How To Play More Advanced Blues Guitar Solos

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Introduction

Why Your Guitar Solos Don't Come Close To The Solos Of Great Blues Guitarists

So you are starting to play your own blues guitar solos. Great! You have a blast of a time improvising. But soon you start comparing yourself to other guitarists and sooner or later your progress comes to a halt and you find yourself not sounding anything like the guitarists that you listen to. This is how most guitarists stops progressing, no matter how much they practice their progress only seems to take small babysteps. On top of this, the worst thing is that they don't even know how to improve their guitar playing.

While this frustration is shared by many guitarists, there are solutions to this. Ofcourse there are many reasons why a novice guitarists' playing will not sound anything like an experienced guitarist. All of these reasons should be addressed seperatly and taken care of in your personal learning and practice plan. But there's one very prominent reason why your blues guitar solos don't sound great; that reason comes down to the exact notes you play (note choice) and the knowledge of the scales that contain those notes.

In this guide we will be looking at solutions to overcome these restriction in your playing by examining the choices that the great blues masters make and by expanding your knowledge of guitar scales. We'll start of slowly with the basics like the pentatonic scales, but soon thereafter we'll look into more advanced scales like the dominant pentatonic scale and the jazzy sounding mixolydian mode.

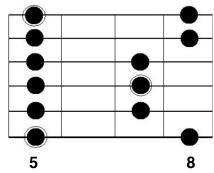
Mastery of these materials will come through the form of application and implementation in your practice routine. Simply reading about these options will not enable you to transform your guitar playing to the extend that you will play mature sounding blues solos. So as you delve in to this guide, it's important that you have two questions on your mind;

- How can I use this in my own playing?
- How can I practice this so it becomes part of my own unique style?

These simple questions will open the door for you to mature decision making in your practice routine and hold the power to lead you to mastery.

I. The Basics: The Minor Pentatonic Scale

A. Why The Minor Pentatonic Scale Is Not The Best Option To Use



Am Pentatonic Scale (box position)

Let's start with questioning the good old minor pentatonic scale. Many intermediate guitarists get stuck playing only this scale over a dominant blues. Let me ask you this; "Did you know that the minor pentatonic scale isn't the best choice to play over a blues chord progression?" In fact, some notes will even 'clash' quite a bit.

Spelling Out The Notes

Whenever you come across a scale and you want to know if you can use this scale over a certain chord or series of chords, it's a great idea to compare the notes in the scale with the notes that are in the chord(s) that are being played in the rhythm parts.

To analyze this we're going to spell out the notes in the A minor pentatonic scale, which are:

ACDEG

Here are the notes in the A7 chord:

A C# E G

The C note from the pentatonic scale will sound pretty harsh against the C# note of the A7 chord. You can try this for yourself; play these two notes simultaneously on the guitar and listen to the dissonance that this creates.

Ofcourse the minor pentatonic is the first scale to get into if you learn to improvise, but we want to move away from only playing this scale.

B. How Professional Blues Guitarists Use The Minor Pentatonic Scale

While it's true that some people like the dissonance that is caused by playing the C-note over the A7 chord, most experienced blues guitarists will choose to either:

- Not use the minor pentatonic scale at all (that's the main reason why many beginners on blues guitar improvisation hear that what they play doesn't sound anything like their favourite players, but they don't know that they actually are using different scales).
- Use the minor pentatonic scale but alter some of the notes.
- Use a variety of techniques to alter the C note (if we play the Am pentatonic scale) so this note becomes a 'passing note' instead of a 'target note'.

Don't get me wrong on this, it's perfectly legitamite to use the minor pentatonic scale over dominant blues chords. It's just that there are many more options and the minor pentatonic scale may be, based on your personal preferences, not the only option that you want to use.

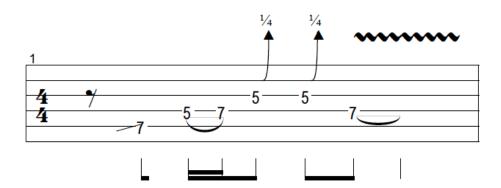
In fact there are so many other scales that we can use to solo over a blues progression, that it would be a pitty to only use one scale all of the time. Many highly advanced blues guitarists make use of not one single scale, but combine many different scales to make their sound stand out more. Since there are countless options that we can look into, we'll just focus on the aforementioned solutions in this guide.

The Blues Bend In Action

One approach we can use is to play the Am pentatonic scale, but use techniques to alter the C note. For instance, you can bend the C note up to the C# note using a blues bend. In this way, the C note becomes a 'passing note' instead of a 'target note', since we don't stay on this C note but use it in a way to get to the C# note.

The dissonance that will be created by using the C note to resolve to the more stable C# note is something that you can use to your benefit to play out the contrast between minor and major tonality, which is something that is being used in the playing of a lot of blues guitarists such as B.B. King,

Freddie King, Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan and countless others. Look at this example in the tab below; here we are using a blues bend on the C note to get to the C# note.

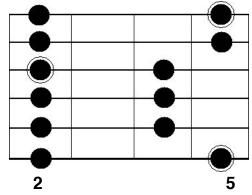


Listen to this lick

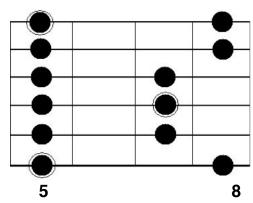
II. The Basics Part II: The Major Pentatonic Scale

A. How To Use The Major Pentatonic Scale

Now let's look at the major pentatonic scale. While most guitarists are aware that you can also use this scale to improvise over dominant blues chords, many run into trouble when trying to make this scale sound great. This comes from not being aware of the order of the notes in the scale. If you're used to playing the minor pentatonic scale and try to 'copy' your licks, phrases and runs to the major pentatonic scale you'll find that this doesn't work well. This is normal, because the notes are positioned differently in the minor pentatonic scale then in the major pentatonic scale. Look at the scale diagram below and notice the position of the root note (the notes which are circled).



A major pentatonic (box position)



A minor pentatonic scale (box position)

As you can see, even thought the fingerings are the same for both scales, the position of the root notes are different from each scale. So if we would play a minor pentatonic lick that ends on the root note and we try to copy this exact same lick to the major pentatonic scale we wouldn't be landing on the root note anymore, which would make our lick sound totally different (and in most cases sound 'wrong').

What you have to do here is to learn that the major pentatonic is a totally different scale then the minor pentatonic scale, with different notes, different sounds it will produce and a different musical function. Which means that you'll need to start using the major pentatonic scale in a totally different way then you're used to using the minor pentatonic scale.

B. Where To Use The Major Pentatonic Scale

Also, knowing where to use the major pentatonic scale is part of the solution to make this scale work well. I'm not talking about the musical style you can fit this scale in, as you're probably aware of the importance of this scale in country-inspired styles (if you want to create a country sound in your soloing the major pentatonic scale is the way to go).

Here we're talking specifically about over what chords we could use this scale. First it is important to realize that we can only use the major pentatonic scale when soloing over a 'major blues' (which means we are playing over a blues progression in a major key with dominant 7th-chords, such as A7, D7 and E7). If we would play over a 'minor blues'-progression (with for instance the chords Am7, Dm7 and Em7) we can't use the major pentatonic scale.

There are many possibility's that can be explored and each of them will bring a very unique sound to your playing, but to keep this simple we'll start of with only playing the major pentatonic scale over the I chord and the V chord. So if we were playing in the key of A we would be using the major pentatonic scale over chords A7 and E7. Over the D7 chord we'll shift back to the minor pentatonic scale.

If you want to know the reason why this works so well, we'll need to 'spell out the notes' again.

- The notes in the A7 chord: A C# E G

Over this A7	chord we	play the A	major	pentatonic	scale,	which	holds t	he
notes:								

A C# D E F#

As you can see, three of the notes in the chord are also included in the scale, which makes it a perfect fit to play. There's no clash between the C# note and the C note as it would be when we play the minor pentatonic scale instead of the major pentatonic we're using here. Let's also look at the D7 chord.

- The notes in the D7 chord: D F# A C

Over this D7 chord we play the A minor pentatonic scale, which holds the notes:

A C D E G

Again, notice the corresponding notes that are present in the chord as well as in the scale.

The notes in the E7 chord: E G# B D

Over this E7 chord we play the A major pentatonic scale again, which holds the notes:

A C# D E F#

There are many other options that can be explored here, but instead of diving head first into the complex world (yes, blues isn't an 'easy' style, it can be quite complex if you want to play it well) of blues scales and chords, let's stay with this first exercise for now.

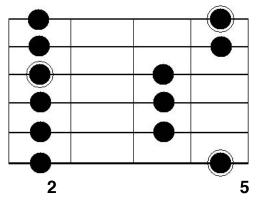
Now go and play over a 12 bar blues progression in the key of A (you can either use a backing track or record the chords yourself) and practice soloing over it using the aforementioned approach.

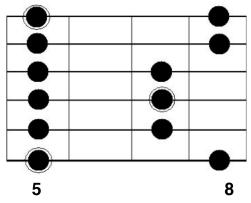
III. Alternating Between The Minor & Major Pentatonic Scales

A. Abrupt Changes Between The Minor & Major Pentatonic Scale

One of the options that we can use to add more variation in our blues guitar soloing is to alternate between the minor pentatonic scale and the major pentatonic scale.

In the scale diagrams below you see both the minor and major pentatonic scale in the key of A. So these scales can be used interchangeably if we play over a 'Blues in A' (the term 'Blues in A' is used when we are playing a Major Blues in the key of A, when we would play a Minor Blues we speak of a 'Minor Blues in A').



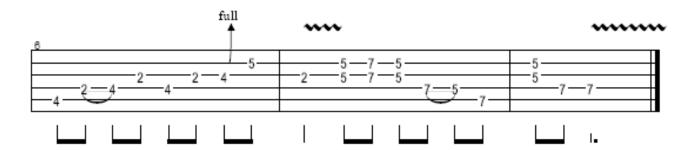


A major pentatonic (box position)

A minor pentatonic scale (box position)

Now try this: play a solo over a blues in A backing track and switch back and forth between these two scales. You will notice that even though this sometimes will result in a nice sound, sometimes it will be challenging to create a fluent change between both scales. The change from the minor pentatonic to the major pentatonic scale (and vice versa) will often sound to 'abrupt'. That's why we're going to look at some transitions, which you can use to combine these two scales.

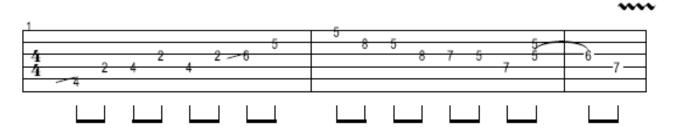
The most common option is to play a lick in the major pentatonic scale and then a lick in the minor pentatonic scale, both played in box position. In the example below you see that we start in the A major pentatonic scale (box position) and then we jump to the A minor pentatonic scale (also in box position).



Listen to this lick

C. Creating Fluent Transitions Between The Minor & Major Pentatonic Scale

In the example below we start of in the major pentatonic scale and then transition to the A minor pentatonic scale all within the same lick. Take note of the use of the C# note in the second measure of this lick. Because we add this note (that originates from the A major pentatonic scale) to the minor pentatonic scale we create a slightly more major pentatonic sound, while shifting focus to the minor pentatonic scale. So in this lick we start of playing the major pentatonic scale and then use the minor pentatonic scale but with the C# note instead of the C note.

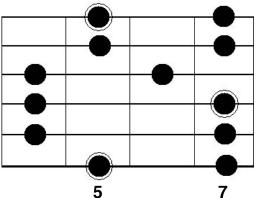


Listen to this lick

Try to experiment with this way of linking both scales together. Simply start playing a lick in the major pentatonic scale and try to make the transition to the minor pentatonic scale as smooth as possible. Also work the other way around, start with the minor pentatonic scale and try to shift to the major pentatonic scale fluently.

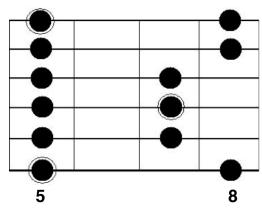
D. Playing The Minor & Major Pentatonic Scale In The Same Position

In the last blues lick we used both the minor and the major pentatonic scale in their box positions. We can also choose to use positions that are even closer related in terms of location on the fretboard of the guitar. It is for instance possible to use the major pentatonic scale in second position, because we're playing at the 5th fret in this position, just like the minor pentatonic scale in box position. Below you find both positions:



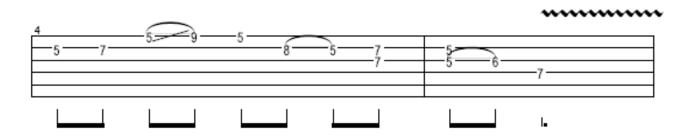


A major pentatonic scale (2nd position)



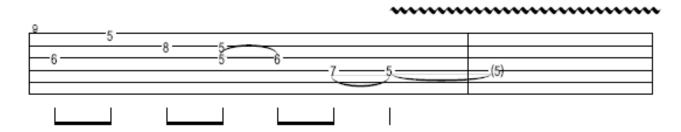
A minor pentatonic scale (box position)

As you can see, we are playing both scales in the same place on the neck of the guitar. In the next lick we use the major pentatonic scale (in 2nd position) and the minor pentatonic scale (in box position).



Listen to this lick

Here is another example:



Listen to this lick

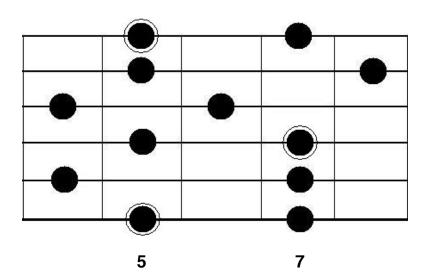
Both scales are strung together to create one homogeneous lick, instead of two separate licks placed together. This way of playing is very commonly used by blues guitarist such as B.B. King and Freddy King.

Start to experiment with these approaches in your own guitar playing. You will notice that this way of playing will prove a radical shift in your sound and will spark your creativity. Practice these blues guitar licks until you have memorized them and start playing them in your own way while you're jamming with backing tracks.

IV. Going Beyond The Basics: The Dominant Pentatonic Scale

The Dominant Pentatonic Scale

Many modern blues guitar players (such as Robben Ford, Scott Henderson, Matt Schofield, etc.) will use the dominant pentatonic scale instead of the minor pentatonic scale.



A dominant pentatonic scale

This dominant pentatonic scale contains all of the 'right' notes to play over a dominant seventh chord. Let's spell out the notes of this dominant pentatonic scale:

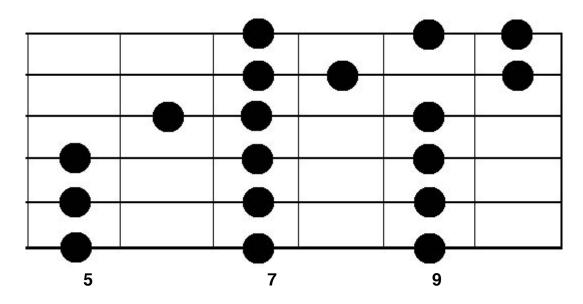
ABC#EG

The notes in the A7 chord are underlined for comparison. As you can see the notes in the A dominant pentatonic scale contain all four notes from the A7 chord, which makes it a great fit to use over this chord.

V. Making It Jazzy: The Mixolydian Mode

Gravitating From Blues to Jazz

Since there are so many scales we can use, it would be overwhelming if we looked at all the options at once. That's why we'll branch out by looking at one other option for now; the mixolydian mode. This mode will produce a jazzier sound if we play a solo over a dominant blues.



A mixolydian mode

You will notice that this approach produces a jazzy sound and that it's much easier to use this scale over the A7 chord then over the other two chords in a twelve bar. That's why it's important to not only learn which scales we can use, but also look at how we can use them and the reasons why they work in a given situation.

Learn about Improving Your Blues Guitar Soloing

About the Author

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Blues Guitarist & Teacher

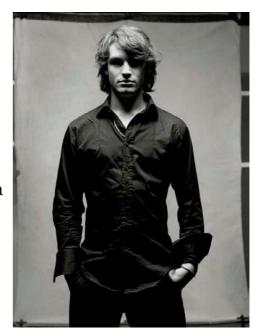
Born in Belguim, Antony learned to play classical piano at the age of seven.

At the age of 17, he saw a friend playing the guitar and later got intensely into guitar.

During high school he practiced for more than 5 hours a day.

At the age of 19 he found a teacher who was just perfect for him, and learned to play blues and countryinfluenced music as well as other styles.

Later, he traveled to Ireland to study with Trevor Darmody, founder of the Waterford Academy.



Antony is currently studying jazz-guitar, and being mentored by worldclass virtuoso Tom Hess. He regularly gives guitarlessons and workshops on both a national and international level.

Antony feels great joy in teaching others and helping them improve their abilities. As executive director of both Guitar Training Studio and Casa da Musica he is training students of all ages and backgrounds on the guitar in his hometown Ostend as well as in the city of Ghent and leads a team of high skilled teachers to deliver the best music education in piano, drum and voicelessons.

His debut-album "Spirtis in Revolution" features the highly expressive guitar sound that he is known for.

It is his goal in life to become the best musician he can be and to share his music with as many people as possible!

To listen to his music visit www.antonyreynaert.com.

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