

The Modes of the Major Scale for Guitar

by Jeff Foster

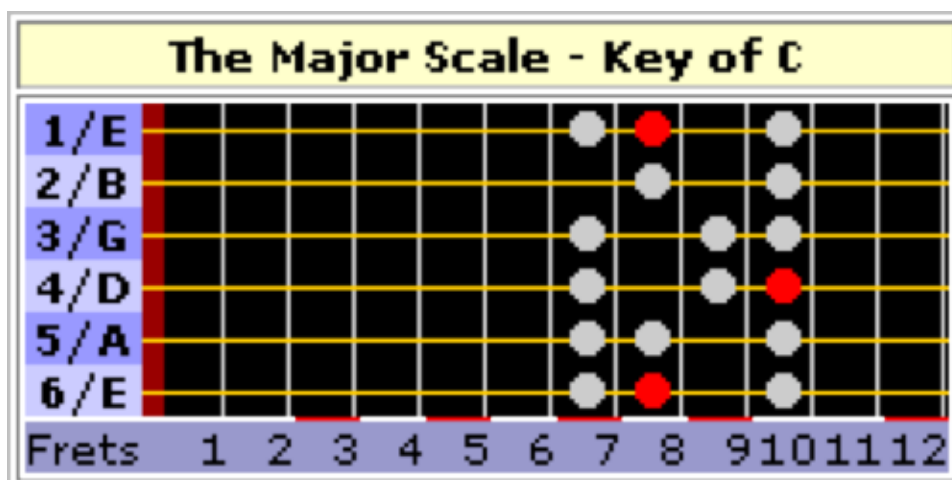
This is an introductory overview of the modes of the major scale, a fundamental body of knowledge which any guitarist aspiring to improvisational excellence will want to learn. The major scale pattern below is one of the primary fingerings (in standard tuning) commonly used by guitarists, and form the foundation for the mode diagrams which follow.

This fingering of the major scale fits nicely within a 4-fret area, coincides with the standard 6th-string major barre chord, and the four fingers of the fretting hand can be logically assigned to specific notes as they occur in the scale. Memorize the scale well to make full use of the following information.

NOTE: As shown, the scale is in the key of C, but remember this fingering does *not* contain any open strings, and thus is a *movable* scale which can accommodate any key by simply positioning it at the appropriate 6th-string root tone on the fretboard.

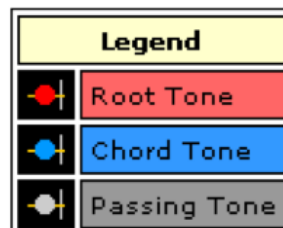
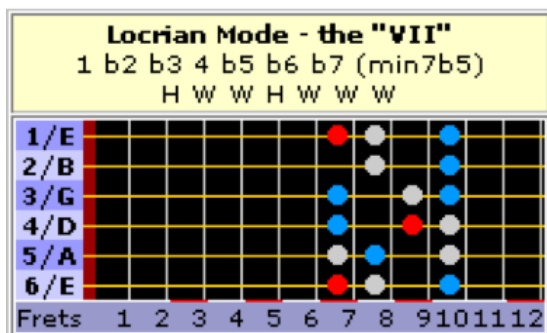
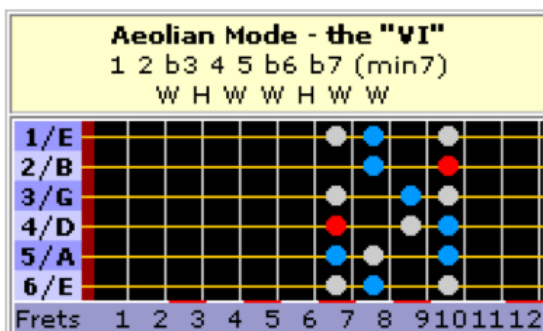
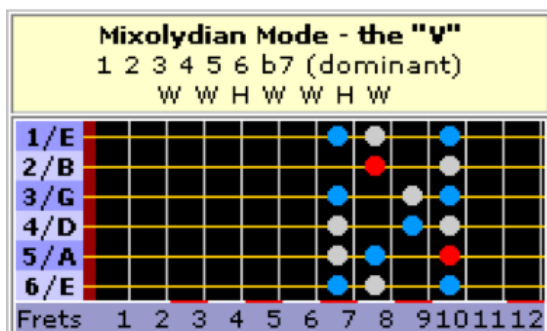
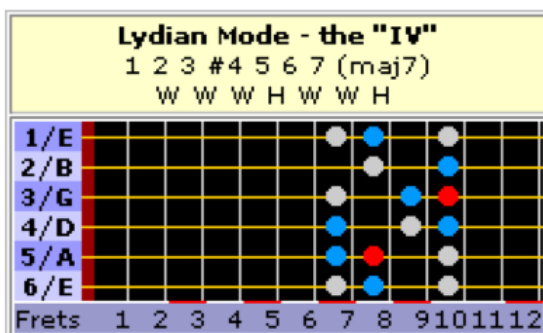
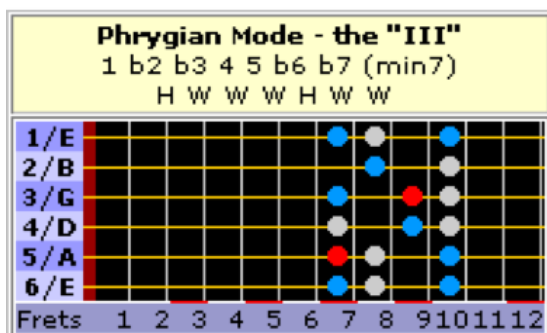
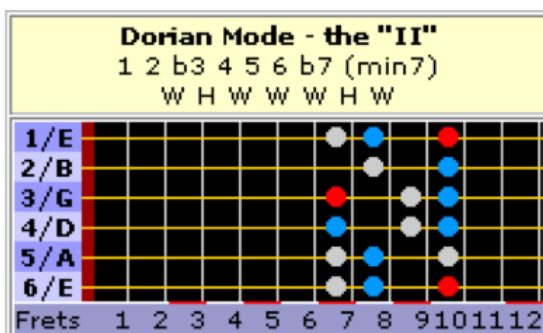
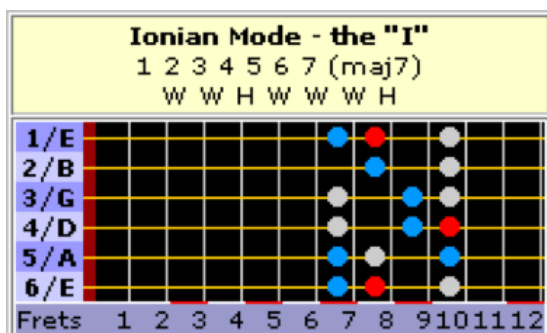
What are modes?

Modes are basically the organization of the major scale into a sub-set of additional scales. By taking each of the 7 tones of the major scale as the root (or tonic) of a mode, we come up with 7 unique arrangements of whole-steps and half-steps, all of which fit perfectly over the chord produced by that mode.



The Modes on the Guitar

In the following fingerings, the **red** dots indicate the roots (tonics) of the mode, the **blue** dots indicate the chord tones (arpeggios), and the **grey** dots indicate the passing (non-chord) tones. Play from the lower red tone to the higher red tone to isolate each mode.



A good way to practice this material is to start on any root and play the arpeggio (only the chord tones), followed by the entire mode, including the passing tones. Do this from each degree of the major scale, listen and study the intervallic relationships you find in each arpeggio and mode.

Remember that all the modes are just subsets of one scale, the major scale. In the heat of improvisation it can be easy to get lost, forget what chord you're playing over, and find yourself rambling about in the dark. But given the diatonic nature of modes (every other tone is a chord tone), if you find yourself riffing on passing tones and you don't care for the sound, try moving up or down one or two degrees in the scale. You'll soon regain your bearings.

It should also be noted that the fingerings provided are meant as an introduction to modes, and for the sake of simplicity lie within just one position. The intervallic information itself (the numeric construction of each arpeggio and mode, and the arrangements of whole and half-steps) is universal, and key to the mastery of arpeggios and modes. The harmonic structures presented can be expanded to cover the entire fingerboard, with alternative fingerings, in multiple positions... and there are particular riffs which will naturally arise from them. A riff that's difficult to play in one fingering will be much easier in another, so you don't want to limit yourself in the many available variations in fingerings and positions.

If you work at fully internalizing the intervallic concepts involved, and practice diligently to extrapolate and apply those concepts to the entire fingerboard, in time you will develop a comprehensive mental grid of information which will enable you to liberate your playing from the always cool (yet mundane) simplicity of pentatonic patterns.

Behind the art of music (invisible to non-musicians), there is a clear, consistent geometry of intervals, and the study of that geometry is one of the keys to unlocking your musical potential. Yes, it does take focus and a lot of practice time, but the results are invariably worth the effort. The mastery of modes is a right of passage for every serious musician. Be patient, practice well, and your music-making capabilities will be greatly enhanced.

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