

Melodic Minor: Not Just For Jazz

by Dennis Winge

To generalize, rock players use the major scale modes plus maybe some harmonic minor other exotic scales, but sparingly do they use melodic minor, diminished and whole tone scales. Jazz players, on the other hand, use the major modes, melodic minor, diminished and whole tone, but not so much more exotic scales such as harmonic minor. All scales are valid choices for any kind of music, and melodic minor is no exception.

To show an example of melodic minor being used in a non-jazz context, we will take a relatively simple progression:

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|| C#m | % | % | % |  
| C#m | % | % | % |  
| A7 | G#7 | C#m | F#7 |  
| A7 G#7 | C#m | F#7 | G#7 ||
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If you are not familiar with the melodic minor scale or its modes, you may want to refer to my other article “Jazz Theory: Melodic Minor Harmony” at <https://surreyguitar.com/jazz-theory-melodic-minor-harmony>. This article goes one step beyond that by showing you how to implement the melodic minor scale in ways that might not seem immediately obvious. In fact, we are going to use it in 4 different contexts:

A performance video I made at this link (<http://guitarlessonsithaca.com/2021/02/24/jkjkjllkljllj/>) highlights the use of the melodic minor scale in each of the 4 contexts. The improvisation uses only the melodic minor scale in each of the 4 scenarios below.

1. Over a Im chord

Notice that I used “C#m” instead of “C#m7” as the tonic chord. Because the b7 of the latter chord is not present in the one I chose, you can use melodic minor on it. If the chord had said “C#m6,” that would also be an opportunity to use melodic minor. If the chord does say “C#m7” but there is no b7 melody present, you can use melodic minor, although there may be some clash with other harmonic instruments (keyboards, guitar, etc.) if they play the b7 in their voicing while you use it. In short, you can use melodic minor over virtually any minor chord.

2. Over a IV7 chord

The F#7 chord is the IV7 chord to the key of C#m. Normally it would be F#m, but here it's a dominant chord. The normal go-to scale is mixolydian, which of course is 1 2 3 4 5 6 b7 to the F# tonic. Note that these are the same notes as C#m dorian (more on that in a minute).

Even though F# mixolydian works fine here, there is no reason we can't sharp the 4th note. In fact, the #11, as it would be called against the F#7 chord, is quite a nice extension to the chord, whereas the regular 4th could clash a little depending on how it's used. In any even this raised fourth is now called F# lydian dominant.

Note that these are the same notes as C# melodic minor. Earlier we had F# mixolydian/C# dorian whose notes were f#, g#, a#, b, c#, d#, e. Now that we raised the fourth note we have f#, g#, a#, b#, c#, d#, e which is the called F# lydian dominant / C# melodic minor.

3. Over a bVI7 chord

The same is true for the A7 chord. A mixolydian gives us a, b, c#, d, e, f#, g. If we raise the 4th note to d#, it actually fits in better with overall key of C# because d# is the 2nd note of C#m. So not only is it a good choice as the #11 to the chord we're on, but it also better serves the overall tonality of the tune. The mode is called A lydian dominant.

4. Over a V7 chord

If you were to choose mixolydian over the G#7 chord, you might have to be a little careful because its notes g#, a#, b#, c#, d#, e#, f# gives us the major third to the key of C#m, which is e#. [Side note: I chose to make the groove before I wrote the article and that's why we're getting more rare enharmonic spellings such as b# and e#, not because I wanted to potentially add confusion or be pretentious. It's good for your music theory to think in keys such as this anyway. :)]

So using G# mixolydian is not wrong, it just might not be the sound that best enhances the tension-and-release of the progression. What if we altered the chord's fifth (either sharpened or flatted it) and altered the 9th (either sharpened or flatted it)? Any combination of flat or sharp 5 plus flat or sharp 9 such as G#+5b9, G#b5+9 can simply be called G#7alt which stands for "altered."

Here you would use the 1, b2, b3, 3, b5, b6, b7 to the g# root. Note that the scale has two types of 3rd because the b2 acts as the b9 and the b3 acts as the #9. Further, because the b6 is the same as a #5, the scale has both a flat five and a sharp five. In the end you have 1-3-b7 (the shell of dominant 7 chord) plus a flat & sharp nine and a flat & sharp 5.

If that's enough to make your head spin, the good news is that this "altered dominant" or "super-locrian" scale as it's called is the same as A melodic minor (the melodic minor up ½ step from the root of the V chord). It's also the same D Lydian dominant (the note ½ step above the root of the key), a phenomenon known as the "tritone substitution" which is a subject for another article. Try it and you'll see it sets up lots of tension to the upcoming C#m chord.

In the end you can see there are lots of ways to use melodic minor. We used modes I, IV, and VII which are probably the most common uses for it. Any Im, IV7 and V7 are potential opportunities to use it. Have fun exploring this great scale.

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About the author: Dennis Winge is a pro guitarist, composer and teacher who has released 6 instrumental albums to date. His guitar school serves [Guitar Instruction Ithaca](#) and the surrounding areas.