

Concert Key

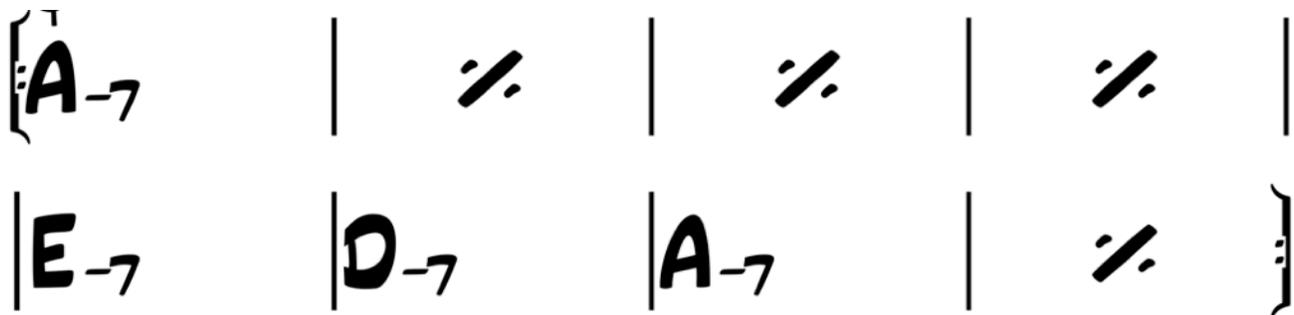
Improv Techniques over Minor Chords

For this lesson we are using the chord progression from Ain't No Sunshine, the Bill Withers classic standard tune.

This progression is great for developing improvisors since it only has 3 chords and they are all the same quality: minor.

All examples below are in concert key. You will have to do the necessary transposition for your instrument if you play saxophone.

Chord Progression



Chord progression diagram showing the sequence of chords: A-7, E-7, D-7, A-7, and a final A-7. The first A-7 is enclosed in a bracket on the left, and the final A-7 is enclosed in a bracket on the right. There are four bars of music, each containing a chord symbol or a slash indicating a rest.

1. A minor pentatonic over all of it

The simplest approach is to just play A minor pentatonic scale over the entire progression. These 5 notes work well everywhere (the melody comes entirely from this scale save for one note). However this approach can feel limiting after a while.



Musical notation showing the A minor pentatonic scale (A, C, D, E, G) played over the chord progression. The scale is written on a single staff in treble clef, with notes corresponding to the chords: A-7, E-7, D-7, A-7, and A-7.

2. A blues scale over all of it

We can upgrade our A minor pentatonic scale to include the flat 5 note making it the A blues scale. This can also be played over the entire progression.



Musical notation showing the A blues scale (A, C, D, E, G, Bb) played over the chord progression. The scale is written on a single staff in treble clef, with notes corresponding to the chords: A-7, E-7, D-7, A-7, and A-7.

3. Modal Approach

The modal approach will open up some more note possibilities and colors allowing us more options to express ourselves musically. In the example below we play A dorian over A-7, E aeolian over E-7 and D dorian over D-7.

Notice that we have the same note options (just ordered differently) for every measure except bar 6 where we must play F natural rather than F#.



4. Minor Pentatonic Scales corresponding to chords

Another approach is to play the corresponding minor pentatonic scales over each chord. In the example below we play A minor pentatonic over A-7, E minor pentatonic over E-7 and D minor pentatonic over D-7



5. Minor Pentatonic starting on 5th of each chord

The last approach for this lesson is playing the minor pentatonic scale that starts on the 5th of each chord. In the example below we can play E minor pentatonic over A-7, B minor pentatonic over E-7 and A minor pentatonic over D-7.

This results in a more colorful sound and gets us away from the expected notes while still remaining diatonic to the chords. In other words we've added some nice tensions without venturing outside the harmony.



The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff is labeled 'Am7' and contains a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, followed by a quarter rest, and then three measures with a double bar line and a slash, indicating a repeat or continuation. The second staff is labeled 'Em7', 'Dm7', and 'Am7' above different sections. It contains a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, followed by a quarter rest, then a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, followed by a quarter rest, then a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, followed by a quarter rest, and finally a measure with a double bar line and a slash.

Suggested Resources

1. Play Sax by Ear Crash Course (Free)

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2. Pentatonic Foundation Course

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E♭ Instruments

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Chord Progression

$F^{\#}_{-7}$		/:		/:		/:	
$C^{\#}_{-7}$		B_{-7}		$F^{\#}_{-7}$		/:	

1. F# minor pentatonic over all of it

The simplest approach is to just play F# minor pentatonic scale over the entire progression. These 5 notes work well everywhere (the melody comes entirely from this scale save for one note). However this approach can feel limiting after a while.



Musical notation showing the F# minor pentatonic scale (F#, G, A, B, C) over the chord progression. The scale is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#).

2. F# blues scale over all of it

We can upgrade our F# minor pentatonic scale to include the flat 5 note making it the F# blues scale. This can also be played over the entire progression.



Musical notation showing the F# blues scale (F#, G, A, Bb, C) over the chord progression. The scale is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#).

3. Modal Approach

The modal approach will open up some more note possibilities and colors allowing us more options to express ourselves musically. In the example below we play F# dorian over F#-7, C# aeolian over C#-7 and B dorian over B-7.

Notice that we have the same note options (just ordered differently) for every measure except bar 6 where we must play D natural rather than D#.



The musical notation for the Modal Approach consists of two staves in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first staff shows a melodic line for F#m7, starting with a quarter note F#, followed by quarter notes G#, A, B, and a half note C#. The second staff shows a sequence of four measures: the first measure is for C#m7 (quarter notes C#, D, E, F#), the second for Bm7 (quarter notes B, C, D, E), the third for F#m7 (quarter notes F#, G, A, B), and the fourth measure contains a repeat sign.

4. Minor Pentatonic Scales corresponding to chords

Another approach is to play the corresponding minor pentatonic scales over each chord. In the example below we play F# minor pentatonic over F#-7, C# minor pentatonic over C#-7 and B minor pentatonic over B-7



The musical notation for Minor Pentatonic Scales consists of two staves in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first staff shows a melodic line for F#m7, starting with a quarter note F#, followed by quarter notes G#, A, B, and a half note C#. The second staff shows a sequence of four measures: the first measure is for C#m7 (quarter notes C#, D, E, F#, G#), the second for Bm7 (quarter notes B, C, D, E, F#), the third for F#m7 (quarter notes F#, G, A, B, C#), and the fourth measure contains a repeat sign.

5. Minor Pentatonic starting on 5th of each chord

The last approach for this lesson is playing the minor pentatonic scale that starts on the 5th of each chord. In the example below we can play C# minor pentatonic over F#-7, G# minor pentatonic over G#-7 and F# minor pentatonic over B-7.

This results in a more colorful sound and gets us away from the expected notes while still remaining diatonic to the chords. In other words we've added some nice tensions without venturing outside the harmony.



The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first staff is labeled 'F#m7' and shows a scale starting on G# (the 5th of F#m7) with notes G#, A, B, C#, D, E, F#, G#. The second staff is divided into three measures: the first is labeled 'C#m7' and shows a scale starting on D# (the 5th of C#m7) with notes D#, E, F#, G#, A, B, C#, D#; the second is labeled 'Bm7' and shows a scale starting on C# (the 5th of Bm7) with notes C#, D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#; the third is labeled 'F#m7' and shows a scale starting on G# (the 5th of F#m7) with notes G#, A, B, C#, D, E, F#, G#.

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Bb Instruments

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Chord Progression

$\{$	B_{-7}		/:		/:		/:		$\}$
	$F\#_{-7}$		E_{-7}		B_{-7}		/:		$\}$

1. B minor pentatonic over all of it

The simplest approach is to just play B minor pentatonic scale over the entire progression. These 5 notes work well everywhere (the melody comes entirely from this scale save for one note). However this approach can feel limiting after a while.

3. Modal Approach

The modal approach will open up some more note possibilities and colors allowing us more options to express ourselves musically. In the example below we play B dorian over B-7, F# aeolian over F#-7 and E dorian over E-7.

Notice that we have the same note options (just ordered differently) for every measure except bar 6 where we must play G natural rather than G#.



The musical notation for the Modal Approach consists of two staves in G major (one sharp). The first staff shows a B7 chord above a melodic line starting with B2, C3, D3, E3, F#3, G#3, A3, B3. The second staff shows a sequence of chords: F#m7, Em7, and Bm7, with a melodic line that changes notes to match the modal approach for each chord: F#m7 (F#2, G2, A2, B2, C3, D3), Em7 (E2, F#2, G2, A2, B2, C3), and Bm7 (B2, C3, D3, E3, F#3, G#3).

4. Minor Pentatonic Scales corresponding to chords

Another approach is to play the corresponding minor pentatonic scales over each chord. In the example below we play B minor pentatonic over B-7, F# minor pentatonic over F#-7 and E minor pentatonic over E-7.



The musical notation for Minor Pentatonic Scales consists of two staves in G major. The first staff shows a Bm7 chord above a B minor pentatonic scale: B2, C3, D3, E3, F#3. The second staff shows a sequence of chords and scales: F#m7 (F#2, G2, A2, B2, C3), Em7 (E2, F#2, G2, A2, B2), and Bm7 (B2, C3, D3, E3, F#3).

5. Minor Pentatonic starting on 5th of each chord

The last approach for this lesson is playing the minor pentatonic scale that starts on the 5th of each chord. In the example below we can play F# minor pentatonic over B-7, C# minor pentatonic over F#-7 and B minor pentatonic over E-7.

This results in a more colorful sound and gets us away from the expected notes while still remaining diatonic to the chords. In other words we've added some nice tensions without venturing outside the harmony.



The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The first staff is labeled with a Bm7 chord and shows a scale starting on G (the 5th of Bm7) with notes G, A, B, C, D, E, followed by a quarter rest and three measures with a double bar line. The second staff is divided into three measures, each with a different chord and scale: the first measure is F#m7 with a scale starting on C# (notes C#, D, E, F#, G, A); the second measure is Em7 with a scale starting on B (notes B, C, D, E, F, G); and the third measure is Bm7 with a scale starting on G (notes G, A, B, C, D, E), followed by a quarter rest and a double bar line.

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