

Tenor Banjo Modal Scales and Arpeggios: by Ron Hinkle

I've long advocated the learning and use of the modes for the plectrum banjo; now I'll turn my focus to the tenor banjo. I meant to do this five years ago, but got busy and kept putting it off. Now that I've done it, my thought is "well, that was easy!"

Simply put, the **Modal Scales** are a set of seven different scales that are all derived from the familiar Major scale. They are the 7 essential scales that every musician should know. The "Church Modes," as they are formally called (aka "White-key Scales" for piano players), have been around for centuries in one form or another. Their ancient Greek names speak to how universal they have been and for how long. To wit (using the key of C—no sharps or flats):

Ionian (Major): C to C. **Dorian:** D to D. **Phrygian:** E to E. **Lydian:** F to F. **Mixolydian:** G to G. **Aeolian (Natural Minor):** A to A. **Locrian:** B to B.

Play through the scales at **[A]**. Each scale simply starts on the next note of the C scale, and goes one octave (eight notes). At this point it is very important to *hear* each scale as being *different* from but *related* to the C Major scale; you might say they are *all C scales*, since there are no sharps or flats in them. It is important to learn their *names* as you learn to *play* them, if for no other reason than to be able to *speak* intelligently with other jazz musicians, who most-likely know these already.

In time, you should be able to tell which scale it is (and how it relates to the home key) upon hearing it by itself. You didn't know that scales were good ear-training, did you? It's not *just* an exercise for the fingers! "Classical" music theory (which most jazzers start with also) and jazz theory are both based on scales; it is my contention that banjo playing should be as well.

This is all fine and dandy—*for the key of C!* Of course, you can do the same thing easily in the keys of G and D (starting on those open strings), but what about the *other* keys? Don't you run into difficulties with open strings? Yes, you do! In fact, the more sharps or flats that you add, the more difficult they are (bordering on *impossible* or at least *impractical*), unless. . . Unless you play them as *closed scales*, meaning that you use *no open strings*.

Now play the scales at **[B]** (pay strict attention to the TAB). I call these 4-4 scales, meaning that you play four notes on each string to complete the scale. This is where it gets a bit dicey for the tenor banjo; you must use all four fingers of course, and some of them are awkward at best. Though they are awkward, you will get used to the difficulty with time and practice. Here's my plug for the *plectrum* banjo; these are *very easy* on that tuning, at least on the top three strings (the bottom two strings are exactly the same of course). If you play both tunings—and have already learned them on plectrum—compare them; it's very educational and stereotype-breaking ("*everyone knows you can [or should] only play chords on the plectrum!*").

It should be obvious that—since the tenor banjo is tuned entirely in fifths—these scales can be played on any two-string combination; I didn't write them out because this lesson would get very long. For example, play the C scale starting at the **4th string/12th fret**, or the **2nd string/10th fret**. Just like you did on the 3rd and 2nd string combination, move through the Modes by starting and ending on each consecutive note; move down an octave if you have to to complete the set.

To play this Mode set *in another key*, simply start the series on a different key note; for instance, **F** on the **4th string/5th fret**, **3rd string/10th fret**, or **2nd string/3rd fret**. These patterns work with *all 12* keys! See if you can extrapolate the F Mode series now. Now how about the **F#** Mode series? Do you know *all* of your scales? *Of course you do*; you just haven't *done* them yet!

This is where the question always arises; "Why?" Well, if you've followed the instructions so far (and had never seen these before), you already *know* infinitely-more about the tenor banjo than you did before! Isn't that reason enough? Will you ever *use* them in actual music? *Maybe, maybe not*. Actual use requires *just a bit* more practice/study/*advancement* (which I highly recommend), but at least this is a start, and in the meantime, they are an incomparable finger/ear exercise and will eventually lead you to said advancement.

Now we get to the real meat of this lesson—the *thing that the tenor banjo absolutely excels at*:

Modal Arpeggios

I'm sure you know what an arpeggio is; it is simply the 1-3-5-1 of a scale played in succession. I always knew that I should learn my arpeggios, but didn't really know where to start (kinda like the scales, actually); I mean, playing C-E-G-C is fine and dandy, but that gets boring pretty quickly, and soon other things seem more important to practice.

To play a *Modal* arpeggio however, requires a slightly different approach—one that lends itself easily to the tenor banjo, and creates an amazing practice routine that opens the instrument up to all sorts of new, fascinating possibilities.

“Modern Jazz” is based in large part on the Modes; therefore, the Modes lead one to understand Jazz. They easily spell out and outline what are known as the *Jazz 7th Chords*; to wit (in the key of C): CM7, Dm7, Em7, FM7, G7 (Dominant 7), Am7, Bm7b5, and CM7. They are forever and intimately tied together with the corresponding Modal scale; indeed, each name can be used for either the scale or arpeggio: Ionian = M7, Dorian = m7, Phrygian = m7, Lydian = M7, Mixolydian = 7, Aeolian = m7, and Locrian = m7b5 (or half-diminished in Classical speak).

So now, the C arpeggio becomes 1-3-5-7 (C-E-G-B) and is known as a C Major 7 arpeggio. In straight ahead jazz, you will rarely if ever see just a Triad; the “tonic” will be represented by a CM7 chord (in the key of C). This gives a fuller, hipper sound, and makes for clearer voice leading. These will sound strange at first, but will soon make sense as your ear expands and advances. This is the theoretical and auditory dividing line between 1920s jazz (which happily included the banjo), and the rest of jazz history (after the banjo had been kicked to the curb as worthless, hokey junk—“*them mean jazzers!*”). It's high-time we got even with them by learning their Modal “secrets!”

So now, turn thy attention if you will (preferably after a break, or a drink or two, or both) to **C**. Notice that I have jumped immediately to a 2-2 fingering pattern (2 notes per string played on 2 adjacent strings = 4 notes). Except for the first open-string arpeggio, these are all closed-string, meaning you can easily play them in any key, on any area of the fretboard.

At **D** and **E**, I have simply begun the Mode series on the next open string; G7, and Dm7. This is an important pre-requisite to the next step, so play them all.

At **F** we take another giant step into jazz territory by learning the “extensions,” which again are very easy on the tenor banjo. If you take the 1-3-5-7 and continue up in odd numbers (in intervals of a 3rd), you get 9-11-13 and 1 (two octaves up from the key note). You've probably wondered what a “9,” “11” or “13” chord is; now you know (though the extensions are often modified in actual chord use; we'll get to that in a later lesson)!

These will definitely sound weird until you get used to them; they are a great ear stretcher, which is probably the main point at first. Physically, they give us an easy, legitimate way to practice arpeggios clear across the fingerboard, covering all four strings—and we needed a reason and especially a *means* to do that, didn't we?

One last very important and mind-boggling aspect of this is that within each extended Modal arpeggio is contained the notes of *all seven of the Jazz 7 chords*. This is simply because *every note of the C scale* is contained in each of the extended arpeggios. Notice the bracket above the CM7 arpeggio; it outlines the Em7 that is contained within. I have bracketed the Em7 in each of the arpeggios. This has profound implications for jazz improv; there really are very few “wrong” notes in jazz! Also, can you see where an Em7 chord would make a nice substitute for a CM7? All you have to do is get used to the *different* (no longer *weird*) sound, and learn a bit more theory to put them to use.

This is but a humble beginning to something that should keep you learning more and more for the rest of your days. I practice my scales and arpeggios a lot, and it always amazes me when I learn a slightly different trick; my eventual goal is to know those tricks so well that I can just “*play without thinking*.” That is jazz in a nutshell I believe.

Meanwhile, I know that my fingers and my ears are getting the best possible workout there is! My playing of standard banjo music has improved greatly since starting this exploration. I am just now crossing that jazz divide into realizing that scales/arpeggios *far exceed* chords in importance. Chord Melody, be gone! Well, hello jazz. . .

Tenor Banjo Modal Scales and Arpeggios

by Ron Hinkle

A Open Modal Scales

C Ionian (Major) D Dorian (Minor w/ raised 6) E Phrygian (Minor w/ lowered 2)

F Lydian (Major w/ raised 4) G Mixolydian (Major w/ lowered 7) A Aeolian (Natural Minor)

B Closed Modal Scales

B Locrian (Minor w/ lowered 2 and 5) C Ionian (Major) C Ionian (Major)

D Dorian (Minor w/ raised 6) E Phrygian (Minor w/ lowered 2) F Lydian (Major w/ raised 4)

G Mixolydian (Major w/ lowered 7) A Aeolian (Natural Minor) B Locrian (Minor w/ lowered 2 and 5)

C Jazz 7th Chords

C Ionian (Major) Cmaj7 Dm7 Em7

Fingerings: 17-19-21-22, 17-19-21-22, 0-4-0-4, 0-4-0, 2-5-2-5, 2-5-2, 4-7-4-7

Fmaj7 G7 Am7

Fingerings: 4-7-4, 5-9-5-9, 5-9-5, 7-11-7-10, 7-11-7, 9-12-9-12, 9-12-9

D

Bm7(b5) Cmaj7 G7 Am7

Fingerings: 11-14-10-14, 10-14-11, 12-16-12-16, 12-16-12, 0-4-0-3, 0-4-0, 2-5-2-5

Bm7(b5) Cmaj7 Dm7

Fingerings: 2-5-2, 4-7-3-7, 3-7-4, 5-9-5-9, 5-9-5, 7-10-7-10, 7-10-7

E

Em7 Fmaj7 G7 Dm7

Fingerings: 9-12-9-12, 9-12-9, 10-14-10-14, 10-14-10, 12-16-12-15, 12-16-12, 0-3-0-3

Em7 Fmaj7 G7

Am7 Bm7(b5) Cmaj7 Dm7

F Jazz 7th Chords with extensions

Cmaj7 Dm7 Em7

Fmaj7 G7 Am7

Bm7(b5) Cmaj7