



GUITAR

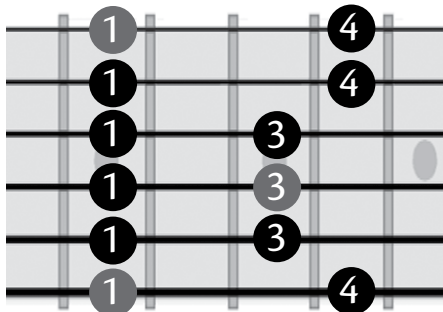
The Power of The Pentatonic

by Jason Vanselow

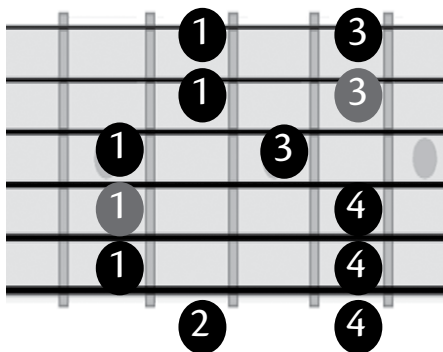
In this article I want to talk for a minute about the power of the pentatonic for the beginning guitarist. Normally, when we present the concept of a scale, the first model that we use is the major scale. This makes a lot of sense; the major scale is the springboard to the basic concepts we use in harmony and melody. But when teaching beginning guitar, there is a case to be made for starting with the pentatonic scale.

The pentatonic scale is the five-note scale that is found in many musical heritages around the world. In the minor version of the scale, the second and sixth notes of what would otherwise be a natural minor scale are omitted. If we think in terms of a minor pentatonic, this would give us a scale consisting of A C D E G. We can also think about this scale the major mode as well. In the major pentatonic we omit the fourth and seventh notes of the major scale. If we think in C major pentatonic, this gives us C D E G A.

Here are two different ways to play the pentatonic scale on the guitar:



Shape 1: Put 1st finger on the 5th fret for the a minor pentatonic



Shape 2: Put 1st finger on the 7th fret for the a minor pentatonic

Graphics courtesy of Eric Anderson, from his forthcoming book, co-authored with Jason Vanselow on the topic of teaching class guitar.

There are five basic pentatonic shapes. The first (Shape 1) starts with the root of the scale. The second (Shape 2) begins on the second note of the scale. The third shape begins on the third note, and so on, just like the major scale modes. The second shape above serves two purposes. It is the second scale shape in the minor

pentatonic set. But it also is the root position shape for the major pentatonic scale. As you may have noticed above, a minor and C major pentatonic have the same set of notes. So this means that like relative major and minor, these shapes can both be used in the major and minor context.

One thing to observe about these scale shapes is that is that you only need to play two notes per string. This is different from a standard major scale shape, which generally requires three notes on each string.

Having only two notes on each string is good practice for beginning guitarists. One reason is that the three-fret stretch between first finger and fourth finger (and for some students, the two fret stretch between first and third fingers) can be tough. Students can practice this stretch by first “teeter-tottering” between first and fourth fingers and eventually holding first finger down while they play the fourth finger note.

This relatively easy shape also makes it easier to practice moving across the strings. This is good for both hands. The fretboard hand obviously needs to learn to get from one string to the next but sometimes this is a harder lesson for the picking hand.

I usually start teaching this scale as the a minor pentatonic. That way the shape starts on the fifth fret, right in the middle of the fretboard. This gives beginning students a chance to get used to playing higher on the fretboard rather than always playing in first position. It’s also a good place to start because the frets are narrower on the fifth fret than they are on the first fret. This makes the stretches a little easier at the beginning.

But after the student has learned the basic shape, they can use it anywhere. Because the intervals stay consistent, you can start this shape on any fret and retain the “pentatonic-ness” of the scale. For instance, if you move up one fret and base the shape on the sixth fret, you are now playing b flat minor pentatonic, base it on the tenth fret and you are now playing d minor pentatonic, and so on. Moving the scale around helps the student learn the notes on the sixth string (or any string you choose) up and down the string.

The pentatonic is also a good scale to start with because it is a good beginner improvisation tool. Because it’s a simple shape, choosing which notes to play isn’t so daunting. When starting to have students improvise, I’ll have them only use the top two or three strings of the scale. It makes it a little more manageable particularly for students who are a little nervous playing in front of people.

I also start by teaching the pentatonic in a minor, because once students are ready to start improvising, we can use the a minor 12 bar blues progression to accompany it. By using the twelve-measure format, the students come to know the duration of their improvisation. And because it uses relatively easy chords (am, dm, and E) after the first couple of times out, you can have one student improvising and one student playing the chords, rather than always accompanied by a teacher.

Using the blues also bridges the gap between the guitar that they're learning to play, and the rock guitar that they are used to hearing, and probably brought many of them to learn to play guitar in the first place. And there are some easy connections to make. Guitarists like Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughn, and Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin use the pentatonic almost exclusively in their improvising. In fact, if you listen to the first phrase of the iconic solo in Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven* the first phrase is essen-

tially a descending a minor pentatonic scale. The second phrase utilizes the top three strings of the major pentatonic shape. It's a demonstration of some of the amazing places you can go with a pretty simple concept.

Jason Vanselow is an instructor at Anoka Ramsey Community College. Comments and questions are always welcome at jason.vanselow@anokaramsey.edu. ↩