

CHAPTER 8:

DECODE THE MODES—
When do you use what mode?

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Decode the Modes

Modes can be described several ways: 1) a major scale starting on a different degree (or note) other than the first, 2) a major scale with notes changed, 3) a pentatonic scale with notes added. There are others, but we'll stick to these.

Example 1 shows all the modes in one key (C major) "dovetailed" together. In other words, D dorian, E phrygian, F lydian, etc., all come from C major. This shows how you get seven modes out of one scale. This is important information. If you know even one fingering for one scale, you know how to play all of them. Since no open strings are used, these can also be played in all keys by changing position. The trick is to find the right fret position for the key/mode you want.

The image displays a musical staff in 4/4 time, showing the C major scale (C-D-E-F-G-A-B) with seven modes overlaid. The modes are: C Ionian (C-D-E-F-G-A-B), D Dorian (D-E-F-G-A-B-C), E Phrygian (E-F-G-A-B-C-D), F Lydian (F-G-A-B-C-D-E), G Mixolydian (G-A-B-C-D-E-F), A Aeolian (A-B-C-D-E-F-G), and B Locrian (B-C-D-E-F-G-A). Below the staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with fret numbers: 3, 5, 7, 3, 5, 7, 4, 5, 7, 5, 6, 8, 5, 7, 8.

What makes a scale "modal" is not the fingering used, but the sound it produces. Playing something in D dorian means that you use the notes from C major, but D is the strongest note in the scale.

Let's look at this from a different angle. Example 2 shows a C Lydian scale. The fourth degree is sharped (raised) compared to C major. Those of you who know key signatures will notice that this scale comes from G major (the key of G has one sharp, F#. C is the fourth degree of G, hence C Lydian). Play the first five notes of this example, twice each, to hear a rough approximation of Joe Satriani's "Flying in a Blue Dream" melody. If you experiment with this scale over a C major chord, the F# will probably have an unusual quality to it. Knowing that F# is the "characteristic note" of C Lydian is to understand the essence of modal improvisation.

Example 2: C Lydian

"Flying in a Blue Dream" - Joe Satriani

Example 3 shows C mixolydian. It is a C major scale with a flatted (lowered) 7th. It comes from F major. Try using this scale to play the melody from Jeff Beck's "Freeway Jam" to get the idea. Many people think of this scale as sort of a bluesy sounding major scale.

Example 3: C Mixolydian

"Freeway Jam" - Jeff Beck (Shown here in the Key of C where the original was in G)

A dorian (Example 4) is an A minor scale with a raised 6th degree. It comes from the key of G. A priceless example is The Allman Brothers' "Whipping Post" (particularly the scale passage at the end). Actually, The Allman Brothers use A dorian quite a lot. Worth checking out.

Example 4: A Dorian

"Whipping Post" - The Allman Brothers

E phrygian (Example 5) is built from the 3rd degree of an C major scale. Also, it can be thought of as an E major scale with $b2$, $b3$, $b6$ and $b7$. Keep in mind that a note like the D natural in E phrygian is still considered $b7$ because we compare it to E major, which has $D\sharp$. D natural is lower, therefore called flat. This is often a point of confusion.

Traditional Spanish music often uses phrygian as its base. Have a look.

Example 5: E Phrygian

Musical notation for Example 5: E Phrygian scale in 4/4 time. The scale is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 4/4. The notes are E4, F4, G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, D5, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4. The bass line shows the fretting for each note: 0, 1, 3, 0, 2, 3, 0, 2, 3, 2, 0, 3, 2, 0, 3, 1, 0.

"Malguena" - Traditional Spanish song

Musical notation for "Malguena" in 3/4 time. The scale is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 3/4. The notes are E4, F4, G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, D5, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4. The bass line shows the fretting for each note: 0, 3, 2, 0, 3, 2, 0, 3, 2, 0, 3, 1.

Musical notation for a scale exercise in 3/4 time. The scale is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 3/4. The notes are E4, F4, G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, D5, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4. The bass line shows the fretting for each note: 0.

By now, you should be noticing that the fingerings given for all the modes are very similar.

If you play in a band and have improvised, you have probably played things like this before; even if you didn't realize it at the time. While all this might sound confusing, it's actually quite easy to do. It is just difficult to understand at first. Let's recap what we've looked at so far. Modes can be described these ways:

1) Any major scale from different degrees:

C major scale starting from this degree:	Is called this mode:
1	<i>C Ionian (also called C Major)</i>
2	<i>D Dorian</i>
3	<i>E Phrygian</i>
4	<i>F Lydian</i>
5	<i>G Mixolydian</i>
6	<i>A Aeolian (also called A minor)</i>
7	<i>B Locrian</i>

2) Any major scale with notes changed:

This Mode:	Comes from this key:	Starting on this degree:	These notes are different compared to the major scale from the same note
C Lydian	G Major	4	#4
C Ionian	C Major	1	-
C Mixolydian	F Major	5	b7
C Dorian	Bb Major	2	b3,b7
C Aeolian	Eb Major	6	b3,b6,b7
C Phrygian	Ab Major	3	b2,b3,b6,b7
C Locrian	Db Major	7	b2,b3,b5,b6,b7

3) Any major or minor pentatonic scale with notes added:

This Mode:	Uses this pentatonic scale:	With these notes added:
C Lydian	C Major	4, 7
C Ionian	C Major	4, 7
C Mixolydian	C Major	4, 7
A Dorian	A Minor	2, 6
A Aeolian	A Minor	♭2, ♭6
A Phrygian	A Minor	♭2, 6
B Locrian	C Major	1, ♭5

Now might be a good time to review Chapter 5 - Modes for Morons. Perhaps with the added perspective of the information presented here, it might mean more.

If we put all this information together, you'll notice certain tendencies. There are three major modes (scales with a natural 3rd), three minor modes (scales with a flatted 3rd), and locrian (I think of locrian as the "Black Sheep Mode"). Other than ionian (major) and aeolian (minor), each mode has at least one note that distinguishes it from others in its category. For example, to give a scale or passage a distinctly Dorian sound, all you have to do is focus in on the sixth degree in your phrases. If you want to pin down a particular sound, this is a great way to do it.

	Category	Mode	Degree of scale	Scale formula (compared to major)	Characteristic Notes
Major Modes	Major	Lydian	4	#4	#4
	Major	Ionian (Primary Major)	1	-	♭4, ♭7
	Major	Mixolydian	5	♭7	♭7
Minor Modes	Minor	Dorian	2	♭3, ♭7	♭6
	Minor	Aeolian (Primary Minor)	6	♭3, ♭6, ♭7	♭2, ♭6
	Minor	Phrygian	3	♭2, ♭3, ♭6, ♭7	♭2
"Black Sheep"	Locrian	Locrian	7	♭2, ♭3, ♭5, ♭6, ♭7	♭5

By looking at the "characteristic notes" column, you should see that for the major modes, all the notes indicated are either 4 or 7. These are the notes that fall outside the major pentatonic. In the minor modes, the characteristic notes are either 2 or 6. Again these notes are not in the A minor pentatonic scale. Keeping this in mind helps you remember it all.

It is this reason that pentatonics work so well in so many situations. I've come to think of pentatonics as "Modal Vanilla Ice Cream"; very indistinct in character, but everybody likes it!

The idea is to know what notes make a mode sound the way it does. Please don't misinterpret this as a rulebook for the "best" notes. There is no such thing.

Certain scales and chord progressions seem to create certain moods. Originally, I planned to describe these moods. But sound affects different people in different ways. For this reason, you should decide for yourself what kind of mood a scale creates.

Now let's take a quick look at chord progressions. Again, there are no firm rules. This is only an introduction.

Unlike what it says about people in "The Constitution," all notes are not created equal. In most songs, one note seems stronger than the rest. It is called the Tonal Center. When notes in a song come from a certain key, but another note is the strongest, it's considered modal. Certain kinds of chord progressions help this process. Take a look at the modal chord progressions given here. A closer look will show that each example has two major chords a whole step (two frets) apart from each other. These chords are built on the IV (4th degree) and V (5th degree) of the key they come from. These, along with the chord built on the tonal center (the strongest note) will often produce a strong harmonic backdrop that sounds modal. Many (but not all) rock tunes are based on this idea, regardless of whether the songwriter is familiar with this concept. Since this book is not really about harmony, I've decide to keep these examples simple and clear. You'll find that many of these will remind you of songs you know. That's the idea.

Each example has a summary of facts about itself. In each case the tonal center (the strongest note) is G. This is done for comparative purposes. Each example has two major chords (the IV and V) of the key they come from. Figuring out the relationship of the related key to the tonal center helps you determine what mode to use. Study the summaries carefully until you understand them. Then try to apply the same ideas to other songs you know. You'll find that in the real world, these concepts work very well, but some things can't be described quite so neatly.

The top staff (musical staff) gives you a suggested melodic guide. Play it verbatim at first, then use it as a guide to explore improvisational avenues. Eventually, you'll learn to come up with ideas of your own like these. I like using this way of thinking because it helps me "navigate" the music when I'm improvising. I can't resist a great metaphor: If music is an improvisational ocean, then this is your compass.

The middle staff gives the actual scale. It contains all the notes available within the key. Just as a painter doesn't use all of the colors on his/her palette all the time, a musician should learn to think of note choice as a means to inject "color." Know what's available. Choose wisely.

The third staff gives the chord progression. The indication of four slashes doesn't mean you play "chunk, chunk, chunk, chunk." It means, "This is how long you play this chord. Provide whatever rhythmic feel you think is appropriate." It is deliberately vague so you can put your own style in to it.

I made a conscious decision to leave out the tab and chord diagrams for this part. The intent is that you concentrate on the sound of the notes, rather than where you play them. Fingerings for these scales can be found in other chapters of this book. If there are some chords here you don't know, learn them.

Pay attention to the characteristic notes indicated. Try emphasizing them as you play. Also, work on avoiding them completely! Doing this shows different sides of the same coin. In the same spirit, you might also try using different chords. Try to create a modal chord progression without using this concept.

Once you get this together, the next step might be to analyze some of your favorite songs and/or solos (and the chords that go with them). Are there two major chords a whole step apart? You'll find that this happens a lot. If so, do they come from a different key than the tonal center? What degree is the tonal center compared to the related key?

As always, experiment with everything. One nice benefit of knowing theory is knowing what rules to break!

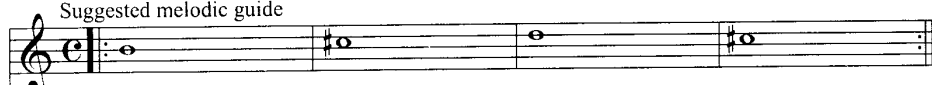
If you have trouble understanding this, keep in mind that the musical process is difficult to describe. It took me several years to reach a point where I felt I understood some of what modes are about. Even now, with music degrees and several decades of performing and recording experience behind me, some things about music still baffle me. All of it is utterly thrilling. The more I learn, the more I realize there is to know. At this point, I feel like I'm scratching the surface of what is possible.

Tonal Center: G
 Relative Key: D
 Mode: G Lydian
 Characteristic Note: C \sharp (\sharp 4th degree)


* CD Track 54

* CD Track 55 rhythm parts only

Suggested melodic guide * \sharp 4




The G Lydian scale



G A/G G A/G

Typical Lydian chord progression




Tonal Center: G
 Relative Key: G
 Mode: G Ionian
 Characteristic Notes: C, F \sharp (4th and 7th degrees)


* CD Track 56

* CD Track 57 rhythm parts only

Suggested melodic guide * 4 * 7




The G Ionian (major) scale



G C D

Typical Ionian chord progression




Tonal Center: G
 Relative Key: C
 Mode: G Mixolydian
 Characteristic Note: F (\flat 7th degree)


* CD Track 58

* CD Track 59 rhythm parts only

Suggested melodic guide * \flat 7 *




The G Mixolydian scale



G F G F

Typical Mixolydian chord progression



Tonal Center: G
Relative Key: F
Mode: G Dorian
Characteristic Note: E (6th degree)

* CD Track 60

* CD Track 61 rhythm parts only

Suggested melodic guide * 6



The G Dorian scale



Gm B♭ C

Typical Dorian chord progression



Tonal Center: G
Relative Key: B♭
Mode: G Aeolian
Characteristic Note: A, E♭ (2nd and ♭6th degrees)

* CD Track 62

* CD Track 63 rhythm parts only

Suggested melodic guide * 2 * ♭6



The G Aeolian Scale



Gm E♭ F

Typical Aeolian chord progression



Tonal Center: G
Relative Key: E♭
Mode: G Phrygian
Characteristic Note: A♭ (♭2nd degree)

* CD Track 64

* CD Track 65 rhythm parts only

Suggested melodic guide * ♭2 * *



The G Phrygian scale



Gm A♭ B♭

Typical Phrygian chord progression



Chapter 8 Review

- Modes can be described at least three ways: 1) a major scale starting on a different degree (or note) other than the first, 2) a major scale with notes changed, 3) a pentatonic scale with notes added. Understanding them from all three points of view will help you use them more effectively.
- Knowing the fingerings doesn't mean you automatically know how to use or understand how modes actually work.
- What makes a song or passage modal is the fact that the notes come from one key, but another note seems to be "strongest."
- Each mode has at least one "characteristic note." Using that note often will give a strong modal sound.
- Pentatonics are modes without their characteristic notes. That's why they work in so many situations. But it's that same quality that will sometimes render them bland.
- If there are two major chords that are a whole step (two frets) apart from each other, they are usually the IV and V of the key they come from. Figuring out the key (based on these two chords) compared to the strongest note will help you figure out what mode to use.
- With this new perspective given in this chapter, refer back to the "The Kitchen Sink" music example given at the end of Chapter 7.