

Hello Fellow Pianists,

I have often been asked by beginning chord concept players, “*What is the secret to making fills?*”

“Fills,” as they are so called, are the creative additions to sections where there are pauses in the melody lines to songs. They should fill the space for a few beats in a way that doesn’t detract from the melody. Fills are spontaneously made from two ingredients, scales and chord outlines. In this note, I would like to talk about the scale component.

I have noticed throughout my years of teaching that most students have an aversion to scales. I think this comes from early classical training and the feeling that they were boring—not as interesting as learning a piece of music one can feel proud of for getting under the fingers and performing. This is understandable, but for classical study, it's detrimental to one's overall development and control at the piano. Conquering and working out with the scales makes playing and learning everything easier in classical music, builds dexterity and finger confidence.

***But why do we need scales if we learning to play by chord concept, playing standards, blues and jazz?***

You are studying my lessons and learning to play by chord concept, *not* classical music, so you may ask yourself why bother with scales at all? You are learning to play blues, jazz and standards. Do I really need to get into boring scales? The answer to both questions is yes and there are ways to make scale work enjoyable, not boring. If you want to make fills or play solos then you need your scales. The better you know them, the more creative you can be!

So, we have a very big reason to learn our major scales, but not in the old-fashioned, classical way. If you look at my [Joy of Scales](#) lesson, on the website (scroll down on the Cocktail Piano lessons page) You will discover an entirely different approach to playing scales. You don’t begin or end the major scales on “do,” the root note. This makes playing and practicing them much more enjoyable. You get free from the old boring construct. You learn how big, creative scale runs are made that you can use as fills or for lead-ins and dramatic endings. Plus, you will already be improvising if you play them this way.

**Begin with the common piano keys first.**

I want to suggest getting the common piano keys firmly under your fingers first. Our common piano keys are C, F, Bb, Eb, and G. Why are these the common keys for playing piano? Because they are the easiest for us to play in. That’s where I do most of my playing when I am relaxing. I play songs in all twelve keys in my professional work and also to challenge myself. But when I am relaxing, I usually roam around in F, Eb, Bb or C, the friendliest keys for the fingers.

**Practice scales with the right hand only...**

To start out with, you only need to play one octave up and down with your right hand. There is little use for the left hand playing scales unless you are going for serious classical development or octave improvisation lines. Play each scale a few times, firmly and loudly and then repeat it, playing softly. In your left hand hold down the root note while your right plays the scale.

Or better yet, hold a simple major triad while the right-hand plays the scale one octave up and down. This is your basic orientation for improvising and making fills. You will begin to

understand that the scale you are playing corresponds to the chord you are holding in your left hand. When you play that chord you can improvise with that major scale that fits with it to make your fills! Also, this exercise mimics the normal movement of playing jazz and blues piano. The left-hand moves slowly playing single notes and chords while the right-hand plays melodies, scales and chord outlines.

Begin with the five common keys. When you feel like you've got them down well, then start gradually adding in the other seven, one by one. Eventually, you need to be able to play all twelve. Conquering them all the with just the right hand is a reasonable goal. Just go about it slowly. This will greatly improve your skill, understanding, and confidence at the piano. There are only twelve keys. You need to be well aware and in control of all of them. Major scales make up the lion's share of what we use when making fills and making solos. If you were a lion tamer with twelve cats, you would want to have complete control over all of them, not just some!

### **Making fills from the major scales**

When making fills you can draw freely from any of the notes in the scales that fit with the chords being played. You don't play them in order very often. You make creative fills by playing them "out of order." As long as you have the right scale for a given chord, then you can experiment skipping around the notes of the scale until you find something that sounds good. Nothing will sound bad as long as you have the right scale for the chord.

### **What scale for what chord?**

If you know your major scales then who can play them anytime you see a major jazz chord (major 7 or 6/9) If you see a minor jazz chord (m7 or m9) then you still play a major scale but you begin it on the second note of the major scale. If you see a dominant jazz chord (9, 11 or 13) you play a major scale but you begin it on the fifth note of the major scale. Starting and ending the major scales notes other than "do," the tonic, is called playing modes. You first need to know your major scales pretty well before you can start doing this freely.

If you don't have it already, I want to recommend you get the "[Joy of Scales](#)" lesson from the website. You will discover that scales can be quite creative and interesting. You will also find that there is no reason to be afraid of the black note keys. They actually can be easier than the white keys scales! The secret is knowing where to start them, and it is not on "do!"

### **Blues scales.**

Blues scales are important for us also, even when playing standards. We can interject a little blues into our fills if we know how to play the right blues scale that goes with the chords. There are major blues scales and minor blues scales. They can fit over major, minor and dominant chords. You just need to know which blues scale works with each of the chord types. I cover the different blues scales in the blues lessons on the website. I have short YouTube lessons for each of the blues studies. Just [click](#) here to go to the website then click on the blues videos there for free sample lessons.

Let me wind up my note here with this link to my fun Youtube video called, "[Major Scale Game for Piano.](#)" It's a brain tickler and will challenge you to see how well you know your major scales in the flat keys.

Pianistically yours,  
Glen