

How Great Blues Guitarists ‘Spell Out’ Changes When Playing Over Blues Chords

by Antony Reynaert

This free guide is made for the guitarist who is stuck with their blues guitar soloing and improvisation. I wrote it so that you can become musically free when you improvise over a blues chord progression.

You probably already know this but the minor pentatonic scale is the most common way to play over blues chords. It’s important that you realize that this approach is only one of the many approaches we can take in blues guitar soloing and many people get stuck in using this basic approach all of the time. In order to sound good melodically there are other, better ways to break through your limitations.

How To Make Your Guitar Solos Stand Out

In this guide we will look at some important concepts that great blues guitarists use to make their guitar solos stand out. We will zoom in on playing over the chords (this is what musicians call “spelling out the changes”), instead of playing one scale over a chord progression. In order to fully understand what is being taught here, take a look at the next chord progression:

- **Approach 1:** playing one scale over all chords:

A7 A7 A7 A7

D7 D7 A7 A7

E7 D7 A7 A7

→ **instructions:** play the **A minor pentatonic scale** over all these chords

- **Approach 2:** “spelling out the changes” over these chords:

A7 A7 A7 A7

D7 D7 A7 A7

E7 D7 A7 A7

→ **instructions:** use a different scale / arpeggio over each chord

As you can see above, in approach 1 we use the same chords as in approach 2, but in the second approach we change scales / arpeggio’s each time we solo over a new chord.

It's important to realize that in order to become a proficient blues guitarist, it's very important that you learn more about approach 2. All great blues guitarists from Joe Bonamassa to Stevie Ray Vaughan, BB King, etc. know how to make their licks fit the chord they are playing over and every blues guitarist should learn about this approach at some point in their playing.

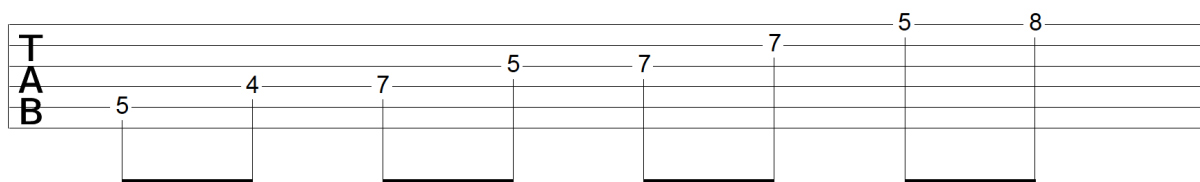
'Spelling Out' The Changes

Novice guitar players will usually try to 'target the right notes' by playing the root of each chord such as D over a D7 and E over E7. This is fine when just starting out but great blues players can 'spell out' changes when playing over a blues progression, as well as any other chord progression. You can hear them change from one chord to the next even without chords being played in the rhythm section.

Either way, the great players have integrated arpeggios as another alternative to targeting notes.

Approach 2A - Using Arpeggio's To Play Over Blues Chords

Below you'll see the arpeggio for the D7 chord. It isn't all that hard, an arpeggio is a chord played one note at a time as opposed to 2 or more played at the same time.



D7 Chord Arpeggio

The notes you see above are the notes of a D7 chord: D, F#, A and C. The question is now how to apply these arpeggios musically. Below are some exercises to help you get started.

Exercise 1

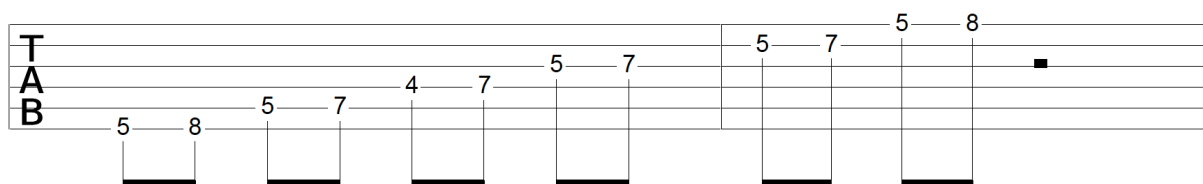
Here we will start with targeting notes using the arpeggios. Turn on a blues backing track in the key of A and land on any note from the arpeggio I just showed you when the D7 chord comes around.

This exercise will make it easier for you to use target notes from the arpeggios. From what I have learned it's not as simple when you think in terms of arpeggios but doing this exercise will help you. You might not sound real smooth at first but persevere. Mastering and integrating arpeggios is an entirely different world from simply using scales. That's why we will integrate scales in our next approach.

Approach 2B – Using The Best Scales To Solo Over Blues Chords

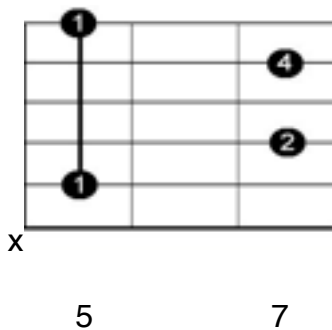
We are going to take a look at how to go right to playing smoothly and naturally when the chords change. You don't even have to switch between using scales and arpeggios, you can integrate them. I will show you which ones you can use in a second but first I want to say that using the right scales (which are not hard if you're already used to the pentatonic scale), will help you sound much more natural. This will also give you a more modern sound as well.

Adjusting the pentatonic scale so that you have the notes that sound best over each chord is one way of maintaining fluency and hitting the right notes when improvising. Even if you have never played like this before these scales will help you get started hitting target notes over your blues progressions.



D Dominant Pentatonic

Over the D7 with the root on the 5th string, this scale fits really well:



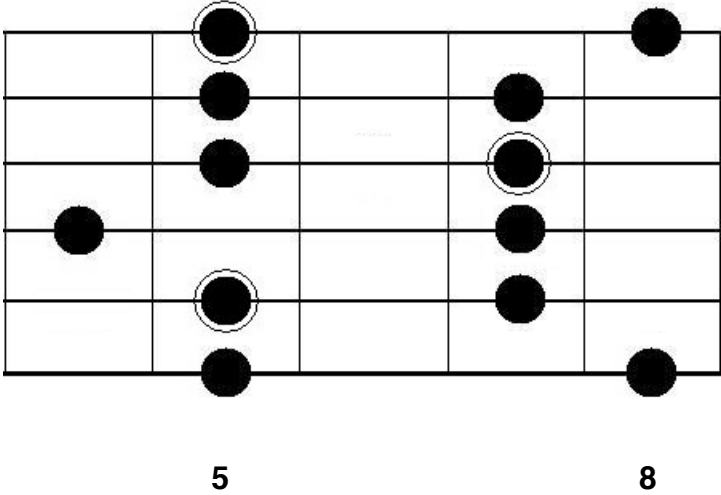
D7

Can you see how the notes in this D7 chord correspond with the notes in the D dominant pentatonic scale?

The 5 tones of the scale are taken from the dominant 9th chord: 1, 3, 5, b7 and 9. (9 is equivalent to 2) The spelling of these notes are D, F#, A, C and E. (E being the 9th).

This scale plays really well over a dominant 7th, dominant 9th or dominant 13th chord. Looking at the minor pentatonic will help you figure this scale out really quickly. Instead of having a G note we are using an F#. Think A minor pentatonic with

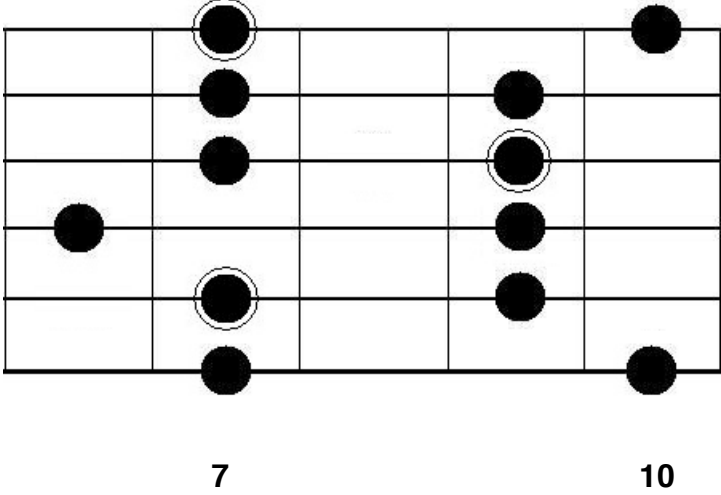
F# instead of G. In the image below you'll see how closely the D dominant pentatonic scale relates to the A minor pentatonic scale.



D Dominant Pentatonic

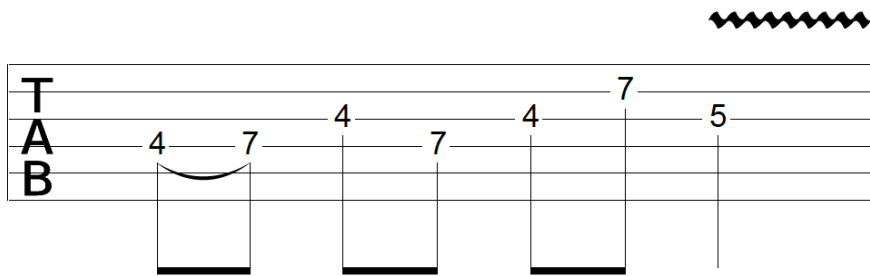
Exercise 2

Go ahead and turn your backing track back on again and improvise over it using this new scale that you just learned. Use this scale over the D7 chord. To use it over E7, just move the fingering two frets up to the e-note on the 7th fret on the fifth string (that's where the root note of this scale is located).

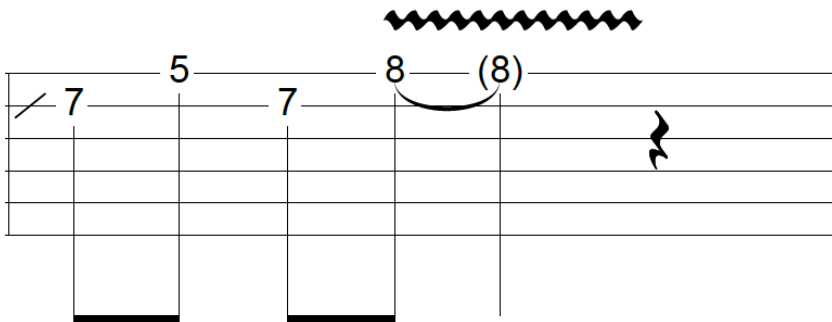


E Dominant Pentatonic

The following are some licks that go well over the D7 chord:

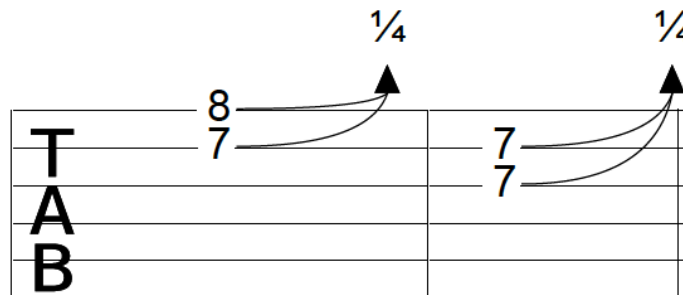


[Listen to this sound example](#)



[Listen to this sound example](#)

Simply move these licks up two frets higher to use it over E7. Finally these are some double stops in D dominant pentatonic scale:



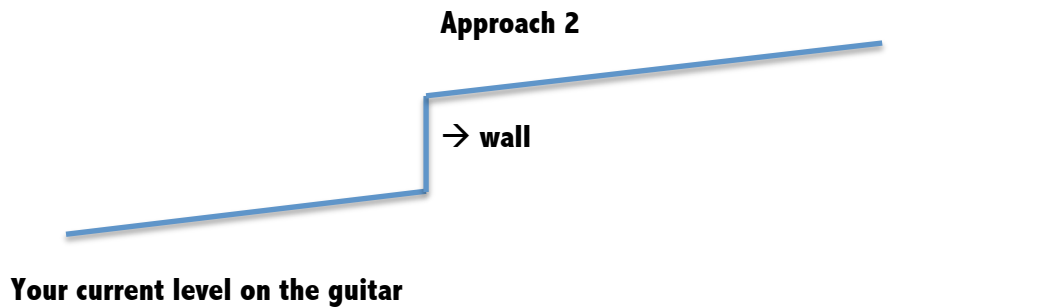
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The key thing here is to experiment using these new scales.

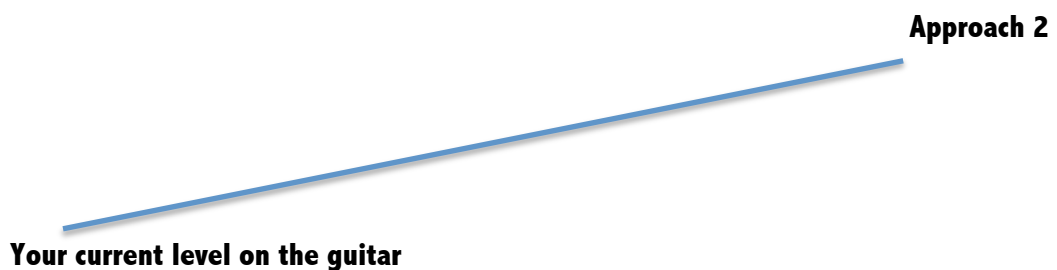
Why Approach 2 Feels Unnatural At First And Will Likely Hold You Back From Becoming a Better Guitarist

As you can see, these new approaches (2A and 2B) might feel very unnatural to you (with approach 2B being the approach that's a bit easier to get into). And you have every reason to believe that these approaches feel unnatural. The reason that this feels hard in the beginning is because you haven't been trained on this subject (which is called "chord tone targetting"; in other words, hitting the right notes at the right time in your solos).

In this guide we've made a "leap of faith" in your playing, but the natural tendency that you might feel is to revert back to your usual playing style. That's very natural, because approaches 2A and 2B might be a bit steep for you to get into. You first need to break free from your limiting approach. Look at the image below; you see that there's a wall between your current level on the guitar and this new approach.



This wall will keep you down, running in circles at your current level. What you need is this:



That's why I developed a systemized step-by-step learning aid for every blues guitar student who wants to break free from their limitations. You can check out this educational blues program here: [The Essential Blues Guitar Soloing Lesson: Busting Out Of The Same Old Blues Box](#).

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