



In the Mode

Easing into Modal Jazz

By Ted Eschliman

Back to simple

Many think of jazz as being extremely complex harmonically and rhythmically. More often than not this is true, at least in comparison to its roots in American folk songs, but at one point during its century long history, the harmonic cadence took a drastic turn for something dramatically slower: during the development of "Modal" Jazz. Note, we aren't referring to tempo or speed, rather to how fast chords

change. Classic **Modal Jazz** is extremely sparse in chords, using a different scale, or, more appropriately, "mode" for a long period of time. A very early example of this would have been from trumpeter **Miles Davis'** 1959 album "**Kind of Blue**," the classic standard, "**So What**," which used only two chords **D minor** and **Eb minor** throughout its entire **32 measures**. Through the intense repetition and lack of distraction from the rapid-fire chord changes and tonal center ambiguity characteristic of the 50's Bebop era, jazz had taken a brief detour into something more similar to its earliest roots. Another kind of sophistication emerged: the only thing different was the "attitude" of cool.

Modes

For the uninitiated, just what do we mean by the word "**Mode**?" The simplest way to put it is in the context of patterns and scale degree relationships based on the **Major Scale**. If you started a **D scale** on its first note, the pitches would be **D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, and D** again. If you started the same scale of pitches on A, and kept the relationships, you'd have a similar scale, but unlike the **A Major scale**, you'd have a **G Natural** instead of **G#**. This would be a **Mixolydian Mode** with its lowered 7th: **A, B, C#, D, E, F#, G, A**. You may already know this, but many Fiddle tunes use this mode; it's quite common. In particular, "**Old Joe Clark**," "**Liza Jane**," "**June Apple**," and "**Red Haired Boy**," to name a few examples. You may have always thought these were in a **Major** key but that lowered **7th scale degree** betrays its true nature. (*Try playing those tunes with the raised 7th and see how long you last in the jam before you're thrown out with the spoon players...*)

Dorian

In total, there are seven modes, but we just want to talk about one in particular for this lesson, the **Dorian Mode**, because it was quite commonly used by some jazz cornerstone figures like **Miles**, **John Coltrane**, **McCoy Tyner**, and **Bill Evans**. It's similar to the **Mixolydian**, except for one note, the **3rd**. Lowering this gives it a whole different vibe, and frames it more like a **Minor** key. In the aforementioned Miles tune "**So What**," the chords are **D and Eb minor**, but the soloing is frequently in **D and Eb Dorian**. If you look closely, it's the consistently raised 6th scale degree that gives it away.

So should you think of the Dorian mode as being a series of notes based on the **2nd degree** of a **Major Scale**? Perhaps, but we prefer to frame it in its "minorness" and consider it a **Major** scale with a lowered **3rd** and a lowered **7th**. Don't get bogged down in semantics and do what works best for you, however. Here is what it looks like:

The image shows two musical staves. The first staff is labeled "D Major Scale" and shows the notes D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D. The second staff is labeled "D Major Scale, lowered 3rd (F), lowered 7th (C)" and shows the notes D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D. Below each staff are guitar fretboard diagrams for the D string, showing the fingerings for each note: 7-2-4-5 for the D major scale and 7-2-3-5 for the Dorian mode.

Speaking of Fiddle tunes, did you know that "**Cluck Old Hen**" is actually a **Dorian** tune? How about the **Drunken Sailor Hornpipe**? You can probably think of more. Interestingly, like **John Coltrane's** classic composition "**Impressions**," the fiddler and the post-bebopper are going to take a similar approach in improvisation, worrying much less about harmonic changes and more about melodic nuance. This is also a great step out for a beginning jazzier who might be intimidated by the rapid-fire chord changes of Coltrane's "**Giant Steps**" or other Bebop milestones. (*Pun intended...*)

In the book "**Getting Into Jazz Mandolin**" (yes, it's really out, now!!!), we introduce an exercise to help familiarize your fingers with **Dorian Scale** patterns. We want to give you a teaser of what you can do with modal skills, so we're offering a sneak peak at the above song, "**Dorian's Grey**" that incorporates the **Modal** concept into some remedial improvisation. Some hints about what notes to use:

- Think of the notes of the **Dm chord (D, F, A)** and the **Gm chord (G, Bb, D)**; use the other notes as passing tones
- Try to get away from playing scalar, or in stepwise motion. Think about jumping around in **arpeggios**
- Think of the upper extensions of the chords, the **9th, 11th, and 13ths**. You can play these upper triads and pull the roots out of the harmony by improvising on an **E minor triad** over the **D minor chord**, and an **A minor triad** over the **G minor chord**.
- Relax and enjoy the simplicity of the harmonic structure and incorporate more rhythmic nuance. *Swing!*

You can download a better copy of the tune in a PDF: http://jazzmando.com/print/GJM_DorinsGrey.pdf

Also, a plug for the book. We've had a hot New Orleans ensemble lay down some great jam tracks for the accompanying CD. (*This alone is worth buying the book!*) You can hear some great examples of what can be done with this tune on the support audio of our "**Webtracks**" Page on the JazzMando site.

Shortcut audio link: 🎧 [Dorian's Grey: Don Stiernberg](http://jazzmando.com/webtracks/DS_DoriansGrey.mp3):
http://jazzmando.com/webtracks/DS_DoriansGrey.mp3

Shortcut audio link: 🎧 [Dorian's Grey: Mark Wilson](http://jazzmando.com/sound/MW_Dor_Grey.mp3): http://jazzmando.com/sound/MW_Dor_Grey.mp3

More audio tracks for Mel Bay's "Getting Into Jazz Mandolin": [Webtracks](#)



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Dorian's Grey

Major scale with a lowered 3rd and 7th or
Minor scale with lowered 7th and raised 6th

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Straight ahead swing ♩ = 144

Dm9 D Dorian

D 7(#9)

Gm9 G Dorian Am7 Gm9

Dm9 D Dorian

Ebm Eb Dorian Em7(b5) A7(b9) Dm9 (Em7(b5) A7(b9))

Dorian scales to base improvisation or in the above song:

D Dorian G Dorian Eb Dorian