Scale Patterns for Guitar and Why You Need Them

In this lesson, the topic of scale patterns for guitar will be covered in detail. You’ll be both introduced to a number of scale patterns, and taught how to create your own licks in the process.

Why should you put time and effort into learning scale patterns on the guitar?

Well, there are a few important reasons to apply scale patterns to your practice routine...

#1 You’ll know the scales better and be less likely to get ‘stuck’ in different areas on the fretboard.

When learning scales on the guitar, it can be tempting to stop practicing once the given scale can be played from beginning to end.

Scales can then stagnate in the practice room, only getting the attention of playing when you decide to run up and down them again as review. Unfortunately, playing scales day after day in the same way is no longer practicing.

You can spend hours a day practicing scales by only running them up and down and you won’t improve at playing scales, or jazz improvisation for that matter.

In order to create the best opportunity for learning in the woodshed (and in your brain), you need to constantly approach old material from a new perspective.

Thankfully for us, having an understanding of scale patterns and their application will provide an endless source of approaches to familiar material from new perspectives.
#2 You’ll have a deeper understanding for what you hear.

Scale patterns are also referred to as melodic scale patterns. Some of the greatest melodies of all time are based off of simple, identifiable scale patterns. For example, in the great Jazz tune All the Things You Are, the melody spends a great deal of time cycling through perfect and augmented 4ths.

Many Jazz guitarists have signature licks based off of scale patterns, including jazz guitarists Pat Metheny, Joe Pass and Pat Martino.

At the end of this lesson, you’ll take a look at how to create your own licks using scale patterns.

#3 Exploration

In order to be creative and find new sounds, you need to try new things. Thinking up different scale patterns or combining sounds from different patterns can lead to unparalleled originality in your sound.

The roots of Jazz music are in exploring and finding new sounds. Jazz didn’t just show up one day, it was decades of experimentation and exploration in the making.

The founders of Jazz music also didn’t have Jazz records to pull from to learn their licks. They were proficient, intelligent musicians combining their knowledge from various backgrounds to create something new.

Seeking out new scale patterns for the purpose of writing new lines or music is synonymous with the spirit of Jazz music itself.

Don’t forget to pick up a free copy of my 64-page eBook, The Jazz Guitar Primer, here.
Now that you know why you should incorporate scale patterns into your practice routine, let's take a look at how to do it.

Use the menu below to jump from topic to topic. If you’re new to the subject of scale patterns I would recommend starting from the beginning.

- **Major Scale**
- **Thirds**
- **Fourths**
- **Fifths**
- **Sixths**
- **Sevenths**
- **3 note scale pattern**
- **4 note scale pattern**
- **Triad Arpeggio patterns**
- **Seventh Chord Arpeggio Patterns**
- **Create Licks with Scale Patterns**
Major Scale

In order to be as thorough as possible with scale patterns on the guitar, we’ll cover all of the material in this lesson in a **single position** of the major scale. Here is the position below in the key of G major.
Play through the above example a few times as a warm-up.

*Note:* As you progress through the scale patterns, there may be times when notes will fall outside of the scale form above. The above scale form and all other scale forms are meant as guidelines to simplify the fretboard. So, if you ever find that a scale pattern becomes more difficult to play within a given form, make it easier on yourself and adjust the notes accordingly.

*There are additional approaches to scales, which include playing 7 positions and the 5 positions of the CAGED system.*

Once you go through the lesson in the position above, you apply what you’ve learned to all the major scale positions.
Thirds Scale Patterns

The first scale pattern you’ll work on is playing the major scale in thirds. You may have heard this exercise played by pianists and other instrumentalists. Playing a major scale in intervals of thirds is commonly the first scale pattern learned for any instrumentalist.

One of the main reasons for learning to play the major scale in thirds is to accustom you to thinking in thirds.

Most of the harmony you’ll encounter in any genre of music is constructed in thirds (known as tertian harmony), so developing the ability to think quickly in thirds will aid immensely in your overall understanding and application of musical concepts.
Before moving on, be sure to play through the example below, which contains thirds played in the **opposite order** as the above example.

While ascending through thirds in the example below, you’ll play the higher note in the interval first. Then, while descending, you’ll play the lower note in the interval first.

Covering both examples will help you master the interval of a third and make incorporating it into **improvisation** easier.
Looking for further information on scales for the guitar? Check out this lesson here on approaches to scales on guitar.

Fourths Scale Patterns
Moving on, you’ll work on the major scale in **fourths**. Fourths are a much more **modern sounding** approach to intervallic scale patterns, as the use of consecutive fourths is highly avoided in the classical approach to performance and composition.

However, in the realm of Jazz and improvisation, playing in fourths is welcomed and encouraged as they sound interesting and can help **define** a player’s improvisational style.

To be as thorough as possible with intervals of a fourth, practice the below example as well, which contains the same interval pattern played in reverse.
Fifths Scale Patterns

Intervals of **fifths** are used frequently throughout contemporary Jazz idioms. Though these intervals are common in modern Jazz, they are still not as common as third, fourth, and sixth intervals.

The interval of a fifth is also the **inversion** of a fourth interval. What do I mean by that?

First build an interval of a fourth from G, so that you end up with G – C (5 semi-tones/frets).

Then place another G an octave higher than the original and measure the space between the C and the G an octave higher. What you’ll find is that from C – G, the distance is 7 semi-tones/frets, which creates an interval of a fifth.
Coincidentally, this means that 2 of the more modern sounding intervals in jazz improvisation happen to be **inversions of each** other (the fourth and fifth interval).
Further your hand and ears’ understanding of the fifth interval by playing through the scale pattern below. The pattern below contains the same fifth interval, but starts with the higher note when ascending and the lower note when descending.
Sixths Scale Patterns

Next, play through the G major scale using the interval of sixths. Sixths happen to be inversions of thirds. Both sixths and thirds invoke a rich sense of tertian harmony. For example, a major third up from G is B and the inversion of a major third is a minor 6th (B – G).
Sixths are used frequently in many other genres of music including blues, bluegrass, classical, country and more. It’s hard to go wrong playing melodies or scale patterns in sixths as they sound so **consonant and harmonious**.
Continue your study of the sixth interval by playing through sixths in reverse order with the notation/tab and video below.
Sevenths Scale Patterns

Why not experiment with the lesser played intervals?

Using intervals of **sevenths** in improvisation and harmonization will quickly bring a contemporary edge to your jazz guitar playing. Play through the example below to familiarize yourself with sevenths on the guitar.
To finish off the intervallic scale patterns, play the seventh intervals in reverse order with the excerpt below.

3 Note Scale Pattern

After working through intervals in the G major scale, you’ll play through the same scale in a **sequence of 3 notes**. For this scale pattern you’ll play using **triplets** because the sequence repeats every 3 notes.

As you seek out new scale patterns to practice in the woodshed, make sure to **take rhythm into consideration**. If you want to come up with your own scale patterns, thinking in different divisions of time (eight notes, triplets, sixteenth notes, etc..) will
force you to come up with **new patterns** that have different sounds depending on your selection.

Here is the G major scale playing a 3 note pattern in thirds.

4 Note Scale Pattern
The same concept of playing the major scale in a pattern of sequential notes can be applied to sequences with more notes. In this example, you’ll play a scale pattern using **4 notes** for each sequence.
You may have noticed that in the 4-note scale pattern, sixteenth notes are used. The reason for applying the 4-note scale pattern to sixteenth notes is because 4 sixteenth notes fall into each beat in 4/4 time.

Take your practice to the next level by playing the 3 note scale pattern using sixteenth notes and the 4 note pattern using triplets. Displacing scale patterns using different divisions of time is a quick way to alter the sound of any licks or ideas you may have, which in turn will provide you with more soloing ideas.

Triad Arpeggio Patterns

After playing through and familiarizing yourself with various intervals on the guitar, the next step is to take a look at navigating arpeggios through the major scale. Start by playing through the major scale using every naturally occurring triad.

Outlining triads is extremely common in Jazz improvisation. Triads pop up everywhere in Jazz, from playing scale patterns like this to outlining extended harmony from a particular root. They also flat out appear in Jazz tunes as well. Johnny Mandel’s ‘Emily’ features a bare bones Em triad as a main theme in the tune.
Now, play through the same scale pattern in a **descending fashion** using triads. Notice that we have again selected triplets to play through this 3-note scale pattern. Why all this playing in reverse?

Well, think about learning scale patterns in the same way you learn to drive a car... Only knowing how to go forward seems fine until you pull into a parking spot that **isn’t a pull through**.
Playing arpeggios as scale patterns can be continued to 4-note chords as well. Playing seventh chord arpeggios through the major scale is an excellent way to improve your ability with scales and arpeggios.

Arpeggios can often be substituted with one another in a given key. So, getting into the habit of playing all the seventh chord arpeggios consecutively in the major scale will help promote new improvisational and substitution ideas.
Continue this scale pattern by playing the same pattern in a descending fashion. In both of these arpeggio scale patterns, sixteenth notes are featured as there are 4 notes in a seventh chord arpeggio.
To immediately double your seventh chord scale patterns you can swap the rhythms again. Try playing sixteenth notes with the triad scale pattern and triplets with the seventh chord scale pattern. Make sure to use a metronome when you work on exercises that involve unfamiliar rhythms.

*Be sure to check out this page on seventh chord arpeggios when you’re done here.*

Create Licks and Original Solo Ideas with Scale Patterns

After reading through this lesson, performing and internalizing the examples, you’re
more than ready to start **creating your own unique soloing material.**

You can immediately come up with new solo material using scale patterns by working with the following **3 parameters.**

**Change the rhythm** – Use triplets, eighth notes, sixteenth notes. You can also use more complex rhythmic ideas by mixing rhythmic figures and not playing on every beat.

**Change the direction** – Invert the given interval or scale pattern by playing it in the reverse order it’s presented in.
Add additional notes - Throw in some neighbouring notes (chromatic or diatonic), but make sure you return to the interval(s) you selected to focus on.

Now, you’ll walk through another example of creating a new solo idea using the methods above the parameters above.

Start the process by first picking an interval to focus on. In this case imagine you selected an interval of a 4th.
To get started with this lick, you’ll add a **passing tone** between intervals.

Because you’ll be adding a single passing tone to the 2 note scale pattern, the new scale pattern would work best using triplets.

In the above example you played through the interval of a fourth with the addition of a passing tone. To keep things interesting, take a look at the same scale pattern again, but this time in **reverse**.
Now, let’s combine both patterns over a II V I progression in G major. Instead of playing the new scale pattern across the entire G major position, you’ll start from C (the 3rd of Am7) in the ascending pattern and F# in the descending pattern (the 3rd of D7).
The last alteration you’ll apply to the lick involves more rhythmic variation! To give the new lick a more spontaneous feel, it’s important to vary your rhythmic palette, or at the very least avoid playing on every beat.

Now that you’ve gone through this process and covered a few key elements in scale pattern alteration and lick building, come up with more licks.

Use any of the 3 lick building parameters with any scale pattern you’ve learned in
this lesson or elsewhere. Armed with these approaches you’ll never run out of new musical ideas.

As always, I’d love to hear from you in the comment section below. Let me know how you plan to approach scale patterns and lick building in the future.

Or, feel free to share any of your favorite lick building approaches.

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