

The Relative Minor: Chords, Keys, and Scales

Relative Minors – Why You Need to Know Them

Let's get back to learning more about the Dobro® fretboard. For the past two months, we've looked at playing resonator guitar in the Key of D, learning D major scale positions along the way.

You've probably heard the term *relative minor* somewhere in your musical studies, and maybe you're familiar with the relative minors of the most common keys in bluegrass and folk music. But from my teaching experience, I've found that many resonator guitar players don't really know what to *do* with their knowledge of relative minors. So this month, we'll explore the basics of relative minor chords and scales, and you'll learn some practical ways to use this knowledge to make great music. You'll find that learning the relative minor keys will greatly enhance your ability to improvise in the minor mode; that is, by simply reapplying your knowledge of major scales, you actually know more about the fretboard than you may have suspected.

The Relative Minor (“6-minor”) Chord

The 6-minor chord is the most common minor chord used in a folk, bluegrass, or even a pop song. In the Nashville numbering system, many classic pop ballads have a 1 – 6m – 4 – 5 (I - vi – IV- V) chord progression; “Earth Angel” and “Blue Moon” come to mind. The Flatt & Scruggs classics “Down the Road” and “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” both go from the 1-chord to the 6-minor chord, and fiddle tunes such as “Cherokee Shuffle” and “Billy in the Low Ground” have 6-minor chords as well. So it's worth remembering that if a tune goes to a minor chord and you're not sure which one, it's likely to be the minor chord that goes with the 6th note of the major scale you're working with.

What is the 6-minor chord?

The relative minor chord, or 6-minor chord, uses the 6th note of the major scale of the Key you're in as its root. Let's look at the Key of D:

D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#	D
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1

Count through the scale notes beginning on D, and stop on the 6th note, which is **B**. In the key of D, the chord that goes with the 6th note of the D major scale (a B note) is **Bm**. B minor is the relative minor or 6-minor of D. The other notes of the Bm chord are the 1st and 3rd notes of the D major scale, or D and F# respectively.

What do you mean by “relative”?

We now know that the minor chord associated with the 6th note of a major scale is called a “relative minor” or “minor-6 chord.” But what does *relative* mean? The D major scale and B minor scale are *related* in that they are comprised of the exact same notes and so have the same key signature, in this case- two sharps. We can therefore say that the B minor scale is the relative minor of D major, and the D major scale is the

relative major scale of B minor—the two keys and scales are like two sides of the same coin. It's just a matter of which note serves as the first or *tonic* note.

I'll write out both scales below so you can see the similarities. First, here's the D major scale:

D E F# G A B C# D

Now, here are two octaves of the D major scale with the B minor scale highlighted in red:

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

As you can see, the B minor scale uses exactly the same notes in the same sequence – it just starts on a B note and ends on a B note, whereas the D major scale starts and ends on a D note. If you have *Band in a Box* software or a buddy who plays rhythm guitar, try improvising with the D major scale notes over a D chord, and try to focus your melodies on the 1 (D), 3 (F#), and 5 (A) notes of the D major scale. It should sound like you're playing compatible melodic notes for the Key of D.

Next, listen to a Bm chord for a while until you feel as if you're in the Key of B minor. Try playing the exact same notes as before (one note at a time), but focus your playing on the 1 (B), 3 (D), and 5 (F#) notes of the Bm chord. You should be jamming nicely in the Key of B minor!

If you look at a key's scale as a pallet of notes from which you can choose harmonically pleasing notes, this "relative major/minor" concept implies that much of what you play in the Key of D major will sound great in the Key of B minor, and vice versa. The same principle applies to other relative major and minor keys.

Here's another idea: Take our previous arrangement of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" and play your solo over an Em chord. Most of it should sound pretty good, because that arrangement is entirely comprised of notes in the G major scale, notes which also appear in the E minor scale.

Why Knowing Relative Minors Helps Your Playing

If you know where the D major scale notes are, you also know where the B minor scale notes are. The same is true for the keys of G major and E minor, C major and A minor, E major and C# minor, etc. If you're familiar with the G major scale, you should jump at the chance to jam in the Key of E minor! The example of E and C# minor might really drive home the point of this lesson; you're probably fairly comfortable playing in the key of E, but playing in the key of C# minor might sound formidable. Not to worry! If you know the E major scale notes, you know the C# minor scale notes as well. If you usually capo on the second fret for the Key of E major and play as if you're in the Key of D, try the same fret positions with Capo 2 for the Key of C# minor. It will sound great!

Where Dobro® Players Go Wrong with Relative Minors

Many Dobro® players mistakenly believe the following statement: “Anything I play in a given key will sound good in that key’s relative minor key.” That is *not* the case. It’s a complicated topic, but I’ll try to distill it to just the practical basics.

For a major key, many of the notes that sound good are not in that key’s major scale; you may be playing bluesy notes (flat-7, flat-5, or flat-3 notes), or you may be playing dissonant chromatic notes or double-stops as passing tones (as in those from my April and May ’07 *Guitar Sessions* lessons on traditional chord-based licks for Dobro®). So, for example, while it is safe to use any single note of the G major scale in the Key of E minor, and it’s generally safe to use most G major scale double-stops (of non-adjacent scale notes) in the Key of E minor, it is not true that everything you play in G will sound good in E minor. The lesson is that individual scale notes will sound good, but caution should be exercised with passing tones, double-stops and chords. When experimenting with this concept, use your ear and try to remember what sounds good.

A Tune in the Key of B minor: “The Creptid Mule”

That’s a good blast of conceptual material for now. I’ve tabbed out the first solo from one of my original tunes, “The Creptid Mule,” from the album *Clawhammer and Dobro*. This tune is in the Key of B minor. If you learned “New River Train” and the hammer-on/pull-off licks for the Key of D last month, you’ll see that many of the notes and fret positions are the same in “The Creptid Mule.” Each individual note in this tab arrangement is in the B minor scale, which has the same notes as the D major scale, and all of the licks will work for either key as long as the same chord is being played.

This arrangement contains some advanced techniques. Even if you can’t play it up to speed, you should still be able to learn some valuable pockets of notes that will work in both the Key of B minor *and* the Key of D. I hope you enjoy trying this one out.

Until next month,
Ivan Rosenberg

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Dobro® News!

I wanted to let you know about a Dobro®-specific newsletter called *Resonance* that recently released its fourth issue. The newsletter recently profiled Tim Graves, Randy Kohrs, and Andy Hall; articles on Billy Cardine, Phil Leadbetter, Mike Witcher, and Chad Graves are scheduled for future issues. Available in both print and online formats, *Resonance* presents tablature of traditional tunes and original music by well-known Dobro® players, interviews, CD and product reviews, and more. The first issue is now online for free at www.deepwellmusic.com/resonance.html. This is great news for resonator guitar enthusiasts!

The Creptid Mule - 1st Solo - (c) Ivan Rosenberg, from the album "Clawhammer and Dobro"

Bm A G A

1. *sl. sl.* P *sl.* P *sl.* P *sl.*

Bm A G A Bm

5. *sl. sl.* P *sl.* *sl.*

Bm G A Bm

9. *sl.* *sl.* P *sl.* H *sl.* *sl.* *sl.* 4 4 4 4

A G D A

13. *sl.* *sl.* *sl.* *sl.* *sl.*

Bm **A** **G** **A**

18

T 4 2 0 0 2 0 4 2 0 2 4

A 4 2 0 2 4

B 4 0 2 4

sl. sl. P *sl.* P *sl.* P *sl.*

Bm **A** **G** **A**

22

T 4 2 0 2 2 0 0 0 0 0 2

A 4 2 2 4 4 4 4 2

B 4 0 4 4 4 4 2

sl. sl. P

Bm

25

T 0 2 0 2 4 2 0

A

B

sl. sl. P