



Modes De-mystified

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What are 'Modes' ?

You sometimes will have heard jazz musicians and writers refer to 'modal jazz' (e.g. Miles Davis' 'Kind Of Blue') or 'modal tunes', or about improvising modally. What are modes, and how are they applied in jazz ?

Modes are scales obtained by taking the sequence of intervals in a particular scale, but starting at a different point in the sequence. Modes can be derived from major, melodic and harmonic minor, and other scales. The most commonly used in jazz come from the major scale, but a couple of those from the minor scales are also useful. Here I will cover the modes derived from the major scale, and perhaps I'll deal with those from the melodic and harmonic minor scales in a future article.

The modes derived from the C major scale are named, and often defined, as shown below :

IONIAN	C -> C
DORIAN	D -> D
PHRYGIAN	E -> E
LYDIAN	F -> F
MIXOLYDIAN	G -> G
AEOLIAN	A -> A
LOCRIAN	B -> B

This is the 'textbook' definition. However, if you play them like this, they still have a C major 'feel' to them. The words '**mode**' and '**mood**' have a common origin. The important thing about modes is that you have to play them from the same root to hear how each one can impart a different flavour, or mood, to what you are playing. These differences in mood arise because certain notes in the modal scales are altered by a semitone compared to the original scale.

Whether the 3rd note in the scale is a major or minor 3rd from the root determines whether the tonality of the mode is major or minor. The major or minor nature of a modal scale determines where you can use them. The other altered notes provide the 'colour' or 'tension' in the scale. Knowing whether the mode is major or minor, and what the altered notes are, provides the key to understanding how to use modes in your playing.

What Notes For Each Mode ?

The major scale is built up from the following sequence of intervals, where T is a whole tone (2 frets) and S is a semitone (1 fret) :-

T T S T T T S

The major scale modes are built by playing C-C, D-D, etc. This means you take the above sequence but start it at a different point for each mode. The table below shows this, and underneath each mode are the corresponding sequences of notes, when you start from C each time. Play these, and you will hear how obviously different they are.

IONIAN (Scale of C starting on C)	T	T	S	T	T	T	S	
	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
DORIAN (Scale of Bb starting on C)	T	S	T	T	T	S	T	
	C	D	E \flat	F	G	A	B \flat	C
PHRYGIAN (Scale of Ab starting on C)	S	T	T	T	S	T	T	
	C	D \flat	E \flat	F	G	A \flat	B \flat	C
LYDIAN (Scale of G starting on C)	T	T	T	S	T	T	S	
	C	D	E	F \sharp	G	A	B	C
MIXOLYDIAN (Scale of F starting on C)	T	T	S	T	T	S	T	
	C	D	E	F	G	A	B \flat	C
AEOLIAN (Scale of Eb starting on C)	T	S	T	T	S	T	T	
	C	D	E \flat	F	G	A \flat	B \flat	C
LOCRIAN (Scale of Db starting on C)	S	T	T	S	T	T	T	
	C	D \flat	E \flat	F	G \flat	A \flat	B \flat	C

Note that when improvising on modal scales, the notes played need to emphasise the root, and the important 'colour' notes *as intervals from it*, to get the proper 'feel' of the mode. The 'colour' notes for each mode are shown in the table below.

Mode	Tonality	'Colour' Notes
Ionian	Major	None
Lydian	Major	b5
Mixolydian	Major	b7
Dorian	Minor	natural 6, natural 7
Phrygian	Minor	b2, b6, b7
Aeolian	Minor	b6, b7
Locrian	Minor	b2, b5, b6, b7

Where can you use major scale modes ?

Four of the major scale modes are minor scales and I explained the use of these in the last SJGS newsletter. The other three are major. Excluding the Ionian, which is just the major scale, leaves the Lydian and the Mixolydian to consider in this issue.

The Lydian mode is my own favourite as it lends a nice 'outside' feel to what you are playing without sounding wrong. It is a scale of G starting on C. G has an F \sharp in it - the flattened 5th of C, and jazz players love flattened 5ths. Try C Lydian with the following chords - Cmaj7 \sharp 11, Am7 or Am9, D7 or D9 or D13, Ab \sharp 5 \sharp 9, F \sharp m7b5, and Gmaj7. Even better, learn the scale fingering like you would learn a chord shape, and then try it in different positions e.g.

E \flat Lydian over Cm7 or Cm9 E Lydian over C7 \sharp 9 \sharp 5

F Lydian over Cmaj7

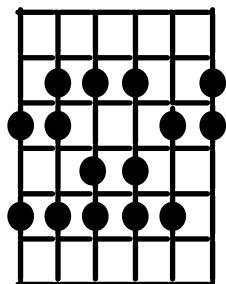
B \flat Lydian over C7 or C9(13) F \sharp Lydian over Cm7b5

Finally, the Mixolydian is a scale of F starting on C. C7 is the 'V chord' or dominant seventh of F, so it should come as no surprise that C Mixolydian is a good scale to play over C7. It also works well over the chord B \flat /C, or C11.

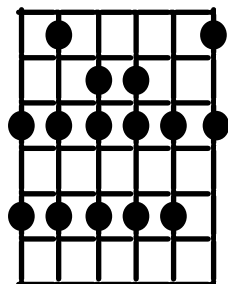
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Fingerings

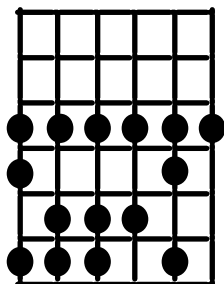
Ionian



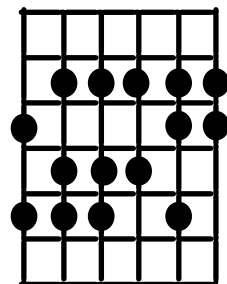
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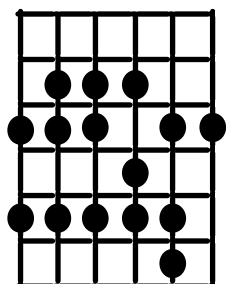
Phrygian



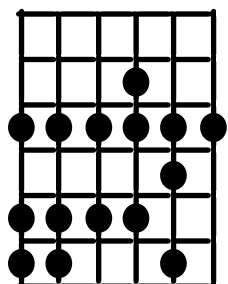
Lydian



Mixolydian



Aeolian



Locrian

