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Harmonic Alchemy: Rhyme Of The Augmented

by Guy Pople

Introduction

The augmented chord is part major, part weirdness. When I first stumbled upon it in the recesses of an old chord book I thought there was a printing error because let's face it, they sound odd.

Specifications

Augmented chords are major triads with raised (or augmented) 5ths. This means that each interval is a 3rd apart (the aug triad is thus comprised of 'stacked 3rds'). They are not diatonic but rather emerge by virtue of the Harmonic Minor Scale. Take E Harmonic Minor = E F# G A B C D#. The major 7th (D#) is responsible for the following augmented outcome: G B D# (with its inversions: B D# C and D# G B). From a modal perspective, G B D# = G Ionian #5, B D# G = B Phrygian #3 and D# G B = D# Mixolydian #1. The augmented family includes the following chords: + (or +5 or aug), maj7 #5, maj9 #5, maj11 #5, maj13 #5.

Shapes

Here are some popular forms with their relevant CAGED shape references beneath:

E		3		7	3
B	8	4		8	3
G	8	4	4	8	4
D	9		5	9	1
A	10	2	6		
E			7		

G+ B+ B+ B+ D#+
(C) (A) (G) (E) (D)

Vibe

Like diminished chords, the 'augmented' produce an almost eldritch ambience if used in isolation. Brush the Gmaj7 #5 below gently... this is probably the most distinct and recognisable chord in motion picture history.

E	
B	7
G	8
D	9
A	10
E	

Gmaj7 #5

Now arpeggiate these two triads below four times each. Any fans of Iron Maiden should recognise this bass line (although in this instance it has been transposed up two octaves).

E		
B		
G	10	8
D	11	9
A	12	10
E		

A aug G aug

Day Job

Some augmented chords have starring roles but most often they have less glamorous (but no less interesting) day jobs as substitutions.

Play through the following chord progression based on a ii m - V 7 - vi m7 progression in Em. Shapes are provided below for your convenience.

Am7 - D7 - Em7 - Am7 - D# dim7 - Em7 - Am7 - B7 - Em7

becomes

Am7 - D7 - Em7 - Am7 - D# aug - Em7 - Am7 - B aug - G aug - Em7

E	5	5	7			5	3
B	5	7	8	7	4	6	4
G	5	5	7	5	4	6	4
D	5	7	9	7	5	7	
A	7	5	7	6	6		
E	5						3

B aug A m7 D7 Em7 D# dim7 D# aug
 G aug

Notice how the aug chord substitutes the dominant or diminished chords.

Altered Dominants

This family of chords are Dominant chords with # or v 5ths or 9ths. The altered dominants with raised 5ths are part-dominant/part-augmented e.g. A7 #5. We could easily use the 7#5 chord in place of the G aug in the progression above i.e. Am7 - D7 - Em7 - Am7 - D# aug - Em7 - Am7 - B aug - G7#5 - Em7.

3
4
4
3
3

G7#5

Conclusion

Equal measures Major and Weirdness (shaken or stirred) produce a peculiar cocktail which is an acquired taste for many. Hopefully I have piqued your curiosity to the extent that you will keep an ear out for the augmented chord and perhaps even find a use for it in your own compositions.

Read the standard version of this column online at: <https://www.guitar9.com/columnist689.html>

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