

Minor Scale Explanation

What notes to play or what scale is appropriate if the chord is Am?

A very good and valid question, unfortunately there is not a simple straight-forward answer to it because there are so many options available.

There's not just 1 Minor scale. There are actually many Minor scales and variations of Minor scales. They have different names and there are even different modes and variations of these scales. You may not know the names of all of them, but even if you know how to play all these scales, the next logical question is "How do I know when I should be playing one Minor scale as compared to another or how and when to combine them?"

The answer is -- you may not know which scale to play!

Some times it will seem obvious, and other times it won't.

You will need to experiment with an open mind and particularly open ears, and decide for yourself which scale or scale segment sounds best within the context of the musical piece you're playing.

With enough hands-on playing and experimentation, you'll eventually recognize some clues within the music, and then the process of figuring out which scale to use will become quicker and easier.

The 3 notes in an Am chord are A, C & E.

Obviously these 3 notes are "safe" and can be played when the chord is Am.

Are there any other "safe" notes?

Yes, I believe the notes B & D appear in so many different Minor scale mode variations, particularly when applied to modern pop, country, rock music, etc, that these notes are also "safe" most of the time.

OK, now we have 5 "safe" notes in an Am scale, A, B, C, D, & E, and for the sake of some simplicity, I'm considering these to be the only "safe" notes at this time to play over an Am.

It's the next step that gets complicated, figuring out which notes between E & the higher octave A to use, if any, in your Am scale. The reason this gets confusing is because depending on the "flavor" of the song, all of those notes can be found, F, F#, G, & G#, and even within the same song some times! Also, some of these notes might only be found in the underlying chords or harmony structure, and not the melody of the lead vocal itself. Many times one or more of these notes may be only used sparingly as a turn-around or passing chord, so again, you can't really categorize them as "safe" notes.

Here are some choices for note variations used between the E & A, to add to the ABCDE.

“G” / the notes in this scale are: A, B, C, D, E, G, & A.

“F” & “G” / the notes are: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, & A.

“F#” / the notes are: A, B, C, D, E, F#, & A.

“F#” & “G” the notes are: A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, & A.

“F” & “G#” / the notes are: A, B, C, D, E, F, G#, & A.

“Walk Don’t Run” uses “G & “G#” so the notes in this scale are: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, G#, & A.

“Eleanor Rigby” uses “F” “F#” & “G” / the notes are: A, B, C, D, E, F, F#, G, & A.

“Tales from the crypt” TV theme song uses the notes: A, B, C, D, Eb, E, F, G#, & A.

Stairway to Heaven uses F, F#, G, & G#, / the notes are: A, B, C, D, E, F, F#, G, G#, & A

So does House of the Rising Sun, 25 or 6 to 4, Moondance, and plenty of others.

George Harrison’s “Something” by the Beatles actually uses EVERY note there is, but it changes keys between C Major and A Major within the song and also uses a variation of an Am mode, and adding some passing-chords as well, so while it’s pleasing to the ear, it’s certainly not a typical song in regards to keys and scales.

“Safe” disclaimer

Even though we have defined certain notes as “safe, you still have to use discretion as to when you play those notes. Not every “safe” note will sound pleasing when played at the same time another “safe” note is being sung or played.