

Modal Scales in Jazz

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Jazz improvisers traditionally use a combination of horizontal/linear shapes (scales) and vertical shapes (chords/arpeggios) to construct their solos. There are a wide variety of scales that musicians employ, but the most basic scales are modal (from a mode) in nature. In essence, modes are scales that result from changing the starting note of a given scale, as we will see below.

In jazz, we frequently play tunes that we call “modal tunes.” These tunes tend to contain a fairly static harmonic scheme, and frequently employ modes as the melodic basis for the tune. A great example of a modal tune is Miles Davis’ “So What.” In that tune, only two chords exist, $D^{\text{min}7}$ and $E\flat^{\text{min}7}$, and improvisers have a lot of room to explore those particular structures.

For our purposes, we will derive the seven modes using the notes of the C major scale. This scale is also known as the Ionian mode.



Each mode is generated from the subsequent notes of the major scale.

Dorian

- 2nd mode, starts on 2nd note of major scale, in this case, it is the C major scale beginning on D
- Fits best with a $D^{\text{min}7}$ chord and is frequently used in jazz



Phrygian

- 3rd mode, starts on 3rd note of major scale, in this case, it is the C major scale beginning on E



Lydian

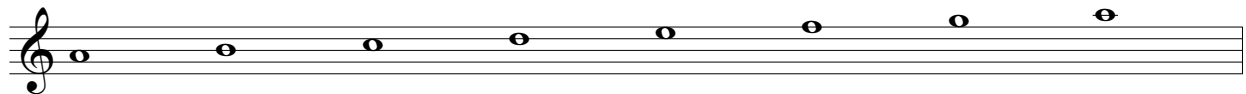
- 4th mode, starts on 4th note of major scale, in this case, it is the C major scale beginning on F
- This mode is sometimes used on a major 7th chord (in this case, F^{Maj7}). The #4 note provides a nice bit of dissonance against the chord.

**Mixolydian**

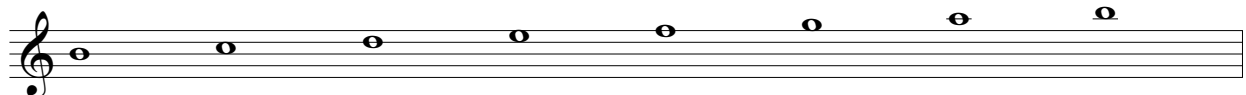
- 5th mode, starts on 5th note of major scale, in this case, it is the C major scale beginning on G
- Fits best with a G⁷ chord and is frequently used in jazz

**Aeolian**

- 6th mode, starts on 6th note of major scale, in this case, it is the C major scale beginning on A.
- Note: this scale is also the A natural minor scale. Recall that A minor and C major are related keys.

**Locrian**

- 7th mode, starts on 7th note of major scale, in this case, it is the C major scale beginning on B



Many students have trouble remembering the order of the modes, which is helpful for being able to quickly recall the modes. Here is a mnemonic that I learned a long time ago to help us remember the order of modes:

I Dig Pez. Leave Me A Loan.

Of course, the letters in bold correspond to the first letters of the name of each mode.

In addition, students often struggle with identifying a specific mode. To that end, try to use this formula to figure out the correct scale:

1. Instruction: “Play or write a B Mixolydian scale.”
2. We know that Mixolydian is the **fifth** mode of the scale and we are looking to create a scale that begins on the note **B**.
3. Ask yourself this question: “B is the fifth note of which major scale?”
4. B is the fifth note of the E major scale, of course, so you will play or write a scale using the notes of the E major scale, beginning and ending on B, as below.



You can apply the modal concept to other scales as well. For instance, in more advanced improvisation study, we study two different “modes” of the melodic minor scale and how they work in modern jazz harmony. You can also study Olivier Messiaen’s “Modes of Limited Transposition” for another, more advanced, approach to the modal concept.