

IMPROVISING VIA PENTATONIC SCALES

Major Pentatonic Scale

A pentatonic scale is a scale that consists of five tones (penta = five). The pentatonic scale presented in this section is usually called a major pentatonic scale as it is built on the major scale. It gives a melodic sound which is free from dissonant tones. This scale can be used in any type of “mellow” music such as ballads, western, folk, and soft rock. This is the scale that traditional music theory refers to when using the term “pentatonic scale.”

The major pentatonic scale is a pentatonic scale uses the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 6th, tones of the major scale. The spacing of the notes is: 1, 1, 1½, 1, 1½. An easy way to remember the major pentatonic scale is to think of it as a major scale that omits the fourth and seventh tones.

Example:

<i>C Major Scale</i>	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>C Major Pentatonic Scale</i>	C	D	E	—	G	A	—	C
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		∩	∩		∩		∩	
<i>Spacing between the tones.</i>	1	1	1½	1	1½			

The above C major pentatonic scale can be used to improvise in the keys of C major or A minor.

Minor Pentatonic Scale

The minor pentatonic scale is based on the natural minor scale and uses the 1st, 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 7th, notes of the scale. The spacing between the notes is: 1½, 1, 1, 1½, 1.

Example:

<i>A Minor Scale</i>	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	A
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>A Minor Pentatonic Scale</i>	A		C	D	E		G	A
	1		3	4	5		7	8
			∩	∩	∩		∩	
<i>Spacing between the tones.</i>	1½		1	1	1½		1	

The Relationship between the Major and Minor Pentatonic Scales

If you compare the C major pentatonic to the A minor pentatonic scale you find that they are composed of the same tones, just like a C major and A natural minor scale.

Example:

<i>C Major Pentatonic Scale</i>	C	D	E	G	A	C
	1	2	3	5	6	8
<i>A Minor Pentatonic Scale</i>	A	C	D	E	G	A
	1	3	4	5	7	8

Because of this, you can use this scale to improvise in both the keys of C major and A minor.

Using the Minor Pentatonic for Rock and Blues Improvisation

The minor pentatonic scale is the primary scale used to improvise in both Rock and Blues. This is done by using the minor pentatonic scale that has the same name as the major key that you are playing in. For example, if you are playing a Rock or Blues song in the Key of A major, you would use the A minor pentatonic scale. When you do this, it turns out that you are using a scale that contains what are called the two “blue” notes, the flatted third and flatted seventh, that are characteristic of these styles of music. This makes the minor pentatonic scale one of the primary scales used by rock and blues musicians. When playing in a major key, an easy way to generate the related minor pentatonic scale is to think of it as containing the 1st, lowered 3rd, 4th, 5th, and lowered 7th tones of the major scale you are playing in.

Example:

<i>A Major Scale</i>	A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G#	A
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>A Minor Pentatonic Scale</i>	A	—	C	D	E	—	G	A
	1		-3	4	5		-7	8
		⌒	⌒	⌒		⌒	⌒	
<i>Spacing between the tones.....</i>	1½		1	1		1½	1	

While this may all sound very complicated, it is actually fairly easy to remember since the relative major and minor pentatonic scales use the same tones, just like a relative major and natural minor scale such as C major and A minor. So, once you have memorized the main major pentatonic scales, you can think of them as relative minor pentatonic scales and use them to improvise in the style of rock and blues musicians. For example, if you have mastered the C major pentatonic scale, you can use the same tones to play rock or blues

lead in the keys of A minor or A major. All you have to remember is to renumber the tones in your mind as you visualize the pattern on the guitar fret board. The C, for example, is a "1" in the C major pentatonic scale but is a lowered third in the A minor pentatonic scale.