

# 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:





Have you been enjoying the great resources at **Mel Bay's MandolinSessions.com**? If you're new here, be sure to click on the **Back Issues** button above. If you've been a regular, take the time to drop us a note with some feedback: a question for a future article, an observation about something that is helping your playing, or just let us know what part of the world you are. Some of you have already done this, and we are treasure it when you take the time. Contact us at [http://jazzmando.com/contact\\_jazzmando.shtml](http://jazzmando.com/contact_jazzmando.shtml) , and of course drop in on the [JazzMando.com](http://JazzMando.com) website, for the latest "Tips and Tricks" and jazz mandolin-related news! If you have an RSS Reader, take advantage of our **RSS** feed feature!