

Lesson: An Introduction to Seven String Scales

It's amazing how something as basic as simply adding an extra string to a guitar can make the once-familiar fretboard seem utterly incomprehensible. When first making the transition from a six to a seven, this was (in my experience) the biggest hurdle to overcome: that all of the familiar scale, chord, and arpeggio shapes I'd been playing ever since I first picked up my dad's acoustic suddenly didn't apply any more (as an aside, this is still one of the biggest little-known perks to playing a seven - handing your guitar to an unsuspecting six-stringer. A good 90% of the players I've tried this on immediately reach for an open E chord, and get this horribly out-of-tune sounding tangle of notes somewhere in the neighborhood of a B. The look on their faces as they try to figure out what the hell happened is absolutely priceless). This is both a good and a bad thing, as there is a lot to be said for getting a chance to approach a familiar instrument that you already have a decent amount of technical aptitude at with a completely blank slate. But at the same time, when someone calls out "blues in E," you want to be playing blues in E; at some point, you're going to have to bite the bullet and learn some seven string scale patterns.

Part One: Fixed Position Scales

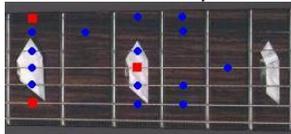
Luckily, you can apply a good portion of what you already know with only the slightest of changes. As the top six strings of a standard-tuned seven string are still the same as the six strings of a six string, any scale pattern on a six-string can be played on the top six strings of a seven. Additionally, in the case of a fixed-position scale, as the low B string mirrors the high B two octaves lower, it's a simple question of playing the same sequence of notes on the low string as you would on the second highest, when you want to include the low B in some of your scale runs. Take a look at the following two patterns:

7th Position B Minor, six string

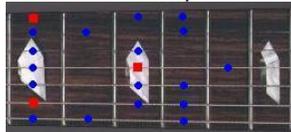
7th Position B Minor, seven string

Or, in fretboard diagrams (picture courtesy of www.jemsite.com, used and modified by permission)

7th Position B Minor, six string



7th Position B Minor, seven string



Pay special attention to the two B strings in the seven-string fretboard diagram; much like the low E and high e patterns mirror each other on a 6-string, the low B and high b patterns are also parallel on a seven. In a pinch, this method of "stretching" a six-string pattern you already know across one extra string will allow you to include that low string in your melody lines.

The same can be done for scales with a root on the 5th string. Worth noting here is that the note an octave below will be located two strings below and two frets back from it's position on the A string, so it will be possible to play an additional octave here:

7th Position E Minor, six string

7th Position E Minor, seven string

Not too bad, huh? If you start on the 5th fret of that low B string, shift positions up to the 7th, and ascend conventionally from there, you have four complete octaves of the E minor scale comfortably within seven frets. Also worth trying is the relative major of E minor, a G major scale based on this shape. This one falls quite comfortably under your fingers without any position shifts:

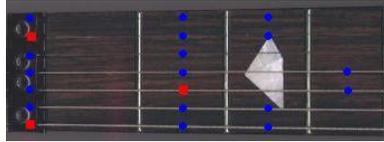
7th Position G Major, seven string

From here, it makes sense to begin looking at seven-string scale patterns not as derivatives of six-string patterns, but rather as scales laid out first and foremost as seven-string scales. Open position scales are probably the easiest place to start:

Open Position B Minor, seven string

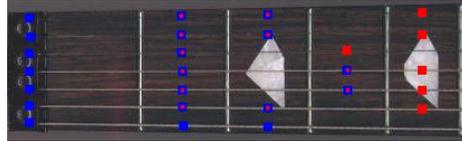
Or, in a fretboard diagram (again from jemsite.com, with permission):

Open Position B Minor, seven string



This pattern can be transposed up and down the neck fairly comfortably. Useful to note is the way it overlaps with the 6-string pattern with the root on the 5th string:

Open Position B Minor (extended), seven string



This gives you a great minor (and relative major, if you treat the b3 as the root) "box" position that can be transposed freely up and down the neck.

Part Two: Three Note Per String Scales

Box patterns are useful, but lead guitarists, especially those favoring legato or economy picking techniques, have a fondness for three-note-per-string patterns. So, once the box position scale pattern above begins to feel comfortable, give these a try:

C Ionian, three notes per string

11:8

11:8

Str I

T

A

B

1 3 5 1 3 5 2 3 5 2 3 5 2 4 5 3 5 6 3 5 7

D Dorian, three notes per string

11:8

11:8

Str I

T

A

B

3 5 6 3 5 7 3 5 7 3 5 7 4 5 7 5 6 8 5 7 8

E Phrygian, three notes per string

11:8

11:8

Str I

T

A

B

5 6 8 5 7 8 5 7 8 5 7 9 5 7 9 6 8 10 7 8 10

F Lydian, three notes per string

Gtr I

T 8 10 12

A 7 8 10

B 6 8 10

G Mixolydian, three notes per string

Gtr I

T 10 12 13

A 9 10 12

B 8 10 12

A Aeolian, three notes per string

Gtr I

T 12 13 15

A 10 12 14

B 10 12 13

B Locrian, three notes per string

Gtr I

T 13 15 17

A 12 14 16

B 12 13 15

Mess around with these a bit - by the time they start to feel natural your fretboard knowledge on a 7-string will have improved tremendously. Note that each pattern resolves to the minor 7th degree of their respective scale - if you jump up either a half step or a step (whichever is appropriate to the scale in question) you'll be able to cover 4 octaves. That's a bit over a half octave more than a 6-string, which can make quite a difference when you're jumping around the neck on faster runs.

So, that's a crash course on trying to make sense of the wider fretboard now looking up at you. There's about as many ways to arrange scales onto the neck of the guitar as there are guitarists, so these are by no means set in stone; if you find something that works better for you, then by all means, do it. But, at the very least, these patterns will give you a quick "vocabulary" to begin building melodic ideas from on your seven-string guitar. Enjoy!