

UNDERSTANDING SCALES

There are only 12 notes in the standard musical scale – it ain't rocket science!

A A# B — C C# D D# E — F F# G G#
 Bb half-step Db Eb half-step Gb Ab

The next note above G# in the series is an A, one octave higher than where you started. Then the scale repeats all over again.

Whole steps and half step occur in certain patterns to make up our standard scales. There is nothing mysterious or magic about these intervals – this is just the pattern of pitches that we are accustomed to hearing in western music. Indian, Oriental or African music uses different intervals and more than 12 notes, what we would call micro-pitches. The combination of micro-tones, different “standard” chord progressions, and different rhythms make these styles sound so different from western music.

All “major” scales have the same pattern of whole and half steps. The familiar “do - re - mi” sequence is a major scale. If you don't have this pattern of whole and half steps, then you simply don't have a major scale. It might be a minor scale or a modal scale, and it will definitely have a different feel to it.

Each guitar fret is one half step, and two frets is a whole step. On a piano, moving from any key to the very next adjacent key (either white or black) is a half-step. Moving from one white key across a black key to the next white key is a whole step.

A# is exactly the same as Bb, and ditto for D# and Eb. They are just two different ways to name the same pitch value. Because of the half steps that occur at certain points, there is technically no B# or Fb.

Major scale pattern, starting on “C”

 W W H W W W H
C **D** **E** **F** **G** **A** **B** **C**
 do re mi fa so la ti do

Major scale pattern, starting on “A”

 W W H W W W H
A **B** **C#** **D** **E** **F#** **G#** **A**
 do re mi fa so la ti do

Note that sharps (or flats) are needed to get the whole-step and half-step intervals to come out correctly on any scale other than “C”. The key of C has no sharps or flats (all white keys on the piano).

On the guitar there are certain fingering patterns, often called “boxes”, that make up a major scale. Different boxes are used for major scales, minor scales, pentatonic scales, etc. (We won't get into playing scales right now, but it is easy enough to look up when you get interested). Here is a major scale box:

