

Guitar Modes: An Easier Way

Guitar modes are a creative way to give your soloing a new and different sound. Some guitarists are enamored with the idea of modes but don't know how to practically use them. Perhaps it is the exotic sounding names and elusive promise of "secret" guitar scales that causes some guitarists to treat them like a mystical holy grail of advanced understanding. When, in truth, with a little bit of music theory you can easily understand what modes are and how you could use them to bring a new sound to your music.

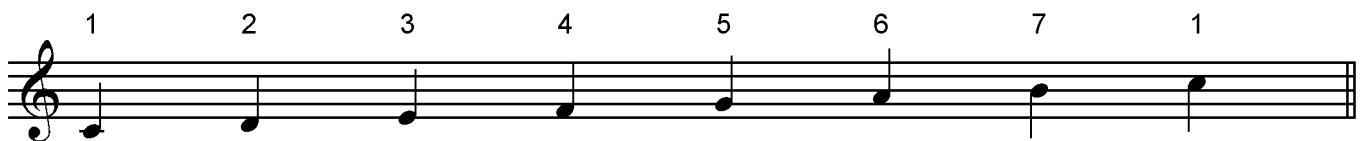
This lesson covers an easier, player-friendly approach to modes - taking from the realm of unusable, mysterious theory and turning them into real tools that you can use on the bandstand.

Modes and the Key

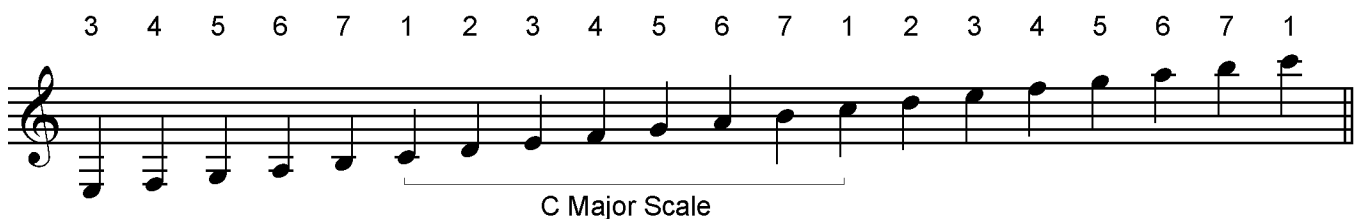
For our purposes, there are seven different modes that can be related to the major scale through the key and key signature. (There are other modes, but we won't get into that here.)

Let's get started, a major scale is a repeating musical pattern of half steps and whole steps.

Here is the C major scale with numbers assigned to each scale tone. Notice how the C at the beginning and end is referred to as 1 since it is the same note name "C", albeit a different octave.



But a scale and the key signature it generates are more than those specific notes. Think of a scale like a musical number line with scale tones extending above and beneath the specific defined one octave scale. The same half step and whole step pattern that made up the major scale can also be extended up and down. These other tones are still in the key and are various octave doubles of the original scale. So, the major scale is actually a smaller subset of this larger musical line that is defined by the key.

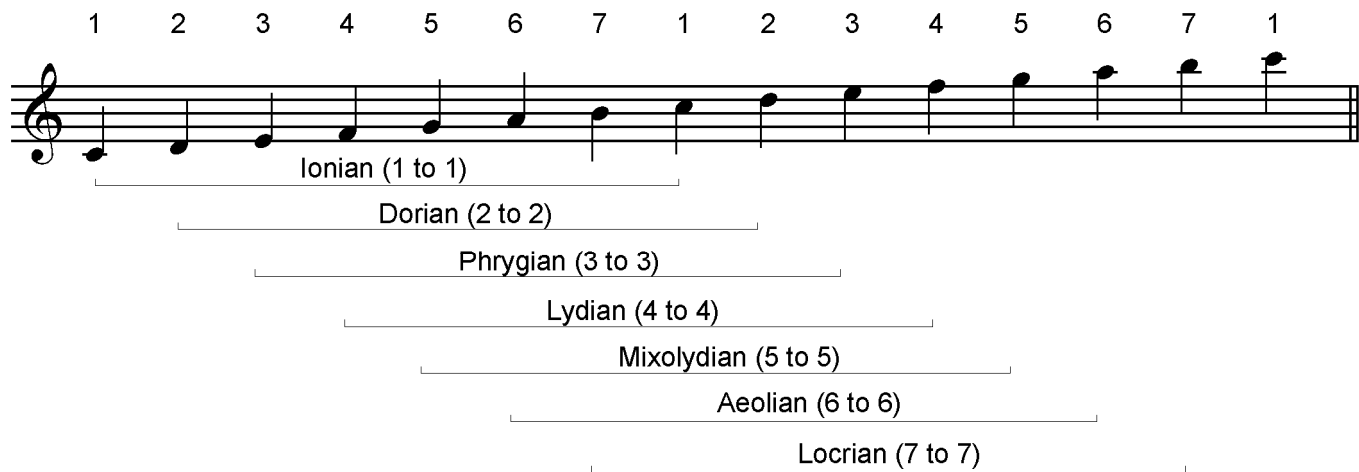


The Modes

A mode takes an octave range of notes and adjusts it within the key so that the starting and ending note are different. So, instead of going from C to C as in the case of a one octave C major scale, you could also go from D to D, or from E to E. Keep in mind; you are still in the key of C. You are simply shifting over the starting and ending notes of a one-octave scale.

When you do this, seven different scales, called modes, are derived all sharing the same key signature. Each of these seven modes has a unique name.

Here is a chart with these seven modes and their names.



Another way to think about the relationship between modes and a related key is this.

The Ionian mode starts/ends on the...	1st step of the key.	In C, going from C to C.
The Dorian mode starts/ends on the...	2nd step of the key.	In C, going from D to D.
The Phrygian mode starts/ends on the...	3rd step of the key.	In C, going from E to E.
The Lydian mode starts/ends on the...	4th step of the key.	In C, going from F to F.
The Mixolydian mode starts/ends on the...	5th step of the key.	In C, going from G to G.
The Aeolian mode starts/ends on the...	6th step of the key.	In C, going from A to A.
The Locrian mode starts/ends on the...	7th step of the key.	In C, going from B to B.

Soloing with Modes

Now that we know what modes are, how can we use them to create great music? First, it's important to understand that three of these modes fit better in major keys and three fit better in minor keys.


Modes that sound "major" are the ones built off of the 1st, 4th, and 5th scale steps - the Ionian, Lydian, and Mixolydian.

Modes that sound "minor" are the ones built off of the 2nd, 3rd, and 6th scale steps - the Dorian, Phrygian, and Aeolian.

So, let's say you need to solo over an Am chord and you're looking for some new ways to create fresh sounds. Well, an Am chord appears in three different keys - the keys of G, F, and C. So, if you were soloing in Am, then you have three different minor modes as possible choices to solo over.

- "A" Dorian = From A to A in the key of G.
- "A" Phrygian = From A to A in the key of F.
- "A" Aeolian = From A to A in the key of C.

Notice that each of these modes contains the main tones of an Am chord which are A-C-E. But each mode has a slightly different overall sound because of the other notes in the key involved.



The image shows three musical staves, each labeled 'Am' above it. Each staff contains a sequence of notes representing a mode. Below each staff is a caption:

- A to A in the key of G (Dorian Mode)**: The notes are A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A.
- A to A in the key of F (Phrygian Mode)**: The notes are A, Bb, C, D, E, F, G, A.
- A to A in the key of C (Aeolian Mode)**: The notes are A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A.

So, to sum up, mentally switching your soloing from the framework of licks and pentatonic patterns to looking at a chord and relating it to a variety of different modes can bring about some unexpected and creative sounds in your playing.

Experiment with soloing with various modes and see if you don't come up with some new and fresh sounds!

For step-by-step quality guitar instruction check out the award winning Gibson's Learn & Master Guitar course at www.LearnAndMaster.com and the lessons section at www.gibson.com for all the help you need to become the player you want to be!



Steve Krenz

*As an educator, Steve is best known for the top-selling guitar instruction course, **Gibson's Learn & Master Guitar** that received the 2011 Acoustic Guitar Magazine Player's Choice Award for Best Instructional Material. As a professional guitarist in Nashville, Steve's broad playing experience includes playing guitar with a symphony orchestra, to jazz big bands, to performing with numerous Grammy-winning artists like Donna Summer, Michael W. Smith, Bryan White, The Fifth Dimension, Israel Houghton, Tommy Sims and American Idol finalist Melinda Doolittle.*

Gibson's Learn & Master® GUITAR

with Steve Krenz

Comprehensive learning in the
comfort of your home.

What's in the box?

20 DVDs in HD with over 40 hours
of instruction.

5 Jam-Along CDs.

100+ page lesson book.

Bonus Content: The Life of Les Paul,
Gibson USA, and more.

Unlimited access to our online
student support site.



Learn at home or on the go with the
Learn & Master Guitar App

