

Pentatonic Scales

Robert Higginbotham

The pentatonic scales are prominent in most genres of music including country, rock, jazz 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 the A major pentatonic scale starting at the root on low E string and ascending three octaves:

A Major Pentatonic Ascending, 3 Octaves

5 7 9 7 9 7 7 9 11 9 11 10 10 12 14 12 14 17

And descending:

A Major Pentatonic Descending, 3 Octaves

17 14 12 14 12 10 10 11 9 11 9 7 7 9 7 9 7 5

This was taught to me by MattSmith (www.mattsmithsworld.com), a great teacher out of the Northeast. This gives you pentatonic scales ascending up and down the fretboard. You can play these scales almost entirely with your first and third fingers.

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

D Major Pentatonic Ascending, 2 Octaves

5 7 9 7 9 7 7 9 11 10 12 10

And descending:

D Major Pentatonic Descending, 2 Octaves

10 12 10 11 9 7 7 9 7 9 7 5

As you practice these scales, get to know what notes you are playing and also **what degrees of the scale** you are playing.

Notice that the major pentatonic has a 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), fourth, fifth, and flatted seventh degrees. Following is A Minor Pentatonic scale spanning three octaves.

A Minor Pentatonic Ascending, 3 Octaves

17 18 19 20

T
A
B

5 3 5 7 5 7 7 5 7 9 8 10 10 13 15 12 15 17

And descending:

A Minor Pentatonic Descending, 3 Octaves

21 22 23 24

T
A
B

17 15 12 15 13 10 10 8 9 7 5 7 7 5 7 5 3 5

As with the major pentatonic pattern earlier in the lesson, this scale can be played almost entirely with the first and third fingers. 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.

D Minor Pentatonic Ascending, 2 Octaves

25 26 27 28

T
A
B

5 3 5 7 5 7 7 6 8 10 8 10

And descending:

D Minor Pentatonic Descending, 2 Octaves

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 tool box as well.

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

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 is when playing over a I-IV-V blues progression play major pentatonic over the I chord, switch to minor pentatonic of the same key over the IV chord and take your pick (mix and match) over the V chord. Another cool trick is to play either major or minor pentatonic over the I chord and then switch to the major pentatonic of the key of the IV chord, over the IV 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 rules.

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

Enjoy !