

FINDING SCALES FROM CHORD SYMBOLS

When you are confronted with a weird and wonderful chord symbol, it can be very difficult knowing what notes you can play against it. If you don't recognise the chord (most commonly-encountered chords are usually easy to spot, even altered chords), all you can hope to do is to listen like crazy to what the rhythm section is playing or to any backing figures the rest of the horns might be playing, and fit in with that. Even when you *do* know what to play, you should always be guided first and foremost by your ears.

If you can take a look at the chord progression in advance, however, you can work things out for yourself, or if you are playing any of my tunes, you can take advantage of the fact that I've saved you the trouble of doing your homework by providing you with the scales.

Why is it important to know the scales? Because the chords themselves only tell you about some of the notes you can play, the rest you have to guess. A scale is also a very concise way of labelling all the notes implied by the chord. You can be reassured too by the knowledge that there are very few types of scales that are used, these being:

- * the major scale
- * the melodic minor scales (ascending form both ways = same as major with minor 3rd)
- * the harmonic minor scale
- * the diminished scale (only 3 of them)
- * the whole-tone scale (only 2 of them and these are very rarely used)
- * the arabic/gypsy major and minor scale (useful but not used too often)
- * the pentatonic major and minor scale and those with flattened sixth - all of which are derived from major and minor scales
- * the blues scales

(Notes: I have not listed Modes as they are all major or minor scales starting on the different notes. I have also not included the bebop scale which to my mind is more of a lick than a bona fide scale.)

The first four of these categories are the most commonly used, if we disregard the blues scale. All of these scales are fundamental to learning an instrument, so with the possible exception of the diminished scale, anyone who plays an instrument will already be familiar with them in all keys. If not, practicing scales and arpeggios is all that is needed.

Now let us take a fanciful chord you might get thrown at you. Imagine 10,000 people in a big concert venue intently listening to every note you play. Or 3 drunks in your local pub/bar, to be more realistic. Either way, you want to get it right.

Let's say the chord is a Bb major 9 (+5) sus 4 on a C bass-note. Seemingly not too complicated but enough to make your grey cells start to panic.

What we do to find the chord is this. First of all, arrange the notes within the range of an octave.

From the C bass-note, we get this:

C D Eb F# A Bb

(The Bb, D and A make up the Bb major seventh, the C is the ninth as well as being the bass, the F# is the sharpened fifth and the Eb is the suspended fourth. *For this analysis you can include the third and the suspended fourth, although you wouldn't play the third.*)

Ask yourself, do I recognise this as a scale?

You should do as it's the very first scale you played when you were learning. (You were attempting to play a C major scale at the time!)

Seriously though, it doesn't ring any bells. So try starting on one of the other notes besides the C.

Still not recognisable?

Well, it can't be a pentatonic as there are 6 notes rather than 5. There are 6 notes in a whole-tone scale, but the distance between adjacent notes is a tone, so we can rule that out too.

As it's too short to be one of the other scales, it stands to reason that there must be one or more notes missing. So add a note in the gaps between the existing notes and go up the scale that results from this. It's a bit tedious but you can quickly rule out any that aren't immediately familiar to you.

You will find that when you try inserting a **G** the resulting scale becomes clear to you (or it should do). Yes, it's a G harmonic minor scale. So there we have it.

Now you know what scale to use, you can do things like play scalar runs, patterns with some of the notes omitted, arpeggios based on that scale, and rhythmic patterns on that scale. You can also add chromatic notes and blues notes not in the scale. You can also sidestep (play on an Ab or Gb harmonic minor scale or further afield) knowing you have a base to come home to. In short, you can be creative without having to bluff your way out and doing it confidentially which will reflect on your playing.