

Chapter 7: Pentatonic Substitution

Almost every guitar player who uses pentatonic scales for soloing uses them in very limited ways. More specifically, most guitar players who see or hear a C chord immediately play an A minor pentatonic scale, not being aware that A minor pentatonic is not the only minor pentatonic scale one can use over a C chord.

That's why you want to know about **pentatonic substitution**. This improvisation concept teaches that you can play multiple possible pentatonic scales over any given chord. This is a really fun lesson, because this knowledge will make it possible for you to create and discover tons of new colors in your guitar solos, all without having to learn any new scales. You're merely using the minor pentatonic scale you already know, in entirely new ways.

Over a C chord, you can play:

- 1) The minor pentatonic scale **up a sixth** from the chord:

A minor pentatonic.

This is the pentatonic scale almost all guitar players play all the time over a C chord, missing out on the many colors they can create if they'd also use following options:

- 2) The minor pent scale **up a major third** from the C chord root:

E minor pentatonic.

- 3) The minor pent scale **up a seventh** from the root:

B minor pentatonic.

This creates a C Lydian sound. B minor pentatonic = **B D E F# A** (= 7th, 9th, 3rd, #11th, and 13th over a C chord)

- 4) The minor pent scale **up a whole step** from the chord:

D minor pentatonic.

The notes in the D minor pentatonic are **D F G A C**.

It's a bit more challenging to make this scale sound right over the C chord. The reason is because the most important note in a C chord is the note E, which is missing in the D minor pentatonic scale. In addition, the F in the scale creates a harsh clash with the E note

in the C chord. The trick is to end all your melodic phrases as much as possible on the notes C or G. When you play the F note, resolve it up a whole step to G.

You want to memorize this with math, not with note names. Instead of memorizing “I can solo over a C chord with Am, Dm, Em, and Bm pentatonic scales,” memorize that over every major chord, you can solo with the minor pentatonic scales:

- 1) Up a whole step from the chord root (two frets up)
- 2) Up a major 3rd from the chord root (four frets up)
- 3) Down a minor 2nd from the chord root (one fret down)
- 4) Down a minor 3rd from the chord root (three frets down)

The best and most fun way to enjoy these new sounds is by soloing with these four scales over a C or Cmaj7 one-chord groove type of backing-track. Be patient with the D minor pentatonic option. It does work. You just have to be diligent in resolving to the right notes, which might take some getting used to.

Enjoy the new sounds. You have made another great step forward in your musicianship now you know that you can solo over any given major chord with four different minor pentatonic scales.

One last note before moving on: These four scale options work really well over a C **one-chord groove**. However, in **chord progressions** in the key of C major (which has an F note) you would not be able to use the B minor pentatonic scale because the F# note in the scale would clash with the F notes in the chords. That doesn't mean that you can't use the B minor pentatonic at all, you just have to be careful that you only hit the F# note on chords that don't have an F note. All that said: while you could theoretically do that, it's unusual to solo with a scale that has an F# over a chord progression with chords that have F notes. It makes the solo sound disconnected from the harmony and makes the storytelling less fluent. But it **can** work. We'll cover a chord progression in the key of C where using B minor pentatonic actually sounds great.

Over a Dm chord, you can play

- 1) The minor pentatonic scale from the root:

D minor pentatonic.

- 2) The minor pent scale up a major 2nd from the chord:

E minor pentatonic.

The E minor pentatonic scale over a Dm chord creates a D Dorian scale sound. You want to memorize this: When you solo over a minor chord with a minor pentatonic scale that is up a whole step from that minor chord, you are playing a Dorian sound.

Feel free to first go have a look at the chapter on Modes if you want to learn what a Dorian scale is.

3) The minor pent scale up a 5th from the root:

A minor pentatonic.

Have fun soloing with these three scale options over a one-chord groove in D minor. Enjoy the cool new improvisation sounds these scale options create over the chord.

If you would like to solo with them over **chord progressions** in D minor:

- The minor pentatonic scales **from the root** and **from the 5th** work over chord progressions in Aeolian, also called the natural minor scale. As an example, the notes in the D Aeolian scale are **D E F G A B \flat C**. You can solo with D minor pentatonic and A minor pentatonic over the chords of the D Aeolian scale, but not with the E minor pentatonic, which has a B note. That B note in the E minor pentatonic scale is going to clash with the B \flat notes in the chords of the D Aeolian scale.
- The minor pentatonic scale up a whole step from the root (E minor pent over a Dm chord) is the minor pentatonic scale of choice over chord progressions in Dorian (in this example: D Dorian).

If you are a little unsure about all this theory, your safest bet for now would be to just improvise over a one-chord groove. In later chapters, you'll learn more about modes and about chord progressions used in the different modes. The explanations above about chord progressions will make more sense once you get to those chapters.

Also, practice what you learn in this chapter in different keys. Solo with the four minor pentatonic options that work over major chords, not just over C chords, but also over the other eleven keys. For example, over an F chord, you would solo with the minor pentatonic scale:

- Up a whole step from the root = G minor pentatonic scale
- Up a major 3rd from F = A minor pentatonic scale
- Down a half step from F = E minor pentatonic scale
- Down a minor 3rd from F = D minor pentatonic scale

The same holds true for the minor chords: Solo over the other eleven minor keys besides the key of Dm.

Over Altered Chords

First off, what are **altered chords**?