Understanding Modes

Modes From A Different Perspective

If you are having trouble understanding what a mode is you are not alone. It is a subject that many musicians fear like the plaque. But fear not, understanding them can be a very simple process if you know what you are doing. Just like everything else in music theory, it is all in how you look at it. So we are not only going to look at modes in one way, we are actually going to try and understand them from 3 different perspectives. Why would we do this? Well, it is actually pretty simple to understand how a mode is created, and how to spell all of its notes. However, the way you do that, even though its very simple, is kinda limited in teaching you how to apply it to an instrument or to get the sound of it in your head. So we are going to examine modes 3 different ways.

First, we will just try and understand how to spell modes and if you know how to spell all of your basic major scales you will have no problems at all. If you don't know your basic major scales, simply check out the "Understanding Keys" lesson at www.GuitarLessons365.com and it will catch you right up to speed.

Second, we will study modes in a way that will enable you to get the sound of them in your ear much easier. You should be able to sing all the modes just as easy as singing your major scale solfeggio ie. Do Re Mi etc.

Third, we will examine modes in a way that I feel best enables you to apply them to the guitar neck. I will also have accompanying video lessons showing this method in full detail. You do need to know your major key scales as well as your 3-notes-per-string major scale forms which are also available from the main site. :) OK, let's get going!!

Mode Names And Order

Before we tackle all of these methods, we first need to memorize the mode names as well as the order in which they appear. For this lesson we are concentrating on the "church modes", which is another way of saying the modes of the major scale. There are other modes available to use but they make up about 5% of all the modes used, so we will work on them at another time. However, if you can understand the modes of the major scale it will make those modes much easier to understand. So for now, here is the complete names and order of the modes for the major scale in the key of C Major.

1. C Ionian
2. D Dorian
3. E Phrygian
4. F Lydian
5. G Mixolydian
6. A Aeolian
7. B Locrian

Sounds Like Greek To Me

Well, it is. These modes are actually one of the first musical systems ever devised. They are much less complicated than the major and minor tonal systems that we use today. Music before around the 1400's was mostly sung or played monophonically, meaning one note at a time. Each of these modes has their own sound, therefore melodies were sung using the particular mode that suited the situation. OK, enough of the history lesson. Lets get to some modern day applications!!

Spend Some Time With The Family

Our first look at modes will be a quick method that you can use to quickly determine the notes of a particular mode. If we take the seven notes of any major scale going in order from 1-7, we will basically have an Ionian mode. Ionian is just the modal name for Major. So C Ionian is the same as C Major. Easy enough. Well the process of getting all of the other modes is quite simple as well. There is a mode created from every single tone in the major scale. Therefore, we will have seven modes that we will be working with. The parent mode is the Ionian Mode because it is basically the major scale that we are figuring out all of the modes from. All other modes in the key can be considered part of the larger family. Every mode in the family will be made up of the **EXACT SAME NOTES AS THE PARENT IONIAN MODE**.

Here is how it works. If we take a C Major scale and start on the first note in the scale which is C and go through all seven tones back to C we have C D E F G A B C. Looks like a C Major scale right? It is, and it gives us the seven tones of the Ionian mode since the Ionian mode is built off of the 1st scale degree. Now, just remember that the second mode is built by going through the same seven tones as the 1st one except we will start on the second tone of the major scale. In the key of C major the second tone is D, so the second mode of the key of C major will look like this D E F G A B C D. The modal name for the mode built from the 2nd scale dgree is Dorian. So we now have the name D Dorian since D is now the first note. Here is the entire modal family for the Key of C Major.

C Ionian – C D E F G A B C
D Dorian – D E F G A B C D
E Phrygian – E F G A B C D E
F Lydian – F G A B C D E F
G Mixolydian – G A B C D E F G
A Aeolian – A B C D E F G A
B Locrian – B C D E F G A B

So as you can see, all you need to do to figure out all the modes of any particular major scale is just start from a different scale degree each time. If I take the notes of a major scale and say all seven tones starting from the 4th scale degree, I will always have a Lydian mode because the Lydian mode always starts from the 4th note in a major scale. Likewise, if I say the same seven tones of a major scale but this time start from the 6th tone, I will have an Aeolian mode because Aeolian is always built from the 6th note in a major scale.

So you can see, all you need to do is know your major scales well and get used to going through them from different starting points in the scale and keep going through the scale until you get back to your starting note and you will have your complete mode.

If It Is The Same Seven Tones For Every Mode, How Do They Sound Different?

Well lets take a look at our original Parent Major Scale or Ionian mode. If you look at the intervals between each note in the scale you will see a bunch of whole-steps and half-steps. If you already know the formula for a major scale you will know it is whole-whole-half-whole-whole-whole-half. So C to D is a whole step. D to E is a whole step. E to F is a half-step and so forth. But, if we now start from a different point in the scale say the 2nd degree, it will give us D Dorian and the notes will be D E F G A B C D. The distance is now a different combination of whole steps and half steps. A different formula if you will. The formula for a Dorian mode is whole-half-whole-whole-whole-half-whole. So every mode will have a different interval makeup and therefore a different sound.

How Do I Hear All Of This?

Now that we can spell our modes it would be great to be able to hear them in our heads as well, so we can more easily improvise and compose with them. Well if you don't have any ear training experience at all this will take some time. The first thing you should be able to do in ear training is sing the major scale. It's just the familiar Do Re MI Fa So La Ti Do that most everyone has sung before in school. If you can sing that scale exercise off of any note you want you are well on your way. The major scale is the foundation of music and many college level ear training classes make it the first thing you learn to hear well.

After you can sing a major scale it is much easier to learn the sound of your modes by just comparing the difference in them to the regular major scale. This is what were going to do now with our 2nd method of looking at modes. We will start by comparing all modes to a major scale.

Major Scale/Ionian Mode
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Dorian Mode
1 2 b3 4 5 6 b7
Phrygian Mode
1 b2 b3 4 5 b6 b7
Lydian Mode
1 2 3 #4 5 6 7
Mixolydian Mode
1 2 3 4 5 6 b7
Aeolian Mode
1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7
Locrian Mode
1 b2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7

So all you need to do to sing a Lydian mode is sing the familiar major scale but raise the 4th scale degree a half step and you will have to sound of Lydian. Likewise if you want a Mixolydian scale you would sing through the regular major scale but this time lower the 7th scale degree a half step. This may be easier said than done and you really need to know the sound of the major scale really well AND be able to lower and raise any note in it a half-step at will, but I think you will find it the quickest way to get these sounds into your ear.

Visualizing Modes On The Guitar

This last method of looking at modes I believe is the quickest way for you to feel confident across the fretboard with whatever mode or key you want. Most guitarist's first try to learn their modes on the guitar by going note-for-note from the root of a mode or memorizing a separate set of scale forms for each mode. This makes everything WAY to cumbersome. If we can remember that all of these basic “church modes” are just major scales starting from a different point in the scale then all we need to figure out is what key a particular mode is in and just play that keys major scale like you can do already and you will have your mode. So for example, if I wanted to play in G Lydian I would take these following steps to figure out how. First, I know that Lydian is always the 4th mode. So I need to figure out what major scale has G as it's 4th note. Well, we can count backwards from G/4th to F#/3rd to E/2nd to D/1st. So as soon as we get to the 1st scale degree that will be our Parent Key and in this case it is D Major. So all you have to do from this point is play your D Major scales and as long as your rhythm section is playing a G note or G Major type chord underneath you, your playing G Lydian.

What's This Rhythm Section Business About?

Well the true understanding of modes is this. It really doesn't matter what notes YOU are playing, it is more about the harmony going on underneath your notes. Let me explain. For us to truly be creating a modal sound you need to have a modal harmony underneath you. If you can imagine that when you are playing a D Major scale, it is really 7 modes in one. In order to get the sound of each mode out of that scale you need to create a different harmony foundation for each mode. So in the key of D this 1st mode is Ionian. This is the only mode that you can actually play a full chord progression on because it is part of the major/minor tonality system that we use today. However, if you wanted to create an E Dorian sound which is the second mode of D Major, you would still play D Major Scales but the harmony underneath will have to be static on an E Minor type chord. That is right, modal progression are static. The whole idea is to create the illusion that even though you are improvising with the D Major scale you are in an E Key. If your rhythm section starting to just play G Major type chords underneath you, the sound would become that of G Lydian because now you are hearing those same 7 tones of the D major scale against a G foundation. So to fully understand how modes work you need to understand that it all comes down to how your ear relates those same D Major Scale notes to different harmonic foundations.

This may be a little hard to grasp at first, but hopefully you can try a few experiments on your own to fully understand this. Create or find a backing track that just comprises of a static E minor 7 chord played over and over. Then improvise with D major scales over it. Doesn't sound like major does it? The sound you are hearing is of course Dorian because E Dorian is the second tone of the D major scale and you are now hearing an E foundation to the music.

I will be making some videos to help you fully grasp these concepts so don't worry if it isn't competely clear yet. And feel free to contact me at www.GuitarLessons365.com if you have any specific questions that you would like answered about this tutorial.

So have fun with these incredibly inspiring modal sounds, and don't forget to check out the corresponding videos. SEE YOU SOON!!

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