

Chapter 8: Creative Pentatonic Chord Progressions

Improvisers are trained to think in terms of, “Which scales go over these chords?” The study of improvisation always starts from the idea of, “Here’s an intricate chord progression... and these are the scales you can use to solo over this progression.”

But how interesting would it be to go completely backward on this: learn how to improvise odd, intricate, or unusual chord progressions underneath a set scale, instead of improvising with a scale over a set chord progression. This idea can lead to interesting songs or to really cool music being produced during jam sessions.

This harmonic technique can be used with pentatonic melodies or when playing with a lead guitarist whose style is very pentatonic based. One of the cool features of a scale with less notes is that you can use that scale to solo over complex chord progressions that combine chords from various larger (seven-note) scales, as long as these seven-note scales contain the notes of that smaller scale. To put this differently, any given seven-note scale only works over the chords that one can form with the notes of that scale. When the chord progression has a chord that is foreign to that scale, the improviser needs to switch to another scale over that chord.

Let me explain this with a real-life musical situation.

In a jam session, there’s going to be someone laying down the harmony and rhythm, and someone else improvising lead melodies. The musicians agree upon a key before the playing starts, and everybody operates within that chosen framework. For example, if the chosen key is A, the musicians will play the notes of an A major scale and the chords that go with that scale: **Amaj7 Bm7 C#m7 Dmaj7 E7 F#m7 and G#m7b5.**

In this situation, there’s no wiggle room. Seven notes in the scale; seven chords can be formed with those seven notes. Everybody in the jam session is playing the same seven notes. If you, the rhythm player, throw in anything other than these seven chords in the jam, that chord is more than likely going to clash with the notes of the person who’s soloing.

When the soloist primarily uses the pentatonic scale, however, there’s a lot more you can do harmonically, because the omission of two notes that turns a seven-note scale into a pentatonic scale, open up a lot of possibilities. Consider the A minor pentatonic scale, which consists of the notes **A C D E G.**

To start with, there are three major scales that contain these five notes.

- 1) C major scale **C D E F G A B**
- 2) F major scale **F G A B♭ C D E**
- 3) G major scale **G A B C D E F#**

The chords in a C major scale are: **C Dm Em F G Am Bdim C.**

The chords in an F major scale are: **F Gm Am B \flat C Dm Edim F.**

The chords in a G major scale are: **G Am Bm C D Em F \sharp dim G.**

Since, as shown above, these three major scales all have the notes of an A minor pentatonic scale in them, that means that you can play an A minor pentatonic scale over any combination of chords that are in these three scales.

You are now, as a rhythm player, no longer confined to just the seven chords of a C major scale. You can play any of the following chords under the A minor pentatonic melodies of the improviser:

C, Dm, D, Em, Edim, F, F \sharp dim, G, Gm, Am, B \flat , Bdim, Bm.

You get even more options when you play the four-note versions, called **7th chords**:

The 7th chords in a C major scale are **Cmaj7 Dm7 Em7 Fmaj7 G7 Am7 Bm7 \flat 5.**

The 7th chords in an F major scale are **Fmaj7 Gm7 Am7 B \flat maj7 C7 Dm7 Em7 \flat 5.**

The 7th chords in a G major scale are **Gmaj7 Am7 Bm7 Cmaj7 D7 Em7 F \sharp m7 \flat 5.**

Putting these chords in alphabetical order starting from C, we get:

Cmaj7, C7, Dm7, D7, Em7, Em7 \flat 5, Fmaj7, F \sharp m7 \flat 5, Gmaj7, G7, Gm7, Am7, B \flat maj7, Bm7 \flat 5, Bm7.

Adding in the triads:

C, Cmaj7, C7, D, Dm, Dm7, D7, Em, Em7, Edim, Em7 \flat 5, F, Fmaj7, F \sharp dim, F \sharp m7 \flat 5, G, Gm, Gmaj7, G7, Gm7, Am, Am7, B \flat , B \flat maj7, Bdim, Bm7 \flat 5, Bm, Bm7

Chords Taken from Blues

It doesn't end there—there are more chords.

In major blues, the preferred scale of choice for improvisation is the minor pentatonic scale. While you *can* solo over a major blues using the major pentatonic scale, it doesn't entirely nail the blues sound. Blues guys primarily use the minor pentatonic scale to solo over major blues.

The A minor pentatonic scale, is the preferred scale to solo over a blues in the key of A major. The chords in a blues in A are: A7, D7 and E7.

When we now update the list of chords, adding in A7 and E7, we get:

C, Cmaj7, C7, D, Dm, Dm7, D7, Em, Em7, Edim, Em7b5, E, E7, F, Fmaj7, F#dim, F#m7b5, G, Gm, Gmaj7, G7, Gm7, Am, Am7, A, A7, Bb, Bbmaj7, Bdim, Bm7b5, Bm, Bm7

Those are **thirty-two chords** that work with the A minor pentatonic scale... but it still doesn't end there yet.

The Dom7alt Chord Pentatonic Substitution

Remember the minor pentatonic substitution chapter? As you might remember, we can use the minor pentatonic scale to solo over V7 altered chords. The minor pentatonic scale that works over an altered chord is the one up three frets from the chord.

That means that to find the altered chord that works over a given minor pentatonic scale, we need to go down three frets from the tonic (first note) of that minor scale. Three frets down from A minor pentatonic = F#.

In conclusion, we can add F#alt to the chord list, adding up to thirty-three chords. This is harmonically a huge step up from the fourteen (seven triads and seven 7th) chords of the C major/A minor scale that most guitar players play when jamming with a pentatonic-based soloist. Given that the V7alt chord can have any combination of altered 5ths and 9ths, this means that the alt dominant chord can take eight forms:

- F#7b5
- F#7#5
- F#7b9
- F#7#9
- F#7b5#9
- F#7b5b9
- F#7#5#9
- F#7#5b9

When we consider these eight forms of the altered chord as eight separate options, then the list adds up to forty chords we can use to create chord progressions for minor pentatonic melodies.

Cool Chord Progressions for the A Minor Pentatonic Scale

You can literally combine any of the above thirty-three chords any way you want. Imagine the compositional possibilities! The use of these harmonic improvisation ideas is not confined to jamming or performance. This harmonic concept works really well in composition, too. Next time you write a pentatonic melody, experiment coming up with very interesting chord progressions for that melody, applying what you learned here.

As for jamming, I apply this above knowledge absolutely *all* the time when I'm playing rhythm guitar for someone who mostly solos with pentatonic scales. The musicians I play with love it

when I do this, because of the really interesting and sometimes surprising harmonic colors it creates for them to solo over.

These rich, intricate sounding chord progressions make the lead guitarist sound very advanced, even though they're playing guitar solos using a simple, easy scale. It's a great way to make your friends sound really good or much more advanced, even if they aren't that good yet at playing guitar solos.

Here are some cool chord progressions for you to have fun with. All of the following chord progressions work with the A minor pentatonic scale. Of course, ideally you will want to practice these in all twelve keys over time.

G | F | C | B \flat D |

A7 | G7 | C7 | D7 |

Blues in A: chords are A7, D7 and E7

Blues in G: chords are G7, C7 and D7

You could combine these two blues keys into one longer chord progression.

G7 | D7 | C7 | A7 | D7 | E7

Or

G7 A7 C7 D7 E7

Gm B \flat D7

Cmaj7 B \flat maj7 Gmaj7 Fmaj7

A7 B \flat maj7

B \flat one-chord groove (Lydian)

B \flat | A | C | Dm |

F G A7 B \flat

F G A B \flat C D

F Gm A

A7 F \sharp m7 \flat 5 B \flat maj7

A7 F#m7b5 Fmaj7 Bbmaj7

F Gm A7 Bb C D Em

Em7 F#7alt Bm7

Em7 F#7alt Bm7 Bbmaj7

C7 F#7alt Bm7

Be creative, and above all, have fun with this. Come up with your own chord progressions combining any of those thirty-three chords.

It's a lot of information, so you want to take your time and be patient with this. Applying this takes time. You will find, though, that the time it takes to learn and memorize this is time well spent.

The excitement you'll feel when you see the flabbergasted look on the faces of your pentatonic guitar buddies who can't believe your chord progressions—priceless.