

# Distinguishing Tones

by Eric T. Johnson

When improvising a solo one must think ahead. Direction and forward momentum should always be paramount. Music is a fluid, real-time entity, and “gravitates” forward in time, as an apple gravitates towards the ground.

Improvising Jazz musicians should be able to create this forward flow by manipulating melody, harmony, and rhythm.

A soloist should be able to create an effective solo with or without accompaniment. The existence of harmonic or/and rhythmic accompaniment should inform the soloist’s decision process regarding note choice, especially target notes.

When approaching a harmonic change, whether a new chord or alteration of the current chord, the target note is the note chosen as a the representative of that chord. This note can be the root, as it often is for a bass player. It can be the third, fifth or seventh, as it often is with a traditional bebop line. It can also be an upper extension of the chord, or a “tension”, which enters the realm of colorization of the harmony.

The **distinguishing tone** (DT) is the target note that best represents the harmonic change that is occurring. Thus it is as determined as much by the current chord as it is by the new chord. Unlike “guide tones”, DTs can be upper extension notes, as long as they strongly reflect the difference between a chord and it’s preceding chord. There may be multiple DTs. If so the improviser can choose which one to use as a target note based on the natural direction of the line or a judgement as to the amount of tension desired. For example, if the fifth and ninth of the new chord are foreign to the old chord and are determined to be DTs, then one may choose to move to the ninth, since the fifth often doesn’t say much about the quality of the chord, and in any case is often played by the accompanist.

DTs are a big part - a key - to expressing a lot with a little. They are about getting to the essence of harmony. They are as essential for the chordal accompanist as for the soloist, for they focus one’s attention on the hierarchical importance of the notes of a chord, allowing one to efficiently maximize expression.

The following two pages demonstrate DTs on a fairly standard Bb blues.

# B FLAT BLUES DISTINGUISHING TONES

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**B FLAT MIXO**      **E FLAT MIXO**    **E DIMISHED**    **B FLAT MIXO**      **F DORIAN**      **B FLAT ALT DOM**

**E FLAT LYD DOM**      **E FLAT DORIAN**    **A FLAT LYD DOM**      **B FLAT LYD DOM**      **D LOC2 (9)**    **G ALT DOM**

**C DORIAN**      **F MIXO**      **F ALT DOM**      **B FLAT LYD DOM**      **B FLAT BLUES MINOR**

GUITAR

IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT THE LYDIAN DOMINANT CHORDS ARE NOT A "STANDARD" FEATURE OF A JAZZ BLUES. THEY DO, HOWEVER, PROVIDE MORE HARMONIC VARIETY AND CHOICES FOR DISTINGUISHING TONES. THELONIOUS MONK, AMONG COUNTLESS OTHERS, EMPLOYS THESE HARMONIES.

I AM NOT PROVIDING THE ACTUAL CHORD CHANGES BECAUSE IT IS IMPORTANT TO THINK IN TERMS OF CHORD SCALES, NOT JUST CHORDS. TO DETERMINE DISTINGUISHING TONES IT IS NECESSARY TO CONSIDER ALL THE AVAILABLE NOTES OF A GIVEN HARMONY, NOT JUST THE LOWER STRUCTURE OF THE CHORD.

# B FLAT BLUES

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GUJAR

B FLAT MIXO      E FLAT MIXO    E DIMISHED    B FLAT MIXO      F DORIAN      B FLAT ALT DDM

E FLAT LYD DDM      E FLAT DORIAN    A FLAT LYD DDM    B FLAT LYD DDM      D LOC2 (9)    G ALT DDM

C DORIAN      F MIXO      F ALT DDM      B FLAT LYD DDM      B FLAT BLUES MINOR

The sheet music is written for guitar in the key of B-flat major (two flats) and 12/8 time. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats, and a common time signature. The second staff begins with a measure rest labeled '5'. The third staff begins with a measure rest labeled '9'. Above the notes, various chord modes are indicated: B Flat Mixolydian, E Flat Mixolydian, E Diminished, B Flat Mixolydian, F Dorian, B Flat Altered Dorian, E Flat Lydian Dorian, E Flat Dorian, A Flat Lydian Dorian, B Flat Lydian Dorian, D Locrian (9), G Altered Dorian, C Dorian, F Mixolydian, F Altered Dorian, B Flat Lydian Dorian, and B Flat Blues Minor.