want to stretch the alterations in either direction in order to increase the tension to taste. Here are two examples in the lower octave.

We can approach the sound of the V+ chord by getting students to convert the major scale to a melodic minor scale. Again, this is too much theory! When students like the tonal center approach, just lowering the 3<sup>rd</sup> scale degree will get the desired results.

Here is a simple idea going around the circle:

This idea should be accessible to students because it is based on the five note – Do – Re – Mi – Fa – Sol pattern. The combination of lowering the third and including the leading tone results in the sound of the V+ chord. (We know that the raised fifth of the V+ should be spelled: D#. You guessed it – too much theory!) The sound of this note resolving down to the 2<sup>nd</sup> scale degree is one of my personal favorites and a bit of a cliché. Because the pattern above is based on a half note rate of harmonic rhythm for the ii and V, stretching the sound to one measure each will instantly give the students some creative freedom. Here are some longer ideas, again featuring a tonic-based, scalar approach to start each.

This approach will still require practice, but simplifying sophisticated concepts into accessible sounds should get some good results. After teaching college level theory for several years, it was liberating to remember the sound was the important part, not the “intellectualization.”



Scott Mercer is an associate professor of music in his 27th year at Vincennes University, where he teaches Music Technology, Pro Tools Certification, History Of American Music, and Jazz Guitar. He has performed as a guitarist with J.J. Johnson, Frank Vignola, and the Owensboro Symphony and Evansville Philharmonic Orchestras. Currently, he performs jazz and popular styles with the Two Tone Express and the Steve Greenwell trio in the southern Indiana area. Mercer holds a Master of Music in Jazz Studies from Indiana University and a B.S. in Music: Concentration in Merchandising from Indiana State University. He has had lesson and transcription materials featured in the Sept. 2012 issue of JAZZed magazine. Mercer plays Heritage Guitars.