

Playing Minor Chords on the Resophonic

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Outsiders to the resophonic—and many newbies—think that because it is open-tuned to G major that you can't play minor chords. They see it as a I, IV, V progression instrument. Actually, there is a rich landscape of minor chords (as well as all the other ones), and the good news is that they follow a pretty easy pattern.

Some basics about chords

But first, let's review some basic principles about how chords are built. It is often useful to talk about intervals when discussing chords. An interval is the musical distance between two notes, usually expressed in half-steps (frets). A major interval has four half steps, and a minor interval has three half steps.

A major chord is composed of a major interval followed by a minor interval. We often express it as 1, 3, 5, meaning it is the first note of the scale, the third, and the fifth. The resophonic is tuned to the G major chord of G, B, D. If you still tune the old fashioned way (I still can't warm up to those electronic tuners) you tune your G to someone, then lay your slide on the fourth fret of the third string to get your B. Then you lay the slide on the third fret of the second string to get your D. See? A four half-step interval followed by a three half-step interval.

A minor chord is composed of a minor interval followed by a major interval. Essentially, that entails taking the major chord and flattening the middle note. We often express that as 1, b3, 5.

So in the case of a resophonic, the pattern for a major chord is a straight barring across the fret where the third string is the root note. So for a D major, we can bar straight across the seventh fret—getting a D, F#, A. The pattern for a D minor looks like a chevron, the third and first strings "fretted" on the seventh fret and the second string "fretted" on the sixth fret. That would render a D, F, A.

Playing minors

I know, unless you are using a horseshoe for a slide, it's going to be a bit hard to get that chevron pattern. So what do you do if you need to sit on that chord for awhile? Well, there are two solutions.

Solution 1: The easy minors

Some minors have alternate patterns that use open and "fretted" strings that allow you to maintain a fixed slide position and pick the minor chord. The two I use are E minor and B minor. A nice E minor is:

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G B D G B D
x x 2 0 0 x
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As you can see, that pattern would give you E, G, B. Ta-da! E minor.

Here is a workable B minor:

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G B D G B D
x x 4 4 0 0
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That gives you F#, B, B, D which is an inversion of B, D, F#, which is B minor.

Solution 2: The minor seventh

For this one we need our friend the interval back again. To make a minor seventh, we just add another minor interval to the minor we've already made. So the pattern is 1, b3, 5, b7.

OK, for starters, the flatted seventh doesn't have to be at the top, a rich-sounding seventh adds it at the bottom as in b7, 1, b3, 5.

Next, you can drop the root note if you need to (and trust me, you're going to need to) and still get a good, workable minor seventh. For one thing, the context of the song and the other instruments will establish the root note in the ear of the listener.

So here is the "cheater's rule:" *If you need to hold a minor, go three frets up from the fret where would play its major—and play the fourth, third, and second strings.*

And here is why this is all cool. If you "fret" the fourth, third, and second string along any fret, you are playing the b7, b3, 5 for the chord that would normally be played three frets down. Wait! It's not that bad. Play the fourth, third, and second string on the fifth fret and you are playing an A minor seventh! Technically, it's a C, but look at the notes: G, C, E. Well, an A minor seventh would be G, A, C, E. So all you've done is drop the root. Again, the other instruments and the context of the chord will establish that it is an A minor seventh.

So here is the "cheater's rule:" *If you need to hold a minor, go three frets up from the fret where you would play its major—and play the fourth, third, and second strings.* Example, say you're playing a song in D and it has an F# minor. OK, you would play an F# by barring the eleventh fret. Go up to the fourteenth (or the second which is one octave lower) and play the fourth, third, and second strings. (Advanced tip: One way to "sell" it to the listener is to start your chord on the true root and then drop down two frets to the flatted seventh while you hold the chord with a roll.)

So don't be reluctant to play progressions that use I, ii, iii, IV, V, vi chords. Enjoy!