



Rock Modes III

by Chris Botta

In our last lesson, we worked to solidify our concepts of modal improvisation by looking at how pentatonic scales are applied modally in everyday rock and blues, and also how the major and minor pentatonic can be used together in a technique called, "mode mixture." In our final lesson in this series, let's swing back to the original major scale-based concept of modes as used in the original seven Greek modes model.

Have you ever played a tune that appears simple on the surface, with chords that you know well and no obvious modulation or jaggedly abrupt chord changes, yet for some reason, the basic major/minor or blues scales just don't seem to fit? Or, a note that sounds fine in one section sounds "off" in the chorus, or a lick that's based on the melody suddenly falls flat when used in another section of the song? This is often a situation where an understanding of modes can be of help. It's always best to connect theoretical or technical studies with living, breathing music- so let's take a look at a couple of tunes and see how we can master them through the application of modal concepts.

Switching Between Modes

Diamond's Girl

Dm Dm G G

Guitar

Guitar

T
A
B

Dm Dm G G

Guitar

H.O.

H.O.

B \flat C Dm Dm

Guitar

1/2

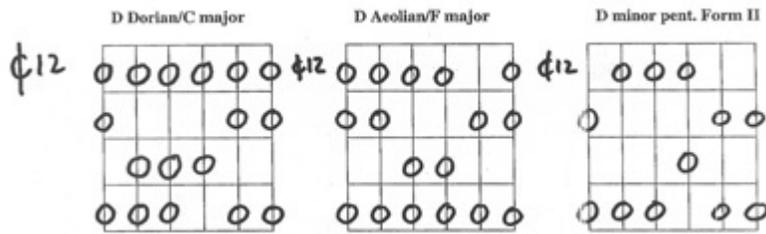
B \flat C Dm C Dm

Guitar

1/2

1/2

"Diamond's Girl" is a minor key rock number with a verse section and chorus section. The melody bears some resemblance to Neil Diamond's "Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon," and the piece has a distinctly 60s flavor. The two modes at work here are D Dorian, which is the equivalent of C major, and D Aeolian, which is the equivalent of F major. D Aeolian is also known as D natural minor. Note that there is only a one-note difference between the two modes: D Dorian has the note B natural, while in D Aeolian, the B is flatted. This allows for a very efficient fingerboard approach. You can use two of the most common major scale patterns at the 12th fret to access both modes. Another convenient pattern is the D minor pentatonic scale. Form II of the scale occurs at the 12 fret also, so all three scales are in the same position. Here are the patterns:



One of the concepts that I like to stress is positional play. Often in guitar instruction books, an effort is made to promote the idea that you should master all scales all over the fretboard. This is a worthy goal, but not necessarily the most practical one. Many of the greatest guitarists use the entire fretboard, but even then, they tend to return again and again to favorite "sweet spots." The twelfth position, with the index finger covering notes at the twelfth fret, is one such position. Large portions of many of the most popular solos are played at the twelfth fret. Guitarists who seek to improve their improvisational and soloing skills should know how to access a variety of scales in different keys from this position.

How to Work with This Piece

To really get something out of this exercise, you'll have to put some serious effort into it, but conscientious effort to improve musical skills always pays off, so it's worth it. The key skills in improvisation are memory, physical dexterity, and listening ability. Here is a checklist that you can follow:

1. Play the tune and try to get some of the licks under your fingers. It's not necessary to memorize it, but improvisers often draw on the main melody of a tune, or the "head," when they're searching for licks.
2. Memorize the scale patterns and practice them until you can play them rapidly.
3. Make a recording of the progression or have a friend play rhythm while you play lead - then switch off.
4. Improvise to the changes, toggling between D Dorian for the first half or verse section and D Aeolian for the second half or chorus section. You'll have to listen closely to see what kinds of melodic movement or licks work best.

Disclaimer - The Myth of Improvisation

One of the stumbling blocks that can confuse the uninitiated improviser is the myth that improvisations are completely, "made up," or that you have to invent all your own licks. This is not true. Improvising is a combination of previously assimilated material and some new ground, including reshaped or altered melodies, "happy accidents" that are relearned and repeated, mindless technical running of scales and patterns, and in the best of all worlds- truly inspired bits of spontaneous composition. You have to look for the first two, try not to overdo it with the third category, and hope for the last scenario. And always remember, even the greatest improvisers, like John Coltrane, Lester Young or Jerry Garcia, relied heavily on licks they'd practiced over and over.

Modes of the World

Modes of the World

The first system of music features a treble clef and a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The melody is written in a 6/8 time signature. The guitar tablature below the staff is labeled 'TAB' and includes a 'H.O.' (harmonic octave) marking above the first measure. The fret numbers are: 11-12, 11, 12, 9, 9, 11, 12, 12, 9, 9.

The second system of music continues the melody. It includes a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure. The guitar tablature includes a 'H.O.' marking above the first measure. The fret numbers are: 9-10, 9, 10, 9, 12, 12, 10, 9, 10, 9, 11.

The third system of music continues the melody. The guitar tablature fret numbers are: 9, 9, 10, 11, 12, 9, 12, 10, 12, 12, 11, 9, 12.

The fourth system of music concludes the piece. The guitar tablature fret numbers are: 10, 10, 12, 9.

9

14-16 13-14-16-13-14-16 14-16-17 14-16 17-14-16 17-17 16-16 14-14 16

11

15-15 15-14-15-14 16-14 H.O. 12-14-12

13

11-12-11 14-11 14-12 13 12-14-12 13-12 11-12-11 14-11 14-12 13

15

12 H.O. 14-15 14 14 13 1/2

17 *vib.*

(13) 14-12-14-12-14-13-14-13-16-13-16-14

19

11-14-14-14 12-9-10

21

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

23 *vib.* *vib.* *vib.* *vib.*

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

Rake

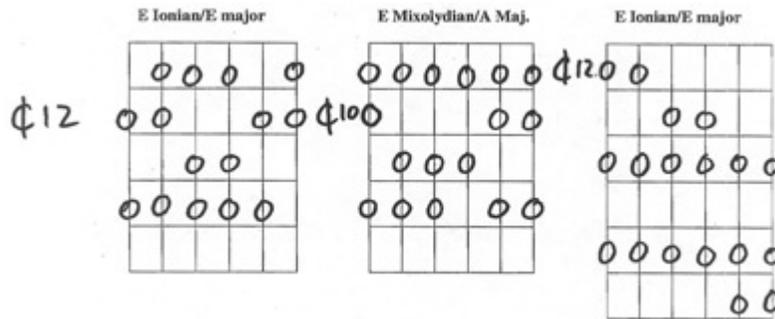
Our next musical example and the last in our modal improvisation series, is a solo based on the Grateful Dead's song, "Eyes of the World." The band recorded the song on their 1973 LP, and it combines elements of funk, jazz and a tiny hint of the creeping menace that would soon rear its ugly head, disco, into a flowing and catchy tune that offers an interesting palate of chords and melody, just right for an extended improvisation in front of 20,000 or so grooving souls.

This piece is similar yet different from the one above: similar because it requires the improviser to "toggle" or switch between two modes that are very close together, in this

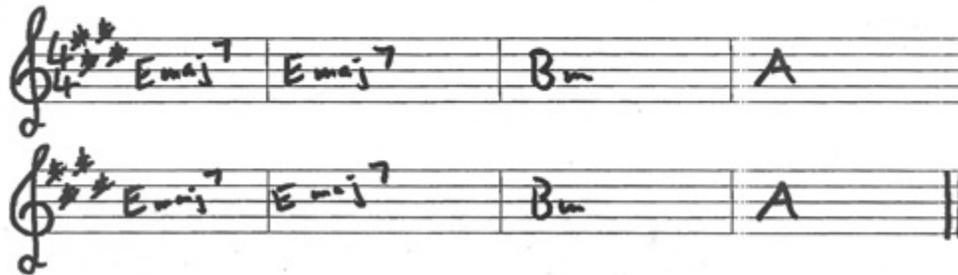
case Ionian and Mixolydian, but different because a single four-bar phrase of the piece requires the use of both of these modes. To put it another way, "Diamond's Girl" is a verse/chorus form, while "Modes of the World" is an extended vamp that repeats over and over.

Let's take a look at the progression. The chords are Emaj7, Bm and A. If you think about these chords, you may come to the conclusion that they don't occur naturally in any key. That's indeed the case. The piece is in the key of E major, hence the Emaj7 chord. But in the key of E, the chord based on B would normally be a B7 (dominant) chord, whereas here, we have a Bm chord, which occurs naturally in the key of A, among others, but not E major. The A chord presents no departure and fits into both key areas.

To navigate this chord change, we can use a modal approach. During the two-bar vamp over Emaj7, play E Ionian, otherwise known as an E major scale. In the third and fourth bar of each four-bar phrase, you can play E Mixolydian or A major over the Bm/A change. As in "Diamond's," there is only a one-note difference, with the note D# in the E Ionian mode, and D natural in E Mixolydian. Here are some scale patterns that work well for improvisation with this combination of modes:



Chord Progression for "Modes Of The World":



Working on "Modes of the World"

Follow the same steps as above. However, this piece is more of a solo that can be analyzed for style and various techniques, as opposed to a "head"-styled melody to be mined for melodic ideas. Here are some of the improvisational/melodic techniques that are found in the piece and much of Garcia's playing, especially during the 70s.

1. Sequences - there are many sequential licks, such as in bars 1 and 2, or bar 18 and 19. Sequential licks are defined by melodic intervals or figures that are repeated in a pattern at different points up or down a scale.
2. Rhythmic Variety - There is a lot of step-wise motion, i.e., notes running down a scale without any skipped notes, so it's important to vary the rhythm in order to

keep the runs from sounding boring. Also, longer note phrases are interspersed with faster runs.

3. Use of Space - There isn't a ton of empty space here, but there are some rests and the piece breathes because long, busier phrases are followed by melodic phrases that tail off and allow the listener's ear to relax.
4. Playing Around the Chords - The choice of notes favors consonance over dissonance on the strong beats of the measure. For example, bars 5 - 8 all start with chord tones, usually the third, on the downbeat of the measure. This creates a secure feeling in the listener, which of course can be toyed with...
5. Try to give the song "Eyes of the World" a listen. Remember, listening is one of the most important skills in improvisation, as well as in all musical performance and study.

More Tips and Encouragement

Just as you probably did with blues and pentatonic scales when you first learned them, it's possible to get bogged down with modal theory and just as possible to master it. I encourage people to learn blues scales in E and A, eventually mastering all the positions, then bringing in other keys like F#, B and C, eventually looking at the major/minor pentatonic relationship. The point is to build it up slowly.

You can apply the same approach to modes. You must first learn to play several major scale patterns; then, learn modes based on those patterns as instructed in my first article. Eventually, you'll learn modes based on different keys until you're able to quickly apply a formula for whatever mode you need in the key you're playing. The first steps are hard, and then it gets easier and easier. Just stick with it and it will eventually come together.

Conclusion

If you've followed along with our series "Modal Improvisation for Rock Guitarists" this far, then I offer my thanks and congratulations. It's not the easiest area to get into in musical study, but it presents an excellent basis for learning music theory and is incredibly useful for guitarists who play and compose rock and other popular styles.

Good luck in 2006!
Chris Botta

About the Author

Chris Botta grew up in New York City and began studying the guitar at the age of nine at a local music school. In his early teens, he began playing with his first rock bands.

He took his undergraduate studies at the Mannes College of Music, studying guitar with Michael Newman and theory with Carl Schacter. Upon graduation, Chris began teaching privately and at the Queens Village School of Music. At this time Chris also began writing, recording and performing with a variety of local groups.

He continues to teach and to craft his sound, style and songwriting, which combines influences from the rock era while reflecting the modal melodies of Indian music, modern classical harmony, and the edgy New York rock sound.

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