

Pentatonic Scales

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The pentatonic scales are very important in many genres of music including country, rock and blues. These 5 note scales yield a great variety of melodies to pick from. There are two pentatonic scales. The major pentatonic scales is composed of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 6th degrees of the major scale.

Following is an A major pentatonic scale starting at the root on low E string and ascending three octaves:

Musical notation for an A major pentatonic scale starting on the low E string and ascending three octaves. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The scale is written on a single staff with a guitar icon. Below the staff is a fretboard diagram with strings labeled T, A, and B. The diagram shows fret numbers for each string: T (10, 12, 14, 17), A (7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 17), and B (5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 17). Slides (sl.) are indicated under the B string notes at frets 9, 12, and 14.

This was taught to me by MattSmith (www.mattsmithworld.com), a great teacher out of the Northeast. This gives you a pentatonic scale covering the entire fretboard. You can play this scale entirely with your first and third fingers. The slides indicate where to shift positions.

Following is a D major pentatonic scale starting at the root on the A string and ascending two octaves:

Musical notation for a D major pentatonic scale starting on the A string and ascending two octaves. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 4/4 time signature. The scale is written on a single staff with a guitar icon. Below the staff is a fretboard diagram with strings labeled T, A, and B. The diagram shows fret numbers for each string: T (10, 12), A (7, 9, 11, 10, 12), and B (5, 7, 9).

As you practice these scales, get to know what notes you are playing and also what degrees of the scale you are playing. Let's look at one more position for the A major pentatonic scale that includes some open strings. Being able to include open strings in your improvisations is a fun thing. Some very cool tones exist in the open strings to create variety among fretted notes.

Pretty cool stuff. Notice that the major pentatonic has a rather sweet sound. The minor pentatonic is a little nastier, a little bluesier.

Minor Pentatonic

Now let's look at some minor pentatonic scales. The minor scale uses the root, flatted third (hence, minor), fifth, and flatted seventh degrees. Following is an A minor pentatonic scale starting on the flatted 7th degree. This scale starts on the Low E string and utilizes the entire fretboard:

Again, the slides indicate where to shift positions. This scale can be played almost entirely with the first and third fingers. You will probably want to use your second and third fingers to fret the G & A notes on the B string.

Following a D minor pentatonic scale, starting on the A string. Again we are starting on the flatted seventh degree and the slide markings indicate where to shift positions:

Pentatonic Boxes

Many books will show us pentatonic “boxes” which certainly have their value but knowing the pentatonic scales from one ‘end’ of the fretboard to the other is a very valuable tool to have in the box. A few more tricks in this lesson from Matt Smith. He calls this the finger shifting method. This is a great way to play in 5 note patterns:

When wanting to play in Major pentatonic, find the root of the key on any string and start with your first finger. When you want to play in minor pentatonic, find the root of the key on any string and start with your third finger.

Switching from Major to Minor Pentatonic

I usually think of this more in terms of switching from a sweet sound to a bluesy sound. One of the more ear catching tricks of the trade is when you get a chance to play in major pentatonic for a while over a jam groove (say G to Am) every once in a while throw in a minor pentatonic blues lick in the same key. It’s a great way to wake up the listeners’ ears after you have lulled them into major pentatonic bliss.

Another trick, again courtesy of Matt Smith is when playing over a I-IV-V blues progression play major pentatonic over the I chord, switch to minor pentatonic over the IV chord and take your pick (mix and match) over the V chord.

One final note about blues playing – remember that unlike some other forms of music, such as jazz, when playing blues you do not change pentatonic scales with the chords. If you are playing a over I-IV-V in G then stay with G pentatonic scales throughout. Generally you would not switch to C pentatonic over the IV chord, and D pentatonic over the V chord. ALTHOUGH – ultimately you need to play what you feel, what sounds good and true to you. Don’t get too caught up in the rules.

Do get caught up in knowledge. A little can go a long way !

Speaking of knowledge, I highly recommend Matt Smith’s book “Chop Shop” available at Matt’s Website www.mattsmithsworld.com This book is concise and has years worth of great information in it. All for a reasonable price. Tell Matt I sent you!

Enjoy !