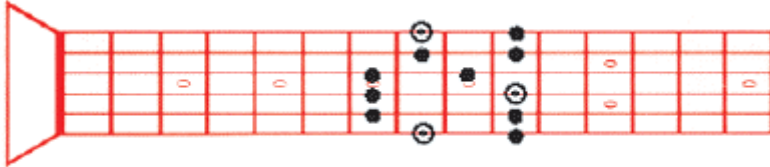


The pentatonic scale is best described as a **five note scale**. In fact, any five notes within an octave could be considered some form of a pentatonic scale. However, by far, the most used pentatonic scale is derived from the major scale. The "**major pentatonic scale**", as it's called, is the **root, second, third, fifth and sixth degrees of a major scale**. For many guitarists, there's confusion surrounding this major pentatonic and it's relative, the so-called minor pentatonic. This lesson should clear up any confusion and hopefully open the door to creative and confident improvising.

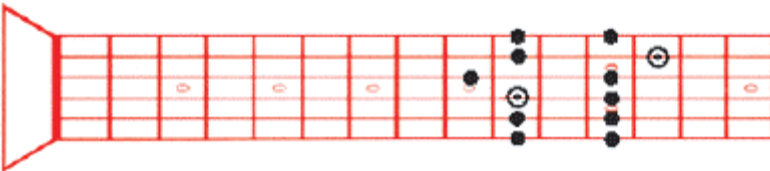
Below is a common fingering for a C major pentatonic with the root on the sixth string, eighth fret. This pattern is two octaves in length. You might find it helpful to relate this pattern to the C major scale pattern in the same position. Just leave out the fourth degree (F) and the seventh (B).

Pattern #1



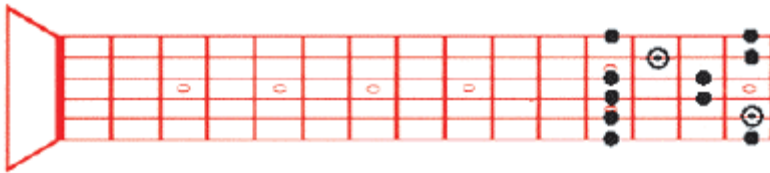
This next pattern is also a C major pentatonic, just starting on D, 10th fret. Don't let the fact that the scale starts on D fool you; it's still the notes of C major pentatonic.

Pattern #2



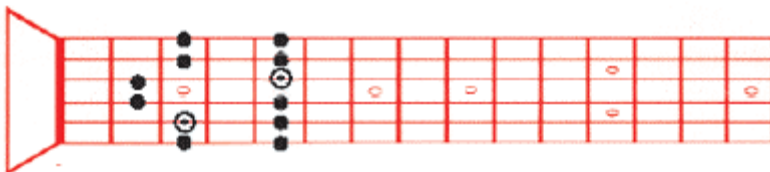
Pattern #3 starts on an E note, 12th fret and is also a C major pentatonic.

Pattern #3



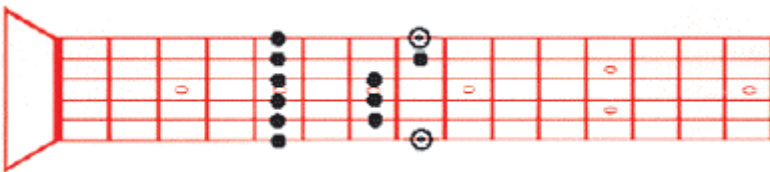
The lowest note in pattern #4 is G, either on the 15th fret, or down an octave on the 3rd fret. Some guys like to use the C on the 5th string, 3rd fret, to locate this C major pentatonic.

Pattern #4



This final C major pentatonic is familiar to most guitarists, often referred to as a "minor" or "blues" pentatonic in A. More on this later, for now, think of it as a C major pentatonic pattern starting on A.

Pattern #5



Now that we've checked out these five common fingerings, for C major pentatonic, be sure you understand their "**moveability**". You should be able to relocate the patterns to any key by simply sliding them up or down the fingerboard. By perfecting these 5 patterns, learning melodies and sequences, and learning to superimpose them over chords, you can play in any musical situation with pentatonics.

Alternative Names For Pentatonics

Now, let's dive into the subject of alternative names for this scale. If you understand "modes", you may have figured out that there are actually 5 major pentatonic modes. Just like in the diatonic major scale modes, any note of the pentatonic scale could be considered a root. This is not a common practice and there are **not** universal names for pentatonic modes. Most players, including myself, do not find it necessary to deal with the modes of pentatonic. The only "mode" of pentatonic, that is widely used, is the "fifth" mode or "**minor pentatonic**". This is the relative minor pentatonic and lives a minor 3rd below the major pentatonic. This means that the above patterns can also be considered A minor pentatonic scales. Blues musicians borrowed the minor pentatonic and play it over chords to create the **classic five-note-blues scale**.

The confusion often comes because of the multiple names. C major pentatonic and A minor pentatonic are the same scale. For most of us, it's better to think of only one name; major or minor. We don't want our fingers to think there are two types and positions of pentatonic scales.

Going even further with the use of this scale, let's talk about the art of "**superimposing**" pentatonics. This technique can make simple pentatonics sound, modern, bluesy or even "outside". To conquer this concept, you only need to know the major pentatonic patterns. Even if you only have a couple of patterns down, you can still create great sounds by superimposing the scale.

The first thing to understand is that there are **three major pentatonic scales in every major key**. They based off the **root, fourth and fifth** of any major scale. In the key of G, for example, G, C and D major pentatonics. Analyzing the fifteen total notes from these three scales, you'll find that there are actually only seven, the notes of G major.

Pentatonic Key Centers

The subject of **key centers** is next. Although it's not within the scope of this lesson to cover the entire topic, I'll outline a few of the best key center situations. G7, for example is the V chord in the key of C major. This means that G7 is in the key center of C and the correct scale to play over G7 is C major. Some may refer to this scale as G mixolydian, but either way, the key center is still C. If you can play C major over G7, then you can also play, or superimpose, the three major pentatonics; G, C and D.

Here's another example. Our chord is Dm7. What key center is Dm7 in? Dm7 can be found in more than one key. It's found in the key of C as the II chord, the key of Bb as the III chord and it's also the VI chord in the key of F. Which key should you choose? Your ear and some experience will teach you the correct key, but musical style, and how the chord is used in a progression, play a big role in your choice. In some situations, Dm7 may best be treated as a II or Dorian sound. In others, thinking of Dm7 as a III or VI gives a different texture.

Try all three. Record a Dm7 vamp and improvise using all three key centers. You can hear the different colors created. Then try all the major pentatonics from the three keys. You'll actually only have a total of five pentatonic scales because of the duplicates. Listen to how they all sound against Dm7. Play licks or sequences that you know in all five scales noting the results.

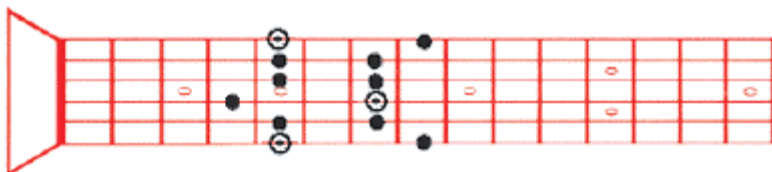
As simple as this concept may seem, complex sounds can be created. Most of world's top players use this technique in one form or another. Jazz musicians from **John Coltrane** to **John McLaughlin** discovered long ago that the pentatonic scale can be a powerful tool for creating numerous effects. Here's one such example; a popular altered scale, jazz players often use over dominant 7th chords, is a major pentatonic, a flat fifth interval above. For G7, play Db major pentatonic scale. In fact, here's an easy cool move with pentatonics over a II-V-I progression in C major (Dm7-G7-Cmaj7). Play a Cmajor pentatonic (A minor) over the Dm7, then move up 1/2 step to Db (Bb minor) pentatonic over the G7, and finally up another 1/2 step, resolving to the Cmaj7, using a D major pentatonic (B minor).

Non-Diatonic Pentatonic Scales

The final frontier of pentatonic scales are those that are not based on the major scale. Many cultures around world use exotic sounding five and six-note scales. A good place to look for unusual pentatonics, that are useful, are from the **melodic and harmonic minor scales**.

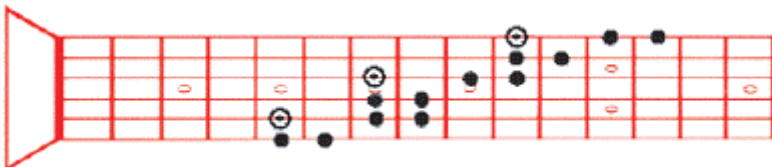
This first example is a very useful pentatonic from melodic minor. It's built from the root, b3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th degrees. Even though it sounds like an A minor (or Amin6) scale, it also makes a great D7 scale. If you like the sound, work out a few additional positions. One way is to flat all the G's in your C major pentatonic patterns. Start with 2 or 3 patterns at first, and work out new ones only when you need them.

A Melodic Minor Pentatonic



From the harmonic minor scale comes a good pentatonic with several uses. Built off the root, second, b3rd, 5th and b6th, it's best use it as an dominant scale. If the chord is A7, play this scale in D harmonic minor and start on A.

D Harmonic Minor Pentatonic



Hopefully, this journey through pentatonics will get you thinking about and exploring new ideas. If you take anything from this short lesson, I hope it is the value of superimposing these and other scales over various harmonic situations. It's really not about learning tons of stuff, but rather getting the most out of things you already know.

- Don Mock