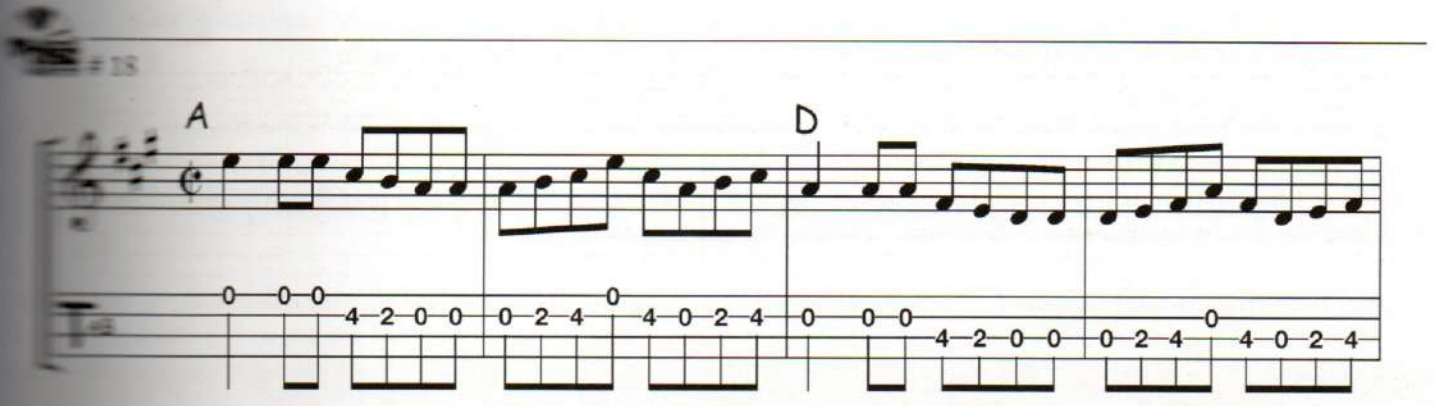
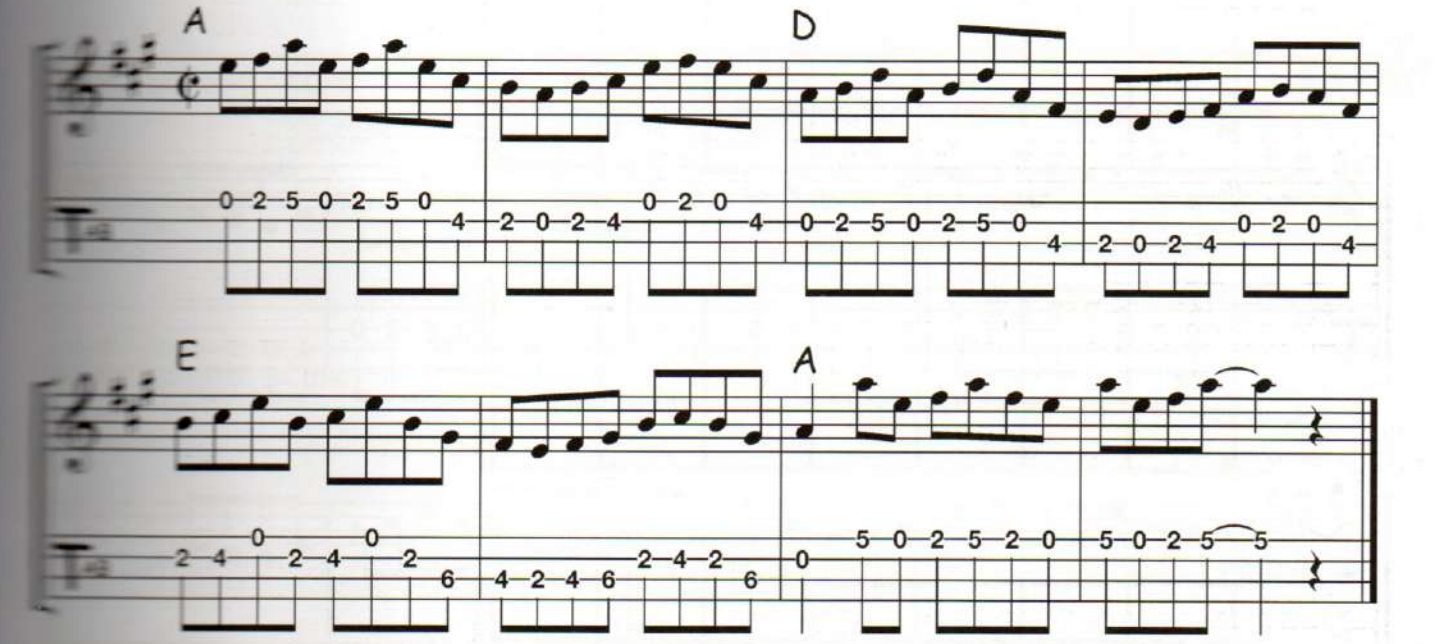




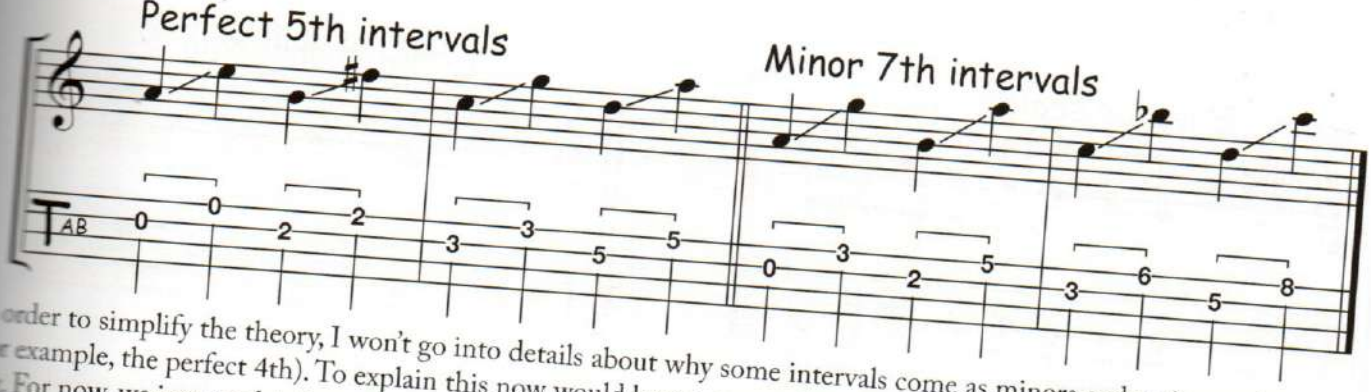
From now on, I'll give you some assignments to do at the end of each chapter. These assignments are extremely important and I highly recommend that you do them. But don't get stressed out now. Take your time. Find a quiet place where you can "study" undisturbed. Take your mandolin, some standard notation or tablature paper, a pen and let's get started.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write out a two-bar pentatonic lick, using the one octave A-pentatonic scale. Don't make it too difficult. The lick should be playable and easily learned.

2. Transpose the lick to D by moving the A lick one string lower.

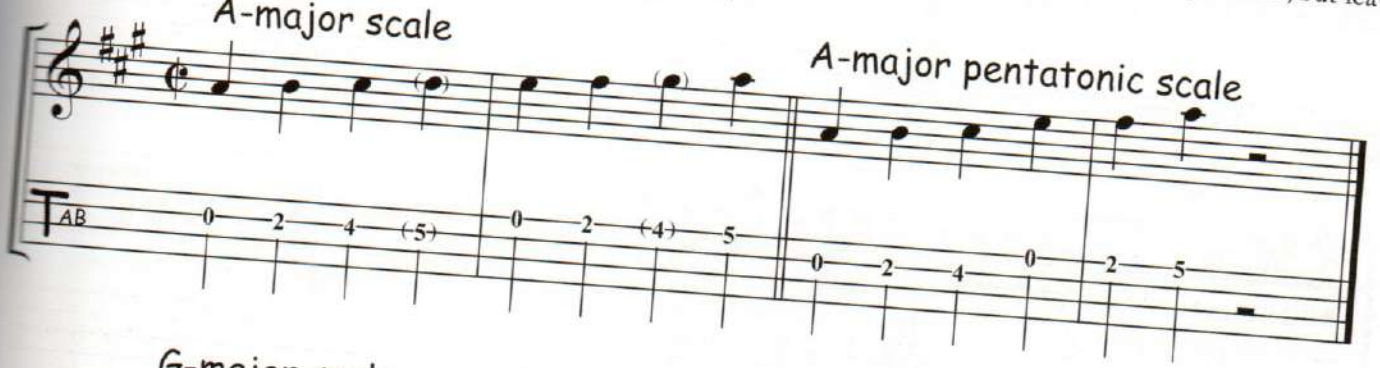
3. Now transpose the lick to E, which isn't so easily done. Every note in the D lick should be played a whole tone higher (two frets).

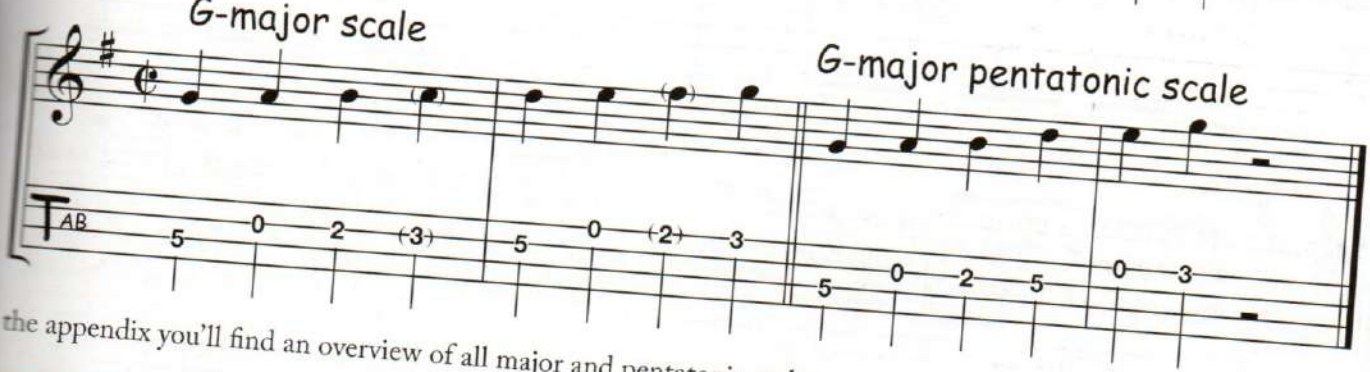


In order to simplify the theory, I won't go into details about why some intervals come as minors and majors and other not (for example, the perfect 4th). To explain this now would be too comprehensive and might even make things more confusing. For now, we just need to know to names of the intervals. But if you like to know more about this subject, it's recommended that you read some books about harmony and theory. It will explain everything and it's even quite interesting.

The major pentatonic scale:

Another important scale is the major pentatonic scale. As you probably already know, penta means five and the pentatonic scale actually is a scale containing five notes. The structure of this scale is quite simple. Just take the major scale, but leave out the perfect 4th and the major 7th, as in the following examples

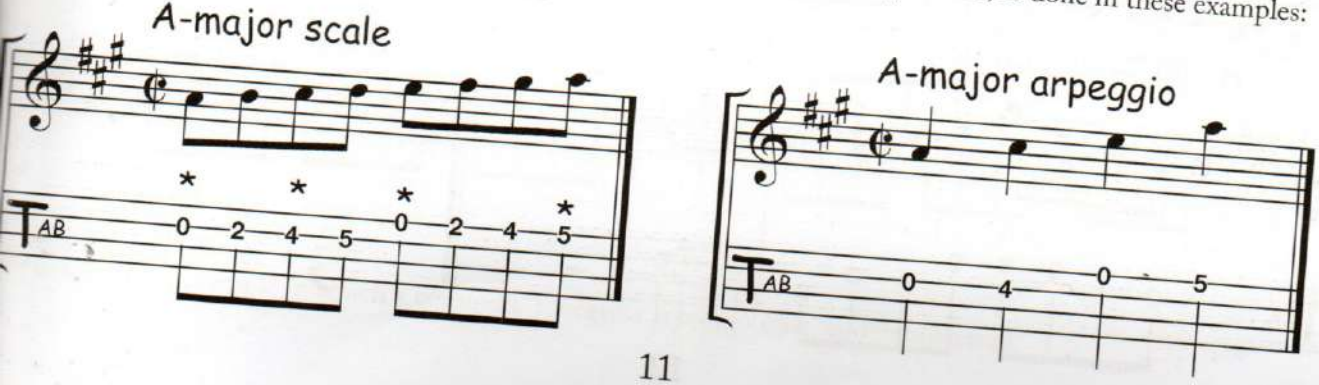


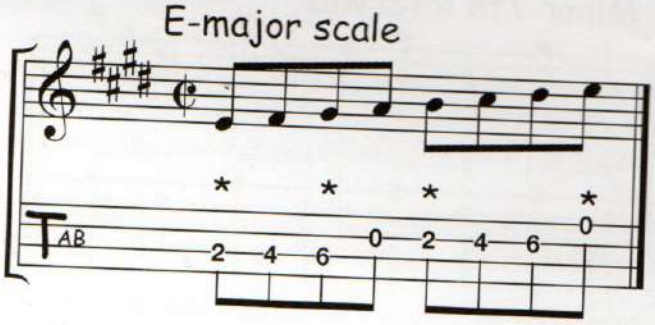


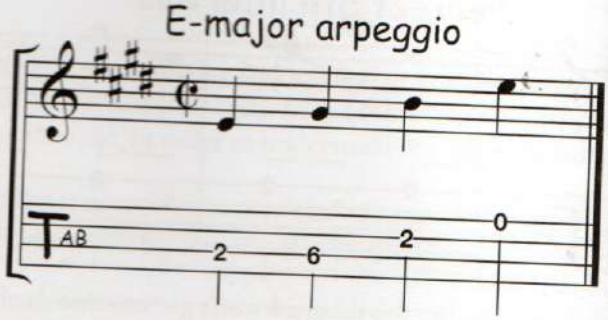
In the appendix you'll find an overview of all major and pentatonic scales.

CHAPTER 2: Chord Tones

The structure of a major chord is very easy to explain, now that we know the structure of the major scale. To build a major chord, we need to take the root, the major 3rd and the perfect 5th from the major scale, as done in these examples:

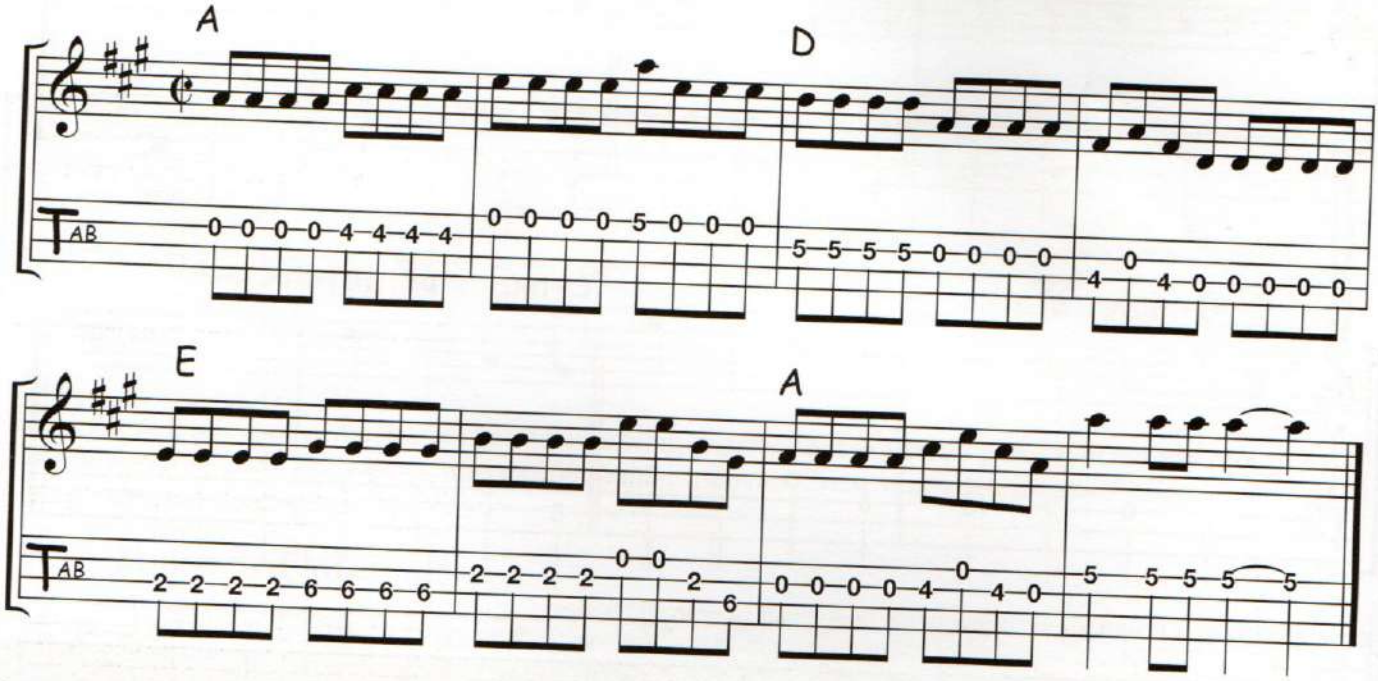




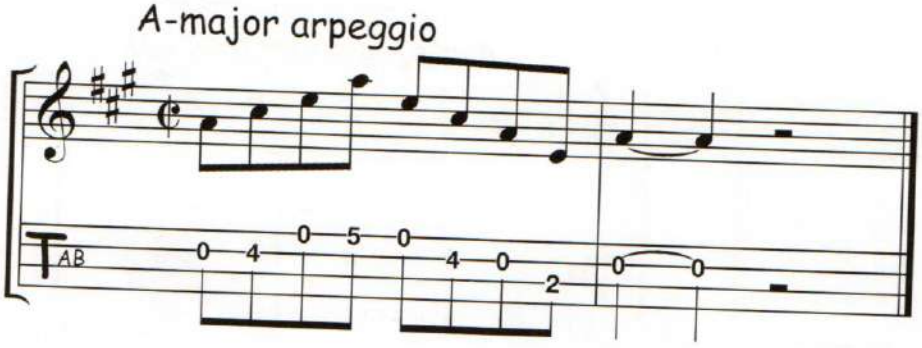


If we play these three tones at the same time, we have a major chord. When we play an A-major chord on the mandolin, for example, the chord will contain the tones: a, c♯ and e. Because of the "four" strings on the mandolin, one of the tones appears twice (often the root). As an exercise, try to figure out what notes a D-major chord contains (in the appendix you can find the D-major scale, if you don't know it already).

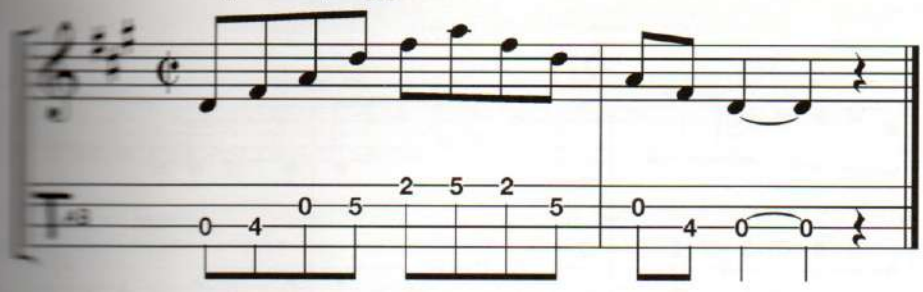
Three chord tones played in a row make up what is called an arpeggio. Arpeggios can also be used as an improvising tool. In the following example, I'll show you how it could be done. On the A-major chord I play a small A-major arpeggio motive/lick. On the D- and the E-major chords, I do the same thing with a D- and a E-major arpeggio.



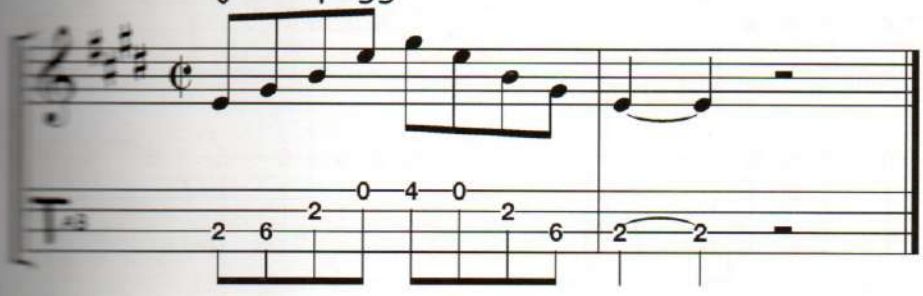
When we use arpeggios as an improvising tool, it's important to know the arpeggios by heart. In order to make an improvisation sound more melodic, we need to be able to play our arpeggios on at least the three highest strings. Our extended arpeggios would sound like this:



D-major arpeggio



E-major arpeggio



A small exercise would be to do some variations on the next example. As you can see, it's not necessary to start on the root all the time. If you let the last tone ring for half a bar, it would give you a little time to get to the nearest tone of the following arpeggio. After playing the example a couple of times, it's time for you to come up with some variations starting on other chord tones. Be sure you know the arpeggios by heart before doing the variations.

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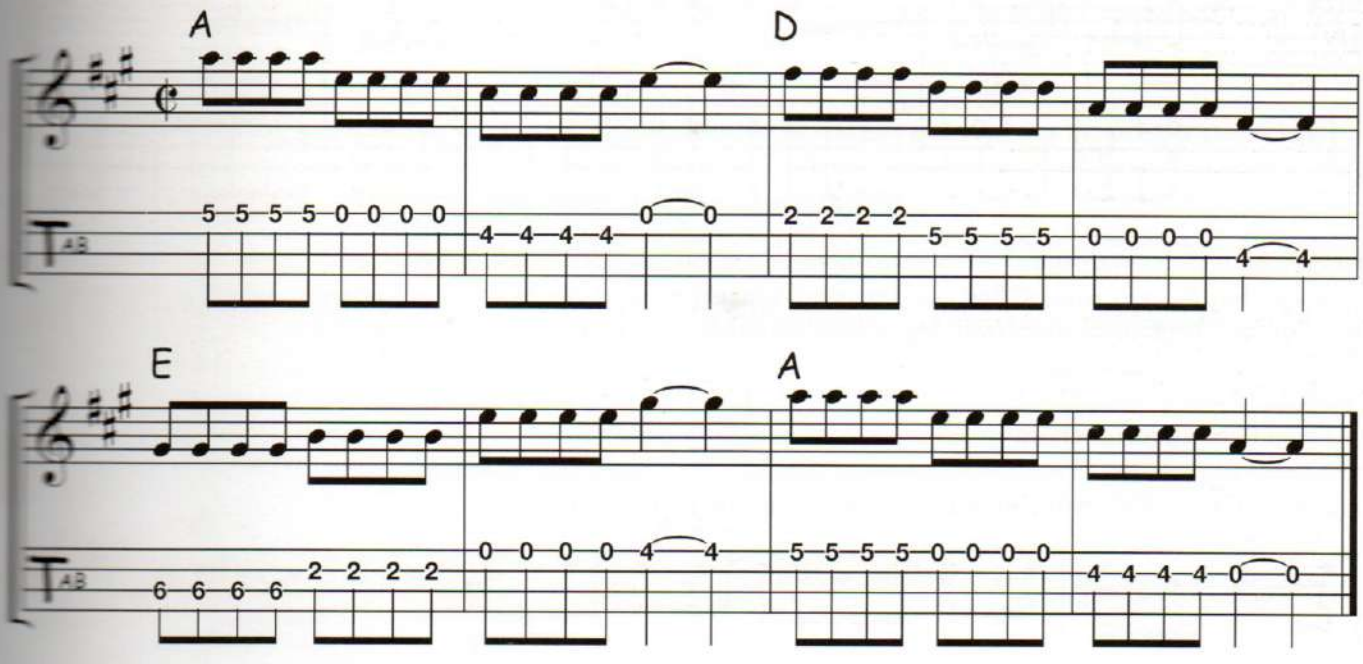
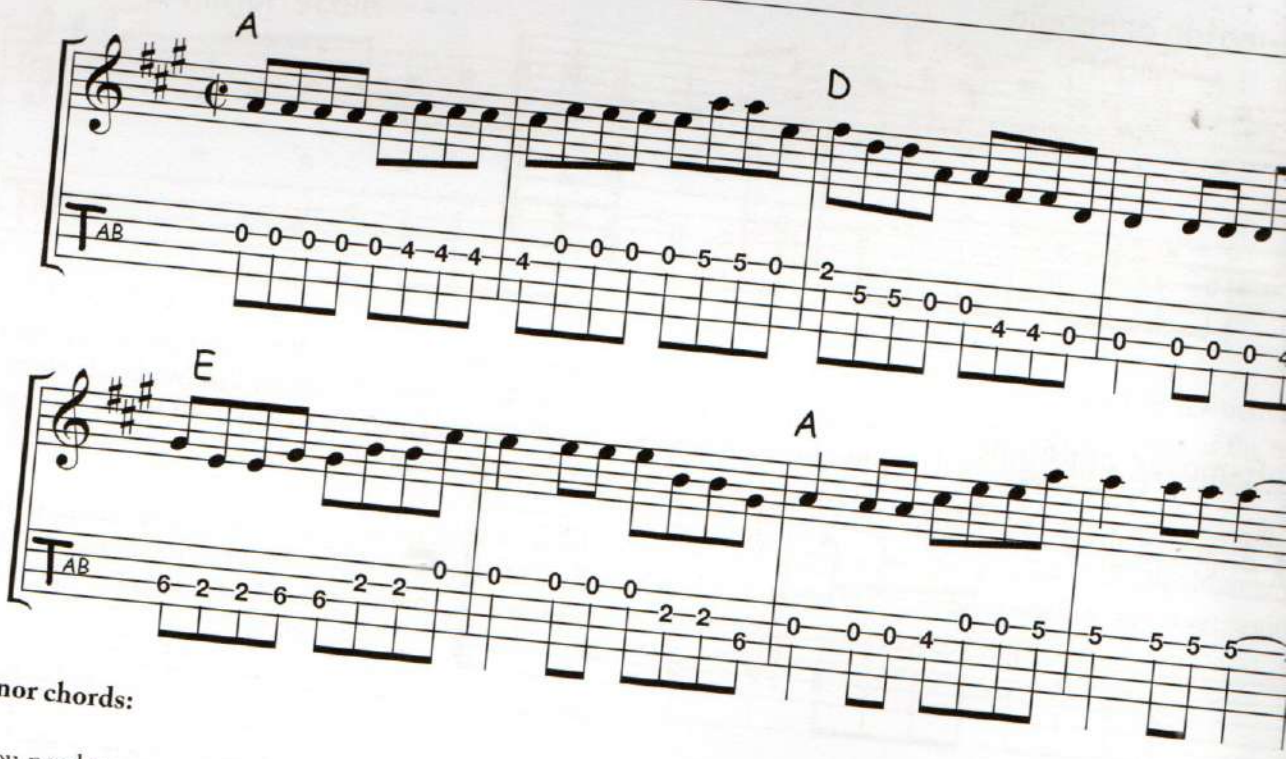


Check out the next example in which a common "bluegrass arpeggio style" is demonstrated.

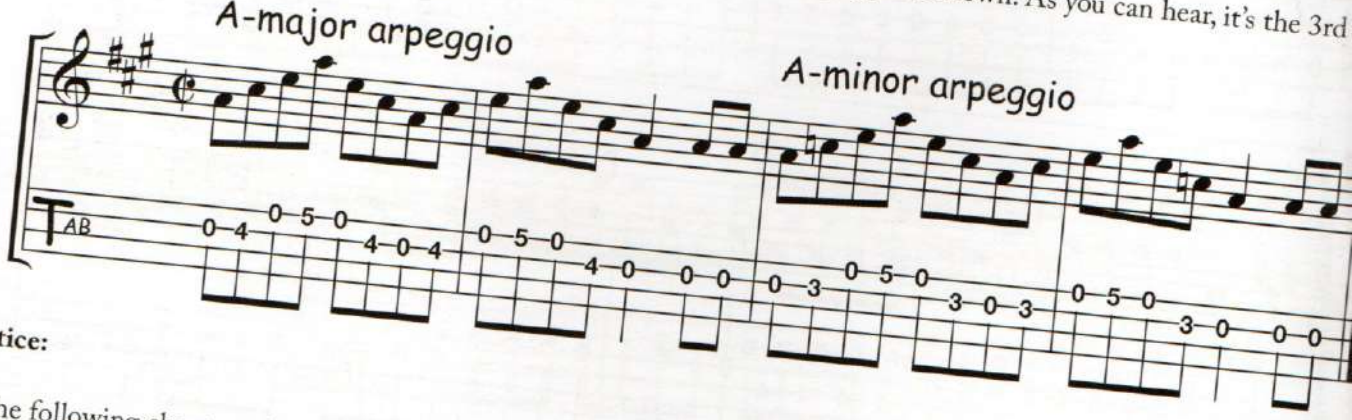


Minor chords:

If you need an arpeggio for a minor chord, you must use the following structure:

Root → minor 3rd → perfect 5th

In this last example the difference between the major and the minor arpeggio is shown. As you can hear, it's the 3rd gives the arpeggio its special character.

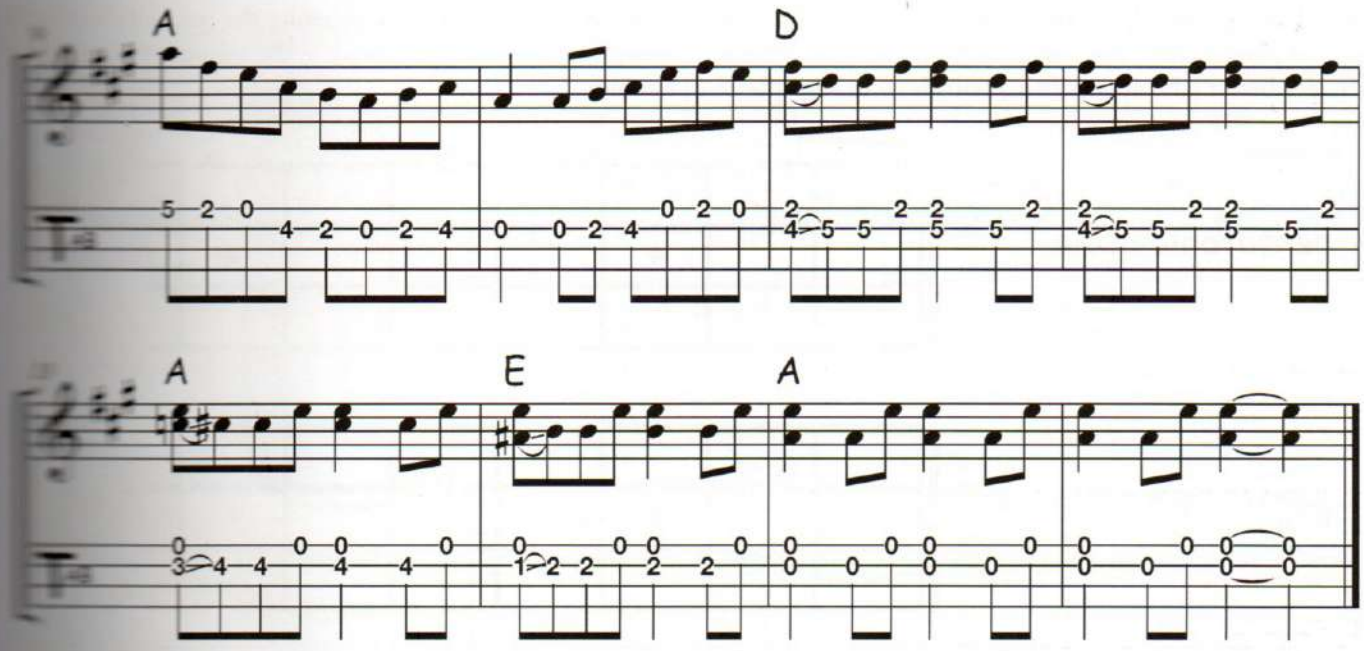


Notice:

In the following chapters all chords will be written like this:

For example. (A-major chord) = A chord
Or (A-minor chord) = Am chord

The major pentatonic scale will also just be referred to as the *pentatonic scale.*



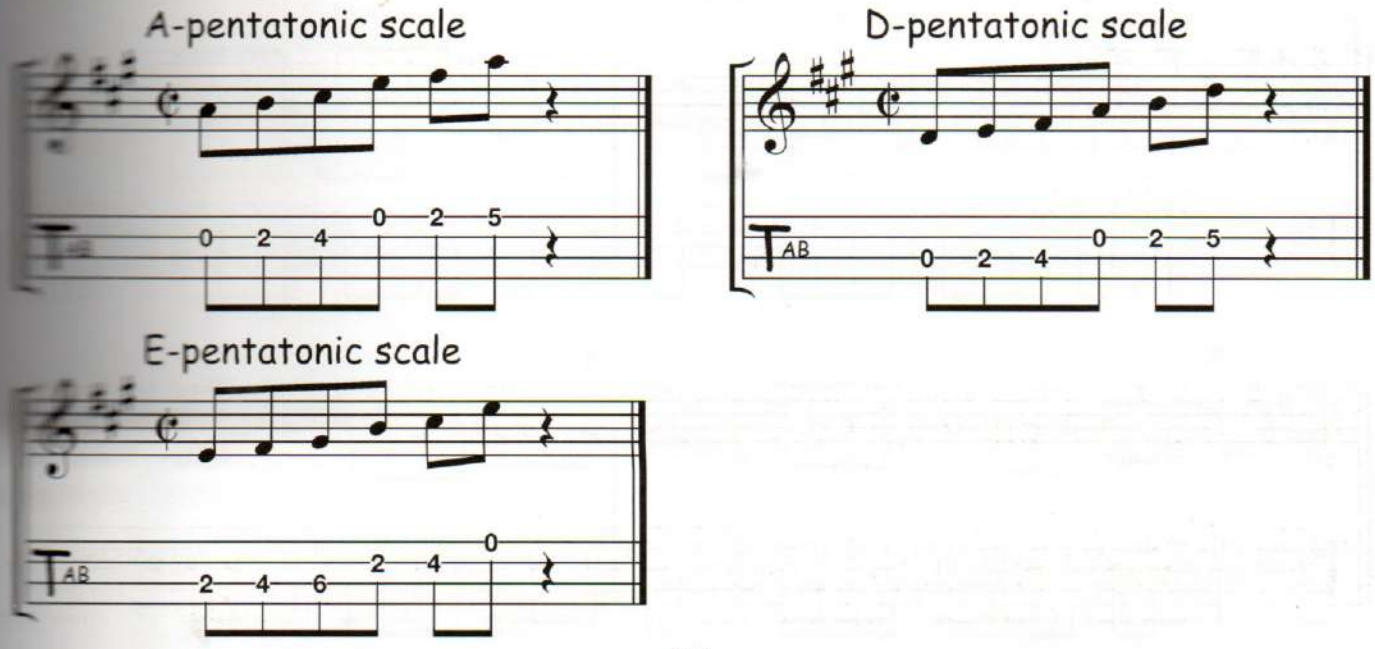
As you can see, we only used the scale-related licks on the A chord. This way of mixing up licks with "double-stop shuffles" can be really helpful if you would like to simplify some of the upcoming examples and exercises. Also when composing (see Chapter 6: Slow Improvising) or when you have to improvise in real time, the "double-stop shuffles" technique could be effectively used.

Another technique which might help you in the following chapters, is the "let's skip some notes" technique. This technique will be covered in Chapter 28 (How to Simplify a Lick).

CHAPTER 4: The Pentatonic Sound

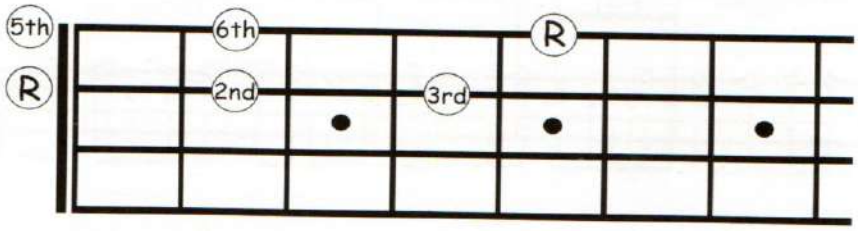
This might be the most important chapter in the entire book. This is because not only will we make the first steps into the "world of improvising," but also because we'll learn the foundation of bluegrass improvisation - the pentatonic scales.

If you have read the first chapter about theory, you already know that a pentatonic scale contains five different notes. Now let's take a look at the first three pentatonic scales. The very first one is the A-pentatonic scale, which fits the A-major chord. The next is the D-pentatonic scale, belonging to the D-major chord and at last the E-pentatonic scale which could be played over the E-major chord. At first, they might not sound particularly "bluegrassy," but they will later on! Trust me!

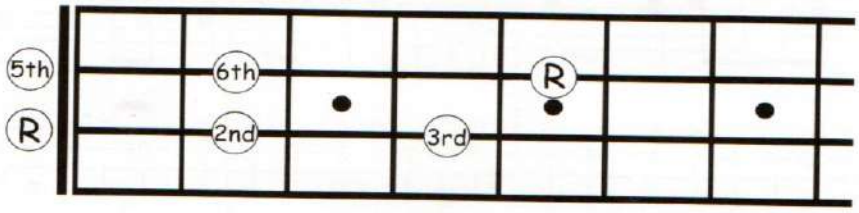


In the following example we have the same pentatonic scales written out in a box system, showing the neck of the mandolin and the played frets. This way of writing out the scales in a box system helps you to visualize the shapes of the pentatonic scales better (the appendix explains how to read the box system).

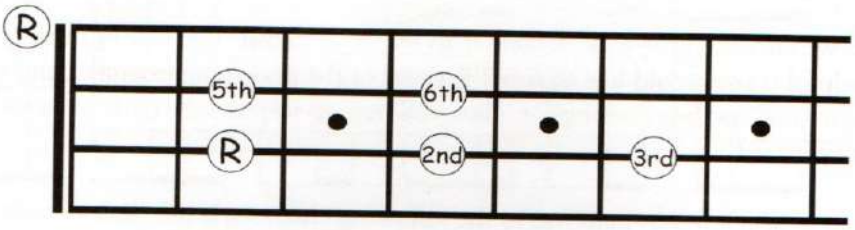
A-pentatonic scale



D-pentatonic scale



E-pentatonic scale



Like crossing a river by walking on big stones, we can also pick the notes in these shapes without getting "wet feet." Said another way: Playing pentatonic licks on the right chord, nearly can't go wrong. So let's get started!

I've written out some licks using the pentatonic scales. The fact that I'm only using one octave scale and always transposing the licks from one chord to another, might give the exercise a slightly mechanical sound. But the main goal right now is to learn these scales, picture them in your mind and become familiar with them. It's important to learn improvisation one step at a time. So play the next examples over and over again and get used to the sound of the pentatonic scales. Playing over the E chord might not seem so easy, but don't worry, in a later chapter you'll learn some new tools that will help. On the last A chord in the line, I might play a non-transposed lick, in order to make the ending sound more smooth.

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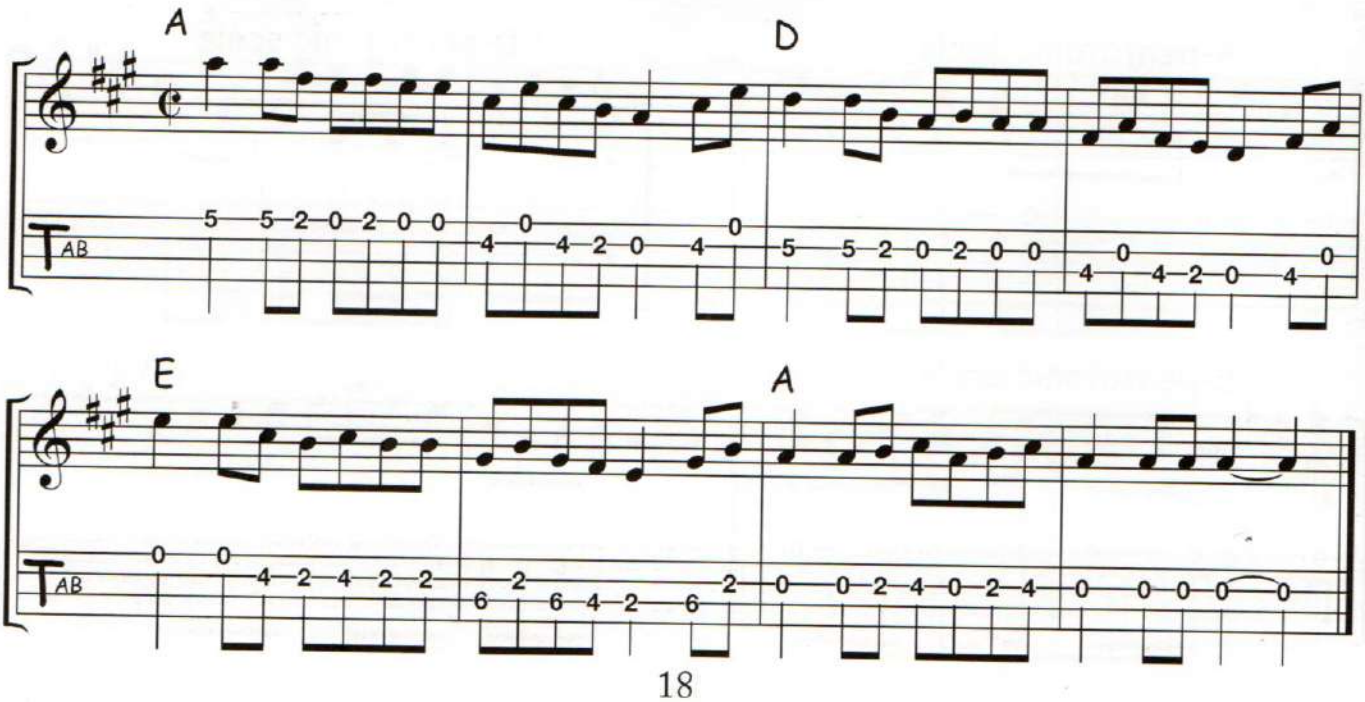

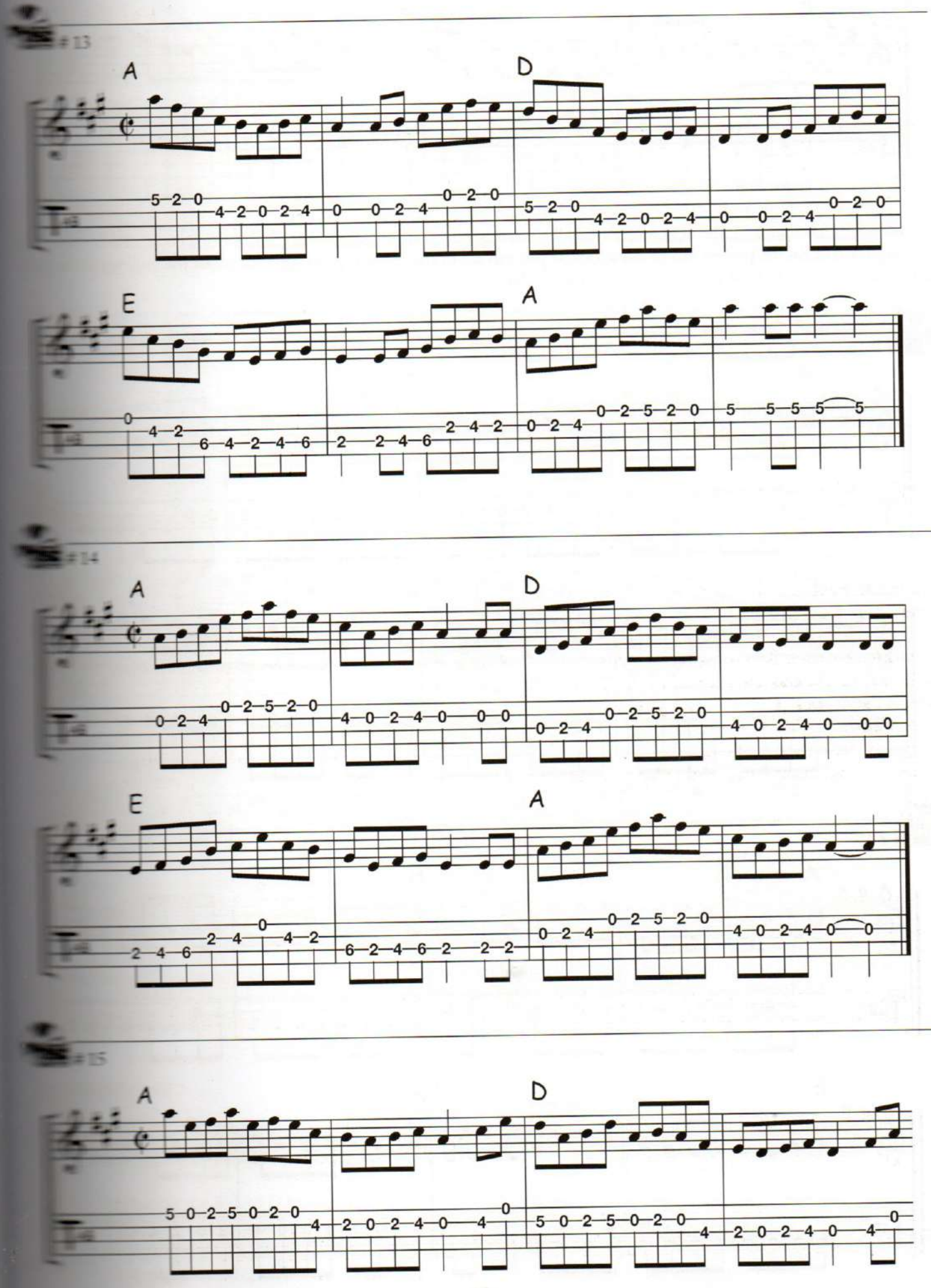
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