

Modal Arpeggios for the Plectrum Banjo: by Ron Hinkle

An “arpeggio” is simply the notes of a chord played in succession. If you think of a scale in numbers—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 1—the arpeggio would be 1-3-5-1; the corresponding chord of course is the 1-3-5 played at the same time. This scale-arpeggio-chord relationship is very important; if you start with chords and that’s all you ever learn (without an understanding of their underlying structure—as most banjoists do, using the popular “play-in-a-day” chord melody methods), then you will have hit a conceptual wall that is very hard to get over. *Start with scales, and everything comes together clearly and logically.*

To play “modal” arpeggios, a simple adjustment is required. The complete arpeggio becomes 1-3-5-7-9-11-13-1. Play this example (if you are unsure of your reading skills, follow the TAB and the fingering indications):

This *should* sound “strange” to you! In time, you’ll realize that it sounds “hip.” The first three notes form the basic Triad, and the rest are known as “extensions.” Here is the theoretical dividing line between 1920s jazz (which includes the banjo), and the rest of jazz history (which *does not* include the banjo); if you want to take the banjo beyond its historical limitations then, the modes are a logical place to start. Things to note:

- All of the notes are on lines; the intervals are all thirds (and the interval names are all odd numbers). This is the basis of “harmony in thirds,” or Tertian Harmony.
- Every note of the C scale is covered.
- The B string is not used (except in rare cases); the interval relationship between the 4th, 3rd, and 1st strings (perfect 5ths) makes Modal arpeggios very easy, making the plectrum banjo an ideal vehicle for them. By the same token, the relationships between the 3rd, 2nd, and 1st strings (Major 3rd, Minor 3rd) make Modal *scales* very easy, making the plectrum banjo an ideal vehicle for *them* (actually easier than the tenor banjo).
- You’ll soon realize that the first measure is a C Major 7 arpeggio, and the next measure by itself is a D Dorian arpeggio; these stacked relationships are found throughout the Modal arpeggio set (see illustration below). Every individual *extended* arpeggio contains every note of the scale! This has profound implications for note choice in jazz improvisation; there really are very few “wrong notes” in jazz.

On the next page is the complete set of Modal arpeggios in the key of C. You’ll note that the 13th and repeated 1 are not played (though they can be with some creative sliding). Again, let the TAB lead you to the correct strings/frets.

I like to use the mode names to name each of the arpeggios; can you see that in this example, the extended Dm7 is slightly different than the extended Em7? The Minor 7 flat 5 is also known as a “Half-diminished” (its name in the Classical world).

The G Mixolydian arpeggio is the familiar Dominant 7; there is only one naturally occurring Dominant in the key. If you encounter other Dominant 7s in a piece of music, it means there is a modulation from the home key.

You will need these arpeggios to understand the jazz patterns; most of the patterns are based on them.

Modal Arpeggios

Plectrum Banjo

Ron Hinkle

Key of C

1 3 5 7 9 11 9 7 5 3 1 1 3 5 7 9 11 9 7 5 3 1

Cmaj7 C Ionian (Major) Dm7 D Dorian

D
B
G
C

0 4 0 4 0 3 0 4 0 4 0 2 5 2 5 2 5 2 5 2

Em7 E Phrygian Fmaj7 F Lydian G7 G Mixolydian

3-7-3 5-9-5 7-10-7

4-7 4-7 7 5-9 5-9 9 7-11 7-10 10

4-7 4-7 7 5-9 5-9 9 7-11 7-10 10

Am7 A Aeolian (Minor) Bm7(b5) B Locrian Cmaj7 C Ionian (Major)

9-12-9 10-14-10 12-15-12

9 12 9 12 9 11 14 10 14 14 12 16 12 16 16

9 12 9 12 9 11 14 10 14 14 12 16 12 16 16