

The Bebop Scale

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Bebop era jazz musicians experimented with adding chromaticism to diatonic modal scales. The result was scale concept that has become known as the Bebop scale. The basic premise of the Bebop scale is to add one (or more) chromatic pitches to a pre-existing scale in order to achieve a smoother melodic line with better voice leading. While the Bebop scale concept can have many different permutations, the most commonly used version is played over a dominant 7th chord, as in the example below.

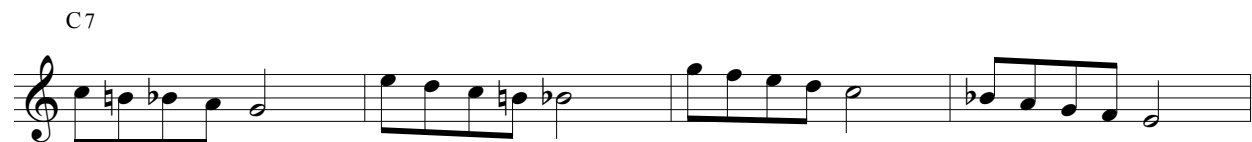


Notice that, especially on the descending scale, the extra chromatic note (in our example, a B natural) allows the chord tones of the C7 chord to remain on downbeats.

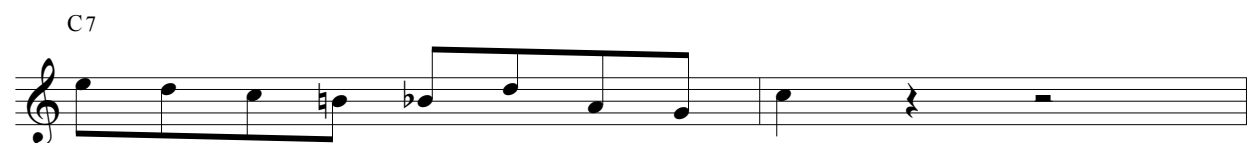
Countless jazz musicians play the phrase below, often referred to as “The Bebop Lick.”



Here are some ways to practice the Bebop Scale. First, play fragments of the scale descending, starting on a variety of chord tones, but **always** starting on a chord tone.



Now, combine the fragment concept and the Bebop lick for a longer phrase.



A more advanced exercise involves playing a descending Bebop scale combined with ascending diatonic chords, as in the examples below.

C7



C7



C7



C7



The image shows four musical staves, each labeled 'C7'. Each staff contains a descending Bebop scale starting from a different chord tone: the root (C), the third (Eb), the fifth (G), and the seventh (F). The scales are written in treble clef and consist of 10 notes each, including a chromatic alteration (a flat) on the second-to-last note.

Notice that these examples begin on the root, third, fifth, and seventh of the chord, respectively, then build an ascending chord on only the third, fifth, and seventh. Without worrying about a specific time signature, but with a steady beat, try mixing and matching these concepts freely. This will help you drill the scale into your muscle memory. One possible version appears below, but realize that this exercise is limitless. Be creative, experiment, and be sure to practice these in every key!


C7



The image shows a single musical staff labeled 'C7'. It contains a descending Bebop scale starting on the root (C) with chromaticism. The notes are: C, Eb, G, Ab, Bb, C, Eb, F, G, Ab, Bb, C. The scale is written in treble clef.

It is worth noting that you can add additional chromaticism to the Bebop scale, as in the example below.

C7



The image shows a single musical staff labeled 'C7'. It contains a descending Bebop scale starting on the root (C) with additional chromaticism. The notes are: C, Eb, G, Ab, Bb, C, Eb, F, G, Ab, Bb, C. The scale is written in treble clef.

Finally, the Bebop scale concept extends to other scales, too! In the first example, we add a half step in between the 5th and 6th notes of a major scale, and play the resulting scale over a CMaj7 chord.



The last example incorporates the harmonic minor scale, and is especially effective at resolving a V chord in minor.



Further Resources on the Bebop Scale

- David Baker's *How to Play Bebop, Volume 1, 2, and 3*, published by Alfred
- Jerry Coker's *Elements of the Jazz Language*, published by CPP Belwin
- *The Barry Harris Workshop Video*, produced by Bop City Productions