

It's All About the Line

Playing jazz on the Diminished-tuned chromatic harmonica

by Jason Rogers

As a broad generalization, for a jazz solo to sound stylistically appropriate, certain stylistic elements must be present to some degree. The improvised melody, or the “line,” needs to have forward motion and a rhythmic flow. At the same time, the line must comment on the harmonies of the tune, develop melodic motifs, echo shades of the melody or be able to execute any melodic idea that pops into the imagination. On the down side, a line that is rhythmically awkward, too repetitive or too harmonically inflexible begins to sound uncharacteristic of jazz—or even worse—unskillful on the part of the improviser.

This set of criteria is why it is a challenge to make the chromatic harmonica sound appropriate in jazz. It's not easy to navigate breath changes and embouchure movements across the holes of the harmonica in a flowing manner while meeting the demands of the changes and melodic interest. Even more difficult, this type of control often must happen at a very fast tempo!

There is no magic bullet of course, but the Diminished-tuned harmonica (or Dimi)—discussed previously in the Winter 2012 issue—is highly suited for jazz playing and makes this challenge a little bit easier.

When discussion comes up about which layout might be the most suitable for playing jazz, the conversation often turns to abstract analysis. We compare the number and placement of enharmonics on each tuning, scales with the fewest breath changes, the pros and cons of symmetrical layouts vs. key or mode-oriented layouts, and so on. All of these details are meaningful, but don't necessarily yield convincing conclusions. At some point, the player just needs to try the harmonica and find out how it feels to play it.

One time-tested way to learn what an instrument is capable of is to transcribe the improvisations of a great player. Once ground has been broken by the master innovator, others feel inspired to follow because they now hear what can be done. In the case of the Dimi, however, there are, to date, very few recorded examples.

So instead of offering more analysis, I have written a jazz line to illustrate some of the characteristics of the Dimi. The exercise purposefully uses primarily 8th notes on a traditional chord progression. A number of elements of the composition line up with the natural layout of the Dimi, and I'm sure you will notice some of these patterns.

Due to the symmetrical nature of the Dimi layout, a melody or phrase that is played in one key can be played with the exact same fingering in three other keys. To demonstrate this, the line has been transposed into four keys. It works equally well in the keys of Db, Bb, G and E. [Note: Due to space considerations, we will include only two transpositions here. You can find the other transpositions, as well as versions for G Dimi and Bb Dimi, at <http://jasonharmonica.com>].

Of course, there are other lines that work well in the other eight keys. In general, all twelve keys lay almost equally as well. This is fundamental in jazz as we want to have equal facility in any key we encounter. For example, a tune in the key of C may have a bridge in the key of E, and with the Dimi, we don't get into difficulty with the change of key. In addition, in modern jazz it is common to play very chromatically, which can sometimes equate to moving through many keys within the same phrase.

I hope this written line, with the fingerings included, makes it possible for you to follow along and experience how these melodies feel on the Dimi.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or comments at jasonharmonica@gmail.com. 🎷

The tab font is Chromatic Sans:

↑	↓
1 = hole 1 blow`	2 = hole 2 draw
⤴	⤵
3 = hole 3 blow/slide	4 = hole 4 draw/slide

Db Line

For C Dimi

Jason Rogers

A Db7 Bb7 Eb- Ab7

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

4 F- Bb7 Eb- D7 Db7

3 4 4 5 5 4 3 2 2 2 2 3 3 2 1 1 1 2 2 2 2 3 4 5

7 Gb Go F- Bb7 Eb- Ab7

5 4 3 2 2 3 4 4 3 6 3 3 4 4 5 6 6 7 7

A Db7 Bb7 Eb- Ab7 F- Eo

6 6 6 5 5 4 3 4 4 5 6 6 6 6 6 5 6 5 6 6 5 4 3 2

13 Eb- Ab7 Ab-7 Db7 Gb7 Cb7

2 3 4 4 5 5 6 7 8 8 7 7 6 5 4 3 2 2 5 5 4 3 2 2 3

16 Ab7 Db **B** C-7

3 4 4 3 3 3 4 5 5 2 1 1 2 3 3 4 3 3 3 4

19 **F7** **Bb7**

22 **Eb7** **Ab7**

25 **A** **Db** **Bb7** **Eb-** **Ab7**

28 **F-** **Bb7** **A7** **D7** **Ab-** **Db7**

31 **Gb7** **Gb-** **Db** **Ab7** **Db**

E Line

For C Dimi

Jason Rogers

A E7 C#7 F#- B7

2 2 3 3 3 4 3 2 2 2 3 4 5 5 5 4 3 2 2 3 4 5 4 4

G#- C#7 F#- F7 E7

4 5 5 6 6 5 4 3 3 3 3 4 4 3 2 2 2 3 3 3 3 3 4 5 6

A Bb G#- C#7 F#- B7

6 5 4 3 3 4 5 5 4 7 4 4 5 5 6 7 7 8 8

A E7 C#7 F#- B7 G#- Go

7 7 7 6 6 5 4 5 5 6 7 7 7 7 7 6 7 6 7 7 6 5 4 3

F#- B7 B-7 E7 A7 D7

3 4 5 5 6 6 7 8 9 9 8 8 7 6 5 4 3 3 6 6 5 4 3 3 4

B7 E **B** D#-7

4 5 5 4 4 4 5 6 6 3 2 2 3 4 4 5 4 4 4 5

19 **G#7** **C#7**

22 **F#7** **B7**

25 **A** **E** **C#7** **F#-** **B7**

28 **G#-** **C#7** **C7** **F7** **B-** **E7**

31 **A7** **A-** **E** **B7** **E**

6 7 7 8 7 6 6 6 6 7 7 7 7 6 5 5 5 5 3

4 4 4 5 5 6 6 7 7 8 7 7 7 7 7 6 6 6 6 6 5 5 4 4

4 5 6 7 8 9 9 9 8 7 7 8 7 6 6 7 6 6 5 5 5 4 4 3

3 4 5 6 7 8 8 9 8 7 6 7 6 5 5 4 4 5 6 7 7 6 5 4 4

4 5 5 6 7 6 5 4 4 5 6 7 7 5 5 6 7 7 8 9 8 8