

Pentatonic Scales

Part 4: The Major Pentatonic Scale

In previous lessons we discussed the Minor Pentatonic Scale. Videos for those lessons can be found [HERE](#). Each of those videos has an associated PDF that can be found in the descriptions of the videos. You can also get them on the [lesson page of my website](#). I highly recommend having a solid grasp on the concepts covered in those videos before diving into to major pentatonics.

The following PDF is a supplement to the [Major Pentatonic Scale Lesson Video](#). It covers the various fretboard patterns used to play the scale, as well as the theory behind the scale. The major pentatonic scale formula, relative keys, parallel keys and transposing scale patterns are all discussed in detail.

Happy Learning
-Pete

Quick Review of the Minor Pentatonic Scale

The Minor Pentatonic Scale is a 5 note scale that shares many similarities to the Natural Minor Scale. The main difference is the Minor Pentatonic contains only 5 notes versus the 7 of the Natural Minor (We will cover the natural minor in an upcoming series.) Eliminating these two notes makes for a more **consonant** scale with less **dissonant** notes that cause tension. This makes the Minor Pentatonic a go to scale for soloing over simple Rock and Blues progressions. It is the scale that many famous Pop, Rock, Country and Blues riffs are based on, and is a great place for first time improvisers to start.

A Scale is a formula for a repeating pattern of notes

Like we discussed in previous lessons we can think of any scale as a formula or recipe. The formula for a given scale can be calculated using the distance between the notes. We measure the distance between notes in **intervals**. When discussing scales we will focus on the intervals of a half step and a whole step. Lets look at the A Minor Pentatonic Scale which contains the notes: **A C D E G** with the note **A** being the **root** or **tonic** of the scale. If we calculate the distance between **A** and **C**, and then the distance between **C** and **D** and so on we will arrive at this formula or pattern: **W+H - W - W - W+H - W** where **W = whole step** and **H = half step**. Thus **W+H = one and a half steps**.

Now we don't always have to start on the root of the scale. If you recall from the last lesson we learned five shapes of the minor pentatonic, where each of these shapes started on a different note of the scale. Mastering these five shapes allows us to play the same scale all over the neck of our guitar and in different registers. Now let's keep all of these concepts in mind as they will apply to the Major Pentatonic.

Relative Keys

Before diving right into major pentatonics lets look at the relationship between major and minor keys.

Key Concept: Every major key has a corresponding minor key that uses the same set of notes. Look at keys of C Major and A Minor as an example:

C Major - C D E F G A B A Minor - A B C D E F G

Even though these scales start on different notes (or have different tonics) they contain the same set of notes. When this happens we call them **relative keys**. You would say **A** is the relative minor to **C**, and **C** is the relative major to **A** minor. Many times these scales can be used interchangeably. For instance you may want to use the A Minor Pentatonic to improvise over a song that is in C Major and vice-versa. This is not always true but works in most instances in Rock, Pop and Country music.

- The relative minor is the 6th scale degree of any given major key. Use D major as an example: **D E F# G A B C#**. The note B is the 6th note in the D Major Scale, thus B Minor is the relative minor to D Major.
- Conversely the relative major is the 3rd scale degree of any given minor key. Use G Minor as an example: **G A Bb C D Eb F**. The note Bb is the 3rd note in the G Minor Scale making it the relative major to G minor.

Let us now turn those C Major and A Minor scales into their pentatonic counterparts. If we eliminate the more dissonant notes of F and B we end up with the A Minor and C Major pentatonic scales. If we use the note **A** as the tonic of the scale then it is called A Minor Pentatonic, but if we consider **C** to be the tonic then it is the C Major Pentatonic.

A Natural Minor - A B C D E F G

A Minor Pentatonic - A C D E G

C Major - C D E F G A B

C Major Pentatonic - C D E G A

Let's calculate the intervals between the notes in the C Major Pentatonic in order to figure out what the formula is for all major pentatonic scales:

C - D = whole step
D - E = whole step
E - G = whole + half step
G - A = whole step
A - C = whole + half step

Now we our major pentatonic formula:

W - W - W+H - W - W+H

Putting it into Practice

You may be wondering to yourself "I thought we could start the A Minor Pentatonic on any note in the scale and it will still be called A Minor Pentatonic. Couldn't we start on the note **C**

and still call it A Minor Pentatonic? What's the point of even learning major pentatonics if they are the same as their minor counterparts?"

Relative Keys

| MAJOR | MINOR |
|--------------|--------------|
| C | A |
| G | E |
| D | B |
| A | F# |
| E | C# |
| B | G# |
| F#/Gb | C#/Db |
| Db | Bb |
| Ab | F |
| Eb | C |
| Bb | G |
| F | D |

I have thought the same thing myself, and as I mentioned before there are many times when you can think of them as the same scale. Here is where I come back to the term ***relative keys***. Think about a litter of puppies. They will all be the same breed, but they will have different patterning in their coats, some will be different sizes and they will all have different personalities. Think of relative keys the same way. Something in the key of C will vary in character and mood to something in the key of A Minor even though they are derived from the same place. So when you're playing in the key of C Major, you might want to use A Minor Pentatonic patterns if you are more familiar with them; but in order to arrive at this conclusion you had to first know that A Minor and C Major are relatives. Learning major and minor pentatonics is a great way for guitarist to learn all major and minor keys that are relatives, which is of the utmost importance for improvising and being a well rounded musician. Also, if you are playing more complex harmonic patterns that you may see in Jazz, Blues and more progressive forms of Rock and Fusion these two keys won't always be interchangeable. For now I would not be too concerned with these advanced applications of the scale, but understand there are times where it is very important to make the distinction between a major key and its relative minor.

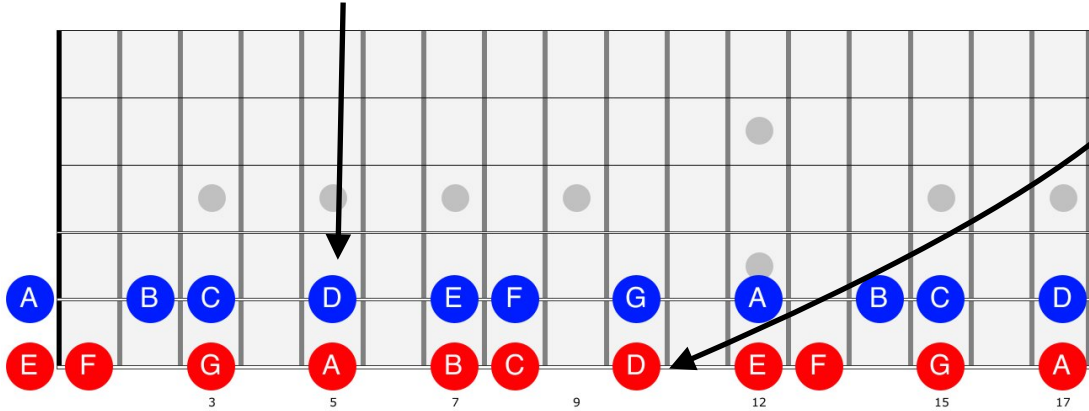
Major Pentatonic Shapes

When discussing minor pentatonics we learned 5 shapes of the scale in which each shape started the scale on a different note and position on the guitar. This was useful for being able to play in any position on the guitar while staying in the same key. If you are able to calculate

the relative major key for a given minor key then you can go ahead and use those same shapes. Above is a list of all 12 major keys and their minor key relative.

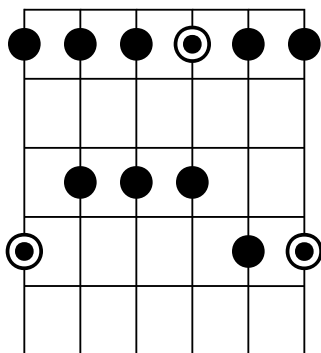
E string and A string tonics:

Instead of utilizing the 5 minor pentatonic shapes, let's learn two standalone shapes for the major pentatonic. We will use D Major as the example key. Go ahead and find the note D on the E and A strings. If you calculated correctly you should have landed on the 10th fret of the E string and the 5th fret of the A string. (See the neck diagram below)

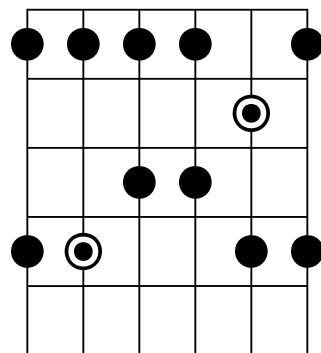


Many times on the guitar when learning movable patterns and shapes it is useful to break down a scale or chord into the **E Tonic Shape** and the **A Tonic Shape**. The E tonic pattern of the Major Pentatonic will start with the tonic note on the E string and the A tonic pattern will start on the with the tonic on the A string. Here they are:

E STRING TONIC
Major Pentatonic

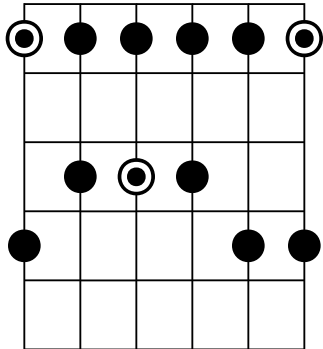


A STRING TONIC
Major Pentatonic

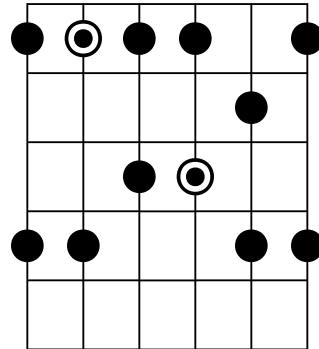


If you are thinking that those look exactly like the 1st and 4th shape of the Minor Pentatonic, then you are correct. (If you don't know what is meant by 1st and 4th shapes please go watch the previous minor pentatonic video: [5 Shapes of the Pentatonic](#).) However, notice the difference in where the tonics are located. The tonic notes in both scales will be played with the 4th finger on either the E or A strings, whereas in the Minor Pentatonic the 1st finger plays the root. (The tonic notes are indicated with the bullseye.)

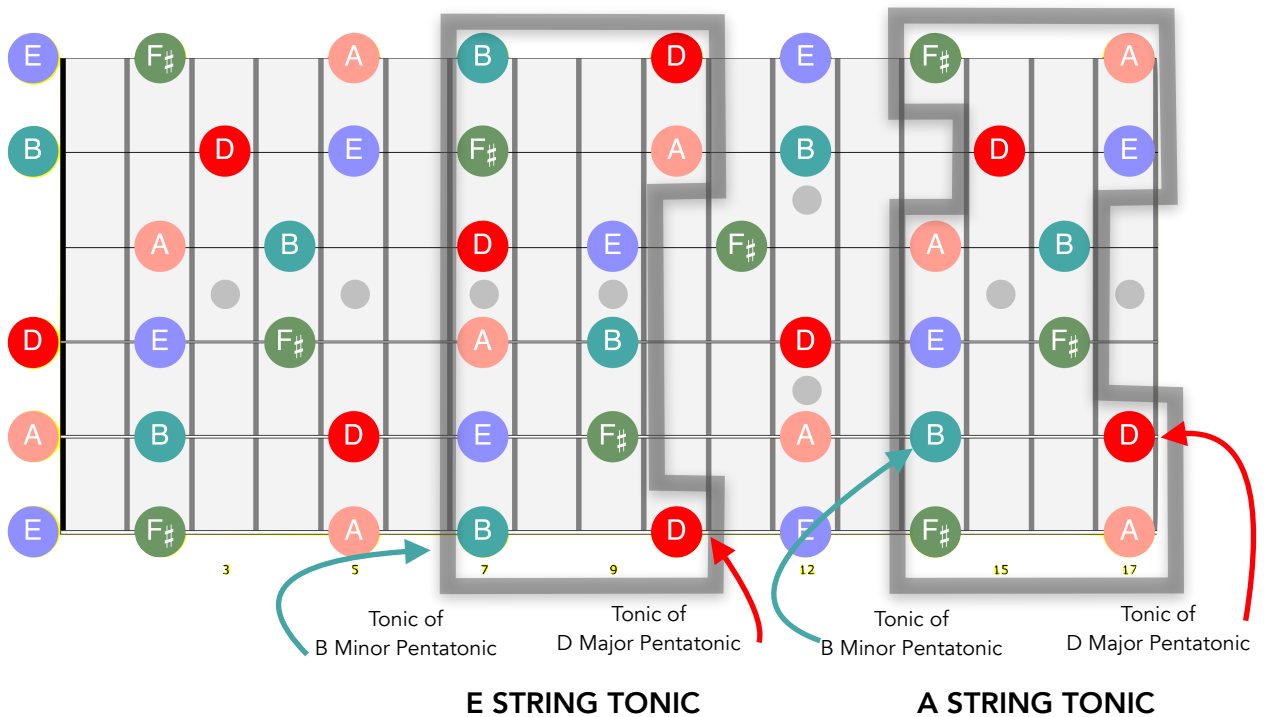
E STRING TONIC
Minor Pentatonic
(Shape 1)



A STRING TONIC
Minor Pentatonic
(Shape 4)



Let's put our 4th (pinky) finger on the 10th fret of the E string and get ready to play the D Major Pentatonic. We will be starting on the root which is the 2nd note in the diagram. Go ahead and play it a few times. Now if you want to quickly find the relative minor that note would be the 1st note in the diagram. Thus, Playing shape 1 starting with the 1st finger (7th fret) would yield **B Minor Pentatonic** and starting with the 4th finger gives us **D Major Pentatonic**. Now try the same thing with the A Root Pattern or shape 4.

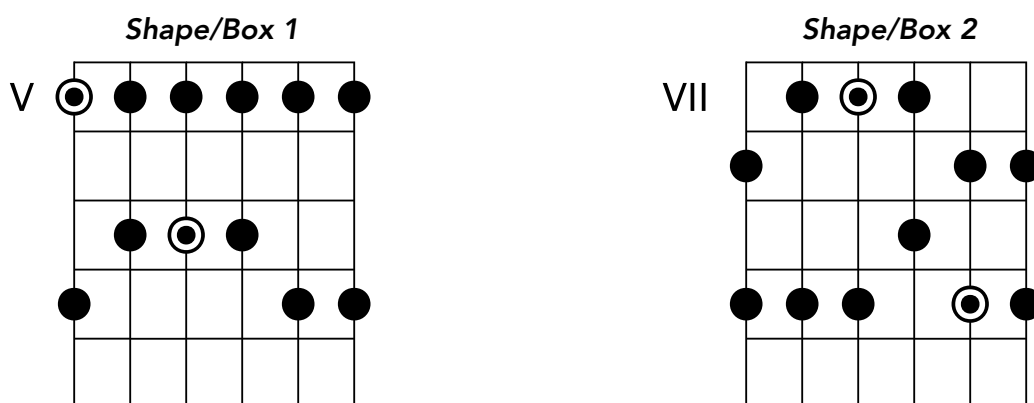


The 5 Shapes of the Major Pentatonic:

Breaking scales down into E and A string tonics is a great way to go about learning them. Many guitarists learn the notes on the E and A strings before the rest, which it makes it easy to quickly identify where our tonic is for a given key. Once we know what string and fret our tonic is on then we can use the appropriate pattern (E or A string tonic.)

There is of course another way (there's always another way). The other method of learning major pentatonics is to use the same 5 shape or box method we used when discussing minor pentatonics. As was mentioned earlier the 5 shapes of the major pentatonic are the same as the minor pentatonic. This is due to relative keys and the fact that every minor scale has a corresponding major key with the exact same notes. The only difference between relative keys is which note ends up being the tonic.

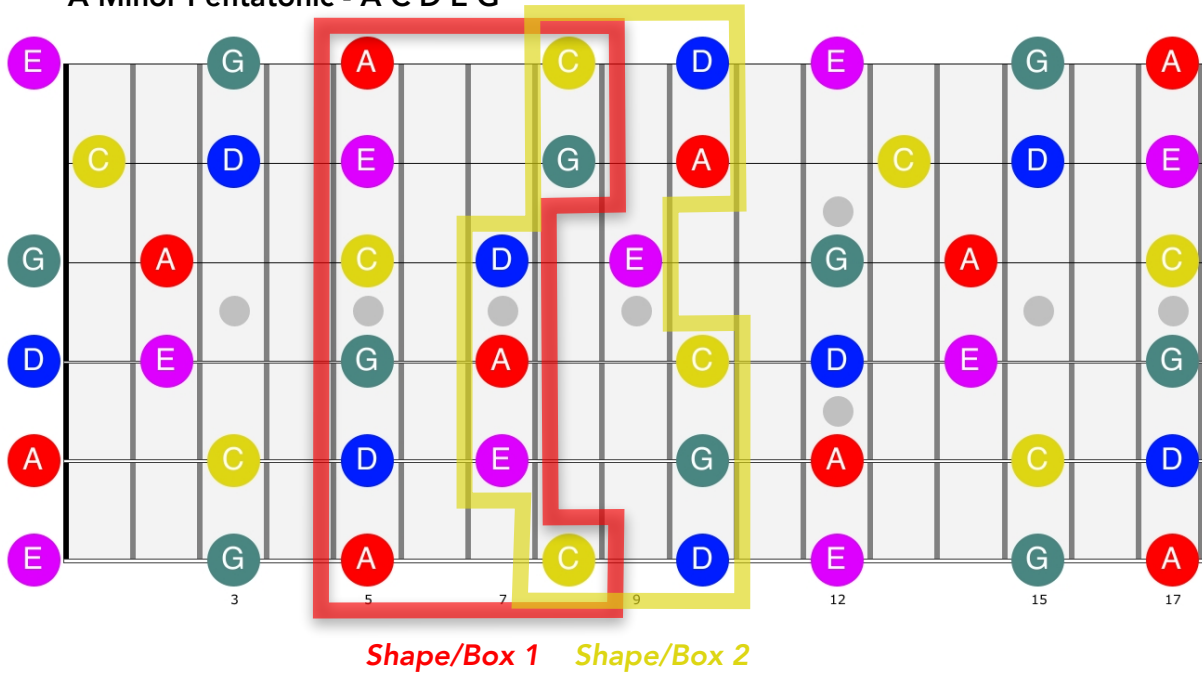
Now the shapes (or boxes) are the same, but we are going to want to number them differently as our tonic has migrated. If we look at shapes 1 and 2 of the minor pentatonic scale this will make more sense. Lets keep using C major and A minor which we now know are relative keys.



Now let's see how these scale shapes lands on the fretboard. In the fretboard diagram below of notice how shape 1 and 2 overlap. If we look closely we will see that shape 2 starts on the note C, which is the second note we play when playing shape 1. Thus, it is helpful to know that each shape of the minor pentatonic starts on the second note of the previous shape.

What we will also notice is that the first note of shape 2 happens to be the note C. Since this is the tonic of C major pentatonic we will call this shape 1 of the major pentatonic. That means every shape of the major pentatonic is just one number behind its relative minor.

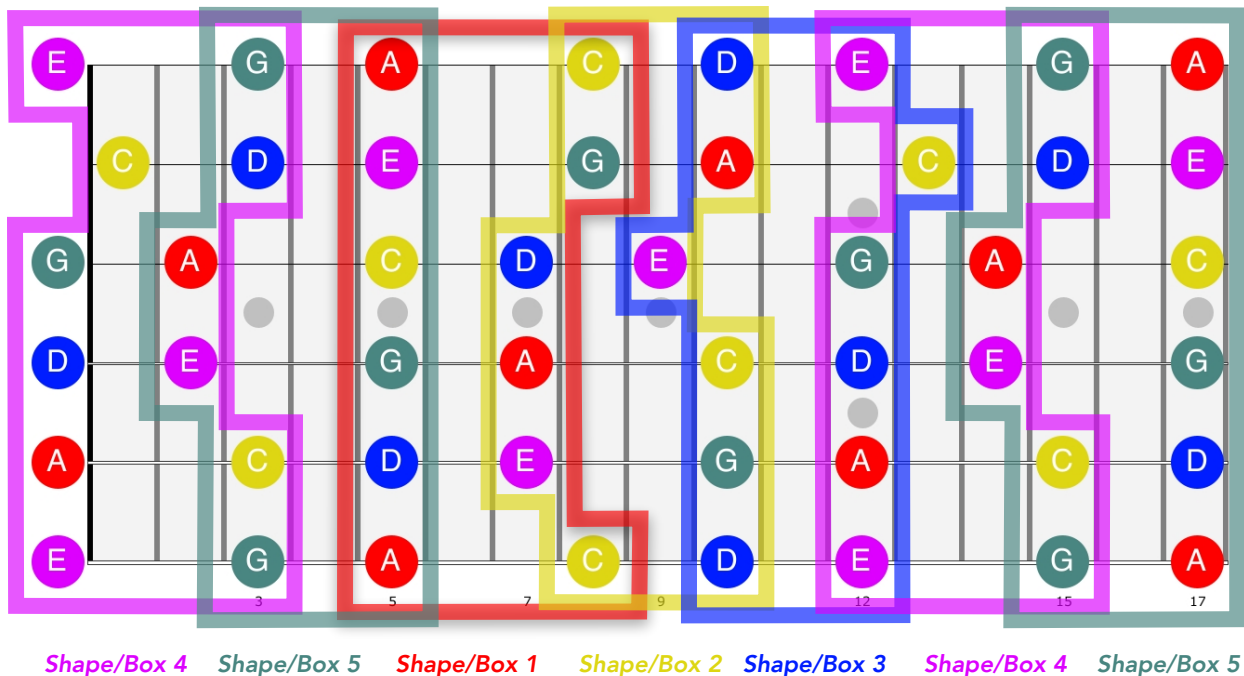
A Minor Pentatonic - A C D E G



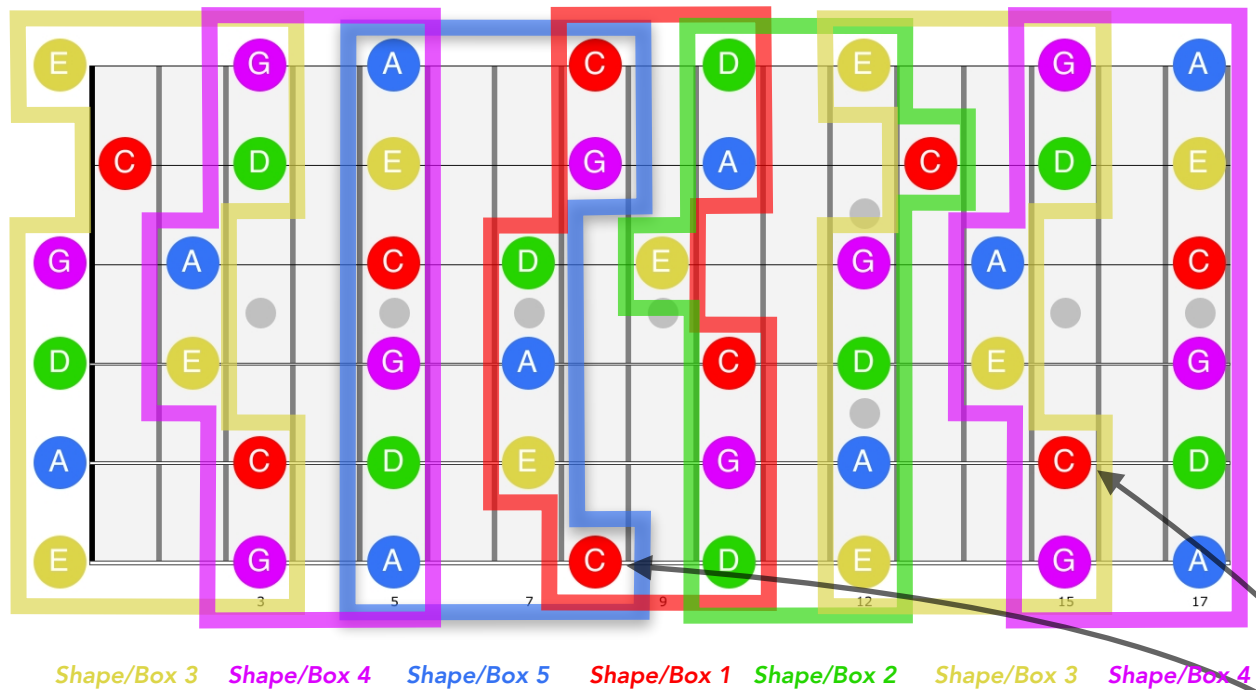
- Shape 1 of the major pentatonic = Shape 2 of its relative minor
- Shape 2 of the major pentatonic = Shape 3 of its relative minor
- Shape 3 of the major pentatonic = Shape 4 of its relative minor
- Shape 4 of the major pentatonic = Shape 5 of its relative minor
- Shape 5 of the major pentatonic = Shape 1 of its relative minor

Look at the diagrams of A minor pentatonic and C major pentatonic to see how all 5 shapes relate.

A Minor Pentatonic - A C D E G



C Major Pentatonic - C D E G A



These diagrams can be a bit cluttered, but it's a good way to see how the scale patterns overlap and in which position on the fretboard each one is played. Also notice how there are 2 locations for some of the shapes. In A minor shapes 4 and 5 can be played in 2 locations that are 12 frets (an octave) apart. You could even expand the diagram and see that shape 1 would occur again on fret 17. For C major pentatonic it's the same except we just number the shapes differently.

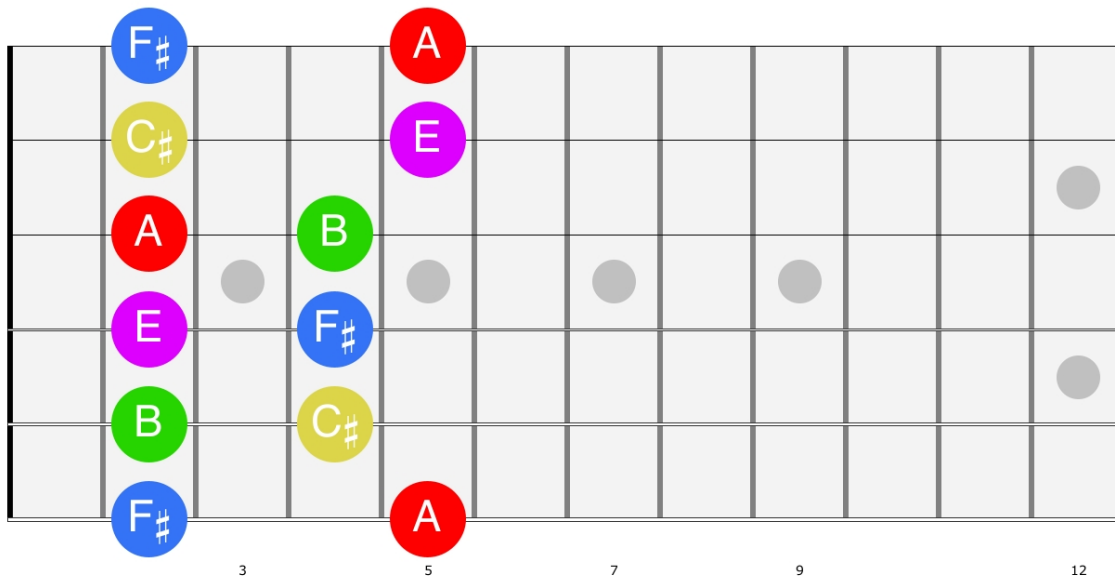
It is also possible to see that the E string and A string tonic patterns for C major pentatonic can be picked out of the sea of colors. Shape 5 corresponds to the E string tonic pattern that was mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, and Shape 3 corresponds to the A string tonic pattern.

Parallel Keys

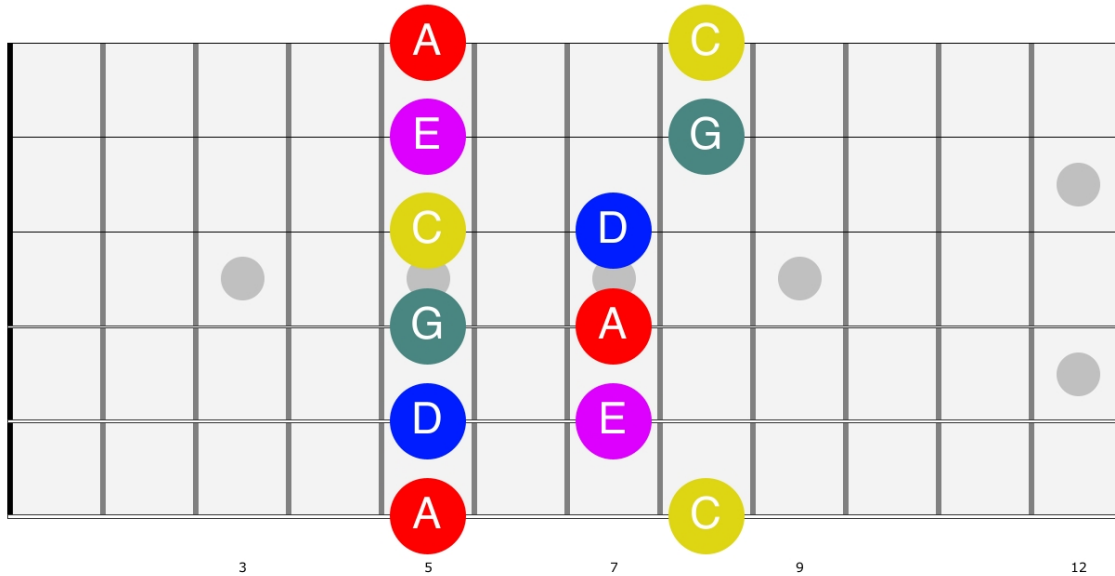
We have discussed relative keys. We learned that relative keys are when two different scales share the same set of notes. There are also **Parallel Keys**. Parallel keys are when a minor and major scale share the same tonic or root note, but have different notes in them. For example A major and A minor are parallel keys. This can be useful when implementing your pentatonic scales, especially when playing in a blues or jazz setting. Lets use two more diagrams. One displays the E string tonic pattern (or box 5) of A major pentatonic, and the other has the E string tonic pattern (or box 1) of the A minor pentatonic. Take a look at how A minor pentatonic is just the A major pentatonic shifted up three frets.

Many guitarists find this to be useful information as you can switch between the E string tonic patterns of parallel keys but simply shifting you position 3 frets. Some call this the "pinky trick" as you can start the A minor pentatonic with your first finger on the note A (5th fret), but then switch so your pinky is on A (5th fret) and now you can easily access the A major pentatonic. Don't quite get it? Pick up your guitar and try it. Sometimes we have to try out new concepts for ourselves to truly understand them.

A Major Pentatonic - A B C# E F#



A Minor Pentatonic - A C D E G



Now For Some Licks

At this point you should be feeling like you are getting a grasp on the 5 shapes of both the major and minor pentatonic, how relative keys work, what parallel keys are, and how all these pentatonic shapes interact with each other. Now it is time for 4 licks to help you practice these scales in context. Maybe you can come up with your own licks. Practice hard and enjoy!

Major Pentatonic Licks

Pete Cornell

Standard tuning

♩ = 140

C Major Pentatonic

el.guit.

1 H H P sl. 2 3 P P sl. 4 sl.

TAB: 7 5 7 5 7 5 7 9 8 9 9 10 8 10 8 9 12 10 13 15 13 12 12

♩ = 86

E Major Pentatonic

5 H P H H P H P H P let ring - 4

TAB: 4 7 4 5 4 6 7 6 4 6 5 4 7 9 7 9 7 9 7 9 6 9 6 9

♩ = 100

Bb Major Pentatonic

7 sl. sl. 8 sl. sl.

P.M. ----- 1

□ V □ V □ V □ V □ V □ V □ sl. □ □ sl. V □ V □ V □ V □ sl. V □ V sl. □ V

TAB: 3 1 3 1 X 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 5 3 5 8 5 8 5 8 10 7 10 12 10 11

♩ = 82

G Major Pentatonic

9 sl. 10 H P 3

TAB: 3 7 12 10 12 12 10 12 10 12 10 12 10 12 9 12 12

