

FIX YOUR PENTATONICS

A GUIDE TO USING THE MINOR PENTATONIC SCALE LIKE A COOL PERSON

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Let's face it.

We all want to sound cool when we use the minor pentatonic scale. But a lot of times we don't.

In this booklet I've identified a few variables that you can tweak to take your pentatonic licks from lame to hip. I hope that you'll not only explore these particular examples with me, but take the concepts I present and apply them to as many different situations as you can.

So let's jump right in and check out a lick that exemplifies some of the problems that come up with common pentatonic noodlings.

Problem Lick #1

3 3 3 3

12 10 12 10 12 14 12 14 12 14 12 14 12

What's wrong with this lick? Here are a few things I noticed:

- By ascending through the scale in groups of 3, it ends up moving **sequentially** through the scale
- By playing notes in groups of 3 **and** playing them as triplets, we're playing a **cliché rhythm**.
- It **only** uses notes from the minor pentatonic scale. This isn't a dealbreaker by itself, but often hip musicians will throw in a nonpentatonic note occasionally in their primarily pentatonic licks.

Summary: Lame minor pentatonic licks are **sequential, rhythmically clichéd, and exclusively pentatonic**. This isn't a complete list, but that's what we'll deal with in this group of lessons.

Note: For simplicity and brevity, I'll present everything in this booklet in A minor only. Make sure you practice in all 12 keys - there's a reason every music teacher tells you to do that ad nauseum!

Let's Fix Our Pentatonics!!!

The first thing I want to show you is one really simple way to fix this sequential scale problem - **different size note groups**. Instead of playing notes in 3 note groups as above, let's see what happens if we play a very similar lick in groups of 4 (notice the starting note of each group is the same as the starting note of each group above).

Exercise 1: Go Nonsequential with groups of 4

12 15 12 14 15 12 14 12 14 12 14 14 12 14 17 14

We're already getting out lame-noodley-guitar-riff land and into something more usable. And we're not restricted to 16th notes either - triplets are a perfectly fine rhythmic choice as long as we're not doing sequential groups of 3 notes through the scale!

Exercise 2: Similar lick as triplets instead of 16ths

Notice that now we're naturally moving our accent pattern around as well, by playing notes in 4 note phrase groups with the triplet rhythm. This also helps solve the **cliché rhythm** problem.

Let's try those same solutions with another problem lick, which is basically the same as the first one, but working its way down the scale instead of up.

Problem Lick #2 (same thing in descending form)

Ever heard a lame-o guitar player playing that one? Let's all make a pact together never to play this lick again. :)

Again, we can easily solve the sequentiality problem by adding a note to each group:

Exercise 3: Groups of 4 as 16ths

And again, we can still play triplets and keep our 4 note phrase groups, which gives us a cool moving accent pattern that keeps us out of the **cliché rhythm** trap.

Exercise 4: Groups of 4 as triplets

The Fun Doesn't Stop At Four

Adding a note to our groupings worked so well, what if we add another one?

Pentatonic licks with five note groups work great too, breaking up the sequentiality just as well as the 4 note groups. And also, because they're most commonly played as 16th notes, we get a shifting accent pattern again, which moves through the bar like a 4:5 polyrhythm, so again we avoid **sequentiality** and **clichéd rhythm** in one fell swoop!

You can hear something like this in the string intro of Jaco Pastorius's "Kuru/Speak Like A Child."

Here's what that looks like ascending through the scale:

Exercise 5: Groups of 5 as 16ths ascending (in the style of Problem Lick #1)

Cool, right? And of course you'll want to experiment with starting on different scale degrees, making the lick different lengths, try starting on the offbeat, etc. This is just a starting point.

Here's the same concept in its descending form:

Exercise 6: Groups of 5 as 16ths descending (in the style of Problem Lick #2)

To summarize the pentatonic fixes we've learned so far:

- Using larger-than-3 groups of notes helps avoid the **sequentiality** problem we identified in our problem licks.
- Putting those note groups into less expected rhythmic subdivisions (i.e. groups of 4 as triplets, groups of 5 as 16ths, even groups of 3 as 16ths) helps avoid **rhythmic clichés**.

In the next section I'll show you another way to solve the sequentiality problem, as well as give ourselves access to some cool new licks.

Achieve Nonsequentiality by "Flipping"

Another way we can fix these awful, awful Problem Licks is by "flipping" our note groupings. Here's Problem Lick #1 again for reference:

And here it is "flipped":

Exercise 7: Flipped lick in ascending form (in the style of Problem Lick #1)

So what did I change? Notice that the starting note of each group is identical in both licks (A C D E). From the starting note, instead of walking up the scale, the lick walks down. This creates a nonsequential lick because there's a dramatic jump from the end of a note group to the beginning of the next. So it's not groups of 3 that are the criminal in these problem licks - it's the sequentiality (primarily, in addition to the clichéd rhythm).

So Exercise 7 is better than the problem lick, but we can still hip it up even more by using a rhythm that gives us some interesting accents:

Exercise 8: Flipped lick in ascending form as 16th notes

Let's explore flipping some more with Problem Lick #2, which you will recall is basically the descending version of Problem Lick #1.

Musical notation for Problem Lick #2, showing a descending sequence of four groups of three notes each, followed by a quarter rest. The fretboard diagram below shows the notes: 14, 12, 14, 12, 14, 12, 14, 12, 10, 12, 10, 12, 10.

I'll do a slightly different version of the flip here. This time instead of keeping the first note of each group the same, I'll actually take each group of 3 and flip it around left to right, so the last note is now the first note and vice versa, with the middle note staying constant.

Exercise 9: Flipped lick in descending form (in the style of Problem Lick #2)

Musical notation for Exercise 9, showing a descending sequence of four groups of three notes each, followed by a quarter rest. The fretboard diagram below shows the notes: 14, 12, 14, 12, 14, 12, 10, 12, 14, 12, 10, 12, 10.

Does that make sense? So in Problem Lick #2, the first three notes are A G E, and in Exercise 9 it becomes E G A. Et cetera.

Again, this lets us play 3 note groups without committing the sin of sequential minor pentatonic noodles.

And remember, once you've done your flip, you can still dial your hipness up a notch by picking a funky rhythm to fit your groupings into, whether its 8ths, 16ths, or 32nd note septuplets. :P

Exercise 10: Flipped lick in descending form as 16ths

Musical notation for Exercise 10, showing a descending sequence of four groups of three notes each, followed by a quarter rest. The notes are played as 16th notes. The fretboard diagram below shows the notes: 14, 12, 14, 12, 14, 12, 10, 12, 14, 12, 10, 12, 10, 12, 10.

Flipping works great on those groups of 4 and 5 we played with earlier, so don't skimp on practice time and make sure you explore all those options! The more pentatonic options you have, the more creatively you can play, so you're choosing notes based on your feeling in the moment and not just pulling licks out of your bag-o'-licks in a rote or mechanical fashion.

Flipping will also allow us to do something cool that doesn't really work without doing the flip - playing groups of 2!

Flip Those 2's!

Flipped groups of 2 is a great sound in the minor pentatonic scale. You can hear this idea in Tower of Power's "You Got To Funkifize" right after the vocals sing the title line.

Exercise 11: Flipped groups of 2 in descending form

Exercise 11 shows a descending line of notes on the bass clef staff, with a corresponding fretboard diagram below it. The notes are: 12, 14, 14, 12, 12, 14, 10, 12, 12, 10, 10, 12, 12, 10, 10, 12, 8.

If you look at every other note (i.e. the notes on the beat and the notes on the "and," you can see we're just walking down the scale, but by adding those flipped notes in the middle we're getting a bunch of interesting intervals, particularly a bunch of perfect 4ths, which gives it a nice modern, "hip" sound (compared to all the seconds and thirds in our Problem Licks).

Here's the same idea ascending:

Exercise 12: Flipped groups of 2 in ascending form

Exercise 12 shows an ascending line of notes on the bass clef staff, with a corresponding fretboard diagram below it. The notes are: 12, 10, 10, 12, 12, 10, 14, 12, 12, 14, 14, 17, 17, 19, 19, 17, 14.

Here's yet another way to get an infinite pile of fresh pentatonic ideas: take a lick you already play and start it on a different part of the beat. So far we've started all of our licks on beat 1 - what if we take Exercise 12 and start it a 16th note later?

Exercise 13: Previous lick starting on the "e" of 1

Exercise 13 shows the same ascending lick as Exercise 12, but starting on the "e" of the first beat. The notes are: 12, 10, 10, 12, 12, 10, 14, 12, 12, 14, 14, 17, 17, 19, 19, 17.

Now we're getting into some seriously legit pentatonic ideas. I highly recommend taking all of our "fixed" licks from previous pages and starting them on every 16th note of the bar (or take it even further and do the same thing through the triplet grid as well). Not only will you multiply your pentatonic lick library by 16, I think you might also find that doing this rhythmic sequencing in practice translates to your real world improv and soloing as well.

Okay, let's play with one last thing before we unleash you onto the world with your decidedly non-lame pentatonic ideas. Let's cheat our way out of pentatonic noodle hell with some hexatonics!

If You Liked Pentatonics, You'll Love Hexatonics

This one is definitely cheating. But I won't tell if you don't tell.

Like I said back on page 1, sometimes the problem with a pentatonic lick is just that it's a pentatonic lick! Often professional musicians will build the bulk of their licks around the pentatonic scale for its smoothness and simplicity, but they will **occasionally throw in a note from a more interesting scale** so that it doesn't sound so freaking pentatonic.

I would estimate that at least 50+% of the time the minor pentatonic scale is used, it's in a situation where the dorian mode would also work.

One paragraph theory lesson: Take the minor pentatonic scale and add a major 2nd and major 6th. Poof. Dorian scale. So A Dorian = A B C D E F# G A.

So here's a really easy way to hip up your note choice - try throwing one of those two added notes into your licks. Which means we're really talking "hexatonics" not pentatonics at this point (pent means five, hex means six).

Here are a couple examples where I've taken our "fixed" licks from previous pages, and all I'm changing is the final note they resolve on. In this first one, the whole lick is identical to Exercise 3 except the final note.

Exercise 14: Exercise 3 ending on major 6th instead of root

The musical notation for Exercise 14 shows a bass line with a melodic line. The fretboard diagram below it shows fingerings for the notes: 14, 12, 14, 12, 12, 14, 12, 10, 14, 12, 10, 12, 12, 10, 12, 10, 9.

Major hipness has been achieved. This speaks to another big problem not only with pentatonic licks but with bass players' solos in particular - we resolve to the root way too often! If you're not in the "bass role" at the moment, resolving to the root constantly is a bummer, it creates painfully low-tension solos that nobody wants to hear. Listen to your favorite soloists - their phrases don't all end on the root!

Let's try the same idea again. We'll take Exercise 5, our ascending groups of 5 notes, and I'll change the final note to B natural, which is the 9th of an A minor chord.

Exercise 15: Exercise 5 ending on major 9th instead of root

The musical notation for Exercise 15 shows a bass line with a melodic line. The fretboard diagram below it shows fingerings for the notes: 5, 8, 5, 7, 8, 5, 7, 5, 7, 5, 7, 10, 7, 10, 12, 10, 12, 10, 12, 14, 12, 14, 12, 14, 12, 14, 17, 16.

Cooler, right? And keep in mind I'm making a generalization when I say dorian is usually the scale to go to, especially in a jazz or funk context (like over an Am7 chord). If you're in more of a rock setting, it maybe be aeolian (natural minor) or even phrygian that you want to borrow notes from.

Final Thoughts

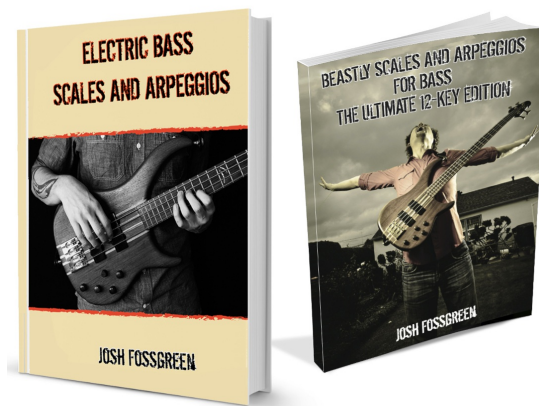
Let's summarize what we learned.

- Some of the variables that make a pentatonic lick lame are **sequential scale movement**, **clichéd rhythms**, and (sometimes) **exclusive use of the pentatonic scale**.
- We can get nonsequential movement either by using larger-than-3 note groups, or by "flipping"
- We can avoid rhythmic clichés by placing our note groupings into rhythms which will naturally create interesting accent patterns.
- If nobody's watching, you can sneak a major 6th or 9th into your phrases occasionally so people know that you're super hip and you know more than just the minor pentatonic scale.

There are more variables we could explore (maybe in *ReFix Your Pentatonics Episode II: This Time It's Personal*), but if you can get the hang of these you'll be off to a great start.

I used a lot of strong and colorful language in this book, but I really want you to know that I have a playful attitude towards this topic. Is there really a "wrong" way to play music? Is "hipness" or "lameness" really something that exists objectively? I certainly don't think so. If you actually like the sound of what I called our Problem Licks, then that's great. My purpose in putting this booklet and corresponding video lessons together is to help people who are tired of the relatively clichéd ways of using this scale and want to explore some new sounds. But whatever sounds good to you is what you should play!

If you enjoyed this free booklet and lessons, I think you'll love my other books *Electric Bass Scales and Arpeggios* and *Beastly Scales and Arpeggios*, which you can check out by clicking the image below or visiting joshfossgreen.com/books



Thanks for hanging with me, and may your pentatonics be extremely hip!

Josh Fossgreen