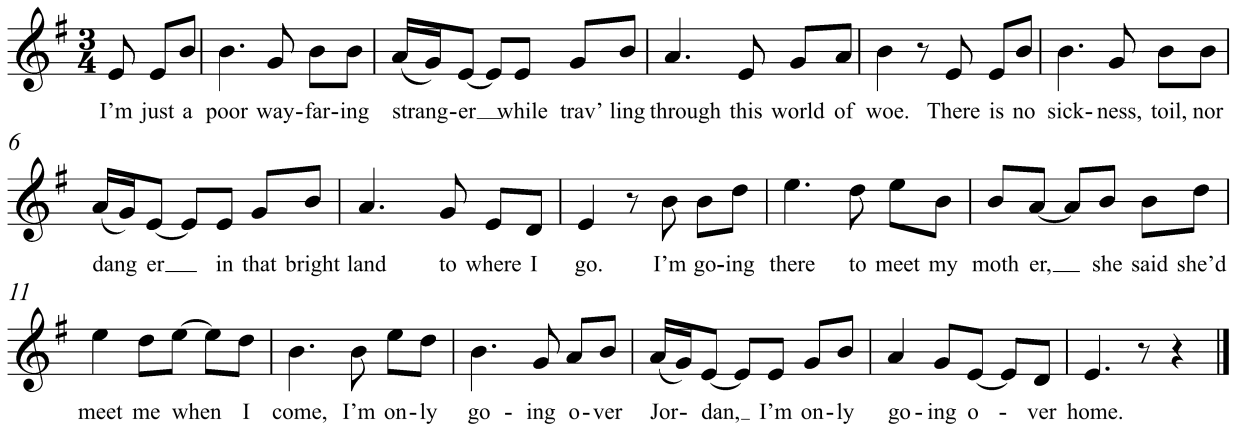
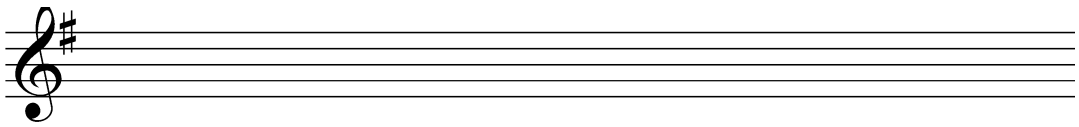
MU 1310 (Feurzeig) The Minor Pentatonic

Wayfaring Stranger (early 19th-C. American gospel; origin uncertain)



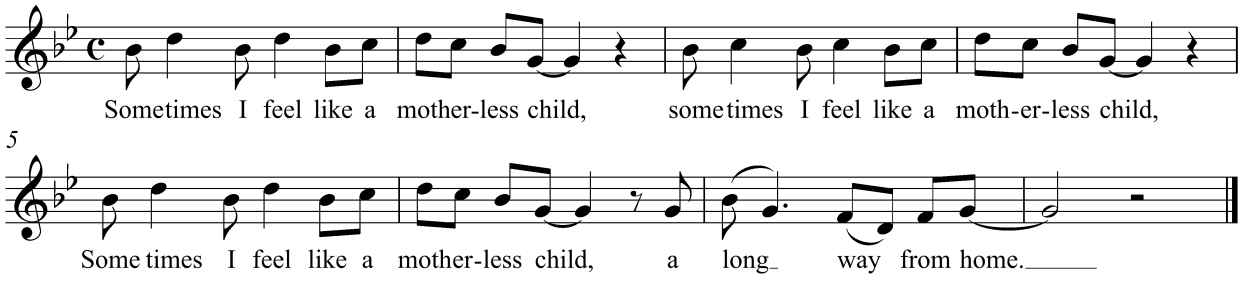
Listen to and sing "Wayfaring Stranger". Determine the tonic pitch (by ear/intuition), then write out all the pitches used in the tune in scale order, in a single octave from tonic up to tonic.

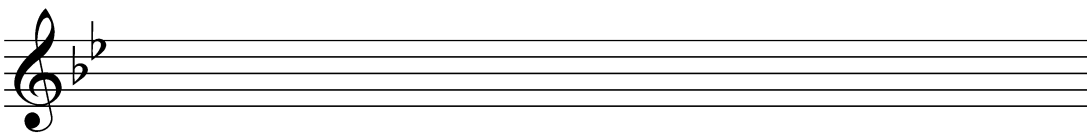


(The key signature is symbolic. There is neither F♯ nor F♮ in the tune, but since the system of key signatures is deeply ingrained for most musicians, the signature of one sharp is generally used to signify G major or, as here, E minor.)

Do the same for "Motherless Child":

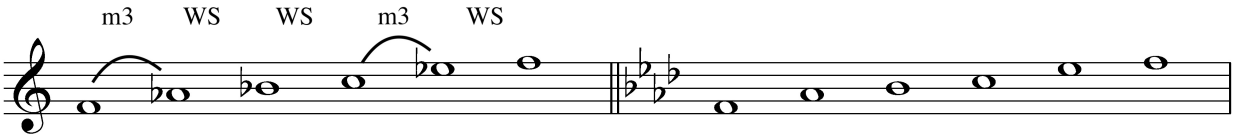
Motherless Child (African-American spiritual)



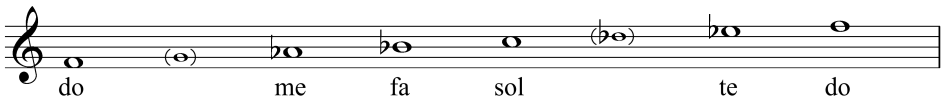


(Again, the key signature is partly symbolic: there is no E or E♭ in the melody.)

Both tunes are constructed from the same kind of scale, consisting of 5 distinct pitches spaced in a combination of minor thirds and whole steps: m3 – WS – WS – m3 – WS. Here is the scale starting on F, written first without, then with the standard F minor key signature:

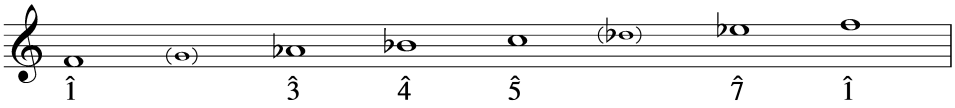


This is called the **minor pentatonic scale** ("pentatonic" = five pitches.) You can construct it from its interval pattern, but it may be easier to think of it as do-me-fa-sol-te, that is, simply the parallel natural minor scale with scale degrees $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{6}$ left out:



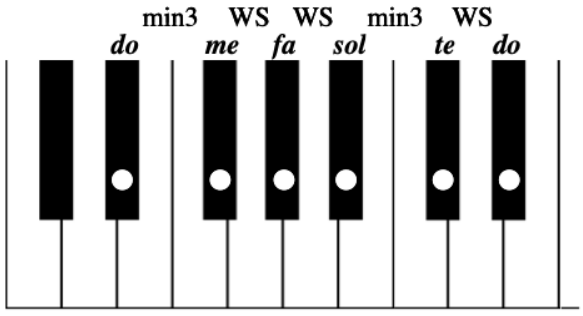
Because it skips $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{6}$, the pentatonic is sometimes referred to as a "gapped" scale. But in the context of a minor pentatonic melody, the minor thirds do not sound like "gaps". (Likewise, in a 7-note scale, the whole steps are "missing" the half-step pitch in between, but we do not feel this as a leap or a gap.) In a tune using the F minor pentatonic scale, you are unlikely to miss the G or the D♭, or be tempted to sing them; the minor pentatonic scale sounds complete in itself.

We do however leave gaps in **numbering** the notes of the pentatonic scale:



In other words, each scale degree is named according to its interval distance above the tonic. This avoids confusion: the third degree of F minor is always A♭, regardless of whether it's part of a pentatonic (5-note) or a heptatonic (7-note) scale. The scale degree names and solfège syllables likewise match the names of the corresponding degrees in a 7-note scale:

Another way to remember the structure of the minor pentatonic is to think of the black notes of the keyboard, which form a minor pentatonic scale starting on E♭/D♯:



Although you can think of the minor pentatonic as a minor scale with $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{6}$ omitted, it is by no means derivative of the 7-note scale. The opposite is true: the minor pentatonic scale is more universal—found in the traditional music of virtually all cultures all over the world—and almost certainly predates the minor heptatonic scale. Many blues, gospel, folk, and rock songs are entirely or prevailingly minor pentatonic, at least their melodies, including The Star of the County Down (trad. Irish), The Birds' Courting Song (trad. Appalachian), House of the Rising Sun (trad. English), Summertime (George Gershwin), Moanin' (Bobby Timmons), The Thrill Is Gone (B.B. King), Hit the Road Jack (Ray Charles), Money (Pink Floyd), Nights in White Satin (Moody Blues), One of These Nights (The Eagles).