

# Keyboard

## Jeff Lorber on Pentatonic Soloing in Fusion

BY JEFF LORBER July 17, 2013



Welcome to “Cold Fusion,” a new *Keyboard* column where we’ll be exploring concepts of jazz-fusion playing from the ground up. Let’s begin with pentatonic soloing.

Pentatonic scales are especially relevant when it comes to improvisation in a jazz-fusion context because of the many patterns you can play with them. Like other tools that help you improvise, the pentatonic scale should be used sparingly, but it can be a fun way to navigate through different kinds of chord progressions, and especially when jamming over mostly one-chord modal songs. You can also use them in songs with a lot of chord changes by timing your phrases to end on a target chord. Even though the pattern might be slightly dissonant with regard to the approaching chords, if the notes fit the target chord, your ear will interpret them as fitting the changes.

### 1. Pentatonic Basics



**Ex. 1** illustrates the C major pentatonic scale. Any major pentatonic scale contains scale degrees 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 from the major scale.

### 2. Pentatonic Practice



**Ex. 2** demonstrates one way you can practice a C major pentatonic scale by breaking it down into groups of four notes per phrase.

### 3. Pentatonic Patterns



**Ex. 3** illustrates a useful pentatonic pattern created by playing every other note in the pentatonic scale in ascending and descending shapes. Practicing these patterns in all 12 keys will help you develop facility with this technique. The major pentatonic scale sounds great when played starting on the root or fifth of a major seventh chord, or the flat third or flat seventh degree of a minor seventh chord.

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### 4. Minor Pentatonic Scales



**Ex. 4** illustrates the C minor pentatonic scale. Note that this scale contains scale degrees 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7 from the natural minor scale.

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### 5. Pentatonic Phrases

Many pentatonic phrases have become mainstays of jazz improvisation. **Exs. 5a** through **5d** illustrate variations that you can use in your sonic explorations. It's interesting to note that compared to the keyboard, the way the guitar is set up makes it easy to play pentatonic patterns.



## 6. Pentatonics in Action

Since melodies can often be thought of as distilled or crystallized improvisations, **Ex. 6** illustrates the melody of my song “Live Wire,” which is the first track on my latest CD, *Galaxy*. Note the use of pentatonic patterns throughout.

The musical score for "Live Wire" is presented in four staves. The first staff is the melody, starting with a rest followed by a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, a quarter note Bb4, and a quarter note C5. This is followed by a repeat sign and a half note F4. The melody continues with a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, a quarter note Bb4, and a quarter note C5. The second staff is a vocal line that mirrors the melody. The third and fourth staves are accompaniment, featuring chords and rhythmic patterns that support the melody. The key signature is F minor (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The label "F min" is placed above the first staff.

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### Practice Tip

“Even fragments of pentatonic scales can be useful in improvisation. If you check out John Coltrane’s solo on ‘Giant Steps’ you’ll see that he starts this solo by playing a pentatonic scale fragment starting on the root of each chord,” says acclaimed jazz-fusion keyboardist **Jeff Lorber**. His latest release is *Galaxy*. Find out more at [lorber.com](http://lorber.com).

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