



An Introduction to Altered Scales

By Scott Blanchard

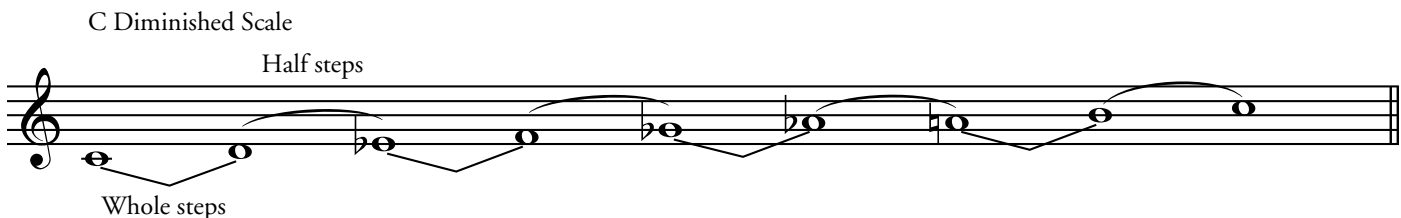
In this edition of the Theory Corner, we're going to look at an excerpt from jazz guru Jody Fisher's book, *The Total Jazz Guitarist*. In the excerpt, Jody will explain two altered scales—specifically the diminished scale and the whole tone scale, covering the basics ranging from their construction to their application. Coming from a true virtuoso, this book is a great addition to any guitarist's collection. The book includes a CD so you can easily follow along with all the examples. Check it out below!

Chapter 15: Altered Scales

Another way to introduce chromaticism into your solos is by using various *altered scales*. There are quite a few to choose from, and one could easily spend a lifetime looking for and studying these kinds of scales. In the following sections, you'll be introduced to three altered scales that most players consider essential. In order to get you up and improvising as quickly as possible, only the most essential theory will be discussed. If you love theory and want to look at all these scales from various vantage points, you'll find this information readily available in my earlier books (see page 5 for a partial list). Altered scales are primarily used to improvise over altered chords. Not all scales "fit" all altered chords, so you do need to discover which ones work in different situations.

The Diminished Scale

The diminished scale is a *symmetrical scale* (a scale whose notes divide the octave into equal parts) whose formula is: Whole Step–Half Step–Whole Step–Half Step–Whole Step–Half Step–Whole Step–Half Step.



The diminished scale is useful in two different applications. As you would guess from the name, it can be used to improvise over diminished chords. In this case, you use the diminished scale that shares the root of the diminished chord you wish to improvise over.

The second application of the diminished scale is to improvise over altered chords. In the case of altered chords, we start this scale one-half step above the root of the altered chord in question. In other words, we would use an Ab Diminished scale over an altered G7 chord, a Db Diminished scale over an altered (alt) C7 chord, and so on.

To find out exactly which altered chord the diminished scale works with, it is useful to write the scale out and analyze how each degree of the scale relates to the chord.

In the example below, we see an A^b Diminished scale used over an altered $G7$ chord. We can see that in this case, the A^b Diminished scale provides us with a $b9$, $\#9$ and $b5$ of a $G7$ chord. This means that this scale can be used to improvise over the following altered $G7$ chords: $G7b9$, $G7\#9$, $G7b5$, $G7\#11$ (same as $b5$), $G7b5b9$ and $G7b5\#9$.

A^b Diminished scale over $G7alt$

One of the cool things about diminished scale fingerings is that you can move them around the fretboard in minor 3rds and they will always contain the same notes, so you can use the diminished scale all over the fretboard quite easily.

Check out the fingerings that follow:

“A” Diminished Scale Fingerings

Altered dominant chords are commonly used as $V7$ chords in $ii-V7-I$ progressions. This example shows how well a $C\#$ Diminished scale works over the $C7b5$ chord in this $ii-V7-I$ progression in F .

C $\#$ diminished idea - - - - -

T	6	8	6	5	6	7	6	7	5	8	6	5	8	5	7	5	(5)	
A																		
B																		
	2	4	2	1	2	3	2	3	4	3	1	4	2	1	4	1	3	1

The Whole Tone Scale

The *whole tone scale* is another useful scale to use over altered dominant chords. Simply start it on the root of the chord.

Here is how the G Whole Tone scale stacks up over an altered G7 chord:

G Whole Tone scale over G7

R 9 3 $b5/\#11$ $\#5$ $b7$ R

We now see that the whole tone scale can be used over a $G7b5$ (or $\#11$), $G7\#5$, $G9b5$ or $G9\#5$ chord.

Below are three fingerings for the whole tone scale to work with.

G Whole Tone Scale

G Whole Tone Scale

C Whole Tone Scale

Here is an example of whole tone scale usage in a ii-V7-I progression in C.

Dmin7 G7 $b5$ CMaj7

T 5 5 6 5 5 6 6 8 6 6 4 6 4 4 5 5 5 (5)

A 7 7 6 4 4 4

B 7 7

1 1 2 1 3 1 2 3 2 4 2 2 1 3 1 1 1 1 1

Conclusion

For more on altered scales, be sure to check out advanced jazz lessons taught by Jody Fisher in the “Symmetrical Scales I” and “Symmetrical Scales II” courses. And of course, don’t forget about his book, *The Total Jazz Guitarist*.

Not a guitarist? Wait! We’ve got something we’d like you to see. Check out the Adult Refresher lesson “In Other Modes: Modal, Chromatic, Pentatonic and Whole Tone Scales,” taught by Leo Marchildon and Andrea Amos. Enjoy!