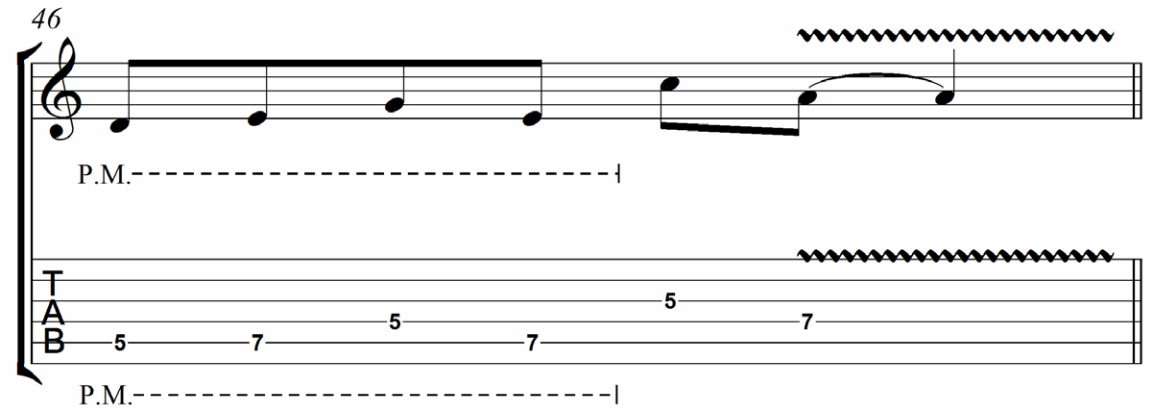
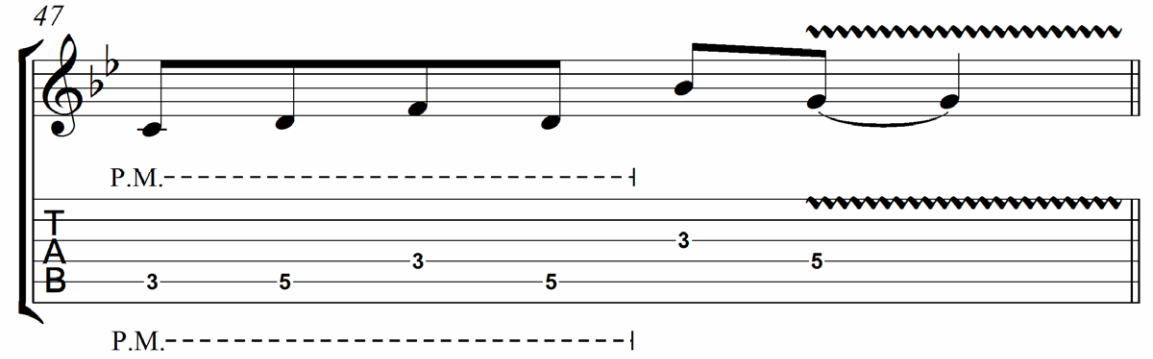
Why Learning the Chromatic Scale Matters



Let's say you want to play this riff not in the key of A (the original key) but in the key of G. How would you do it? Through chromatic scale knowledge, we know that the G in the 6th string is at the 3rd fret. We just move the same idea and start the riff at the 3rd fret.



Let's say for instance you know how to play a 6th string power chord shape and you wanted to play the G power chord. How do you know where G is on the 6th string? The answer lies in the knowledge of the chromatic scale. Take note that the guitar's fretboard is arranged in half-step intervals meaning that the guitar's fretboard is divided into the notes of the chromatic scale.

There are a few things a guitarist needs to know about how the chromatic scale applies to the guitar:

1. The pitches of the open strings of the guitar i.e. tuning. The pitches of the open strings serve as initial reference points e.g. E for the open 6th string.
2. Each fret represents a half-step. For example, we start with E for the open 6th string (i.e. fret zero or the nut). The 1st fret is a half-step above E and is therefore F, 2nd fret is F#, 3rd fret is G, etc.

3. Inlay markers (the dots) are visual markers that allow guitarists to map out the fretboard easily. In a typical guitar fretboard, there is a single dot for the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 9th, 15th , 17th, 19th and 21st frets. The 12th and 24th frets have two dots, signifying the octaves above the pitch of the open string. If a guitarist knows the pitch per string over the dot plus the fact that each fret represents half steps, mapping out the pitches of the fretboard is easier. For example, the 3rd fret has a single dot and playing the 6th string at this fret produces a G; the fret immediately to the right is therefore G♯/A♭ and the fret to the left represents F♯/G♭.

To successfully be able to utilize the chromatic scale, a guitarist must be able to:

1. Memorize first 12 pitches of the 6th string. Knowing the open pitches and utilizing the dot markers can help a lot as visual cues. Learn them first one way (e.g. all sharps) and then move on to the next challenge. Inlay markers can also serve as visual shortcut to be able to work learning the chromatic scale.
2. Keep in mind that there are no B or E sharps and no C or F flats for practical purposes.
3. Even without a guitar, we can practice visualization to understand how the chromatic scale manifests on the guitar.

Here is the chromatic scale for the 6th string from the open string to the 12th fret: