

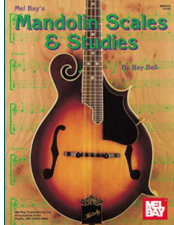


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Developing Pentatonics for Jazz

A systemic approach to pentatonic mastery in all 12 keys.

by Ted Eschliman

Why Pentatonic?

We've stayed away from discussing **Pentatonic Scales** in previous articles, only mentioning them in passing as something to avoid overusing. There is certainly a lot of potential in these; some Folk/Bluegrass musicians depend on them almost exclusively, outside of the addition of the characteristic "blue" notes (lowered **3rd**, **5th** & **7th**). The problem is not that they aren't useful in jazz; the issue is with shifting tonal centers sometimes rapidly, the player can't rely on just knowing them in the open string keys or "Cowboy Keys" of **G**, **D**, and **A**.

Let's back up and explain **Pentatonic** for the uninitiated. The Major scale based on **G** would be **G, A, B, C, D, E, F#,** and **G** repeated. A Pentatonic Scale would omit the **C** and **F#**, leaving five notes, scale degrees **1, 2, 3, 5, & 6** ("Penta" meaning five).

Why are these used so much in Folk music? The "defining" notes of the home triad of **G** are right there, **G, B, D**, with the addition of a few benign "passing" notes, **A** and **E**. What is left out are the "motion" notes, the **4th** and **7th** which have a compelling, directional harmonic force within the scale. Leaving them out is like a Chicken Dijon entrée without the Dijon. (See our previous article on "Gravity Notes," <http://www.mandolinsessions.com/apr04/understanding.html>.) **Equal Chromatic Rights for all!**

Still, these are a magnificent way for beginners to dive into improvisation, relatively accessible and easy to learn. (Based in **G, D,** and **A**, two out of the five notes are easily referenced, being open strings.) **The trick really blossoming with Pentatonics is learning them and being equally comfortable in all 12 keys.** Later on, you'll also find out they are useful for expressing the upper extensions of more complex chords (**9ths, 11ths, 13ths**), but for now let's talk about the ease of which a mandolinist and any fifths-tuned instrumentalist has at his/her fingertips for acquiring versatility and chromatic "equity."

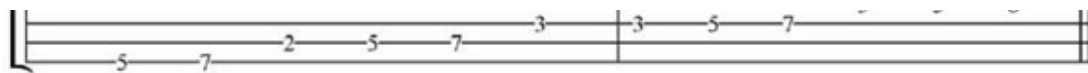
We've mentioned the **FFcP, Four Finger Closed Position**, approach in previous articles many times. (See <http://jazzmando.com/ffcp.shtml>) If you're willing to wean yourself off the comfort of the open strings, you'll find there are only 4 ways to finger a major scale; start with the **1st, 2nd, 3rd,** or **4th** finger. Don't worry about forgetting where your open strings are, they'll come back! When they do, you'll be able to use open strings for chromatic movement, string crossings, and certainly drones, but they will be additions to your playing, or "tricks" and not just anchors.

Take a look at a two-octave **Pentatonic Scale** starting on low **A** (G-string) with your **1st** finger.



Note, the second octave starts on the **4th** finger, so already we have two of the four **FFcPs**. (You're halfway there!) We'll do the same with two octaves of C and start with the 3rd finger.





The second octave starts with the **2nd** finger, so already you've tackled all **4 FFCp**) options with just these two scales.

Starting out on all fours

Now what we want to do is show how you can gain fluency with **FFcP** with a simple exercise that moves your **Pentatonic** up in a way you might never have tried; using **minor 3rd** transposition you get all four **FFcPs**, starting **1st, 3rd, 4th**, and finishing **2nd**. Understand that after you feel comfortable with this, you've already used 1/3 of the 12 keys. Another 1/2 is only one fret away, and the remaining ones are the next fret over. (*Anything more is duplication of keys!*)

For now, let's look at a basic stepwise, one-octave version:



Start scales with different notes

One of the other inherent dangers of the abuse of the pentatonic is making improvisation "scale-like" or what jazz musicians refer to as "just blowing scales." Moving up one direction too long is hardly interesting, and it can wear on the ears. We'll introduce mixing the motion up and start these scales on a different note, the **3rd** note of the key:



Ups and Downs

If we want to be really musical, let's vary the motion more and descend:



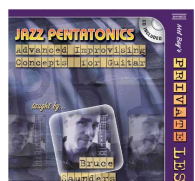
Now we're ready for the whole exercise.

If we finesse these further by starting on other scale degrees, two things happen. One, we don't get dependent on always starting on the tonic and it helps you develop melodic directional flexibility in your improvisation. Two, the more you mix these up, the better you learn them. It's equivalent to math flash cards kids use in elementary school to learn multiplication tables. Let's take a look at the whole exercise; we suggest you print this out before we go on. Here is a PDF link:

FFcP Pentatonic Studies (two pages): <http://www.jazzmando.com/print/FFcPPentatonic.pdf>

Note when you play these, you don't necessarily play straight through; don't move on to the next pair of measures until you're comfortable. Don't be afraid to repeat each measure, individually, ad nauseam. Certainly, don't play them faster than you can handle, either.

We can't stress enough the importance of tone; we aren't aiming for blistering speed, but instead, linear phrasing competence. Make "sentences" with these notes in the exercise, and you'll find yourself blowing in sentences when you use them to improvise.



Extra Credit

We mention in one of our articles on the [JazzMando.com](http://www.jazzmando.com) site a great resource for jazz guitarists, in the Mel Bay "Lessons" Series, "Jazz Pentatonics" by Bruce Saunders. Granted this is written for guitarists but you still might glean some insight into opportunities for diving into some higher level uses of Pentatonics. We do "mandolin-ize" some of his chord concepts in this online JazzMando article: Jazzed Pentatonics, <http://jazzmando.com/tips/archives/000485.shtml>. Bruce is an amazing guitarist as well as an articulate jazz educator.



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