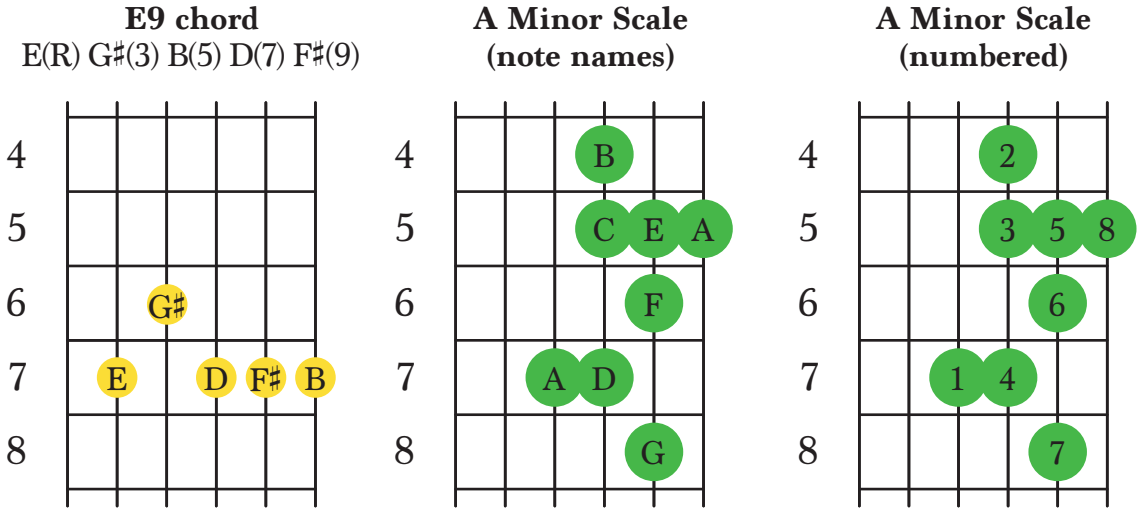
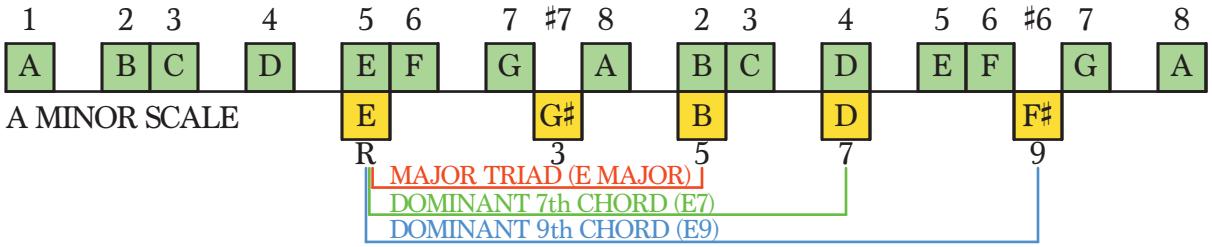
♯9 and ♭9 Chords

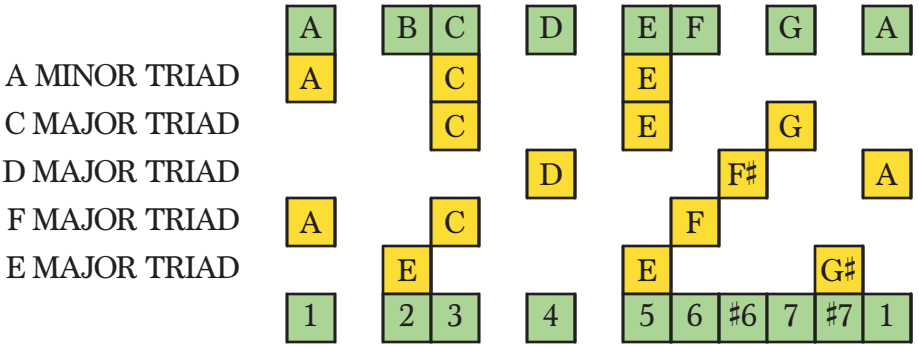
We've only discussed 9th chords in the context of Major Keys, but what happens when we tinker with melodic minor? Melodic minor makes 9th chords more interesting for the V chord in particular. On the left, I've displayed the V chord in the key of A Minor as a 9th chord, called E9.



To the right of the E9 chord, I've shown an A Minor Scale, first with note names, then with numbers. We'll come back to this in a minute, but first lets write out this information in a linear way to make the theory easier to see.



As you can see, an E9 uses the ♯7 *AND* the ♯6 of the A Minor Scale. This means that the Dominant 9th chord technically only fits in a Melodic Minor setting. As we've discussed in previous lessons, any time you're writing chord progressions in a Minor key, you can choose wether to engage with natural, harmonic or melodic minor on a chord by chord basis. This is why we get chord progressions like House of the Rising Sun containing the chords Am C D F and E

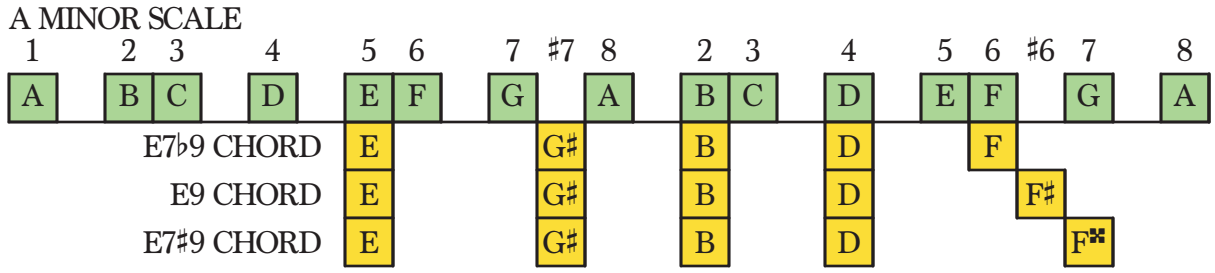


Here are all the chords in House of the Rising Sun. As you can see, some chords use the natural minor scale and other use harmonic and melodic minor notes. Options are available within the song!

♯9 and ♭9 Chords

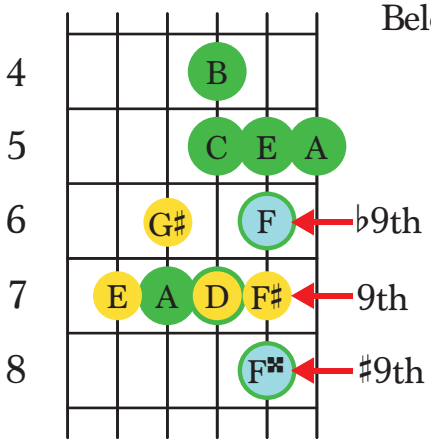
So now we've established two things:
1. When writing a chord progression in a minor key, it is common to mix and match natural minor and melodic minor. In other words, it's ok to play a chord only possible using a natural minor scale and then play a chord only possible to build in melodic minor.
2. The dominant 9th chord can be made using a melodic minor scale, but not using a natural minor scale.

Though I don't know the story, I like to imagine that the origin of the ♯9 and ♭9 chords stems from someone recognizing this kind of information and thinking *"how can I cram all those concepts into the V chord?"* Lets take a look at each chord on the linear graph first.



In this graph you can see that the R, 3rd, 5th and 7th of each chord is identical. In other words, each of these 9th chords is based on an E7 - the only thing different about them is the 9th of the chord. When it comes to naming conventions, E9 is called E9 because dominant chords follow a naming convention starting with E7, and each new extension on that dominant chord just replaces the 7 with the next third, eg. E7, E9, E11, E13. Unfortunately, ♭9 and ♯9 chords can't be named E♭9 and E♯9, because of confusion about either them being a dominant E♭ chord with an added 9th or an E chord with a ♭9. Instead, we get the more specific designation of E7♭9 and E7♯9 to REALLY clarify we're referring to an E7 chord with a specific kind of 9th.

When it comes to how these chords are played on guitar, typically the 5th of the chord is left out. Below to the left is the E9 and A Minor Scale combined from page 1, this time showing the ♭9 and ♯9 available half a step above and below the 9th.



Below, I've shown common fingerings of an E9, an E7♯9, and an E7♭9