

Pentatonics Gone Wild

Jim Bastian
Premier Guitar
June 10, 2008

They're crazy! They're exotic! They're out of control, and they're showing off for the camera! It's Pentatonics Gone Wild! Gone are the days when pentatonic scales had to stay in their home key – now, they're being used everywhere to create dissonant, exotic and colorful sounds. When you start out on the guitar, the first thing you usually learn is the minor pentatonic scale or the blues scale, which is the same thing but with the flatted 5th “blue” note added. Typically, the goal was matching the key of a chord to the key of a pentatonic scale. For example, G minor pentatonic is played over a G7, giving that classic, bluesy rock sound. It's a well-used sound that has its place, but it tends to be too traditional and predictable for advancing jazz and rock guitarists who want to experiment with more modern harmonies.

Let's look at the minor pentatonic in five positions, which will allow you to easily cover the neck. Most of us learn position 1 when we start taking lessons – this is a good start, but now, using the scale diagrams, add four more positions. If you follow the fret numbers on the diagram you can play the G minor pentatonic in five positions, over the entire fretboard. Once that is learned, you can begin transposing it into other keys.

Now the fun begins. Instead of simply matching a scale key to a chord key, such as D minor pentatonic to Dm7, we can begin to think in terms of borrowing pentatonics from other keys in order to create more color in our solos or for composing and songwriting. There are many types of pentatonic scales that this can be applied to, but today we are just going to apply it to minor pentatonics.

Technique 1

A classic Wes Montgomery technique is to play the D minor pentatonic over a G7 chord; think of it as II over the V. This adds the chord extensions of the G7 – the 9th, 11th and 13th – providing more color than simply playing a G7 arpeggio. If you apply this technique to all the dominant 7 chords of a standard 12-bar blues form, your solo immediately becomes more colorful, adding a chill factor that only those chord extensions can give.

Technique 2

Playing F# minor pentatonic over a Gmaj7 chord gives a very modern sound to a chord that can sound too tonicized or resolved. The effect of this application is less of a resolved feel, adding a darker color than by simply playing all the diatonic notes of G major or the Gmaj7 arpeggio.

Technique 3

To take an altered dominant chord more outside and emphasize the dissonant nature of the chord, try playing a minor pentatonic scale that is a minor third away from the root of your chord. For example, play a Bb minor pentatonic over a G7 chord. This will emphasize the altered notes – b9, #9, #5, and b5 – creating greater dissonance. This application will definitely want to resolve to some type of tonic C chord.

Pentatonics Gone Wild

Jim Bastian
Premier Guitar
June 10, 2008

Technique 4

Play a minor pentatonic scale one whole step up from a tonic minor chord. For example, play the A minor pentatonic scale against a Gm7 chord. Once again, this emphasizes the color tones of the tonic chord – the 9th, 11th, and 13th. This creates a much more interesting and modern harmony compared to simply playing the G natural minor scale.

Technique 5

Play a minor pentatonic scale that is a major third away from a tonic maj7 chord. For example, play E minor pentatonic over a Cmaj7 chord. By emphasizing the 9, major 7, 13 and 5, this gives a more interesting modern sound over a traditional maj7 chord.

Lay down your own rhythm tracks for some play-along practice. Really hearing how the different scales sound over the chords will help in internalizing this new application of the scales.

Finally, these are all good applications that can add a modern twist to your soloing. The most important element, however, is always the melodic nature of the improvised line. Rather than simply playing scales over chords, a solo really works when it has a melodic or compositional quality to it, rather than just being a string of scales. The ultimate aim is to use the scale material to craft melodic ideas, resulting in a more mature and moving improvised solo. After all, our goal is to improvise in a way that is inspiring, exciting and tells a melodic story.

Jim Bastian

A clinician and jazz educator, Jim Bastian is a 10 year veteran of teaching guitar in higher education. Jim holds two masters degrees and has published 6 jazz studies texts, including the best-selling How to Play Chordal Bebop Lines, for Guitar (available from Jamey Aebersold). He actively performs on both guitar and bass on the East Coast.