

Pentatonic & Blues

Take the two notes out of a major scale that can clash with the others, and five are left. That is the pentatonic — no semitones, no tritone, nothing that can grate. It is the most forgiving set of notes there is, and it turns up on its own in Chinese, Celtic, West African and Andean music. Add one bent note back in and you have the blues.

The four scales Dotted boxes are the notes left out · gold is the note added back in

Major pentatonic

NOTES
Five

The major scale, without its 4th and 7th

C

D

E

F

G

A

B

1

2

3

—

5

6

—

Open, bright, impossible to get wrong

Losing the 4th and 7th removes every semitone from the scale. Play these five over any chord in the key and none of them can clash.

Minor pentatonic

NOTES
Five

The natural minor, without its 2nd and 6th

A

B

C

D

E

F

G

1

—

b3

4

5

—

b7

The same five notes, a darker home

A minor pentatonic holds exactly the notes of C major pentatonic, started three semitones lower. The first scale most guitarists learn.

Minor blues

NOTES
Six

Minor pentatonic, plus the flattened 5th

A

C

D

E♭

E

G

1

b3

4

b5

5

b7

One note added, and everything changes

The b5 is the blue note. It is passed through on the way between the 4th and the 5th rather than landed on and held.

Major blues

NOTES
Six

Major pentatonic, plus the flattened 3rd

C

D

E♭

E

G

A

1

2

b3

3

5

6

The rub between minor and major

The b3 slides up into the major 3rd a semitone above it. Country, gospel and rock and roll all live on that slide.

Written out in six keys Each major pentatonic and the minor three semitones below it share the same five notes

KEY	MAJOR PENTATONIC	MINOR PENTATONIC	MINOR BLUES	MAJOR BLUES
C / A minor	C D E G A	A C D E G	A C D E♭ E G	C D E♭ E G A
G / E minor	G A B D E	E G A B D	E G A B♭ B D	G A B♭ B D E
D / B minor	D E F♯ A B	B D E F♯ A	B D E F F♯ A	D E F F♯ A B
F / D minor	F G A C D	D F G A C	D F G A♭ A C	F G A♭ A C D
B♭ / G minor	B♭ C D F G	G B♭ C D F	G B♭ C D♭ D F	B♭ C D♭ D F G
E / C♯ minor	E F♯ G♯ B C♯	C♯ E F♯ G♯ B	C♯ E F♯ G G♯ B	E F♯ G G♯ B C♯

WHY NOTHING CLASHES

No semitones and no tritone in a pentatonic — so no two notes in it can grind against each other, whatever the chord underneath.

BENDING THE BLUE NOTE

On a guitar or in a voice the b5 and b3 are bent, sitting between two pitches a piano can give you. That in-between is the sound.

WHERE TO HEAR IT

Auld Lang Syne, Amazing Grace and most nursery tunes are pure major pentatonic; nearly every blues and rock solo is minor pentatonic.

THE FIVE BLACK KEYS

The black keys of a piano are a G♭ major pentatonic. Play only those, in any order, and it will sound like music.