

# Essential Concepts for Characteristic Fully Diminished Melodies

By: Ryan Kerwin

Beginning jazz improvisers typically struggle to create characteristic melodies on diminished chords. Although the diminished seventh chord appears in the most essential jazz forms including the blues, rhythm changes, and many standards like “All The Things You Are,” this is perhaps one of the most unfamiliar and baffling harmonies on which to improvise. The following concepts are presented to help the student begin to assimilate common practice vocabulary for this mysterious chord.

When improvising 1/8th note linear melodies, it’s common knowledge that an underlying harmony can be implied by placing the chord tones on the beat. This is epitomized in the typical use of bebop dominant scales.

Example:



The same concept can be applied to diminished harmony by using chromatic approach tones into each chord member.

Example:



This creates a collection of pitches called an octatonic scale, meaning that each octave of the scale contains eight pitches.

The chromatic approach concept can also be applied to descending sequences of chord tones<sup>1</sup>.

Example:

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<sup>1</sup> For example listen closely to Hank Mobley’s solo on, “Soul Station.” Mobley, *Soul Station*.



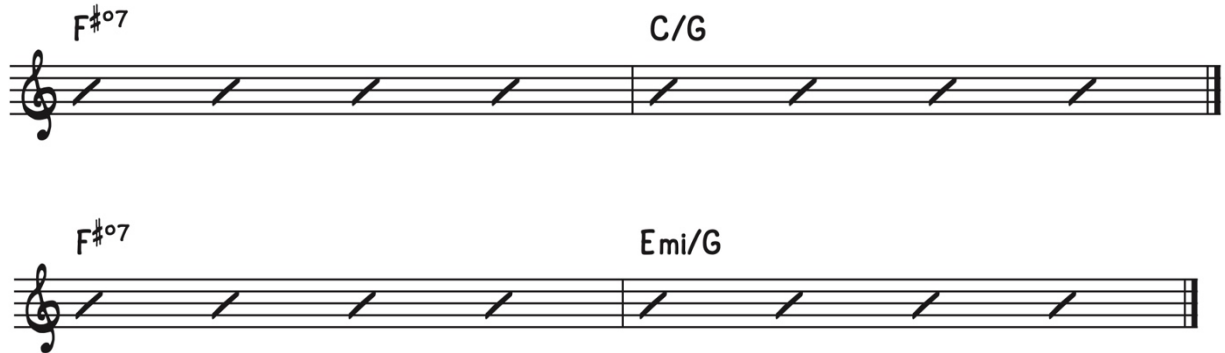
These two examples demonstrate the most fundamental approach to creating characteristic bop melodies over diminished harmony. Technical fluidity with these two basic shapes is a prerequisite for incorporating this concept intuitively in improvisation.

### Resolving Diminished Melodies

Once realizing diminished melodies in isolation becomes natural, the next step is to learn how to resolve diminished melodies.

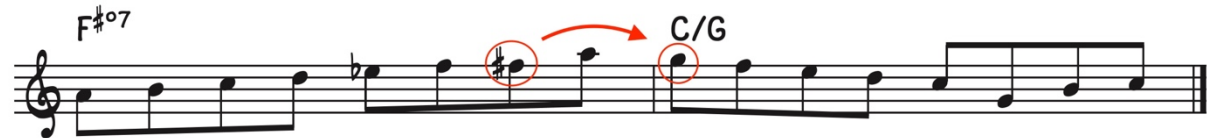
In common practice jazz repertoire, fully diminished seventh chords typically resolve to the tonic harmony (or a substitute).

Example:



The most basic way to resolve these diminished melodies is to use half-step motion between chord members at the point of chord change.

Example:



Example:



Internalizing this melodic motion is essential to properly resolving diminished melodies in the context of an improvisation. Once this has been achieved, incorporating more advanced diminished sequences is relatively straightforward.

Another common tactic is to resolve to the tonic chord by outlining the V7/iii at the end of a diminished line. This approach is built in to the bebop melody, “Donna Lee”:

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the bebop melody "Donna Lee". The first staff contains measures 25 through 28. Measure 25 has a Gmi<sup>7</sup> chord. Measure 26 has a D7(♭9) chord. Measure 27 has a Gmi<sup>7</sup> chord. Measure 28 has a C#°7 chord. A red box highlights the final notes of measure 28, with the text "Implies A7" below it. The second staff contains measures 29 through 32. Measure 29 has a Dmi<sup>7</sup> chord. Measure 30 has a G7(♭9) chord. Measure 31 has a Cmi<sup>7</sup> chord. Measure 32 has an F7 chord. The piece ends with a Bma<sup>7</sup> chord and a Cmi<sup>7</sup> F7 chord.

A similar concept is also frequently used by bop soloists as a substitution for a iiV progression, as in Hank Mobley’s recorded solo on “This I Dig of You”<sup>2</sup>:

The image shows a single staff of musical notation for the solo on "This I Dig of You". The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The progression starts with a Cmaj<sup>7</sup> chord. The next measure has a Dmi<sup>7</sup> chord. The following measure has a G<sup>7</sup> chord, which is highlighted with a red box and an upward-pointing arrow. Below this measure, the text "Implies B7 to Emi<sup>7</sup>" is written with a red arrow pointing to the G<sup>7</sup> chord. The next measure has an Emi<sup>7</sup>/C chord. The final measure has a Dmi<sup>7</sup> chord. The piece ends with a G<sup>7</sup> chord.

### More Advanced Diminished Patterns:

Because this approach to diminished melodies is fairly formulaic, more advanced sequences typically incorporate rhythmic accents to generate interest.

<sup>2</sup> Mobley.

The following example is commonly used in recorded solos by the saxophonist Sonny Stitt<sup>3</sup>, and incorporates a 3 over 4 polyrhythm:



The next example is commonly used in recorded solos by the saxophonist Hank Mobley. It features chromatic approach tones into diminished chord members:



It's also common to hear this pattern displaced by 1/8 note:



The final pattern incorporates a common digital sequence built on each of the diminished chord tones. It also incorporates a three over four polyrhythm:



Practicing these sequences in isolation and applying them to your improvisations takes the ambiguity out of fully diminished chords diminished chord that resolve to the tonic.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, listen closely to Sonny Stitt's solo on the tune "Why Was I Born." Sonny Stitt and Gene Ammons + Organ, *Boss Tenors Is Orbit*.

References:

Mobley, Hank. *Soul Station*. Blue Note, 1960.

Sonny Stitt and Gene Ammons + Organ. *Boss Tenors in Orbit*. Verve, 1962.