



# Plectrum Banjo Technique

## Modal Chord Scales

by Ron Hinkle

In the last three issues of BMG, I have explored various basic thoughts and approaches to the subject of scales, as applied to the plectrum banjo. Having *barely scratched the surface* (suffice to say that you will *never learn all there is to know about scales!*), I am nonetheless ready and eager to move on to the next logical step: Modal Chord Scales.

When I think of ‘scales’, I no longer think of just that familiar (and perhaps a bit boring) series of ascending or descending notes (‘Do, Re, Mi’); my musical ear automatically fills in the blank spaces and brings them to life! There is so much music wrapped up in each of those lonely little notes, once you get past the potential one-foot-in-front-of-the-other drudgery of the subject. Learning to hear the chords that naturally go along with them (indeed are *caused* by them) is a big step in the process of understanding.

I have learned to hear scales as melodies (and conversely, melodies as carefully arranged scales), with the appropriate chords corresponding at the appropriate moments. This is the ultimate goal of scale study; understanding and hearing how they relate to actual music—or should I say, *how music is literally built of scales*. Ear-training is a much-neglected aspect of scale study. Music is at heart an *aural* art; why not learn to *hear* it while you’re learning the basics?

Before I continue, I need to reemphasize a point from Part 3: The things I am about to show you *far predate* Chord Melody theory; they will help to show that there are no actual musical limits for the plectrum banjo—assuming you know some more-advanced theory.

In this lesson, I will show how by combining scales (playing three of them at the same time), you will create a series of simple three-string chords (9 shapes in total) that will serve almost all of your musical needs in a *musically-correct* manner. While I will guarantee that you *already know* all of these chord shapes, you probably have not seen them in their proper context. This may be a total paradigm shift for many players, but if you are familiar with the classic banjo music of Grimshaw, Cammeyer, Bassett, et al, these chords should ring a bell.

First, play these three all-on-one-string scales (I am using the key of G for simplicity’s sake in this lesson). Note: *Play them exactly as shown in the TAB, or you will miss the point entirely:*

G Ionian (third string):

B Phrygian (second string):

D Mixolydian (first string):

Now, we will combine them into a ‘chord scale,’ or Triad Scale; play only the first two measures (A.) for the moment:

A.

B.

C.

This is known as the ‘root inversion’ chord scale; if you move the root note (G) from the bottom of the chord up to the top (and the G Ionian scale in the overall picture), the result is a “first inversion” chord

scale (B.; play it now). And now the “second inversion” chord scale (C.; play it now). For a visual reference (and help in learning to read music—a noble goal for all of us), notice the shape (the space/line relationship) that each of these inversions makes on the standard staff; there will be more on this in my next article.

It is important to think of these as *combined, active scales* instead of *static chords*; it is the scales, *moving* and ‘working in harmony’ with each other that create the chords. In addition, you should hear each of the individual scales in the context of the key of G. In other words, the Phrygian and Mixolydian scales *harmonize* with the Ionian, regardless of if you play them individually or together (or how the notes are ‘stacked’ in the different inversions). To deviate from this naturally-occurring harmonization is to go against the nature of music—a bad habit the banjo is unfortunately infamous for.

In this lesson, I also introduce the concept of numbered chords; we use Roman numerals to set them apart from all the other numbers we run into in music. ‘I’ is simply the first chord in the series, based on the first note of the scale (realize that music is really quite simple and elegant when you get right down to it, and that you should not be scared of it!). We use upper case for Major and Augmented chords, and lower case for Minor and Diminished chords. You will recognize the famous I-IV-V chords that harmonize the vast majority of the song styles in Euro/American music. The minor chords are just as important, and serve as the dividing line between simple music and more-sophisticated music. Because we don’t use them a lot in our music, the minor chords are often misunderstood; seeing them in this chord scale context should help you to understand them better.

Now, let’s relate these chords to the Modal Scale names from Part 3 (this applies to all three inversions); *I* is thus a G *Ionian* chord, *ii* is an A *Dorian* chord, *iii* = B *Phrygian* chord, *IV* = C *Lydian* chord, *V* = D *Mixolydian* chord, *vi* = E *Aeolian* chord, *vii* = F# *Locrian* chord. You’ll not find this terminology in any mainstream theory book that I know of, but the concept has helped me to understand the scale/chord relationships better. Relating the scales and chords in this manner (within the context of the key) will become more important as you *learn* more, and make scale theory your *modus operandi* (ironic word choice there!). It is important to realize that for every chord there is an appropriate scale (and vice versa).

It is my sincere hope that you do not consider this to be ‘over your head’; take it one step at a time, and I believe you will soon find this to be an easier, more efficient, and more musically correct way of thinking. In the next issue, I will expand further on this theory by introducing the concept of Triads and 3-string Dominant 7th Chords.

### Lessons:

I am available for teaching all levels of both tenor and plectrum banjo. I teach via Skype (free download), and take payment via PayPal. Contact me for my rates, scheduling, and additional information.

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