



by Troy Stetina

THE SEVEN MAJOR MODES

Seldom do we encounter a subject that generates more confusion than modes. What are they? How are they really used? And what's with those funky names, anyway? Just getting the pronunciation correct is difficult!

Nevertheless, many advancing guitarists intuitively sense that mastering the modes is one of the keys to [unlocking the fretboard](#) and understanding issues like tonality and scale construction—and they are correct. To this end, many guitarists make an effort at learning them. Yet all too often, the final critical step of learning how to actually use the modes remains a mystery.

In this issue's Lesson Lab, we'll attempt to shed light on the subject. To make things simple, we'll keep the technical jargon to a minimum; however, a few technical terms are unavoidable, so put your hands together, utter a sacred guitar-ritual incantation, and whip out your axe. And remember, even if you don't understand every last detail the first time around, you'll get the essence of it, and you can fill in the blanks later as your playing progresses. Let's do it!

**A PRACTICAL
GUIDE
TO ONE OF
MUSIC'S
MOST ELUSIVE
CONCEPTS**

What Are [Modes](#)?

Modes are essentially just another name for scales. But they have one intriguing twist: They are scales formed by taking a "parent" scale and displacing its starting point. Let's say we begin with a C major scale (C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C). As long as C is viewed as the starting point, or "root" note, those notes spell out C major. But play those same notes from D to D, thereby making D the root, and those notes suddenly become D Dorian [Fig. 1]. Because D is the second note of the C major scale, we say that D Dorian is the second mode of C major. (Remember, it uses the same notes as C major—only the starting point is different.) Now, using the exact same notes, let's start on the third note, E.

Suddenly, we have the *third mode* of C major: E Phrygian. If we continue in this way—each of the seven different notes of C major being regarded as a root in its own right—we end up creating seven different modes from that one major scale [Fig. 2].

Enter the seven different modal names: Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, and Locrian. Don't let these unusual terms freak you out; with a little practice, you'll get to know 'em like the back of your hand. In case you're wondering, the names come from various areas in ancient Greece (Ionia, Lydia, etc.), each of which favored a particular mode and tended to use that mode predominantly in its own homegrown musical style. Although we use

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the modes quite differently today, their original naming scheme has stuck with us,

Let's go through them now, getting both the right pronunciation as well as their proper sequence in mind. Ionian (pronounced "I-oh-nee-un") is simply the modal name for the major scale itself—of course, the modal name is only used when we're talking about modes, such as now, Dorian ("door-ee-un"), as you already know, is the second mode of the major scale, Phrygian (that's "frij-ee-un") is the third mode, Next come the Lydian ("lid-ee-un") and Mixolydian ("mix-oh-lid-ee-un") modes, These are nice to think of together, as their names are obviously linked. The sixth mode, Aeolian ("ay-oh-lee-un"), is the modal name for the natural minor scale. Again, it is referred to by its modal name only in a modal setting. And last but not least, we come to Locrian ("low-kree-un"), the most demented of the lot.

Practice memorizing the sequence of these modes. Say it fast ten times: "Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, Locrian." This is important because the sequence always remains intact. Dorian is always the second mode of the major scale—any major scale. Phrygian always comes after Dorian, Lydian is always right behind that, and so on. In fact, we can draw some sweeping generalizations about the modes—without regard to any specific parent key—if we simply number the major scale steps 1-2-3-4-5-6-7. Armed with this, we can figure out, for example, "What mode is based on the 5th tone of a major scale?" Answer: Mixolydian. How about "What mode begins on the 2nd step of the major scale?" Answer: Dorian. The next step after Dorian is Phrygian. "What mode starts on the 3rd step of the minor scale (or Aeolian mode)?" Answer: Start with Aeolian and walk up to the 3rd step—Aeolian, Locrian, Ionian (or the major scale).

The Relative Perspective

Scales that use the same notes—like C major and A natural minor—are said to be relative scales. A minor, for instance, is the relative minor of C major; C major is the relative major of A minor. Since all the modes shown in Fig. 2 use the same seven notes exclusively, they, too, are all related to one another. Looking at them this way—seeing all the modes as derived from one parent scale—is seeing them from a relative perspective.

So far, so good. But how does this apply to playing guitar? Well, let's say you want to solo in D Dorian, but you don't yet know D Dorian as a scale pattern in its own right. But suppose you do know the major scale pattern, and you can play it in C. Well, since you now know that C major uses the same notes as D Dorian, you could play a C major pattern [Fig. 3] to solo in D Dorian. In fact, you

Fig. 1



Fig. 2

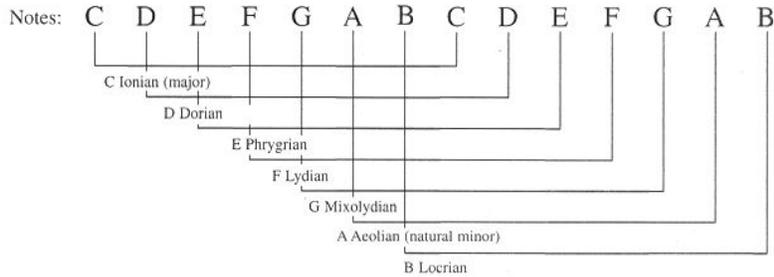


Fig. 3 C Major Scale

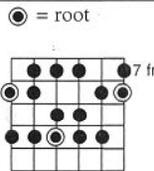
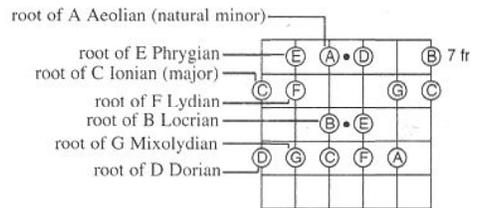


Fig. 4 The Relative Concept



could do this same calculation to use the major scale patterns to play any other mode as well—in other words, you can solo in any mode if you just find the right major scale!

There is a price to be paid for this "quick and dirty" method of modal manipulation, but it does have some utility, and it can get you through in a crisis. The problem is that it is self-deception, pure and simple. You may be playing "in D," but really, your thinking "in C." As a rule, it is far better to face reality and see things as they really are. In this case, playing in D Dorian would mean seeing the notes as being "anchored" over a D Root. Similarly, playing in E Phrygian would mean seeing the notes as being anchored over an E root; playing in F Lydian would mean seeing the notes anchored over an F root; and so on [Fig.4]

This bit of modal trickery has another drawback; it leads a person to think, "if C major and D Dorian use the same notes, they are the same." They are not! If they were, the keys of C major and D Dorian would sound alike. Yet experience tells us that major key sounds happy, and a minor key (Dorian

is a type of minor) sounds sad. To resolve this little dilemma, we have start over, looking at modes in an entirely new light.

The Parallel Perspective

An equally important way to understand the modes is to learn them in parallel. Simply put, viewing modes in parallel means lining them up an comparing them with one another all beginning on the same "home based," or root note. So C Ionian is compared with C Dorian, C Phrygian, C Lydian, etc. This is the flip side of the coin. Where relative modes (or scales) use the same notes but have different roots, parallel notes (or scales) use the same roots but have different notes.

The simplest way to see these notes in parallel is to play them as two-octave shapes, all beginning from the same root—in this case, C—and noting the differences between each mode and the parallel major, as in Fig.5. Again, we'll start with C Ionian, also known as C major. We number the tones of the major scale 1-2-3-4-5-6-7.

Notice the bright, and happy feel of this scale? Next comes C Dorian. Compare that with C major, and you'll see that the 3rd and 7th notes are flattened. We could therefore describe the notes of C Dorian in terms of tonal numbers as 1-2-b3-4-5-6-b7.] Notice the somewhat darker quality of this mode. After that comes C Phrygian: 1-b2-b3-4-5-b6-b7. This one's even darker. And so on...

I recommend that you spend some time with each of these patterns individually. It'll take quite a while, but eventually, your goal should be to memorize them. Learn these two-octave shapes well, then expand each over the entire fretboard as a scale in its own right, and you, too, will become a modal monster!

Using the Modes in Your Music

In terms of actually playing your guitar, learning these modes on a parallel basis is valuable for at least two reasons. First, it allows you to use each mode as a scale in its own right, with its own sound and its own root. The second reason is that it enables you to draw on parallel tonalities in your soloing, as many of the best guitarists do.

First, let's analyze the concept of playing within a single mode. The idea here is really pretty simple: Just choose one of the seven modes and use notes exclusively from that mode as the basis for your song, riff, or solo. For example, let's choose A Phrygian [Fig.6]. Now, working exclusively from the seven notes in A Phrygian (A-Bb-C-D-E-F-G), try coming up with some interesting -sounding riffs or licks. The trick here is to remember that the note "A" is the root. So in order to maintain the true essence and sound of A Phrygian, you'll probably need to return to that pitch frequently in your improvisation, so that "A" always feels like the "tonic," or home base. If you're having trouble, check out Fig.7. This is a sample phrase that uses all seven notes of A Phrygian and clearly employs the open A string as the riff's root pitch.

Now, sticking to a single mode like this is a great way of applying the modes in your playing, but an equally viable, if more advanced, way of using the modes is to draw on two or more parallel modes, combining or mixing them within a single song, riff or solo. To do this, you must first realize that modes can be grouped into two distinct categories: major and minor. In essence, all the modes with a major 3rd tone (3) can be lumped into the "major" category; all the ones with a minor 3rd tone (b3) can be lumped into the "minor" category. Fig.8 shows how this plays out. Ionian (major), Lydian, and Mixolydian are three major-type modes. Aeolian (natural minor), Dorian and Phrygian are the three minor-type modes.

(Locrian is the oddball of the bunch and is actually a half-diminished tonality rather than minor; technically, it doesn't belong to either group.)

Once you understand this major/minor grouping, it's pretty simple, really. If you're playing a song that's in a "major" tonality, you can combine and mix any of the three major-type modes: Ionian, Lydian, or Mixolydian. If you're playing a song in a "minor" tonality, you can combine and mix any of the three minor-type modes: Aeolian, Dorian, or Phrygian. To try this out, let's suppose you're playing a solo in a song that remains on a D minor chord for a number of measures. Since the basic tonality is minor, you can combine and mix D Aeolian, D Dorian, and D Phrygian. To do this, you might choose to play a series of notes from D Aeolian, then a series of notes from D

Phrygian, and then a series of notes from D Dorian. Or you might choose to mix all three modes in one series of notes, like the sample phrase in Fig.9.

"Playing Modally"

Just as a final thought, suppose you had a chord progression in the key of C major that you wanted to solo over—say, C-F-G. What mode (or modes) would you choose? The answer is that you could improvise exclusively in one mode: C Ionian. Why? Well, since all three chords are built from notes within the C major scale, that scale works perfectly over the entire progression. Interestingly, however, within this large-scale framework, smaller modal interactions play themselves out as the chords move through a progression (i.e., even though the soloist may only see it as C major, modes are actually

Fig. 5 The Parallel Concept

● = root

<p>C Ionian (major) scale degree: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 notes: C D E F G A B</p>	<p>C Dorian scale degree: 1 2 b3 4 5 6 b7 notes: C D E♭ F G A B♭</p>
<p>C Phrygian scale degree: 1 b2 b3 4 5 b6 b7 notes: C D♭ E♭ F G A♭ B♭</p>	<p>C Lydian scale degree: 1 2 3 #4 5 6 7 notes: C D E F♯ G A B</p>
<p>C Mixolydian scale degree: 1 2 3 4 5 6 b7 notes: C D E F G A B♭</p>	<p>C Aeolian (natural minor) scale degree: 1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7 notes: C D E♭ F G A♭ B♭</p>
<p>C Locrian scale degree: 1 b2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7 notes: C D♭ E♭ F G♭ A♭ B♭</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Fig. 6 A Phrygian Mode</p> <p style="text-align: center;">● = root</p>

The Sounds of the Modes

One way to become more familiar with the modes is to really listen to them. Each has its own unique sound and "flavor." The more you get to know the modes by ear, the more you'll hear them in the music around you. So, with that in mind, here are some examples to get you started.

Ionian

The Ionian mode, better known as the major scale, generally has a happy, upbeat quality. This riff from "Hello, Goodbye" by the Beatles is one of many examples of the Ionian mode in rock music.

"Hello, Goodbye" (C Ionian [major])

Chorus

C C/B Am

T
A
B

3 0 2 0 2 0 1

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Dorian

The Dorian mode is very similar to natural minor scale (Aeolian mode), except it has a major 6th. So it's a minor mode with a bit of a split personality—basically dark but with a spot of brightness due to the major 6th. The Dorian mode can be found in Joe Satriani's "Surfing with the Alien."

"Surfing with the Alien" (G Dorian)

Half-Time Feel

G5 C5 G5

T
A
B

10 10 7 10 10 9 9 9 10 8 10 8 10 10 10 10

*Key signature denotes G Dorian.

Phrygian

Phrygian is like the natural minor scale, but with a flatted 2nd, and is characteristic of flamenco guitar or the Middle Eastern sound. It has also become a staple of the darker, heavier rock styles. For example, Phrygian is the prevalent mode in Megadeth's "Killing Road."

"Killing Road" (E Phrygian)

E5

T
A
B

0 0 7 0 0 0 0 0 7 0 0 8 0 5

*Key signature denotes E Phrygian.

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Fig. 7 A Phrygian Riff

Am

T
A
B

0 7 0 0 5 0 0 3 0 0 2 0 1 0

*Key signature denotes A Phrygian.

Fig. 8

Major Modes	Minor Modes
Ionian (major) (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)	Dorian (1, 2, b3, 4, 5, 6, 7)
Lydian (1, 2, 3, #4, 5, 6, 7)	Phrygian (1, b2, b3, 4, 5, b6, b7)
Mixolydian (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, b7)	Aeolian (natural minor) (1, 2, b3, 4, 5, b6, b7)
	Locrian (half-diminished) (1, b2, b3, 4, b5, b6, b7)

being formed with each passing chord). For example, the F chord temporarily creates F Lydian; the G chord temporarily creates G Mixolydian. You may ignore this aspen entirely as it "takes care of itself," or you may choose to consciously draw upon and strengthen the modal qualities inherent over each chord. For instance, the riff in Fig.10 G uses notes only within C major, but as the chord progression moves from C to F to G, the underlying notes in the riff emphasize the changing chords.

Typically, this will become more significant if the progression moves slowly and stays over each chord for an extended period. This is known as "playing modally." It doesn't have anything to do with the overall tonality, which may be a scale or mode itself. It simply means that you are aware of the passing modal qualities and playing to reinforce them.

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Lydian

Lydian is a major mode with a raised 4th step. Check out [Rush's](#) classic "Free Will" riff, which draws upon the odd character of Lydian.

"Free Will" (F Lydian)

Intro
F

*Key signature denotes F Lydian.

Mixolydian

Mixolydian is a major mode with a flatted 7th step. It is very similar to the major scale, but with a somewhat "rounded off," or more easygoing, quality. This standard boogie or rockabilly riff demonstrates Mixolydian.

Boogie/Rockabilly Figure (C Mixolydian)

C7

*Key signature denotes C Mixolydian.

Aeolian

The Aeolian mode is, of course, identical to the natural minor scale. It is dark, sad, and perhaps gothic, depending on the particular application. This riff from "[I'll Stick Around](#)" by the [Foo Fighters](#) demonstrates Aeolian in action.

"I'll Stick Around" (G Aeolian [natural minor])

Intro
G5 E♭5 B♭5 C5 F5 G5 E♭5 B♭5 C5 B♭5

play 3 times

*Key signature denotes G Aeolian.

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"The Shortest Straw" (E Locrian)

Intro
E5 F5 E5 F5

*Key signature denotes E Locrian.

Locrian

The Locrian mode is like the Phrygian mode but with a flatted 5th as well. This excerpt from "The Shortest Straw" by [Metallica](#) shows the Locrian mode at work.

The Wrap-Up

If all of this has brought you to the brink of mental meltdown, don't worry about it. Just keep in mind that as you learn tunes and see modes in action, your knowledge base will build gradually. You will recognize familiar patterns, and through experience you'll see how the modes relate to one another.

For now, the most important thing to understand is the basic idea of how modes are formed. Then recognize that songs may use a mode at their basis rather than simply a major or minor scale. All modes can be treated as scales in their own right, so you should ideally learn them that way. If this was mostly new information to you, don't expect to master every detail by the next day, or even the next month. Take what you can, and reread this from time to time as you learn more scales and more music. Eventually, it will all fall into place. Good luck!

Fig. 9 Combining Minor Modes

Dm

full

Fig. 10 à la "La Bamba"

C F G

— C Ionian (major) — — F Lydian — — G Mixolydian —

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