

# GUITAR MODES



## FRETBOARD MASTERY

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Understanding guitar modes isn't as hard as many people believe it to be. I admit the theory can be a bit confusing, but once you get a hold of the basic concepts, it's actually quite easy to use modes on the guitar. In this lesson you'll learn what the modes are, how they look on the guitar and how you can use modes in your solos and improvisation.

## What Are Guitar Modes?

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**Modes** are nothing new, the modes as we use them today were formalized around 1675. Modes are not limited to jazz, but used in a wide variety of genres. They are not limited to guitar either, they are used on most melodic instruments.

*Modes are scales derived from a parent scale. All 7 modes have the same notes as the parent scale, but start on a different note, which defines the tonal center.*

The words mode and scale are **used interchangeably**.

In this lesson we'll concentrate on the **modes of the major scale** (the major scale being the parent scale in this case). There are other parent scales as well, such as the harmonic minor scale and the [melodic minor scale](#).

## Guitar Modes Explained

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The first step in understanding guitar modes is defining **the parent scale**.

You probably have played modes on the guitar before, probably without realizing you were playing them. Can you play a **C major scale**? Then you know the first mode (out of 7), the Ionian mode...

In the following examples, the C major scale is the parent scale. The C major scale runs from C to C and has **no sharps or flats**. The C major scale is also our first mode, the Ionian mode.

Here's a list of all **7 modes of the C major scale**:

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

Let's go back to our parent scale, the C major scale (aka C Ionian mode). In music theory, we number each note of the scale, going from 1 to 7. This is called the **scale formula**.

C Major Scale (= C Ionian Mode)	C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Formula	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Let's play the C major scale starting from the second note (D). This is the second mode, called the **Dorian mode**. The 3rd and 7th note are a half step lower compared

to the Ionian mode, that's why we put a 'b' before 3 and 7. Here are the notes of the D Dorian mode:

D Dorian Mode	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
Formula	1	2	b3	4	5	6	b7

Now let's play the C major scale starting from the third note (E). This is the third mode, the **Phrygian mode**. The 2nd, 3rd and 7th note are a half step lower compared to the Ionian mode. Here are the notes of the E Phrygian mode:

E Phrygian Mode	E	F	G	A	B	C	D
Formula	1	b2	b3	4	5	b6	b7

We can continue this for the other notes of the major scale, but I guess you get the picture by now. If you scroll down a bit you'll find a list with all **7 modes**.

**Each mode has its own unique sound.** This sound depends on how the intervals are mapped across the scale. Although the notes in both scales are exactly the same, the sound of the scale is completely different because the tonal center has changed. In the C Ionian mode, the tonal center is C. In the D Dorian mode, the tonal center is D.

Each mode has a **related chord**. We can find that chord by stacking thirds on the first note of the mode. We'll only touch briefly on this subject here, but if you're not familiar with this essential part of music theory, head over to this lesson: [Jazz Guitar Chord Theory](#).

Let's do this for the **C Ionian mode**: C E G B. The result is a **Cmaj7 chord**:

C	E	G	B
1	3	5	7

If you build a chord on the first note of the **D Dorian mode** you get D F A C, a **Dm7 chord**:

D	F	A	C
1	b3	5	b7

Here's an **overview of the 7 modes** of the C major scale, their formula and corresponding chord:

<b>I C Ionian (Cmaj7)</b>	C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Ionian Scale Formula	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>II D Dorian (Dm7)</b>	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
Dorian Scale Formula	1	2	b3	4	5	6	b7
<b>III E Phrygian (Em7)</b>	E	F	G	A	B	C	D
Phrygian Scale Formula	1	b2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
<b>IV F Lydian (Fmaj7)</b>	F	G	A	B	C	D	E
Lydian Scale Formula	1	2	3	#4	5	6	7
<b>V G Mixolydian (G7)</b>	G	A	B	C	D	E	F
Mixolydian Scale Formula	1	2	3	4	5	6	b7
<b>VI A Aeolian (Am7)</b>	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Aeolian Scale Formula	1	2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
<b>VII B Locrian (Bm7b5)</b>	B	C	D	E	F	G	A
Locrian Scale Formula	1	b2	b3	4	b5	b6	b7

You should memorize the names of the modes + the formula. Here's a mnemonic trick to help you remember the names (the letters in bold correspondent to the first letters of the modes): **I** **D**on't **P**lay **L**ike **M**y **A**unt **L**ucy.

To recap, here are the 7 modes grouped according to chord quality:

Chord Quality	Mode
Major	Ionian, Lydian
Minor	Dorian, Aeolian, Phrygian
Dominant	Mixolydian
Half Diminished	Locrian

## How to Use Modes on the Guitar + Examples

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Next, you'll learn **how modes are played on the guitar** and we'll have a look at some typical examples (there is a sample lick included with each mode so you can hear how guitar modes are used).

**Use all your senses** when learning guitar scales: use your ears (most important), your eyes (recognize the pattern on the fret board), your brains (memorize the guitar scale formulas) and your fingers' muscle memory.

### Legend:



represents the root or 1 of the guitar scale. The letter inside the box is the note name.



represents a guitar scale note.

The **grey numbers** below the music notation is the fingering (1=index finger, 2=middle finger, 3=ring finger, 4=pinky finger).



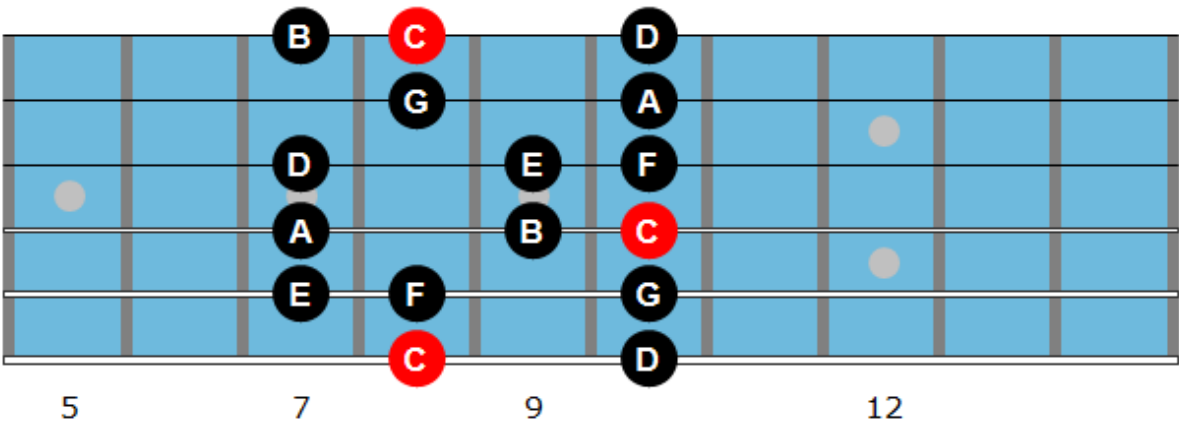
### 1. C Ionian Mode

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- **Formula:** 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- **Use:** on major chords (Imaj7)
- **Related chord:** Cmaj7
- **Characteristic notes:** 3 (e) and 7 (b)
- The 4 (f) is what is called an **avoid note** over major chords. For example, the f (4) played over a Cmaj7 chord will sound dissonant because it's a half step higher than the chord note e (3), creating a b9 interval. This doesn't mean that you can't use the f in your lines (like I do in the example lick below), but I wouldn't keep it hanging for too long, unless you really like that sound.

Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)



Cmaj7

Musical notation for the first system of the C major 7th scale exercise. It shows a treble clef staff with a melody and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The melody is: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, B6, C7. The bass line is: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The notes are: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. The notes C, C, and C are highlighted in red.

Musical notation for the second system of the C major 7th scale exercise. It shows a treble clef staff with a melody and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The melody is: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, B6, C7. The bass line is: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The notes are: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. The notes C, C, and C are highlighted in red.

The following example lick only uses notes of the **C Ionian scale**. It starts with an 1235 pattern on the 5th, followed by an enclosure of the 3rd and finishes with a descending scale run.

There is also a longer Ionian scale study more below in this lesson.

### Backing Track

[Click here to play this backing track](#)

### Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)

**C<sup>maj7</sup>**

10 7-9 7 9-10 7 10-7-9 8 7-10-8-7 10-8 10-9-7 10-9-10 7-9 10-10

## 2. D Dorian Mode

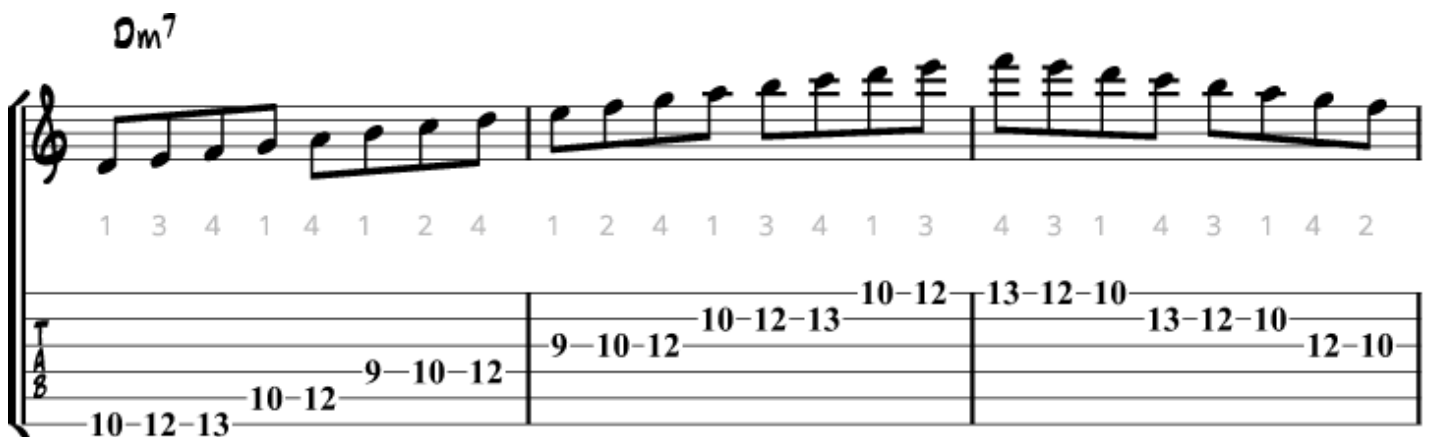
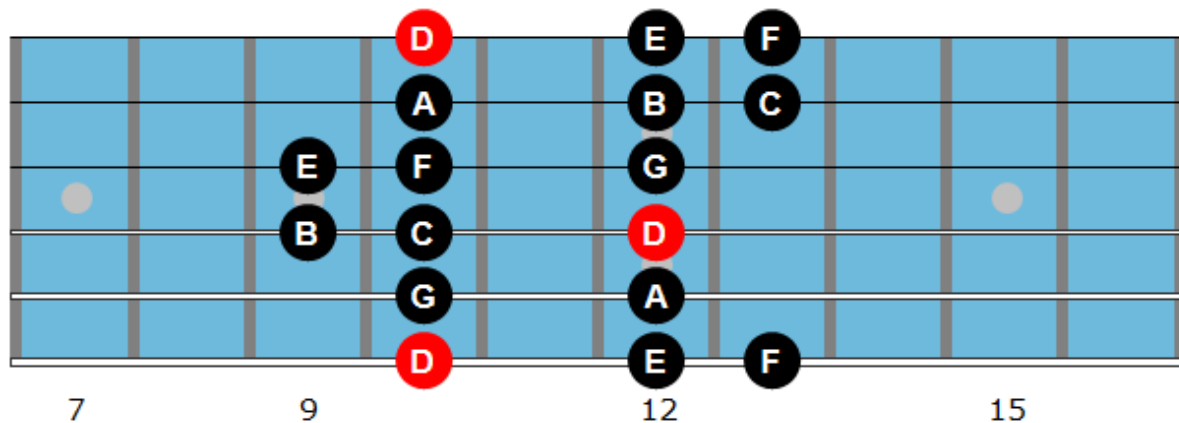
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- **Formula:** 1 2 b3 4 5 6 b7
- **Use:** on minor chords (the ii of a ii V I), on minor modal tunes such as So What.
- **Related chord:** Dm7
- **Characteristic notes:** 6 and 9



## Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)



The following lick only uses notes of the **D Dorian scale** and puts emphasis on the 6 and the 9, 2 characteristic notes of the Dorian mode.

There is a longer Dorian scale study more below in this lesson.

## Backing Track

[Click here to play this backing track](#)

## Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)

**Dm<sup>6</sup>(add9)**

10 13-10-12-10 12-10 9 12-10 12 9 10-12 9 10-12 9 10-12 9 12-9 10 10

4

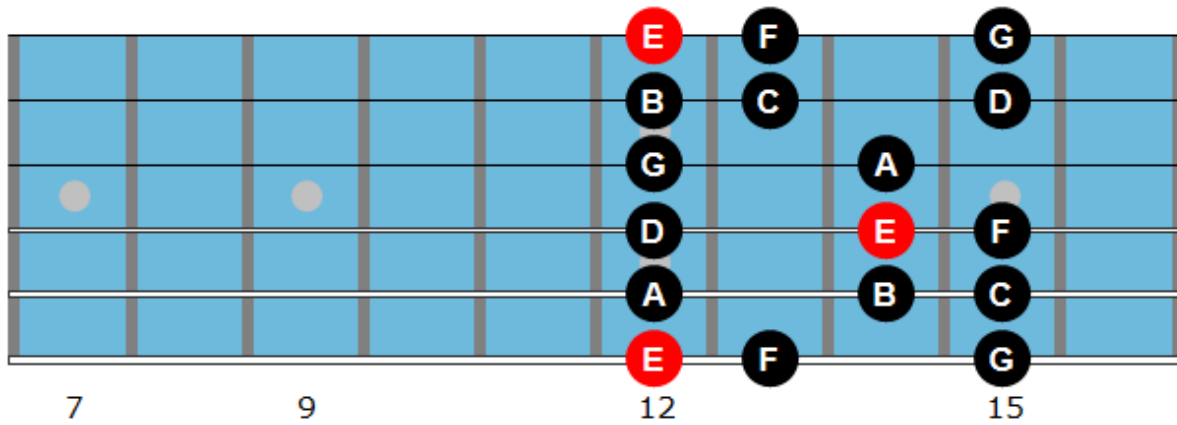
13 10 12 10 12 10 12 10

## 3. E Phrygian Mode

- **Formula:** 1 b2 b3 4 5 b6 b7
- **Use:** on minor chords (iim7). Played on a Im7, the Phrygian mode has a Spanish flavor (one of the guitar scales frequently used in flamenco).
- **Related chord:** Em7
- **Characteristic notes:** b9 and b6

### Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)



**Em<sup>7</sup>**

1 2 4 1 3 4 1 3 4 1 3 1 2 4 1 2 4 2 1 4 2 1 3 1

12-13-15 12-14-15 12-14 15 12-14 12-13-15 12-13 15-13-12 15-13-12 14-12

The following example only uses notes of the **E Phrygian scale**, and puts emphasis on the b9 and b13, two characteristic notes of the Phrygian mode.

## Backing Track

[Click here to play this backing track](#)

## Listen & Play

[Click here to play this example](#)

The image displays musical notation for a backing track in E Phrygian mode, consisting of two systems of a treble and bass staff.

**System 1:**

- Staff 1 (Treble):** Contains three measures. The first measure is labeled  $E_m^7$  and features a descending eighth-note scale: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The second measure is labeled  $F^{maj7}(\sharp 11)$  and features a descending eighth-note scale: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The third measure is labeled  $E_m^7$  and features an ascending eighth-note scale: G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4.
- Staff 2 (Bass):** Contains three measures of fret numbers. Measure 1: 14, 14, 13-15-12. Measure 2: 15, 13-12, 15-13, 12. Measure 3: 12, 14, 15-13-12, 14-12, 15.

**System 2:**

- Staff 1 (Treble):** Starts with a measure number '4'. It contains two measures. The first measure is labeled  $F^{maj7}(\sharp 11)$  and features a descending eighth-note scale: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The second measure is labeled  $E_m^7$  and features a descending eighth-note scale: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3.
- Staff 2 (Bass):** Contains two measures of fret numbers. Measure 1: 13-12, 14-12, 15-12, 14-15. Measure 2: 14.

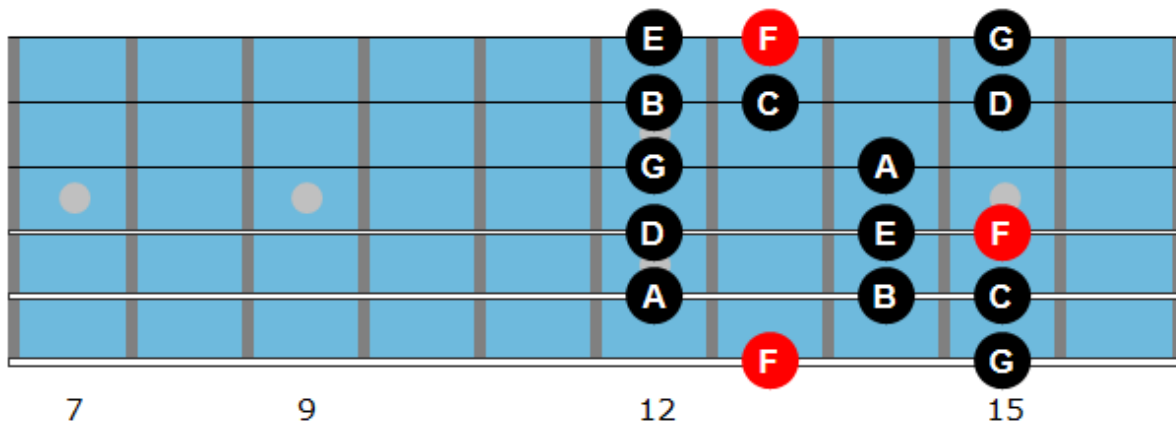
## 4. F Lydian Mode

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- **Formula:** 1 2 3 #4 5 6 7
- **Use:** on major chords (IVmaj7)
- **Related chord:** Fmaj7
- **Characteristic notes:** 7 and #11

**Listen & Play:**

[Click here to play this example](#)



**Fmaj7(#11)**

2 4 1 3 4 1 3 4 1 3 1 2 4 1 2 4

13—15 12—14—15 12—14—15 12—13—15 12—13—15

**3**

2 1 4 2 1 3 1 4 3 1 4 3 1 4 2

13—12 15—13—12 14—12 15 14—12 15—14—12 15—13

The following example only uses notes of the **F Lydian scale**, and puts emphasis on the 7 and #11, two characteristic notes of the Lydian mode.

### Backing Track

[Click here to play this backing track](#)

### Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)

*f* maj7<sup>♯11</sup>

5

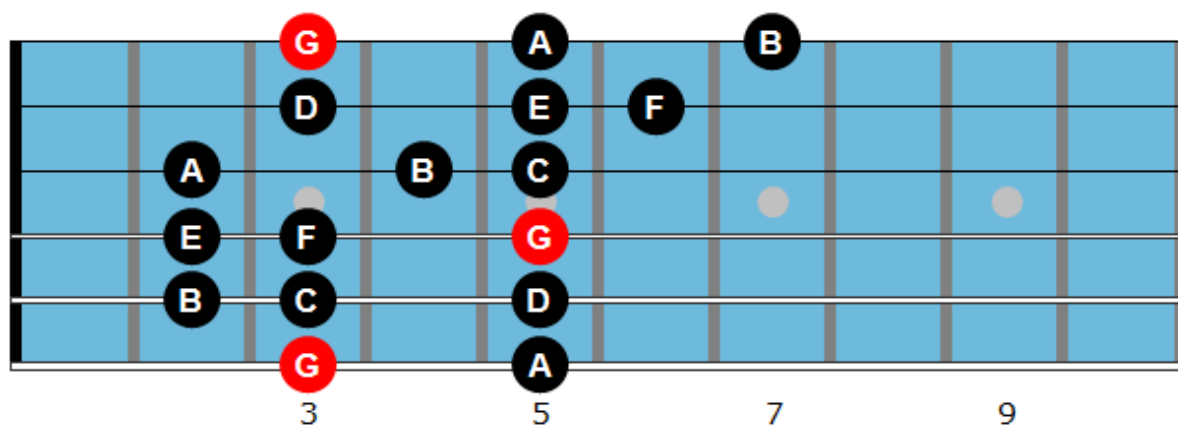
## 5. G Mixolydian Mode

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- **Formula:** 1 2 3 4 5 6 b7
- **Use:** on dominant chords (V7). The Mixolydian scale is often used in blues (on I7).
- **Related chord:** G7
- **Characteristic notes:** 6 and b7

### Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)





This next lick is based on the **G Mixolydian scale**.

### Backing Track

[Click here to play this backing track](#)

### Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)

**G<sup>7</sup>**

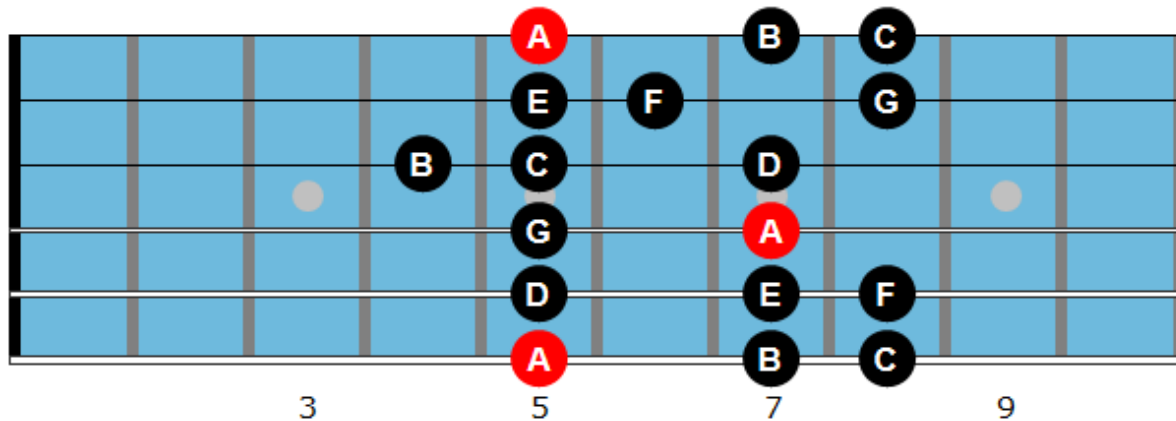
4

## 6. A Aeolian Mode

- **Formula:** 1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7
- **Use:** on minor chords (vim7)
- **Related chord:** Am7
- **Characteristic note:** b6

## Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)



This lick is based on the **A Aeolian scale** and focuses on the characteristic note (b6) of the Aeolian mode. By emphasising this note, you outline the sound of the mode in your lines, differentiating it from other minor modes such as the Dorian mode, which has a major 6.

## Backing Track

[Click here to play this backing track](#)

## Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)

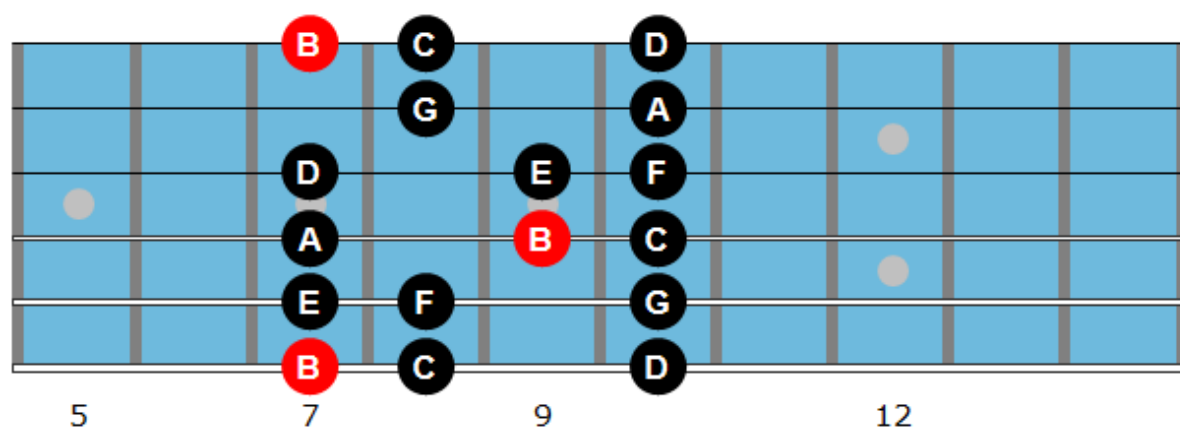
The image displays two systems of musical notation for a backing track exercise. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first system is divided into four measures, each with a chord label above it: Am7, Fmaj7, Am7, and Fmaj7. The treble staff contains a melodic line in A minor, and the bass staff contains a bass line with fingerings indicated by numbers 1-5. The second system also consists of four measures with the same chord sequence: Am7, Fmaj7, Am7, and Fmaj7. The treble staff continues the melodic line, and the bass staff continues the bass line. The exercise concludes with a double bar line at the end of the fourth measure of the second system.

## 7. B Locrian Mode

- **Formula:** 1 b2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7
- **Use:** on half diminished chords (the iim7b5 on a minor ii V I)
- **Related chord:** Bm7b5
- **Characteristic note:** b5

### Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)



Bm7(b5)

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The treble clef staff contains a melodic line with fingerings: 1 2 4 1 2 4 1 3 4 1 3 4 1 3 1 2 4 2 1 3 1 4 3 1. The bass clef staff contains a bass line with fingerings: 7-8-10 7-8-10 7-9 10 7-9-10 8-10 7-8 10-8-7 10-8 10-9-7.

[illegible]

The following example only uses notes of the **B Locrian scale**. I emphasize the 11 in this lick because it adds a nice color played over m7b5 chords.

## Backing Track

[Click here to play this backing track](#)

## Listen & Play:

[Click here to play this example](#)

**Bm7(b5)**

## Using Guitar Modes Over Modal Standards

*A modal standard is a standard that uses modes instead of chord progressions as its harmonic basis.*

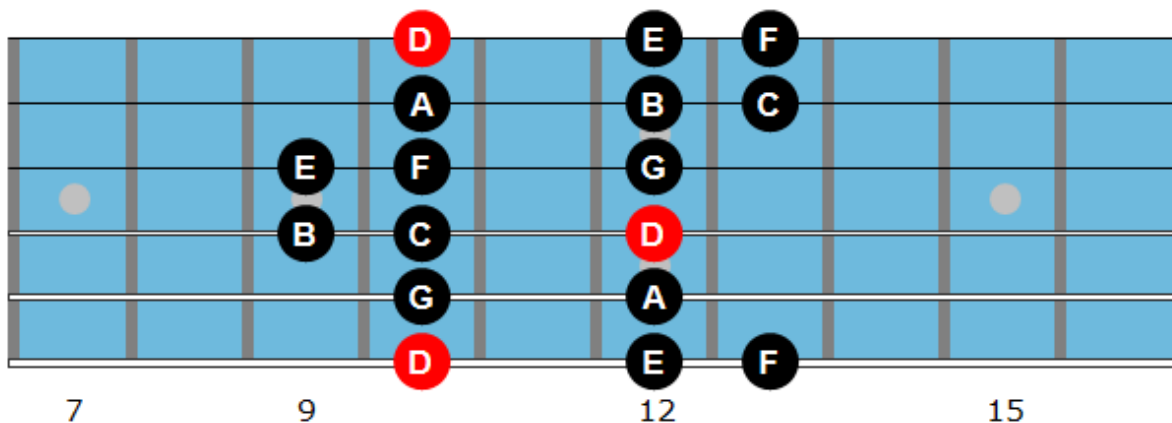
The most famous modal compositions are **So What** (Miles Davis) and **Impressions** (John Coltrane).

Both standards use the same AABA form:

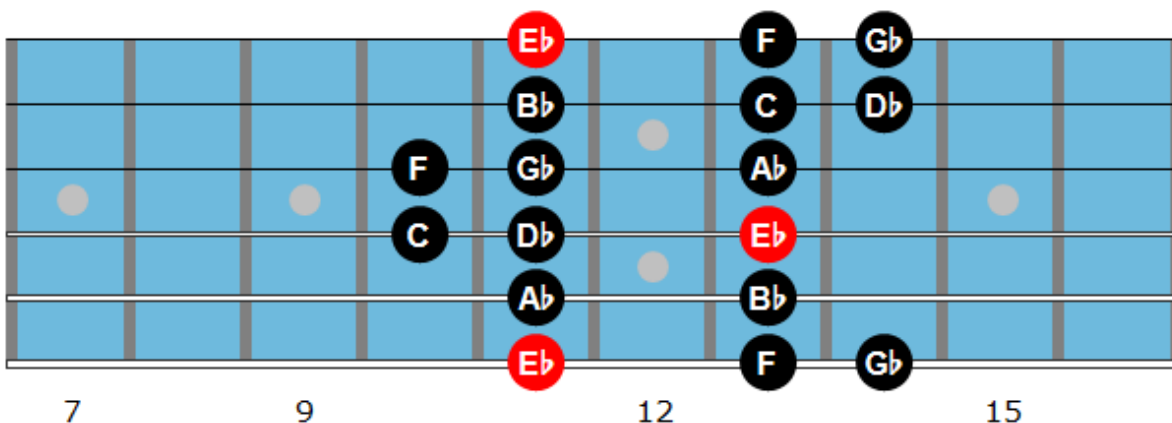
- **A1:** 8 bars of Dm7 (D Dorian scale)
- **A2:** 8 bars of Dm7 (D Dorian scale)
- **B:** 8 bars of Ebm7 (Eb Dorian scale)
- **A3:** 8 bars of Dm7 (D Dorian scale)

In the following solo over So What (or Impressions) I play only notes of the D Dorian scale over the A sections, and the Eb Dorian scale over the B sections:

### D Dorian Scale (A sections)



### **Eb Dorian Scale (B section)**

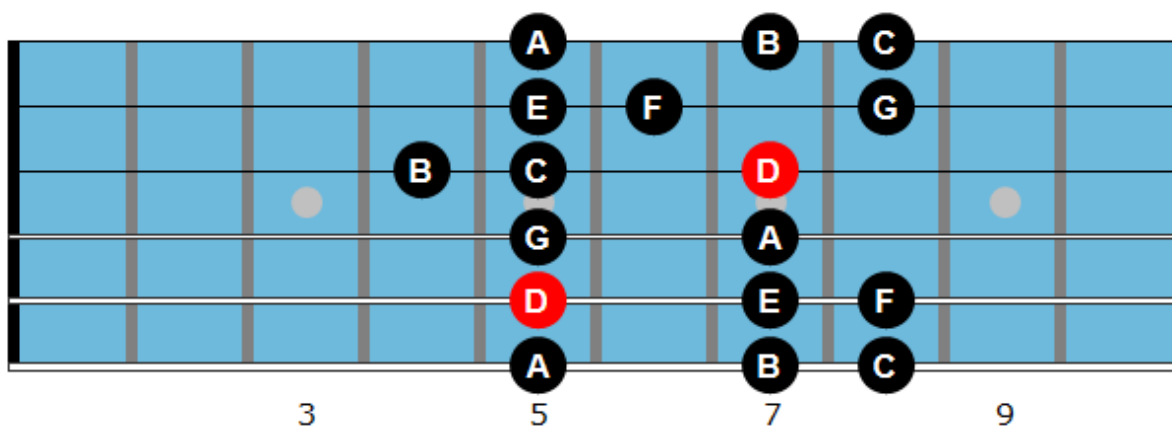


In **bar 26**, you'll notice I switch to another position on the guitar neck. On that part I play the A Aeolian scale shape, which might be confusing for those that just started studying modes because a lot of guitarist think in shapes rather than in notes.

D Dorian has the same notes as A Aeolian (both come from the C major scale), they just start on a different note. Because the harmonic background of this tune is D minor, **the A Aeolian shape will sound like D Dorian**.

You can also play all the other mode shapes of the C major scale over So What (C Ionian, E Phrygian, etc), they will all sound like D Dorian because **the tonal center of the tune is D**.

The diagram below shows you a D Dorian scale that looks like the A Aeolian scale shape. Notice how the **red root note** is D, not A:



*D Dorian = A Aeolian. Although it is ok to visualize scale shapes as you improvise, realize that they are just a set of 7 notes that depend on the tonal center of the tune you are playing. The A Aeolian shape played over D minor, will not sound Aeolian, but Dorian (confusing, I know).*

## Backing Track

[Click here to play this backing track](#)

## Listen & Play

[Click here to play this example](#)

Dm<sup>7</sup>

First system of guitar notation for Dm<sup>7</sup> in 4/4 time. The treble clef staff contains a melody of eighth and quarter notes. The bass clef staff shows fingerings: 9-10 12-9, 9-10 12-9, 10 12 12, and 9-10 12 10.

5

Second system of guitar notation for Dm<sup>7</sup> in 4/4 time. The treble clef staff continues the melody. The bass clef staff shows fingerings: 12-10 13, 12-10 12-10, 9-10 12, and 12-10 13.

Dm<sup>7</sup>

9

Third system of guitar notation for Dm<sup>7</sup> in 4/4 time. The treble clef staff continues the melody. The bass clef staff shows fingerings: 10 12 13, 10 12 10 9 12, 9-10 12 9-12-9 10 10, 13 10 12 10 12 10 12, 10 10 10 9 12-9, and 10 12 10 12 10 12.



13

9 10-9 12-9 12-9 11-10 13-10 13

[illegible]

21

13-11 13 11 \ 10

14 13-11 13

13 13-11 10

13-12 10 12

25  $Dm^7$

12-10-9

7 7 8-6 5

7-5 7 4-5 7 5

8-5 6 5-8 7-5 8

29

6-5 7-5 4 7-5 8

7-8 5-7

4-5-7 5-6-8 5-8

7-5 6 7 8 8

33  $Dm^7$

10 10 12 12 13

## Using Modes over Chord Progressions (Guitar Modes Made Easy)

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Next, you'll learn how you can use modes over a chord progression, a **ii V I vi** (C major) in this case.

Dm7	G7	Cmaj7	Am7
ii <sup>m</sup> 7	V7	I <sup>maj</sup> 7	vi <sup>m</sup> 7

Theoretically, you play a different scale over each chord:

- Dm7 (ii): the D Dorian scale.
- G7 (V): the G Mixolydian scale.
- Cmaj7 (I): the C Ionian scale.
- Am7 (vi): the A Aeolian scale.

In practice we don't think like that because it's **too hard to switch scales** on each chord.

If we have a look at the 4 modes of these chords, you'll notice they **all have the same notes**:

D Dorian Scale	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
	1	2	b3	4	5	6	b7
G Mixolydian Scale	G	A	B	C	D	E	F
	1	2	3	4	5	6	b7
C Ionian Scale	C	D	E	F	G	A	B
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A Aeolian Scale	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	1	2	b3	4	5	b6	b7

So, these 4 modes all have the same 7 notes: C D E F G A B

This means we can **play one scale** (the scale of the Imaj7 chord for example), and use that scale to play over all chords (as long as the chords don't modulate).

- The C Ionian scale played over the Dm7 chord will sound like the D Dorian scale.
- The C Ionian scale played over the G7 chord will sound like the G Mixolydian scale.
- The C Ionian scale played over the Am7 chord will sound like the A Aeolian scale.

In the following example I use the C Ionian scale over a ii V I vi chord progression:

### Backing Track

[Click here to play this backing track](#)

### Listen & Play

[Click here to play this example](#)

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a ii V I vi chord progression: Dm7, G7, Cmaj7, and Am7. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a melody and a bass staff with fingerings. The first system shows a C Ionian scale run (C-D-E-F-G-A-B) over each chord. The second system shows a C Ionian scale run (C-B-A-G-F-E-D) over each chord. The bass staff for the first system shows fingerings: 8-7-10-8-7 for Dm7, 10-8-10 for G7, 8-10-9-7-10-9 for Cmaj7, and 10-7-9-10 for Am7. The bass staff for the second system shows fingerings: 10-9-7-8-10 for Dm7, 8-10-9-7 for G7, 9-8-10-8-9 for Cmaj7, and 8-7 for Am7.

**System 1:**

Chords: Dm7, G7, Cmaj7, Am7

Scale: C Ionian (C-D-E-F-G-A-B)

**System 2:**

Chords: Dm7, G7, Cmaj7, Am7

Scale: C Ionian (C-B-A-G-F-E-D)

9  $Dm^7$   $G^7$   $C^{maj7}$   $Am^7$

13  $Dm^7$   $G^7$   $C^{maj7}$   $Am^7$

17

Dm<sup>7</sup> G<sup>7</sup> Cmaj<sup>7</sup> Am<sup>7</sup>

21

Dm<sup>7</sup> G<sup>7</sup> Cmaj<sup>7</sup> Am<sup>7</sup>



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