

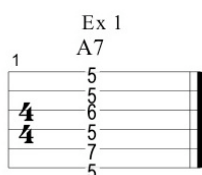
Tritones, the devil's interval.

You may remember the apocryphal story of Robert Johnson going down to the crossroads to make a deal with the devil, well if the story is true you can bet that Lucifer mentioned the tritones at some point as part of the deal.

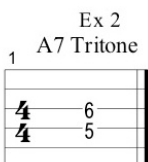
It's very important that the harmony of the chords that you are playing over influences the line you play, otherwise you might as well wear earmuffs. The idea is to target the constituent notes of the underlying chords at strong rhythmic points, this will make your lines sound "glued on" to them. The inexperienced player often sounds as if he is playing over only one chord, the truly fluent player will weave around all the chords, taking liberties with the harmony, changing what he plays as the chords change.

This is a quick and dirty way to become familiar with the tritone. In a separate lesson we will look at them from a more theoretical viewpoint. Let's check them out!

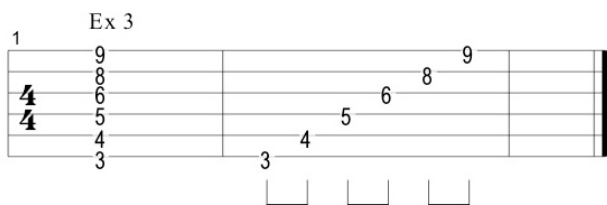
In ex 1 we see a standard A7 barre chord at fret 5.



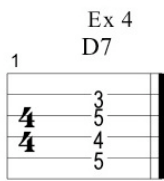
Looking at strings 4 and 3 we can see the shape in ex 2.



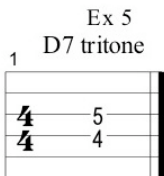
This is the mythical tritone. It is an interval of 6 frets or 3 tones, hence the name. Play it by itself and move it around on the fretboard, listen to how awful it sounds, it's more like a car horn than a musical sound. Despite it's dissonance, the tritone is fundamental to the nature of the 7th chord. We can dispense with the other notes of the chord, play only these two and it's so characteristic of the chord, we can still hear the changes, as you will see in a later example. As we saw a moment ago, the tritone is a 6 semitone interval, the octave is a 12 fret one, so we can see that the tritone is exactly half an octave, this means that we can take the lowest note in the tritone and if we flip it up an octave the tritone still looks the same. We can take the higher of the notes and flip it down an octave to give similar results. Look at ex 3 and you can see the result of this process if we extend it across all 6 strings.



In ex 4 we have a D7 chord at fret 3.



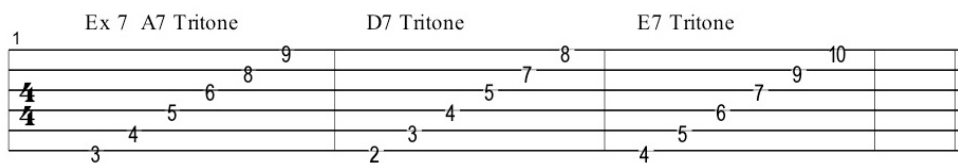
If we pull the tritone from this chord we see it in ex 5.



In ex 6 I have included the tritone of the E7, obviously it will be 2 frets above the one from D7. Let's compare all three. We can see that there is quite a cool relationship between the 3 tritones. They are only a semitone apart. Plus 1 for E7, minus 1 for D7.

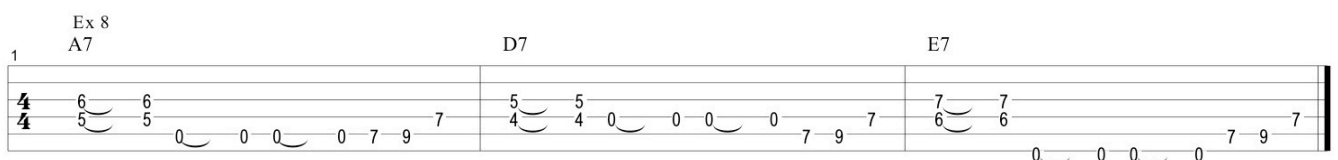


Revisiting ex 3 for a moment, let's do the extension on all 3 tritones, we get ex 7.



Take a look at ex 7 and think about the ramifications of it: The tritones from the 7th chords are the coolest notes and ex 7 shows us that we have 3 huge diagonal stripes going from fret 3 to fret 10 in a very easy to remember pattern. It is your civic responsibility to use these notes, if it's this easy to find them you have no excuse not to!

In ex 8 we have a real world example of how we could use the tritone note in a rhythmic context on a slow blues in A.



Try playing just the tritones without the backing or the single note riff and hopefully you will understand my previous point about the tritone carrying enough information for us to deduce the chord change even though half the chord is missing.

Ex 9 is a more up tempo riff, it might suit a track like "Night Train" by James Brown. Notice how only one note from the tritone changes, yet this is still enough for us to hear the change from A7 to D7.

Ex 9. A7. D7

Ex 10 is a nice way to end a blues lick. Notice how we start playing the riff over E7, resolving onto the tritone of A7 as the chord occurs. We anticipate the change.

Ex 10
E7 A7
let ring - - - - -

When the D7 chord occurs we can use ex 11 to end our riffs. Habitually, blues players bend fret 5 on string 3 if playing in the key of A. What we can see from this example is that if you do that you are bending away from an extremely strong melodic tone. Try playing it unbent, maybe slide up from a semitone below with a grace note, and hear how good it sounds not to bend it.

Ex 11
A7 D7

Hopefully this has been of interest and use to you. As a final thought, using these cool notes has revolutionized my blues playing, not using them now would feel like playing with boxing gloves on. Get this into your playing and it will move you to the next level. Look out for my other lesson on the tritone where we deal with it from a slightly more theoretical viewpoint.