

Melodic Minor Scale Jazz Studies: Introduction

The Concept

As an improvising musician, I've always been thrilled by one thing in particular: Discovering melodies spontaneously. I love to surprise myself each time I play with a new way of imagining and realizing melodic ideas, a new way of connecting impulse with pitch and rhythm. For me, to play with this kind of freedom and control requires a disciplined, methodical approach to practice. This book is a documentation of some of the things I've been practicing on for the last year or so. In a sense, it's a step back toward the basics for me, a method of deepening my understanding of some of the diatonic building blocks of melody.

So much music can be found within a single scale. If you listen to the master improvisers of Indian classical music, you can hear endless melodic variations made through a rather limited selection of pitches. Modern jazz, by contrast, incorporates many notes outside of the diatonic scales, often used as passing tones to frame harmonic and melodic events.

Yet even in jazz there is so much more that can be found within a diatonic scale. A particularly beautiful scale is the ascending melodic minor scale (a major scale with a flatted 3rd), sometimes referred to as the "Jazz Minor Scale" (depending on how it is applied). This scale is rich in natural contour and tension. It contains two tritones, and has within it several tonal implications. Take a look at the example below, a C melodic minor scale:



There is a tritone formed from the 3rd degree (Eb) and the sixth degree (a), as well as one from the 4th degree (F) to the 7th (B). The first four notes of the scale imply a strong minor tonality. The last four (G through C) imply a major tonality. The 3rd through the 7th (Eb through B) imply a whole tone scale. The 4th through the 7th degree (F through B) imply a Lydian tonality. Lots of different colors for melodic creation. When you arrange the notes of the scale into chords, even more tonal implications (and richness) emerge.

If you were to improvise just using the notes of a melodic minor scale, you would easily find strong melodic statements, with lots of resolutions (thanks to the two tritones), and even a kind of rhythmic impetus that helps you along. The scale is bursting with energy.

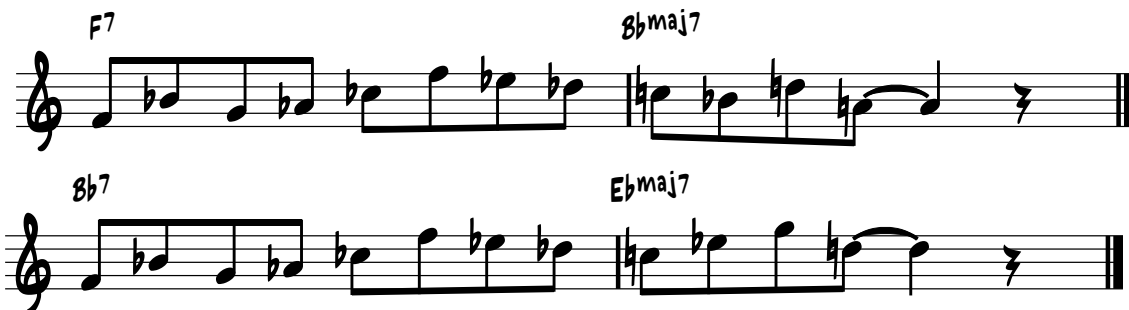
There are so many gorgeous melodies that are based on this scale in many genres of music. For example, some of the most compelling melodic events in some of Béla Bartók's music are constructed from the melodic minor scale (though they're often beautifully "disguised" to become part of his larger, highly unique tonal language). And the jazz lexicon is loaded with melodic minor tonal colors.

This book is an exploration of one very simple concept: using the natural tonal organization of the ascending melodic minor scale as a way to conceive of and organize harmonic tensions over dominant 7th chords as they resolve to tonic in *major* keys. Take a look at the example below, a possible improvised melodic line, and then play it on your instrument:



If you were to look at the above example from a point of view of harmonic tensions, you could analyze each note of the line as follows: 7th, sharp 9th, root, flat 9, 3rd, 7th, flat 13th, sharp 11th of the G7, resolving to the root of the C major seventh. You could also look at the notes over the G7 chord as a reorganization of the Ab melodic minor scale (Ab, Bb, Cb, Db, Eb, F, G). This scale (the root of which is one half step up from the root of the dominant 7th chord) is commonly known as the "jazz minor" scale. And as you can see, it contains many tensions that resolve to the tonic tonality that follows.

But you could also use this same group of notes to find tension and resolution in other keys. Take a Look at the following examples, and then play them:





As you can see (and hear as well) the organization of pitches over the dominant 7th chords resolves nicely to the same pitch in tonic (the “C”). Yet the function of each of the preceding notes (over the dominant chords) functions in a different way harmonically (as well as the “C” in the tonic resolution as having a different function). You might also notice that the quality and quantity of tension changes as the A flat melodic minor scale is applied to the various dominant seventh chords. (Analyze the examples so that you can name the function of each note.)

Over the G7, for example, there are all 6 harmonic tensions (3, 7, +9, -9, +11, -13). There are less tension notes as the scale is applied to the other dominant 7th chords, yet even in the less “tense” applications (e.g., over the D flat 7th) there are still three tension notes, ripe for resolution. These tensions, combined with the beautiful contour of the melodic minor scale, make for some rich melodic possibilities.

The examples above represent the fundamental relationship of the ascending melodic minor scale to dominant 7th chords. Specifically, there are five scales that relate to the dominant 7th with respect to the resolutions to the tonic tonalities. They relate because they contain various tension notes of the dominant tonality (some diatonic, some altered), but *don't* contain the raised 7th that would compromise the essential quality of the dominant chord.

In other words, these are the five scales that “fit” over the dominant chords. (They also share some of the non-tension pitches from the diatonic scale of the dominant chord.) **You can find which scales fit over any given dominant 7th chord by thinking of the roots of these scales in relation to the various degrees of the chord itself.** Using the examples above (but organized here in such a way as to go from less altered tension to more tension over the dominant) they’re formed as follows:

- **From the 5th degree** of the dominant (e.g., Ab minor over Db7), which contains the 3rd, 7th and +11 as tensions.
- **From the 4th degree** of the dominant (e.g., Ab minor over Eb7), which contains the 3rd, 7th and -13 as tensions.
- **From the 7th degree** of the dominant (e.g., Ab minor over Bb7), which contains the 7th, -9 and +9 as tensions.
- **From the lowered 3rd degree** of the dominant (e.g., Ab minor over F7), which contains the 7th, +9, +11 and -13 as tensions.
- **From the raised root (lowered 2nd)** of the dominant (e.g., Ab minor over G7), which (again) has 3rd, 7th, -9, +9, +11 and -13 as tensions. (For all practical purposes, we could say these are all the tensions.)

All the exercises in this book are aimed at developing the skill to utilize this “five scale” relationship between melodic minor scales and all 12 dominant 7th chords as they resolve to major tonalities.

My reason for exploring and developing the material in this book is pretty simple and straightforward: **to help me (and hopefully you, too!) think, imagine, hear and feel harmonic tensions and extensions in a more melodic, linear manner.** It’s a way of thinking of the tensions (diatonic and altered) as being part of a larger tonal system (the various minor scales), instead of just as vertical, isolated extensions of the dominant chord. By gaining a deep fluency and realization of the possibilities of tonal organization found in these scales, I’ve been able to discover huge amounts of yet uncharted melodic territory.

Part of this growth has been because of my thinking about tonality and tension has shifted. Rather than thinking more specifically about “resolution” (this note resolves to that note, etc.), I’m thinking more in terms of “contrasts” (this tonality has a different color than that tonality because of these notes), which, for me, is a broader way of thinking about tension and resolution. (I’ll explain and demonstrate more about this idea a little later.) This “broader” approach has led me not only to find new ways to combine pitches, but also, a whole new way to think of form and rhythm.

The “minor scales as harmonic extensions” idea is certainly not new. I know, for example, that the brilliant tenor saxophonist and teacher of improvisation, Warne Marsh, had his students approach harmonic extensions in this way. What I’m offering here is merely my method of approaching this concept, and organizing the work to explore it.

The Purpose of this Book Based upon my explanation above, I’d say there are four specific skills that I aim to help you develop with this book:

1. To get basic melodic movement patterns from the scales established in all 12 keys, so that you can move easily and beautifully in the minor tonalities as they are organized within themselves
2. To get you to hear and understand melodic minor scale tonalities as extensions of dominant chords
3. To help you become highly fluent in hearing and resolving these tensions from dominant 7th chords to tonic tonalities in major keys
4. To get you to think about how you can extract, reorganize and combine tonalities from minor scales to create richer harmonic complexity and melodic possibilities

I've composed and organized the material in this book to reflect the aims listed above.

Who Is This Book For?

As you might have gathered by now, I'm assuming you have a certain amount of knowledge of fundamental jazz harmony (specifically, you understand how diatonic and altered tensions over dominant chords resolve to tonic). This book is in no way intended to serve as a starting point to learn jazz harmony and theory. There are many very fine books available these days that do just that. So if you found yourself struggling to understand my explanation of the musical examples listed above, you should probably find a good resource to help you gain the skill and knowledge about chords and scales that you'll need to improvise over harmonic forms (chord changes).

Having said that, I do think that improvisers at many different skill levels (and even different musical backgrounds) can benefit from this book. If you're at an "intermediate level" as a jazz improviser, for example, this book can help to strengthen and expand your understanding and execution of harmonic material over ii7-V7-I chord progressions. This will lead to greater fluency and control as you improvise over chord changes. If you're already an advanced player (even a pro) you can still find a great deal to challenge you, as well as help you to expand and personalize your improvisational vocabulary.

Whatever level you're at, you can benefit by using this book:

- As a thorough study of melodic minor scales for technique and improvisation (even if you haven't yet learned basic jazz harmonic theory)
- As a way of thinking about harmonic tensions and resolutions differently
- As a way to start thinking about more advanced melodic organizations (through extraction, combination, etc.), such as triad pairs and altered scales
- As a means for challenging and expanding your hearing and imagination

And even if you don't improvise exclusively over closed harmonic forms (chord changes), this book can help you gain a deeply internal and intuitive sense of melodic shape and resolution. I spend about half of my time as an improvising artist playing over chord changes (standards and other closed bar forms), and the other half playing over non-harmonic, open-ended forms (free improvisation, thematic improvisation, modal improvisation, etc). I can tell you from first hand experience that my "free" playing has become more lucid, richer and clearer as I've grown with the material presented in this book.

Approach, Format and Organization of Material

As I've mentioned above, this method is about using the melodic minor tonalities over dominant chords *as they resolve to major tonalities*. That is, I've purposely excluded harmonic cycles that resolve to minor keys (e.g., D-7b5 G7b9 C-Maj7). I've done this, first, because minor "ii-V" tonalities are based upon the harmonic minor scale (which is a whole other color as well as a whole other topic), and second, because I wanted to simplify and really focus in on the color of these scales specifically in contrast to consonances in major tonalities.

All the exercises in this book deal exclusively with the following tonal

relationship: How the pitches of the five melodic minor scales available over dominant chords resolve to the Lydian tonality (raised 11th) of the major key. The Lydian is a very important tonality over major chords, because it contains no dissonance relative to the chord itself (the natural 11 is, as you know, quite dissonant, and generally used only as a passing tone over major chords). Using the key of C major as an example here, these are the five "scale to scale" relationships (contrasts) from dominant to tonic, (G7 to CMaj7):

1. **D melodic minor** scale resolving to C Lydian (G major scale)
2. **C melodic minor** scale resolving to C Lydian (G major scale)
3. **F melodic minor** scale resolving to C Lydian (G major scale)
4. **Bb melodic minor** scale resolving to C Lydian (G major scale)
5. **Ab melodic minor** scale resolving to C Lydian (G major scale)

If you think about the contrasts between each of the above tonalities, you'll find quite a few voice leading possibilities (resolutions); from strong (e.g., resolution to the 3rd of the tonic chord), to weak (resolution to the 9th of the tonic chord), as well as resolution to the raised 11th itself (Lydian).

In fact, nearly all of the exercises presented in book deal quite directly with voice leading possibilities, not only from dominant to tonic, but also, from minor scale (or extractions of the scale) to minor scale within the dominant tonality. Tons of voice leading in these pages. Please forgive me if it seems a bit excessive (perhaps even tedious), but by gaining a deep understanding and aural impression of how these tonalities relate (and contrast) through voice leading, you'll develop a kind of freedom and imagination with this material that can open up your improvising. As you improvise with this material, you should, of course, feel free to use as much or as little voice leading as you like.

I've used a limited selection of harmonic sequences as frameworks for the exercises (for which I've included recorded backing tracks). Most of the work is done over a four-bar pattern of ii7-V7-I (one bar of ii, one bar of V, two bars of I), which is common in many standard songs. All of the dominant to tonic cadences fall on the first eighth note of the tonic. Again, sorry if this seems tedious, but this kind of constancy will make it easiest to hear the resolutions and contrasts between the scalar material. In reality, I encourage you to displace (suspend and anticipate) or ignore the cadences any way you like when you improvise.

As you'll also find, I've used a very simple and limited rhythmic vocabulary for all the exercises. Most of the work is presented in eighth notes, with the occasional triplets appearing from time to time. I chose this rhythmic simplicity to emphasize the constancy of the resolving cadences, as well as to encourage a continuous fluency with the pitches. Again feel free to alter the rhythms as you wish once you get the sounds in your ear and the notes under your fingers.

There is also a conspicuous lack of passing tones in virtually all the exercises (in fact there are practically none). In the modern jazz lexicon, passing tones are an essential element. But I chose to keep them few because, again, I want you to really be able to hear the tensions from the minor scales as they resolve to the diatonic tonalities of the tonic. Plus, you'll find that you can really improvise quite fluidly and nimbly without help of chromatics and still have a very "modern" jazz sound.

I've included 7 backing tracks (simple Band In A Box tracks that I've made) for you to use as accompaniment for the various exercises. I strongly recommend you practice these exercises with the tracks, as it is very important to hear the tensions and resolutions. If you don't like the tracks I've included (maybe you want a different tempo, or time feel, for example), then please make or find some that will work for you (or find a pianist or guitarist you can practice with). **In the text at the beginning of each chapter I'll mention which tracks to use with which exercises.**

All the exercises are written in treble clef, with no particular instrumental range in mind. Generally, the lowest note I'll use is an "A" just below middle "C", and the highest is an "A" three octaves higher. These are the extreme ends of the range I've chosen. Note that most of the material is written within a narrower range (within the staff of the treble clef going only about a third or fourth higher). If you play an instrument like clarinet, guitar, violin or piano, you'll have no range issues with any of the exercises. If you play trumpet, saxophone (as I do) or flute, you'll have to do a bit of octave transposition from time to time, but nothing too distracting.

Also, I've tried to keep the notes as enharmonically consistent as possible, keeping in mind that you should be able to think as easily in Db minor as you do in C# minor, for example. I purposely avoid double flats and double sharps as much as possible to make for easier reading, but I also try to represent the pitches with either the greatest respect to its harmonic function (relative to dominant 7th), or to maintain the consistency of the minor scale itself, all depending on what I think is most important. I hope I've made choices that make the material reasonably clear and easy to approach.

I've organized the book into two sections, with a total of 5 chapters. They are as follows:

Section 1-Basic Application

- **Chapter 1**-Basic Melodic Patterns (this helps you get the movement and sound of the scales under your fingers)
- **Chapter 2**-Hearing Minor Scales as Harmonic Extensions Over Dominant Chords (helps you to clearly imagine the sound of each minor scale as the "higher partials" of the dominant chord)
- **Chapter 3**-Application of Minor Scales Over ii7-V7-I (covers just about all the possible resolutions from dominant to tonic via the scales; in many ways, this is the "heart" of this book)

Section 2-Advanced Applications

- **Chapter 4**-Extractions and Reorganizations from Single Scales (working with triad pairs, modes, etc, extracted from a single minor scale)
- **Chapter 5**-Combining Scales: Extractions and Reorganization (working with more complex tonalities formed by combining various minor scales to develop a more "modern" vocabulary)

How To Use This Book

I've presented the work in this book sequentially to reflect what I think to be the best way to approach this subject. It represents, to a large degree, how I've studied and applied the concepts and material to gain fluency. You, however, should feel free to approach the book in a way that serves you best. A good question for you might be, "Where should I begin?"

If you're already highly fluent in all 12 melodic minor keys, you might want to skip the first chapter (Basic Melodic Patterns), for example. But even if you are fluent in all 12 keys, you should use Chapter 2 (Hearing Minor Scales as Harmonic Extensions...) as a litmus test of sorts. You must easily be able to sing and play any of the patterns presented in this chapter before you move on. It is absolutely essential that you are able to "hear" (aurally imagine) the five melodic minor scales as upper partial "extensions" of the dominant chord with a lucid precision.

Once you've mastered the material in Chapter 2, you can go fairly effectively to any of the other chapters if you like. But I can assure you, the material in the "Advanced Applications" section will make so much more sense, be much easier to analyze and reproduce, if you spend *a lot* of time on Chapter 3 (Application of Minor Scales Over ii7-V7-I). Your ability to imagine and create even more of your own melodic ideas and organizations will be greatly enhanced by doing so.

There are no "licks" in this book. Instead, I've methodically composed etudes demonstrating various ways to move and to think about the material in such a manner as to be (at least to me) musically pleasing and interesting. But as you work through the book, aim for being able to play most of the patterns in each exercise by memory, as well as being able to sing them (remember to use the backing tracks!) Then, as the great Warne Marsh would advise his students, "Never play them again." Let your playing and thinking remain soft and open. You'll develop a flexible sense of movement, color and resolution as you improvise that you can call your own.

The way you choose to use this book is ultimately up to you. What is your need or interest? Do you simply wish to become more fluent in all 12 keys with the melodic minor scales? Do you want to develop a different way to approach ii-V-I? Do you want to revisit the basics and broaden your skill? Do you want to have a starting point for working with and understanding triad pairs and altered scales? Do you want to improve your ear, or your technical ability? Or do you just want something interesting to read and play through? Whatever your motivation, I hope you'll find enjoyment and growth with the material I've presented here. Best wishes!