

# Target notes: nailing the changes

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I often get asked how one, when soloing, can break out of obvious patterns like going up and down the scale (wether it's pentatonic, minor, major, a mode etc...), but at the same time be meaningful and coherent in the note choice. One way that I find works really well, is to know how to think and play vertically rather than exclusively horizontally and to be able to switch back and forth between the two ideas.

What does this mean? First, it implies that you're soloing over a set of chord changes. It can be a very small set of changes (a blues form, a two-chord vamp or a long one chord vamp with a bridge...) or a larger set like a jazz tune. Playing horizontally means that you'll use the same scale over the whole form (like using a pentatonic scale over a whole blues form), whereas playing vertically means that you consider each chord as its own thing. Let's try to find a way to connect the two.

Let's take a major blues form in the key of A, 3-chord 12-bar version. The three chords in this form are A7, D7 and E7. We know that A minor pentatonic is a very powerful scale over this form: all the notes will pretty much fit on top of those chord changes. What's a way to spice it up? Using target notes.

Target notes are notes that you will land on for a relatively long duration and that fit the chord particularly well. Generally, chord tones work well, especially the 3rd and 7th (wether they are major or minor, depending on the chord).

There's a few different ways to figure out what those target notes are. One way is to use the guitar and your guitar knowledge as a tool.

Take the root position of A minor pentatonic, which lays out as follow:

Fig A

1

T  
A  
B

5 8 5 7 5 7 5 8 5 8

Now let's take an A7 chord in the shape of a bar-chord, with the root on low E string, 5th fret. When playing each note individually and keeping the A minor pentatonic scale in mind, all the notes of the chord are also a note in the pentatonic scale, EXCEPT for the major 3rd, C# (G string, 6th fret) which is not included in the scale. That's your target note number one, associated with A7. If you include this target note in the pentatonic scale, it now becomes this:

Fig B

3

T  
A  
B

5 5 7 5 6 5 5 5 5 6 7 5 8 5 8

C#

Be aware that this is just a visualization, to prepare and map out your options. It doesn't mean you need to stay stuck in the root position of the pentatonic scale. Also, any C# will do, not just the one in that spot. Now try to take different positions of the minor pentatonic scale and see where a C# would be located.

On to the next chord. Let's take a D7 with the root on the A string, 5th fret. Again, when playing the a minor pentatonic, all notes except one match. The major 3rd, or F# (B string, 7th fret) is not part of the scale and is a target note for D7. Again, find different locations for F#, relative to an A minor pentatonic scale position. In the root position, including the target note for D7, we now have this:

Fig C

Finally, the last chord. Take E7 with the root on the 7th fret, A string. This time around, we come up with some far extensions, as the chord shape is not in the same area as the minor pentatonic scale root position. The target notes we come up with are the 5th or B, the major 3rd or G# and the 5th or B. And here is the scale we come up with:

Fig D

Now the trick is to practice landing on those target notes, at the right moment, in other words playing the correct target note over the right chord. It takes some practice to be able to hear the changes go by while you're playing and also to train your brain to be able to go quickly from one chord / target note to the next one, while keeping the horizontal thinking going (minor pentatonic, in this case). Check it out and see for yourself.

Another way to find target notes is to figure out the chord tones of the chord changes. Let's take for instance a chord progression in the style of "All along the watchtower", namely Cmin, Bb, Ab. This time around, the changes happen much faster than the blues form, so much less time to land on those target notes. Over this chord progression, an horizontal way of thinking would be using a C natural minor scale or C aeolian mode. Here's a fingering:

Fig E

Now on to figuring out the vertical part of it all. First, let's break down the chord tones of each chord.  
 Cmin spells 1, b3, 5 which are C, Eb and G  
 Bb spells 1, 3, 5 which are Bb, D and F  
 Ab spells 1, 3, 5 which are Ab, C and Eb

This time around, since we're using C natural minor which a complete scale as opposed to pentatonic, and since all those chords harmonize in the key of C minor, all those chord tones are found in the C natural minor scale. No note jumps out to be a target note like it did when using minor pentatonic. Fine, then.

The 3rd (major or minor, depending on the chord) is generally a good place to start as a target note. Another thing to consider is to try to have target notes that are gonna be unique to the chord relative to. In other words, have a note that won't be found in another chord.

Regarding 3rds, we have Eb for the C minor chord, D for the Bb chord. Now, the 3rd in the Ab chord is C, which not only is the root of the C minor chord but also of the C minor natural scale which we are using horizontally. Not a particularly characteristic note. The Ab note however, should work well over the Ab chord, as it isn't found in the other changes. Here is a map of the C minor scale, with each target note:

Fig F

The image shows a musical exercise labeled 'Fig F'. It consists of a single staff in treble clef with a 7/4 time signature. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), D5 (quarter), Eb5 (quarter), F5 (quarter), G5 (quarter), Ab5 (quarter), Bb5 (quarter), C6 (quarter), D6 (quarter), Eb6 (quarter), F6 (quarter), G6 (quarter). Below the staff, three guitar strings are shown: T (Treble), A (Middle), and B (Bass). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 0-11. Chord changes are labeled as D, Eb, and Ab.

String	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
T												
A							7	8	10	8	9	11
B	8	10	11	8	10	11	8	10				

Granted this second way is more analytical than the first one based on chord forms, the more you do this kind of analysis and the better you'll get to know music theory and more importantly, the relationship between theory and actual playing.

I find these two ways of figuring out target notes pretty accessible in terms of thinking. In terms of playing, it is much less stiff than playing arpeggios over the corresponding chord changes. Explore, experiment and mostly, have fun.

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