

# Minor Blues Chord Progressions

In this jazz guitar lesson you will learn the most common **chord progressions** used when playing a **minor blues**. These progressions will start off rather simply, with what is referred to as the basic minor blues, and will consequently get more and more complex until reaching a point of chordal saturation.

## Example 1

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The first example lays out the chords to what is considered **the most common minor blues progression**. These are the changes that one would play if a minor blues were called at a jam session, or if they were playing with a band for the first time. These chords are a great way to get a band on a common ground before adding substitutions of various kinds. The progression only contains four different chords the I (Cm7), the IV (Fm7), the II (Dm7b5) and the V (G7alt).

Example 1 shows a 12-measure progression in C minor. The chords are: Cm7 (measures 1-4), Fm7 (measure 5), Cm7 (measures 6-8), Dm7b5 (measure 9), G7alt (measures 10-12).

## Example 2

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In the next progression we will insert a common substitution over the II chord in bars 9 and 12. Instead of playing the Dm7b5 chord each time the II chord comes around, we will play its [tri-tone substitution](#), Ab7, instead.

The **Ab7 chord** contains the three most important notes of the Dm7b5 chord, F (3rd /13th), Ab (5th /root) and the C (7th, 3rd). The Ab7 chord also resolves smoothly down by a half-step to the G7alt chord that follows it each time it is played. This progression is often intertwined with example 1 without much distinction between the two.

Since Ab7 and Dm7b5 are so closely related the only real audible difference between these two progressions is the bass movement in bars 9-10 and 12.

Example 3 shows a 4-measure progression in C minor. The first measure contains Cm7. The second measure contains Fm7. The third measure contains Cm7. The fourth measure contains Ab7 and G7alt.

### Example 3

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With this example we will insert our first **secondary dominant chords**. A secondary dominant chord is one that is not found within the tonic key, C minor, but one that temporarily tonicizes a chord found in the progression, in this case the Fm7 chord in bar five.

The two added chords in bar four, **Gm7b5-C7alt**, are a **ii-V7** progression in the key of **F minor**. These chords allow for a smooth transition between the I chord, Cm7, and the IV chord, Fm7, by temporarily cadencing in that key.

Example 4 shows a 6-measure progression in C minor. The first measure contains Cm7. The second measure contains Gm7b5 and C7alt. The third measure contains Fm7. The fourth measure contains Cm7. The fifth measure contains Ab7. The sixth measure contains G7alt.

### Example 4

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In this example we will now add a **turnaround progression** in the second bar. A turnaround progression is any series of chords that takes the listener from one chord, Cm7 in this case, and turning it around back to itself using a series of chords, **Dm7b5-G7alt** in this case.

These chords help to add **harmonic diversity** to the first three bars of the minor blues, which are normally just a long Cm7 chord. They allow an improviser or composer to have more movement with their lines/chords, while not stepping too far away from the tonic key.

Example 4: A 12-bar minor blues progression in C minor. The first four bars are: Cm7, Dm7b5, G7alt, Cm7, Gm7b5, C7alt. Bars 5-8 are: Fm7, Cm7. Bars 9-12 are: Ab7, G7alt, Cm7, Ab7, G7alt.

### Example 5

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Now we will add a **bIIImaj7** chord in between the I and II chords in bars 1 and 12. The **Ebmaj7** chord is the **relative major of C minor**, so allows for a smooth connection of the I and II chords. These four chords, Im7-bIIImaj7-IIIm7b5-V7alt, are one of the most common [minor key turnarounds](#) found within the jazz idiom.

Example 5: A 12-bar minor blues progression in C minor with a bIIImaj7 substitution. The first four bars are: Cm7, Ebmaj7, Dm7b5, G7alt, Cm7, Gm7b5, C7alt. Bars 5-8 are: Fm7, Cm7. Bars 9-12 are: Ab7, G7alt, Cm7, Ebmaj7, Dm7b5, G7alt.

### Example 6

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Now that we have focused our turnaround substitutions on the tonic key, we can start to **turnaround to secondary keys/chords**.

In this example the "target" chord of the new turnaround is the **Ab7** chord found in bar nine. The previous two bars, Cm7-F7/Bbm7-Eb7, act as a **iii-VI/ii-V** progression that resolves when it reaches the Ab7 chord in bar nine.

With this turnaround added to our progression there are now four turnarounds being used with our chorus, bars 1-3, 4-5, 7-9, and 11-1. So without stepping outside of the main chords in our original progression we are now able to create movement in almost every bar of the progression, simply by inserting turnarounds.

Chord progression for Example 7:

- Bar 1: Cm7
- Bar 2: Ebmaj7
- Bar 3: Dm7b5
- Bar 4: G7alt
- Bar 5: Cm7
- Bar 6: Gm7b5
- Bar 7: C7alt
- Bar 8: Fm7
- Bar 9: Cm7
- Bar 10: F7
- Bar 11: Bbm7
- Bar 12: Eb7

### Example 7

Now that we have subbed as many turnarounds as we can, we will now start to **alter these turnarounds** to give ourselves several options when blowing/comping through the progression.

We will start by adding **tri-tone subs** into the tonic turnarounds in bars 1-3 and 11-12. Here we start by substituting the Dm7b5 with its tri-tone Ab7, and the G7alt chord with its tri-tone Db7 chord. Since the Ebmaj7 is already a fifth away from Ab7, we can simply make it a dominant chord, Eb7, which will now start a series of three dominant chords that move through the cycle of fourths before resolving by half-step to the Cm7 chords in bars 3 and 1.

Chord progression for Example 7 (altered):

- Bar 1: Cm7
- Bar 2: Eb7
- Bar 3: Ab7
- Bar 4: Db7
- Bar 5: Cm7
- Bar 6: Gm7b5
- Bar 7: C7alt
- Bar 8: Fm7
- Bar 9: Cm7
- Bar 10: F7
- Bar 11: Bbm7
- Bar 12: Eb7

## Example 8

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We will now apply the **tri-tone substitution** concept to the turnaround in bars 4-5 and 7-9. In bar four the C7alt is subbed by a **Gb7** chord, which resolves down by half-step to the Fm7 chord in bar five.

In bar seven the F7 chord is subbed by its tri-tone to become **B7** and the Eb7 chord in bar eight is replaced by an **A7** chord.

The use of the tri-tone subs **can sometimes become monotonous** because of the continuous half-step movement occurring during each cadence. In order to avoid this, one can alternate between using the standard turnarounds and the tri-tone turnarounds in each chorus of improvising/comping.

Musical notation for Example 8, showing chord progressions in 4/4 time. The notation is divided into three systems of four bars each, with chords indicated above the staff.

System 1 (Bars 1-4): Cm7, Eb7, Ab7, Db7, Cm7, Gm7b5, Gb7

System 2 (Bars 5-8): 5 Fm7, Cm7, B7, Bbm7, A7

System 3 (Bars 9-12): 9 Ab7, Db7, Cm7, Eb7, Ab7, Db7

## Example 9

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We can now add **tri-tone subs** to the ii chords of each of the turnarounds, which produce **cycle progressions**. A cycle progression is one where the roots of each chord moves by a fourth to the next chord, for example the Eb7-Ab7-Db7 chords in bars one and two.

The cycle progression in bars seven and eight starts on an F#7 chord, then moves through B7-E7-A7 before resolving by half-step to the Ab7 chord in bar nine. For the last two bars, 11-12, the tonic chord, Cm7, is replaced by a Bb7 which allows for a four chord cycle progression, Bb7-Eb7-Ab7-Db7, to occur. Since the last two bars will resolve to the tonic chord in bar one, it is not always necessary to state the tonic chord, Cm7, in bar 11 of the progression, since it will be stated two bars later when the progression resets itself.

Cm<sup>7</sup>    E<sup>b7</sup>    A<sup>b7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>    Cm<sup>7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>    G<sup>b7</sup>

5 Fm<sup>7</sup>    F<sup>#7</sup>    B<sup>7</sup>    E<sup>7</sup>    A<sup>7</sup>

9 A<sup>b7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>    B<sup>b7</sup>    E<sup>b7</sup>    A<sup>b7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>

### Example 10

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In the next example we will stretch out our cycle progression so that it stretches the length of the first four bars before it resolves into the Fm7 chord in bar five. All eight chords move by a fourth to the next chord before the Gb7 chord resolves down by half-step to the Fm7 chord.

This progression can be heard in the playing of **McCoy Tyner** and other Hard Bop players of that era. Since the first chord of the progression is now a G7 chord, the last two bars must be altered to cadence into the new key. Here we use the Cm7 chord which moves down by a tone to the Bb7 chord, which moves down by another tone to Ab7, the tri-tone of D7 (the dominant of G7), and resolves by half-step back to the top of the form.

G<sup>7</sup>    C<sup>7</sup>    F<sup>7</sup>    B<sup>b7</sup>    E<sup>b7</sup>    A<sup>b7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>    G<sup>b7</sup>

5 Fm<sup>7</sup>    F<sup>#7</sup>    B<sup>7</sup>    E<sup>7</sup>    A<sup>7</sup>

9 A<sup>b7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>    Cm<sup>7</sup>    B<sup>b7</sup>    A<sup>b7</sup>

### Example 11

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In this last progression every chord found with the cycle progression in the first four bars of the previous example is replaced by its **tri-tone sub**. So the progression now begins on Db7 and moves by fourths until it resolves from the C7alt to the Fm7 chord in bar five.

As well, a Cm7 chord has been added to the beginning of bar seven to remind the listener of the tonic key, since the first four bars do not contain this chord anymore. Also notice how smoothly the Cm7 chord moves down in the B7 chord in the second half of bar seven, before moving by fourths and resolving by half-step to the Ab7 in bar nine.

The image displays three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, representing a blues progression. Each staff contains four measures of music, indicated by diagonal slashes. Chord symbols are placed above the staves to indicate the harmonic structure.

- Staff 1 (Measures 1-4):** Chords are D<sup>b</sup>7, G<sup>b</sup>7, B<sup>7</sup>, E<sup>7</sup>, A<sup>7</sup>, D<sup>7</sup>, G<sup>7</sup>, and C<sup>7</sup>alt.
- Staff 2 (Measures 5-8):** Chords are Fm<sup>7</sup>, Cm<sup>7</sup>, B<sup>7</sup>, E<sup>7</sup>, and A<sup>7</sup>.
- Staff 3 (Measures 9-12):** Chords are A<sup>b</sup>7, D<sup>b</sup>7, Cm<sup>7</sup>, B<sup>b</sup>7, and A<sup>b</sup>7.

Short List of Common Minor Blues Tunes:

- Birk's Works - Dizzy Gillespie, Mr. P.C. - John Coltrane, Equinox – John Coltrane, Interplay - Bill Evans, Israel – John Carisi; **Stolen Moments** - Oliver Nelson