

Intro to Diatonic Theory (Music Theory Foundations)
~East Mesa School of Guitar

GOAL OF THIS SERIES

Now that you have achieved a good foundation on your instrument its time to build a solid understanding of how and why music works. This phase of learning is usually where musicians begin to “connect the dots” and start to understand why and how music works. By applying yourself and mastering this knowledge you’ll experience tremendous growth as a musician and be well on your way to self-sufficiency as a player!

WHY DO MUSICIANS NEED TO KNOW THIS STUFF?

Purpose of music theory: music theory actually came after classical composers had been composing for quite a while. The purpose was to explain why specific musical elements consistently created or released tension in listeners. Contrary to popular opinion, it was not a set of rules created for composers to follow.

Diatonic theory refers to one of the most used musical tools in all of Western music, the major scale. A deep knowledge base of the major scale’s creation, as well as the elements that go with the scale like chords, intervals and chord progressions help musicians better understand music in general, communicate with other musicians more clearly, and figure out or write music much faster. Sounds good, right?

FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS AND DEFINITIONS

Musical Alphabet: Simply the letters A to G with a few possible alterations (A, B, C, D, E, F and G)

Accidentals: Tools used to make alterations to the musical alphabet
♯ (Sharp) – raises a note 1/2 step or one fret on the guitar (A to A♯)

♭ (flat) – lowers a note 1/2 step or one fret on the guitar (B to B♭)

♮ (natural) – cancels a sharp or flat (G♯ to G♮ or E♭ to E♮)

Enharmonic Spelling: Same note with two possible names (black key notes on a piano). For example, A♯ and B♭ both sound the exact same and are assigned to the same keys or frets on the guitar. This is for general knowledge. We’ll explain this further in another class.

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Chromatic Scale: Musical Alphabet with all possible alterations

A	A#	B	C	C#	D	D#	E	F	F#	G	G#
	B \flat			D \flat		E \flat			G \flat		A \flat

Interval: Distance between two notes

Minor 2nd = half-step or 1 fret (i.e. D to D# and B to C / F# to F or D \flat to C)

Major 2nd = whole-step or 2 frets (i.e. B to C# and D to E / C to B \flat or D# to C#)

Diatonic Scale: Typically a series of 7 notes strung together using Major and Minor 2nds (Whole-Steps and Half-Steps).

Diatonic Harmony: Chords associated with each note of a scale; typically a major scale.

Diatonic (in plain English): The notes and chords belonging to a particular key based off the corresponding major scale. Or, simply "Major Scale Theory."

Notes/Questions:

BIRTH OF THE MAJOR SCALE

MUSIC'S ABSOLUTE TRUTH

Mathematical ratios that sounded pleasing on stringed instrument eventually gave birth to the piano. Every piano in the world has the same key configuration (5 black keys and 7 white keys) and that configuration is simply repeated for pianos with more keys.

Since the piano is based around the key of C we will begin by creating a C major scale using the piano keyboard as a guide or template: __, __, __, __, __, __, and __

Using the Major and Minor 2nd intervals (whole-steps and half-steps), define how the C major scale is constructed based off the piano keyboard:

__ - __ - __ - __ - __ - __ - __

(This pattern is **ALWAYS** the same when constructing a major scale)

PROCESS OF CREATING A MAJOR SCALE

1. Start with the 12 note Chromatic Scale. Remember it is repeated over-and-over.

A	A#	B	C	C#	D	D#	E	F	F#	G	G#
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2. Select a note to start the major scale with. We'll use "G" for this exercise. "G" becomes the root, or tonic, of the scale.

G	G#	A	A#	B	C	C#	D	D#	E	F	F#	G
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3. Determine the 7 scale notes based on the major scale formula we discovered above with the C major scale: W - W - H - W - W - W - H

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 OCTAVE

G	G#	A	A#	B	C	C#	D	D#	E	F	F#	G
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W - W - H - W - W - W - H

4. These 7 notes give the spelling for a G Major Scale: G, A, B, C, D, E and F#

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GENERAL RULES

1. Every diatonic scale must contain all the notes that make up the musical alphabet: A, B, C, D, E, F and G
2. Any of the notes can be altered (sharped or flatted) to represent a musical key
3. A diatonic scale can only have 1 version of each letter from the musical alphabet. For example there can not be an A and an A \flat , or and A \flat and an A \sharp . There can only be an A, an A \flat or an A \sharp .

APPLICATION

1. To really solidify this information we'll be determining major scales for some of the most common guitar keys.

Using the four steps outlined in the "PROCESS OF CREATING A MAJOR SECTION" of this document, fill in the chart below with the proper notes. The first 2 scales have been completed for you. Bring this chart to your next class so we can check it together.

Scale	1st Degree	2nd Degree	3rd Degree	4th Degree	5th Degree	6th Degree	7th Degree
C Major	C	D	E	F	G	A	B
G Major	G	A	B	C	D	E	F \sharp
D Major							
A Major							
E Major							
B Major							

2. Once the chart above is completed work on playing through each major scale using the 6th string root major scale shape you learned for the C major scale. (i.e. The G major scale would start at the 3rd fret of the low E string, or G note, etc.)

Notes/Questions: