

# Modal Improvisation for Rock Guitarists

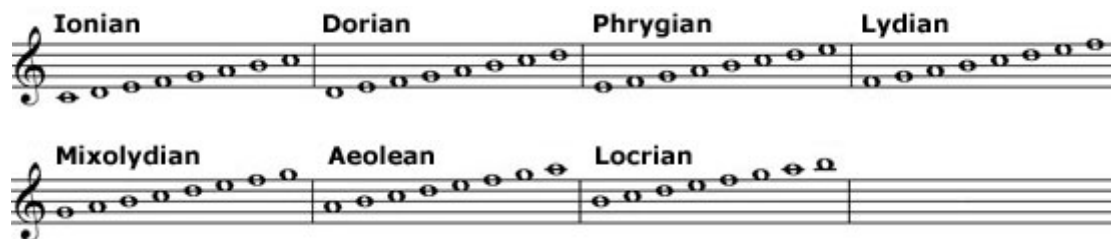
by Chris Botta

After learning pentatonic blues scales in all the positions and various keys, many guitarists will ultimately ask, "What's next?" Attempting to use standard root position major and minor scales in a rock context can sound a little stiff, and then there's the problem of how to relate it to the framework that you're already using with your blues-based licks.

The answer is to learn to think modally. To do this, you'll have to grasp theories that may seem complex compared to the basic blues but remember- you don't have to master the whole universe of modes at once, just enough of them to adapt and use. You may already be using some modal applications without even realizing it, as modal theory applies to most Western Music. Straight major and minor scales are included in the modes, after all, and the major pentatonic/minor pentatonic system contains an element of modalism as well.

But let's start at the beginning. The ancient Greeks invented the first musical scale systems known as the Greek modes. They had discovered the major scale, and found that if each of the seven tones of the scale were tonicized, i.e., if each of the notes were treated as a key center, seven unique modes would result. For example, if a song were constructed around the second note of the scale, the emotional atmosphere, and melodic and harmonic structure of the resulting piece would be different than a piece constructed around the first note.

Let's look at the seven modes as based on the key of C, and then we'll look at the most commonly used ones individually.



We can summarize the seven modes in simple terms:

- Ionian** - same as the major scale
- Dorian** - a variation of pure minor, with a raised sixth degree
- Phrygian** - the "Spanish" sounding one
- Lydian** - a variation of the major scale, with a raised fourth degree  
- not used a lot
- Mixolydian** - like major but with a flat seventh - often used in rock and jazz
- Aeolian** - same as the natural minor scale
- Locrian** - the most dissonant, rarely used in mainstream rock music

## How Modes Function

The most important concept to grasp when using modes in an improvisational or compositional situation is that you are taking a set group of notes, let's say the C major or

white-key scale, and designating a note other than C as the key or tonic note. In this way, a new harmonic structure is created. In the key of C, the tonic triad C-E-G is a major triad, whereas if we create a new key area based around the same scale but with let's say, D as the tonic, we'll have a minor chord as our i or tonic chord, D-F-A.

Other harmonic relationships will change as well. For example, you'll no longer have a dominant seventh chord in the V chord position, but rather a minor triad, A-C-E. Conversely, if you are playing in a certain key in a song or section of a song, you may be able to find a mode that will fit, provided the chords you're using correspond to the notes in the mode.

### The Dorian Mode

One of the modes most commonly used in rock is the Dorian mode. The Dorian mode is always formed by taking the second scale degree of a major scale and basing a new key area upon that note. In the key of C, this would be D-E-F-G-A-B-C. An easy way to remember this construction is that in the key of C, Dorian begins on the note D. Effectively, your new piece will be in D minor, using the notes of the major scale one whole step below. This scale is very similar to a natural minor scale, except that the sixth scale degree is raised one-half step. You have to be a little careful employing this formula, because a clash between say, the B-natural note in the D Dorian mode and the Bb chord that occurs in the key of D-natural minor will sound very sour.

Here are some examples of Dorian licks with the underlying harmony:

The image contains two musical examples of Dorian licks. Each example consists of a melodic line in the treble clef and a guitar tablature line below it. The first example is in 4/4 time and features a Dm chord (D-F-A) for the first measure and a G chord (G-B-D) for the second measure. The melodic line starts on D4 and moves through E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, and C5. The second example is in 3/4 time and features a Dm chord for the first measure and a G chord for the second measure. The melodic line starts on D4 and moves through E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, and C5. Both examples include guitar tablature for the bass, treble, and middle strings, with fret numbers and string numbers indicated.

### Mixolydian

Another very important and useful mode to learn is the Mixolydian, which is derived by forming a scale at the 5th degree of a major scale. In the key of C major, this would be G-A-B-C-D-E-F. The scale contains the same whole step/half step intervals as the major scale, except for the seventh degree, which is flatted.

For this reason, it fits perfectly against a dominant seventh chord, and can be used to create impressive melodic and free-flowing jazz runs over a blues chord structure. Also, because of the harmony that's derived from the Mixolydian scale, with a dominant chord as the I chord and a major chord as the VII, it's used extensively in classic rock. The Mixolydian mode fits well with blues scales because of the flatted seventh and can give a nice psychedelic effect.

Here are some examples of Mixolydian licks with the underlying harmony:

The image contains two musical examples of Mixolydian licks with underlying harmony. Each example consists of a treble clef staff, a guitar fretboard diagram, and a chord label above the staff.

**Example 1:** The first example is for a G chord and an F chord. The G chord fretboard diagram shows a 5th fret barre with a 1/2 bend on the 9th fret. The melodic line for G starts on the 5th fret and moves up stepwise. The F chord fretboard diagram shows a 9th fret barre with a 1/2 bend on the 9th fret. The melodic line for F starts on the 9th fret and moves up stepwise.

**Example 2:** The second example is for a G chord and an F chord. The G chord fretboard diagram shows a 7th fret barre. The melodic line for G starts on the 7th fret and moves up stepwise. The F chord fretboard diagram shows a 7th fret barre with a 9th fret barre. The melodic line for F starts on the 7th fret and moves up stepwise.

### Phrygian

This mode is perhaps the most recognizable. It's also one of the simplest set-ups to play on the guitar and sounds great in first position. Just play an E major chord, then run your fingers through the notes of a C major scale, and you're playing in the Phrygian mode. The resulting sound is reminiscent of the Spanish flamenco guitar style. The conflict between the G-natural in the C major scale and the G# of the E major chord doesn't seem to matter.

Here are some examples of Phrygian licks with the underlying harmony:

## Formulas

When you're learning the theory behind modal improv, it's important to understand exactly how the modes are formed. But in practice, it may not be convenient to always think of scales formed from the root. Instead, I like to think in terms of modal "formulas" or "recipes" that I can use easily on the areas of the fretboard where I enjoy playing the most. The major scale positions that you use can be chosen to coincide with blues scale forms. Most importantly, I want to know, "How can I get to the modes I want in a hurry?" These are some of the formulas that I use for quick reference.

In the key of E major, an A major scale will form the Mixolydian mode. Playing a C major scale against an E major progression results in the Phrygian mode. In the key of E minor, D major will form the Dorian mode and G major forms the Aeolian mode.

In the key of A major, the D major scale forms the Mixolydian mode, and an F major scale forms the Phrygian mode. In A minor, G major forms the Dorian mode and C major forms the Aeolian mode.

In the key of D major, a G major scale forms the Mixolydian mode and a Bb major scale forms the Phrygian mode. In D minor, C major forms the Dorian mode, and F major forms the Aeolian.

Try to figure out formulas of your own to play in your favorite keys not mentioned above.

## Exercises

The best way to practice improvisation is to make play-along tracks, or have a friend play

rhythm while you play lead, and then switch off. Below are some progressions that you can use to jam, along with some scale patterns that work well.

For **A Dorian**, use this progression for your rhythm vamp. Try to add phrasing elements like sliding, bends, hammer-ons and pull-offs.

♩ 4/4: Am Am G D

Try using the scale pattern below. Can you see a blues scale pattern lurking in the background?

♩ 7

What major scale would this be if we started from the true tonic? Answers below.

For **Mixolydian in the key of E**, use this chord progression.

♩ 4/4: E D A E

Try using the scale pattern below.

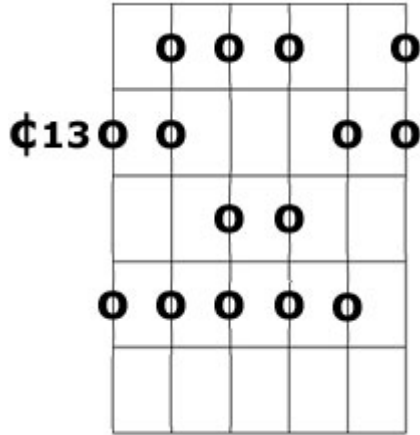
♩ 9

What major scale would this be if we started from the true tonic? Answers below.

For **A Phrygian**, use this progression for your rhythm vamp. Try to make it sound Spanish - it's not too hard!



Try using the scale pattern below.



What major scale would this be if we started from the true tonic? Answers below.

**Answers to questions:** *G major, A major, F major*

Thank you for joining me in my introduction to modal improvisation for rock guitarists. Next month, we'll explore more ways of using modes, with more licks and formulas, and we'll also take a look at how modal theory is employed in the major pentatonic/minor pentatonic system.

Chris Botta