

# Jazz Tools: The Major Scale

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We've all heard the question: *How do I start improvising?* And we've heard a variety of answers, some better than others. "Transcribe solos from your favorite player." "Work on your ear training." "Play what you feel." "Learn your chords." "Play the blues scale." Each answer can be both helpful and harmful. Transcribing solos? Great idea for the intermediate player with some knowledge of harmony, but a disaster for the high school freshman who spends a week trying to figure out the first eight bars of his favorite Freddie Hubbard solo and ends up with more wrong notes than right ones. Ear training? An essential skill, but being able to sing the difference between a major and minor 6th may not get you any closer to improvising. And while emotional content in a solo is paramount, to start out "playing what you feel" may only convey "feelings" of wrong notes and poor technique to the listener. What is really needed is a well-defined path for the beginning improviser to develop basic skills that gradually lead towards becoming a more accomplished improviser. These skills are what I call Jazz Tools. If we consider jazz as a language, and the soloist as a storyteller, we

can look at the Jazz Tools as our collection of alphabet, grammar, outline, punctuation, and speaking skills.

I consider the twelve major scales to be the most powerful Jazz Tool. The vast majority of melodies in any style of western music consist primarily of notes from the major scales. I could list many standard jazz tunes with melodies that contain only notes from one major scale, or have less than three chromatic notes added. Even novices can significantly improve their "ear playing" just by asking the key of the tune and assuming the melody notes will come from that major scale. Our other consideration is harmony. Over how many chords can we improvise using notes from the major scale? Well, let's take a look. If we learn our most basic major scale, C, here is a list of chords we could improvise over: C, C2, C6, Cmaj7, C69, Dmin7, Dmin9, E Phrygian, G7/E, Fmaj7(#11), G7, G7sus, G9, A natural min, and Bmin7(b5). Fifteen chord symbols from ONE major scale—pretty powerful when you think about it!

Let's start with the C major scale as our example. Visually, we could think of the C major scale as the white notes on the piano. Alphabetically, we could list the notes in order from C to

B. Mathematically, we could set up the pattern of distances between notes as whole step, whole step, half step, whole step, whole step, whole step. However we choose to

visualize the scale, the important thing to remember is that the seven notes of the C major scale are C, D, E, F, G, A, B. Most of us start out by playing *up* the scale and then *down* the scale. This makes our sequence of notes as follows: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, B, A, G, F, E, D, C. At this point, we generally feel that we "know" the scale. But do we? Try reversing this simple exercise and playing *down* the scale and then *up* the scale. Did you feel as comfortable as you did with the traditional up and down? Probably not...now try *playing* the first note of the scale, and then *singing* the fourth. Were you accurate in remembering the sound of the F? Yes? Now try playing the F and singing the B... not quite as easy, is it? My point

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here is that playing the scale up and down is the start of the process, not the end. Now we'll talk some more about how to really develop the major scale.

Take the standard up and down pattern (▲CDEFGABC▼BAGFEDC). Memorize it. Then memorize that same pattern backwards, or down and up (▼CBAGFEDC▲DEFGABC). Since melodies are generally characterized by the skips between scale tones, we want to start isolating and practicing these intervals. Start out with the sound of the notes next to each other (seconds). Try this pattern up (▲CDDEEFFFGGAABBC) followed by the same pattern down (▼CBBAAGGFFEEDDC). Play slowly and listen to the individual intervals and try to memorize their sound. Now practice this same pattern with the thirds (▲CE▼DF▼EG▼FA▼GB▼A

C▼BD▼C), fourths (▲CF▼DG▼EA▼FB▼GC▼AD▼BE▼C), fifths (▲CG▼DA▼EB▼FC▼GD▼AE▼BF▼C), sixths (▲CA▼DB▼EC▼FD▼GE▼AF▼BG▼C), and sevenths (▲CB▼DC▼ED▼FE▼GF▼AG▼BA▼C). Try reversing the patterns, as we did with the seconds. Once you feel comfortable with these scale intervals, try playing several standard melodies containing only notes from the major scale "by ear" in that key. For example: *Over the Rainbow* (A section), *I Got Rhythm* (A section), *St. Thomas*, *Lester Leaps In*, *Blame It On My Youth*, *Sudden Samba*, *First Light*, *I'm Old Fashioned* (A section), and *Mercy, Mercy, Mercy*. Next try a few melodies that also include a few notes outside of the major scale like *My Shining Hour*, *Stella by Starlight*, *Oleo*, *These Foolish Things*, and *There 'll Never Be Another You*.

The next question most students ask is "How do I move around and get those great jazz lines?" Let's try a little harmonic experiment. Play the C major scale up from C to C (▲CDEFGABC). If we clear our ear by waiting a few minutes and then play the notes of the C major scale from D to D (▲DEFGABCD) though, we should hear a minor sound. This is the harmonic trick to the major scale theory. By altering

how we play the scale *melodically*, we also alter the *harmonic* sound of the scale. This is how we can improvise over those fifteen chords I mentioned earlier with just one scale. The next thing to realize is that the C major scale is actually seven scales (more accurately known as *modes*) and practice accordingly. Now go back to the beginning, playing the scale up and down, and do this starting

on each of the seven scale tones. As we did before, play each of the scales down and up. Once you have gone all the way through this exercise, you will have accomplished two things. 1) You will have heard the scale in different harmonic contexts. 2) You will learn to move around regardless of your starting scale tone. The next important skill for playing flowing jazz lines is what I call zigzagging. All great jazz players vary the up and down movement of the scales by using some opposing motion, i.e. either skipping notes or changing direction and then resuming motion. This latter idea is what I call the zigzag. Here are two zigzag patterns that should be practiced over every major scale. 1) ▲CE▼DF▼EG▼FA▼GB▼AC▼BD▼C and ▼CA▲BG▲AF▲GE▲FD▲EC▲DB▲C.

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\*Exercise Key: ▲ means ascending interval, ▼ signifies descending interval. The direction specified at the beginning of the exercise is assumed for each interval unless the opposite direction arrow appears directly in front of a note.

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You'll notice that this is the same pattern we practiced earlier for melodic development, but here we will increase the speed and develop technique as well.

2) ▲CDE▼CDEF▼DEFG▼EFGA▼FGAB▼GABC▼ABCD▼BC and ▼CBA▲CBAG▲BAGF▲AGFE▲GFED▲FEDC▲EDCB▲DC. This four-note pattern incorporates three ideas at once: diatonic movement, adding a skip, and changing direction.

By the time you have practiced these exercises in all twelve keys, you will have acquired the fundamental Jazz Tools—familiarity with the notes and intervals of each major scale, technique playing up or down the scale over different chord changes, and the ability to zigzag as you start developing lines. You're ready to start improvising over standard jazz tunes using the chord symbols related to the major scale. Now pick a tune and start playing!

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