

Fretboard Workshop: Recycling Pentatonics

James Hogan *Premier Guitar*
September 05, 2012

Chops: Intermediate
Theory: Intermediate
Lesson Overview:

- Learn how to recycle your stock pentatonic licks.
- Delve into the world of the dominant pentatonic scale.
- Create hybrid-picked lines using major b6 pentatonics.

Have you ever had that “not so fresh” feeling? No, no, no, I’m not referring to personal hygiene here folks! I’m referring to what most of us would call a rut—a situation where you’re musically boring yourself to tears while your practice and performance habits have forced you into musical stagnation. Maybe you haven’t been able to generate any new ideas for a while, and you feel like you’re regurgitating the same old boring licks. Or maybe you have become locked in the good old “blues box” and you can’t find your way out. Perhaps you’re just someone who’d like to learn a few new tricks and freshen up your sound a bit. Never fear, a completely unknown fusion guitarist is here to help you inject some fresh ideas into your playing. Bam!

In this lesson we’re going to cover a few harmonic concepts that jazz musicians commonly use when working with pentatonic scales. Basically, we’re going to jazz up our pentatonic scales and then we’re going to rock ’em like Dokken. Whoo hoo—are you excited yet?

One of my favorite things to do musically is to find creative uses for stock vocabulary I’m already comfortable with. For instance, I grew up playing a lot of blues-based music down South as a kid, so I inherently feel at home playing bluesy pentatonic ideas. You know, some good old Allman Brothers, Molly Hatchet, and Lynyrd Skynyrd licks. Like many guitarists, I’ll play pentatonic phrases over classic rock jams, 12-bar blues, country tunes, metal riffs, funk grooves, fusion shred-fests, and even jazz standards at times. Frankly, I play pentatonic licks over practically everything. Partially because I love the way they sound and feel, and partially because they’re a big part of my musical home base.

A cool idea that I stumbled upon some years ago involves playing minor pentatonic scales based on the root, 2, and 5 of a minor 7 chord. For example, if you’re playing over an Am7 chord, you can use A minor pentatonic (A–C–D–E–G), B minor pentatonic (B–D–E–F#–A), and E minor pentatonic (E–G–A–B–D) licks to capture the vibe of A Dorian (A–B–C–D–E–F#–G). This is something that modern jazz and fusion musicians do quite often to outline the extensions of minor 7 chords (9, 11, 13), and to obtain a more modal type of sound.

In terms of an Am7, the A minor pentatonic scale gives you the root, b3, 4, 5, and b7. The B minor pentatonic gives you the 9, 11, 5, 13, and root, while the E minor pentatonic handles the 5, b7, root, 9, and 11.

In Fig. 1 you can see a string-skipping lick that outlines A minor pentatonic, B minor pentatonic, and E minor pentatonic scales over an implied Am7 chord. This type of lick is something that you may hear from such players as Guthrie Govan and Greg Howe, among others. It features a jazz approach, but with a rock feel.

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When applying this particular concept, try to avoid the “blue note” (b5) on the minor pentatonic scales that are based on the 2 and 5 of the chord. For instance, in relation to Am7 you may want to avoid F when playing B minor pentatonic and Bb when playing E minor pentatonic. I’m not saying don’t try them out, I’m saying be careful. Your ear will tell you whether it sounds good or not. Also, along with the example I’ve given, try using some of your own favorite minor pentatonic licks based on the root, 2, and 5 of a minor 7 chord. You’ll probably notice that they sound a bit different, and hopefully your stock licks will feel recharged.

Another one of my favorite harmonic devices involves playing a minor pentatonic scale a half-step lower than the root of a major 7 chord to outline the chord’s extensions. For example, you can play a B minor pentatonic scale over a Cmaj7 chord to imply a modal Lydian sound. This will give you the 7, 9, 3, #11, and 13 of the chord. This sound is particularly useful in situations where you would typically play a Lydian scale (1–2–3–#4–5–6–7) such as over a IV major 7, a static major 7 chord, or specifically a maj7#11 chord.

I use a B minor pentatonic lick played in fourths over a Cmaj7 chord in Fig. 2. This lick outlines the C Lydian scale (C–D–E–F#–G–A–B) and is in the style of such jazz greats as McCoy Tyner and Woody Shaw, in addition to fusion guitar masters John Scofield and Scott Henderson.

Having fun yet? Here’s another tip for you: Along with the stock major and minor pentatonic scales that we all love and adore, keep in mind that you can also build pentatonic scales based on many other scales. One of my favorites is what is referred to as the dominant pentatonic scale. This scale is a great choice when working with dominant 7 chords. You know, the chords that sound like bingo calls? A7, D9, B11, F13? Bingo!

The dominant pentatonic scale (1–3–4–5–b7) is based on intervals of the Mixolydian scale and is played from the root of a dominant 7 chord. So, if you were to play this scale over a G7 chord, you could use the G dominant pentatonic scale (G–B–C–D–F). Check out Fig. 3 to hear what the scale sounds like on it’s own and then play through Fig. 4 to listen to a lick in context. You’ll hear this sound frequently in the playing of fusion masters John McLaughlin, Jeff Beck, and Jan Hammer.

Another one of my favorite harmonic devices is the major pentatonic b6 scale (1–2–3–5–b6). This scale is taken from the fifth mode of the jazz melodic minor scale. This particular scale sounds especially great when played one step higher than a nonresolving dominant 7th chord—specifically, a dominant 7#11 chord.

For example, if you encounter a static G7 or G7#11 chord you could play the A major pentatonic b6 scale (A–B–C#–E–F) against it. In relation to G7#11, this scale gives you the 9, 3, #11, 13, and b7. So, if you’re in a funk band or a jam band where you hang on the same dominant 7 for 35 minutes straight, this scale is for you! And I jest.

In Fig. 5, you can see one fingering for the scale, and Fig. 6 is a lick that uses a fair amount of legato technique, as well as a bit of picking.