



# Plectrum Banjo Technique

## The Importance of Scales to Music - Part 3

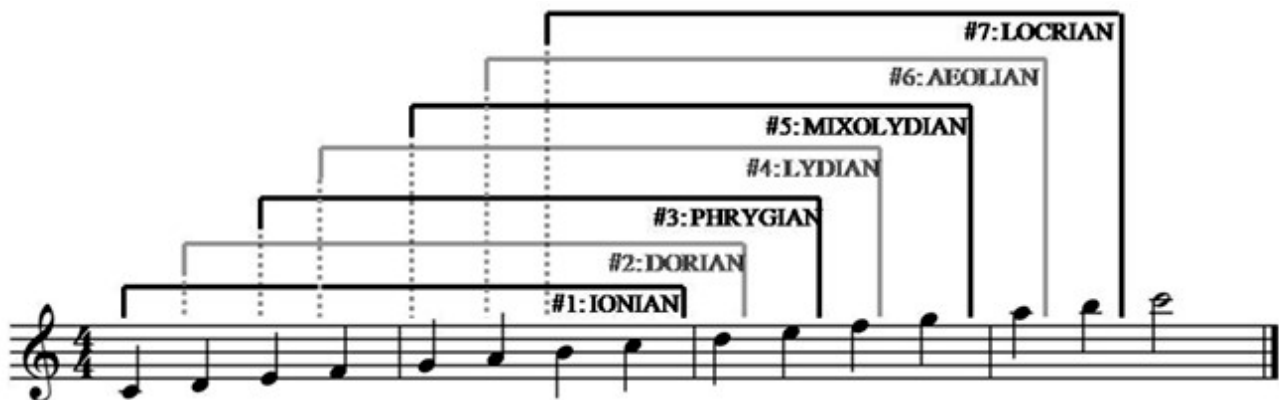
by Ron Hinkle

In this series of articles, we have been exploring the importance of scales to music (and thus the banjo) through practical application and a bit of ear training. As a classically-trained musician, it always amazes me how lightly scales - *the bedrock of music* - are taken by banjoists! True, chord melody does not require much in the way of scales, but if you harbour any dreams of going beyond that limited technique, scales are the key.

The subject of Part 3 is 'modal' scales: The Modes can be seen as simply a way to organize the necessary-to-music scales into a logical and simple continuum. Taken individually, they may not make a lot of sense, but taken as a 'left to right' group (the way they are best learned), they are simple and elegant, and will change the way you hear and think about music. Plus, *they far pre-date Chord Melody 'theory!'*

Serious art music (including that written for the banjo) was based on the Modes long before the 20th century. In the early days of Jazz (the heyday of the banjo), they were temporarily abandoned, but were returned to use by the early 1930s, as the art form matured (at a time when the banjo itself was all but abandoned). 'Modern' Jazz has elevated them to new levels of practical importance and common knowledge.

I am convinced that if the banjo had remained popular long enough to have modal theory applied to it, it would have continued to evolve as a musical instrument (static *history* will always be there, but the progressive *future* depends on evolution). The majority of the Jazz Age players apparently either switched to the more-popular guitar to keep their jobs, or lacked the foresight to adapt the banjo to changing times. I offer this article as a possible means to take *your* banjo playing and musical understanding in new directions (and — ironically — to better understand the early Classic and Ragtime banjo styles while you're at it!). This is a very different approach from the *Tonic-Dominant-Subdominant* concept introduced in parts 1 and 2; they are both 'correct', and should both be learned.



The easiest way to envision the Modes is by looking at a two-octave scale in the key of C; if you play one octave from C to C, you have a C *Ionian* (or *Major*) scale; play D to D, and you have a D *Dorian* scale; E to E is an E *Phrygian* scale; F to F is an F *Lydian* scale; G to G is a G *Mixolydian* scale; A to A is an A *Aeolian* (or *Natural Minor*) scale; and B to B is a B *Locrian* scale.

Just as the Modes put the scales into a simple organizational framework, the *names* give you a means to learn and remember them. While the names *are* important to learn - if for no other reason than to facilitate intelligent musical conversation - much more important is the fact that these scales *exist* and are *simple to learn*.

To tie this in with the T-D-S chord concept, the *Ionian* and *Phrygian* scales are 'Tonic,' the *Mixolydian*, *Locrian*, and *Dorian* scales (in that order: G, B, D - the spelling of the Dominant chord) are 'Dominant,' and the *Lydian* and *Aeolian* scales are 'Subdominant.' If you play a T-D-S chord with the corresponding scale or vice-versa, they will sound correct together (and should be paired for ear-training purposes); an obvious key to improving your ear and improvising jazz! Simply put, you will increase your chord knowledge by studying scales (and vice-versa).

Since this article series has been at heart an *ear-training* exercise, let me put an additional musical bug in your ear. You have likely heard the term ‘harmony in thirds’; it is called *Tertian Harmony*, and is literally how Euro/American music is written and played (and best understood). In overly-simplified terms, the *Ionian* scale is harmonized by the *Phrygian* scale (play them both at the same time); the *Dorian* scale is harmonized by the *Lydian* scale; the *Phrygian* scale is harmonized by the *Mixolydian* scale - see the pattern? Not only is this important for simple harmonization, it is an easy-to-use framework for how chords are properly built and used (modal *chords* will be the subject of my next article).

Theory is one thing; practical use is another! Should you learn to *play* the scales? Only if you want to learn something new and improve your playing skills! After *learning* them, the next step is to *practice* them; learning begets knowledge, practicing begets skill. Will you ever use the actual scales in your music? Only a little; (depends on the song or the style of music), but you *will* use - every time you play the banjo - the physical dexterity and musical/aural understanding that can only be gained through diligent scale practice.

So, how to practice them? On the plectrum banjo - because of the close tuning - there are many ways to play the Modes. I have worked out a practice routine that covers just about every variation (you can also combine them to fit the purpose). If nothing else, I hope this shows just how versatile the plectrum is, and how much there is to learn. This is meant to *inspire you to new heights* by the way, not to *discourage* you!

I will not explain each scale here; follow the TAB and the fingering indications, and that is all the explanation you need. Just remember that in the *key of C* (which each of these scales is based on), there are no sharps or flats! The important thing to realize is that—in any given key—the scales in the ‘modal set’ will all use the parent key signature (F = 1 flat, G = 1 sharp, etc.). On the plectrum banjo, it is simply a matter of switching to a different area of the fretboard to change the key; the physical patterns remain the same (the numbers i.e. 3-3-3 - refer to how many notes are played on each string).

Should you learn these in every key? *Yes and no: No*, you don’t need to *play* them in every key to get the necessary physical training effect. *Yes*, for a *complete understanding* of harmony and the Circle of Keys (and the banjo), playing in every key is vital; ask any classically-trained musician! I have found that—because I *do* practice them in every key—I am literally ‘getting smarter’ as a musician, and that’s important *to me*.

I have posted a scale compendium on my website ([www.banjosnob.com](http://www.banjosnob.com)) - all the modes in every key - click on the Technique tab, and find the file entitled *Modal Scale Compendium*. Why? Why not? Now you have no excuse *not* to learn them all!

*C Modal Scales on the next page*



## Fun with the Ukulele by Ray Woods

### Edelweiss

*Edelweiss* was written by Rodgers and Hammerstein for the 1959 film, *The Sound of Music*, and named after the white Alpine flower *Leontopodium Alpinum*. It was to be the last song that Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote before Hammerstein’s death. He survived long enough to see the musical open on Broadway. Play single notes with your index and middle fingers and use your thumb to strum chords. Whilst it works on a soprano ukulele, it will sound even better on a tenor ukulele.

Chord progression: F C7 F B<sup>b</sup> F Dm B<sup>b</sup> C7 F C7 F B<sup>b</sup> F C7 F F C F B<sup>b</sup> F C7 F F

3/4

A 0 3 10 8 3 1 0 0 0 1 3 5 3 0 3 10 8 3

E 1 6 6 5 5 1 1 1 3 5 6 6 1 5 6 5 5

C 0 7 5 2 0 2 3 5 5 4 0 5 7 5 5

G 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

B<sup>b</sup> F C7 F F C F B<sup>b</sup> F C7 F F

1 0 3 3 5 7 8 8 10 6 7 7 3 3 7 5 3 0 3 8 5 8

1 1 6 6 8 8 8 6 7 7 8 6 5 1 5 8 6 10

2 0 4 4 9 9 9 7 7 7 7 7 7 0 9 9 9

C C7 F C7 F B<sup>b</sup> F C7 F F

10 8 7 3 0 3 10 8 3 1 0 3 3 5 7 8 8

12 10 8 3 1 6 5 5 1 1 0 3 6 6 8 5 5

7 7 7 4 0 7 7 7 2 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4