

Guitar

The Basics

Column #5 – Transitions

One of the most difficult things for aspiring guitar players to learn is transitions. A transition is best described as a “passage”, a “pathway” between point A and point B.

When playing solo lines, many guitar players, even those who have been playing a good while, tend to jump from the root/first position, to the 3rd/4th position of a given scale. Then they’ll jump up to the octave of the root position. There may be some single string climbing or descending those positions, but basically it’s a jump and a leap over a whole host of unused territory.

Let’s compare it to flying in an airplane from Boston to New York. If you are in the air and look down, you will see a lot of roads, pathways, you are not taking. You are literally jumping or leaping over them, choosing not to explore them. This is to your detriment as a player. All pathways, all roads are valid. All access needs to be your foundational principle in all scale work, even chord work. It is often the exploration of the unknown that will yield the most treasure.

On the guitar, the pathways, roads, available to you are not readily apparent or understood. So let’s take a simple Pentatonic Minor run and open it up to scrutiny. All exercises should first be learned, so you know what you’re doing, and then played with a metronome, to help ensure you play in time and on beat.

The first graphic is a **positional** interpretation of a two octave climb – which you probably already know – here shown in the key of **A**.

The image shows a musical exercise for guitar. The top staff is a treble clef staff in common time (C) showing a two-octave Pentatonic Minor scale run. The notes are: A2 (open), A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4. The bottom staff shows the fretboard positions for the strings. The strings are labeled T (Treble), A, C, B (Bass). The frets are indicated by numbers: 5, 7, 8. The fretboard is divided into two measures. The first measure shows the first two octaves: T (5), A (7), C (8), B (5), A (7), G (8), F (5), E (7), D (8), C (5), B (7), A (8). The second measure shows the final octave: T (5), A (8), C (5), B (7), A (8).

The second graphic is a **vertical** interpretation, playing the same two octave Pentatonic run, employing transitions from the root position, through the second position, into the third position and ending in the fourth position. Recommended fingering is included.

Finger: 1 4 1 3 1 1 4 1 1 4 4

Using the Pentatonic Minor scale form as a ‘frame’ or ‘foundation’, you can add notes from the Dorian (1, 2/9, $\flat 3$, 4, 5, 6, $\flat 7$) or Aeolian (1, 2/9, $\flat 3$, 4, 5, $\sharp 5$, $\flat 7$) modes to make the run more tonally complex. The following run employs the same exact pathway as the last example, ending in third position, but with the Aeolian mode’s $\sharp 5$ and 9 tones added in for a more meaty sounding run. Recommended fingering is included.

Finger: 1 3 4 1 1 2 4 1 3 4 1 1 2 4 2

You can do this with any scale all over the fret board. I encourage you to take the above examples and play them in all twelve keys. Then see what you can come up with using these as the template for your ideas. Descending runs are basically just what you played, but backwards, fingering essentially staying the same.

A note on fingerings. These are suggested, but not ‘fixed’ constants. Everyone has different physical advantages and/or limitations, so the way you play something, like a lead line, depends upon your ability to do it the ‘recommended’ way (generally the most practical approach), or if you have to modify it in some fashion. My basic approach is to ‘lead’ with the first finger, not the third or fourth. What I mean is this: when I make a transition, such as in the ascending runs shown above, I make the position changes with my first finger. Why? Control. I have more control over my movement with the first finger than with the third or fourth finger, both when climbing or when descending as I play a given run in the vertical.

However, there are exceptions. Take note of the second example of the Pentatonic Minor scale. You see the last two notes are played with the fourth finger. This may seem awkward, but really isn’t. It is also possible to plant your third finger on the last note, too, as an alternative - which also puts you in correct fingering orientation for any fourth position licks you may want to tack onto the end of this

run. Both approaches can be considered 'correct'. It just depends upon what you plan to do at the top (or bottom) of a given run. You need to be **practical and consistent** in how you approach things

A good example of some "horrible" technique is to look at some well known players, like Eric Johnson or Alvin Lee (Ten Years After). Watch closely and you'll notice they play much of their Pentatonic stuff with only the first and third fingers on their fretting hand. The second and fourth fingers generally only come into play during the use of 'colour' tones or more harmonically dense runs, and in Johnson's case, the use of arpeggios.