

Modes with Bears

Modes are an essential part of understanding jazz theory but are often presented in an overly complicated manner. This chapter aims to present these in a holistic fashion that will be easier to parse, and more importantly, compose and improvise with. As we work our way through this material, try to keep the big picture in focus and not get tied up too much in the minutia.

What is a Mode?

Modes are another name for scales. In fact, the major and minor scales you're already likely familiar with are modes.

- Major is also known as Ionian.
- Natural Minor is also known as Aeolian.

If you know these two scales, you already know a few modes. All we're going to do from here is add to the family and show you how they all fit together.

So you may ask, why do we have two terms then? Modes, when viewed together, do have another characteristic—they connect together into families which help us express all the subtleties of different chords *within a key*. Of course, it's not that a scale doesn't have this. It's just that when we talk about scales, we typically think of them individually, while modes are usually viewed in context with each other and the harmonies they express.

Modes can be understood as scales in context.

As has been done many times in many books about scales, we'll look at all the modes within a given key and observe their unique characteristics, but don't lose sight of what they all have in common. The context a set of modes exist in is as important as the modes themselves. This will become clear as we move forward.

Exploring the Modes of a Key

Let's begin in the key of C. We'll do this so that key signatures and accidentals don't run the risk of confusing us. Just as there are seven notes in any given major key, there are seven basic 7th chords we can build, and seven modes that can be derived. Let's unpack this a bit. Here's the C major scale, which can also be called C Ionian.



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And now, by stacking three 3rds over each tone, we get seven 7th chords.



Doing this gives us the vertical harmonies diatonic to C major. Notice a few characteristics:

- There are two major 7 chords on the 1st and 4th notes.
- There are three minor 7 chords on the 2nd, 3rd, and 6th notes.
- There is a dominant 7th chord on the 5th note.
- And there is a half-diminished chord on the 7th note.

Each of these chords has a different quality to it. We often use terms like tonic, dominant, and subdominant to describe the feelings they create, but I like to think of how they move. Major and minor chords are relatively stable. The five major and minor 7th chords here don't have a ton of urgency to them. The dominant and half-diminished chords however both contain tritones and have an unstable tension that moves us forward.

And something even more subtle is going on here. There are two major chords, but if we play them back-to-back, there's something different between them. They're not identical. The I feels very "home" while the IV is more brilliant. And the minor chords have differences as well. The ii doesn't have the same heaviness I hear in the vi. And the iii often feels a little like a major chord in first inversion (like the 9th bar of Miles Davis's "Four").

If the chords can have these feelings, so too should the scales that go with them. Here's where modes kick in. Just like the seven possible 7th chords, we have seven unique modes that match up with and share characteristics with these seven chords.

- Two scales that express major, but with an important difference.
- Three scales that express minor, but varying shades from bright, to weighty, to brooding.
- A single scale that brings dominant to life.
- And a very peculiar and unstable scale that captures the half-diminished chord.

Let's spend some time looking at each of the seven modes of major. And I've written the likely chord symbol above each scale to help you make connections.

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Ionian (better known as Major)

The mode built on the 1st degree of major is the major scale. It's also known as Ionian but in practice no one uses that term. Call it major and everyone will be happy.



Dorian

Starting on the 2nd scale degree, spells the dorian mode. Given that ii chords are extremely common to jazz, the mode that goes with the ii chord is common as well. Dorian is the minor scale you'll use the most. The major 6th interval makes this minor mode brighter when compared to the other two minor modes.



Phrygian

The 3rd mode is rare. While also a minor scale, iii chords aren't particularly common. They mostly show up as substitutes for I chords or in the iii-VI7-ii-V chord progression. Phrygian has a dark, dissonant sound due to its minor 2nd and 6th intervals.



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Lydian

Lydian is a major scale with a raised 4th degree. As it has all the other characteristics of major, it has a bright sound. Interestingly, the raised 4 means there are no “avoid-notes” in the scale, meaning all notes are consonant against a major chord. IV chords aren’t exactly rare, but they don’t show up as often in their basic form.



Myxolydian

The 5th mode is extremely important to jazz music, maybe even more than the major scale itself. Due to the prevalence of the Blues, and dominant 7 chords in our music, you’ll use this mode constantly. It has a tritone between its 3rd and 7th giving it its characteristically active and “bluesy” sound.



Aeolian (better known as Natural Minor)

The 6th mode is the minor scale we usually refer to as natural or relative minor. It is a darker, weightier scale than dorian. It’s commonly found as the tonic chord in minor key songs from the Great American Songbook, and in the I vi ii V chord progression in rhythm changes.



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Locrian

The 7th mode is paired up with the most unstable chord found in major, the half-diminished chord (often written $\emptyset 7$). This chord has a diminished 5th—the only chord in major with this interval. The mode then has a tense, aggressively active quality to it. You'll use this mode a lot in minor keys as the ii chord.



A quick summary...

Another way to think about what we've just covered is that modes express the full color of the chord they match up with. For example, the 2nd mode dorian is like a ii chord but with all of the additional colors the chord has but are usually left out when played in a piano voicing.

Putting Modes in Context

Now that we've taken lots of time getting specific and nuanced, I want to change direction. Let's return to the big picture and address something I said early on in the chapter.

Modes are scales in context.

These seven modes and their companion chords make up the diatonic sounds available in major. When looked at side by side it can look like there are a lot of them. But notice they're all just C major shifted to emphasize different notes. For instance, playing the dorian mode emphasizes different notes, but it's not bringing anything wild or new to the table. It's still all C.

So the logical question then is, ok, why does this matter? Let's look at a famous jazz standard by Jerome Kern, "All the Things You Are." Here are the first 8 bars:

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The first 5 chords are all in the key of Ab major. In order, they are: vi-7, ii-7, V7, IΔ7, and IVΔ7. Knowing this, we could go look at the previous pages and figure out each mode that goes with each chord, or simply recognize that all these chords are in Ab and play in Ab major, trusting our ears and musical training to guide us to good note choices. The last three bars can also be seen as three separate modes over ii-7, V7, IΔ7, or you can recognize that they're all in C major and choose to play in that key.

This isn't a bad choice, good choice situation. These are just different ways of understanding the music. The vertical, chord-by-chord approach tends to require a lot of thinking and planning but also makes it easy to find a lot of nuance and detail. While the horizontal, "all chords are in the key of" approach allows you to navigate freely and more generally without having to jump through as many hoops in the progression.

Here's an example where I'm playing vertically, trying to make each mode really stick out by highlighting 3rds, 7ths, and characteristic notes like the #11 on DbΔ7:

Musical notation for vertical playing approach. The first staff shows four measures with chords F-7, Bb-7, Eb7, and AbΔ7. The second staff starts at measure 5 with chords DbΔ7, D-7, G7, and CΔ7. The notation includes various rhythmic values and articulations, such as triplets and slurs.

And here, I'm approaching things horizontally, not concerning myself with each chord, but only the overall color and key:

Musical notation for horizontal playing approach. The first staff shows four measures with chords F-7, Bb-7, Eb7, and AbΔ7. The second staff starts at measure 5 with chords DbΔ7, D-7, G7, and CΔ7. The notation is more fluid, focusing on the overall melodic line across the progression.

Because we know that modes are part of a bigger picture, we now have options to get detailed, or to think more broadly. Try both of these approaches for yourself. Changing your mindset can lead you to different choices.

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Modes Without Context

In the mid to late 1950s, an entire genre of jazz emerged around the concept of modes instead of chords, pulling away from the traditional standards and key-based chordal movement jazz had been built on since the beginning. While Miles Davis tends to get all the credit, the work of George Russell had an enormous influence on this as well. The ideas this genre explored liberated modes from key centers. Modes in all their individuality became far more important.

Listen to some or all of the following, with a lead sheet if possible:

- “So What” by Miles Davis
- “Milestones” by Miles Davis
- “Inner Urge” by Joe Henderson
- “Little Sunflower” by Freddie Hubbard
- “Cantaloupe Island” by Herbie Hancock
- “Windows” by Chick Corea

In every case, these tunes abandon the idea of modes related within a key and connected together by diatonic chord progressions, to instead make the modes the star of the show. “So What” contrasts two dorian scales. “Inner Urge” uses a large variety of lydian scales and even begins on a locrian scale. “Windows” is very unusual, wandering between sections of diatonic harmony and sections where modes move freely.

To take on this material, you’ll have to get to a fluent level with these scales. Here are some standard exercises to begin absorbing these sounds into your vocabulary:

- Play the scale to the 9th up and down.
- Play the scale in 3rds or 4ths.
- Play the scale in a variety of rhythmic patterns.
- Play the root and then the 2nd a few times.
 - Now root to 3rd, and so on up the scale until you get used to the intervals.
- Get a play-a-long or jam with a friend on a single chord that goes with the mode and improvise freely with it. Stick with the chord for a while so you can really get inside the sound and how the chord and scale interact.
 - Observe how each note sounds when held against the chord.
 - If your ear wants you to resolve it, try different options to acclimate to the internal movement.

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Assignments

1. Apply your new understanding of modes to a standard.
 - a. Analyze a tune from the Great American Song Book for its key centers.
 - b. Label major keys as follows: C: or A: or Eb:
 - c. Label minor keys as follows: c-: or a-: or eb-:
 - d. Now that the key centers are clear, improvise in those centers separately.
 - e. Now improvise with them in context.
 - f. Compose a solo using the correct scales for each chord based on your analysis.
2. Compose an original modal tune in AABA form.
 - a. Select 1-2 modes for the A-Section.
 - b. Select 1-2 different modes for the B-Section.
 - c. Write an original melody using these modes.
 - d. Label the chords.