

MU 009 (Feurzeig): The Blues Scale and the Dominant Seventh Chord

The **blues scale** contains the notes used to form common blues licks and melodies. It consists of a minor pentatonic scale plus an additional chromatic pitch that fills in the whole step between the 4th and 5th scale degrees.

C blues scale

^1 ^3 ^4 ^#4 ^5 ^7 ^1 ^7 ^5 ^b5 ^4 ^3 ^1

This added note is typically spelled as a raised $\hat{4}$ when it ascends to $\hat{5}$, **and** as a lowered $\hat{5}$ when it descends to $\hat{4}$.

The blues scale should not be taken literally. Many blues licks include other pitches as well. Furthermore, blues-style melody includes bent pitches and other microtuned notes (notes that do not correspond precisely to the keys on a piano) that are not easily represented in standard notation. Nonetheless, practicing the blues scale and patterns using its notes is a great way to start sounding “bluesy”.

Comparing the blues scale to its parallel **major** scale, we see that the 3rd, 5th, and 7th degrees are flatted. These three notes are called “blue notes”. But any note can become a blue note if it is played with an expressively altered intonation.

Remember: when speaking of generalized scale and chord relationships, “flatted” usually means “chromatically lowered”. A “flatted” note is not necessarily a note with a flat in staff notation. In the following example, the flat 7th and flat 3rd degrees are G and C, respectively.

A blues scale

A blues scale: ^1, ^b7, ^5, ^b5, ^4, ^b3, ^1

A major scale: ^7, ^5, ^3

Dominant seventh chords

A **seventh chord** is a 4-note chord formed by a triad plus a note a third above the triad fifth. This note is a seventh above the root, hence the name.

If the triad is major and the seventh is minor (in other words, if the interval between the chord 5th and chord 7th is a minor third), the chord is called a **major-minor seventh** chord. “Major” here refers to the triad quality, “minor” to the seventh between the root and chord 7th.

The only place this particular quality of seventh chord occurs in a major scale is over the dominant pitch. So another term for “major-minor seventh” chord is **dominant seventh chord** or just **dominant seventh** for short. This is in fact much more common than the term major-minor seventh.

Although the chord occurs naturally only on V, chords of this quality are can be called “dominant sevenths” no matter what the scale degree of the root. For example, in the key of E major an E major-minor seventh chord may be formed by altering the D-sharp of the scale. This is called an “E dominant seventh”, even though E is the tonic of the key, and would be labeled with roman numeral I.

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef. On the left, a major triad is shown with notes E4, G4, and B4. A bracket below it is labeled "major triad". To the right, a dominant seventh chord is shown with notes E4, G4, B4, and D5. A bracket above it is labeled "minor seventh". Below the staff, the text reads: "major-minor seventh chord or dominant seventh chord" and "E 'dominant seventh' chord (even though this is a tonic chord in the key of E)".