

Beyond the Pentatonic: Minor Modal scales

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The minor pentatonic is probably the most used scale in modern rock/blues music. Though easy to learn, remember and play, only 5 notes are sometimes limiting for expressive purposes. After all, you want to stand out from the crowd, don't you? It's not a bad idea to add some color to your palette. "Yeah, I see that, but I have to learn a whole new scale, or even 2 or 3!". Well, no, that's not necessary: actually there is just a short path to walk from the familiar minor pentatonic to the minor modal scales (Dorian, Aeolian and Phrygian). Just read on.

A bit of theory

Let's work in the key of A which is the most familiar for most guitarists. We can write a table of the notes for each of the 7 modes in A:

Mode	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A Ionian (Major)	A	B	C♯	D	E	F♯	G♯
A Dorian	A	B	C	D	E	F♯	G
A Phrygian	A	B♭	C	D	E	F	G
A Lydian	A	B	C♯	D♯	E	F♯	G♯
A Mixolydian	A	B	C♯	D	E	F♯	G
A Aeolian (Minor)	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
A Locrian	A	B♭	C	D	E♭	F	G

Among these, 3 are called "minor modes" since their 1st, 3rd and 5th note form a minor triad: they are the Dorian mode, the Phrygian mode and the Aeolian mode (the Aeolian is just the usual minor scale). In the following we will focus only on these 3 modes (the other modes will be treated in another article). If you don't know how to build them (i.e. how to build a table like the one above) don't worry, it's not strictly necessary to know it to understand and use the following.

Let's now focus on the 3 minor modes, and highlight the notes they have in common.

Mode	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A Dorian	A	B	C	D	E	F \sharp	G
A Aeolian	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
A Phrygian	A	B \flat	C	D	E	F	G

The notes that the minor modes of A have in common are: A, C, D, E, G. Think about it for a sec, it's important. Do these notes remind you something? Just try to play them and see if they are familiar..

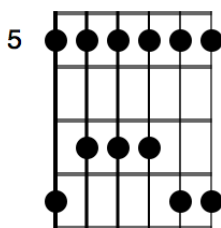
Yes, you probably guessed it, these are exactly the notes of the A minor pentatonic scale! This means two things:

1. The 3 minor modes are very similar to each other: they differ only by the 2nd and the 6th note. These two notes are called the *characteristic notes* of the minor modes: they're the notes you have to play to get the particular flavor of that mode.
2. To remember the 3 minor modes you need just to know the minor pentatonic and know where to add the 2 characteristic notes. You don't need to learn a whole new scale, but just know where to put those two notes (more on this below).

Since the music we currently listen to is primarily based on the major and the minor scales and uses the modes only occasionally, your ear expects by default to hear a major or a minor scale. To make the modal sound clear you *have* to hit one of the characteristic notes, otherwise the ear of the listener will never understand that you are playing a modal scale. In particular, notice that the Dorian differs from the Aeolian (which is the minor scale) by only the 6th note, so this is the note to hit to make the typical Dorian sound. If you don't hit that note at least once, your listener will perceive your solo as a "standard" minor solo, and will not hear the cool modal sound. Be sure to play that 6th note! In the same way, the Phrygian differs from the Aeolian by only the 2nd note, and the same considerations apply: if you want your solo to sound Phrygian, you have to hit the 2nd note, otherwise it will just sound like a minor solo.

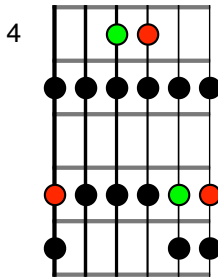
Ok, but how can I use this?

Now, here is the cool part. Let's take the most famous pentatonic fingering, the A minor pentatonic in 5th position. In the figure the vertical lines are the strings and the horizontal lines are the frets, the number 5 indicates that the diagram starts at the 5th fret:

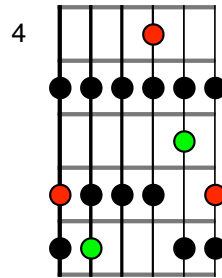


I guess everyone knows that. Now, let's see how this turns out if we add the two characteristic notes for the Aeolian, Dorian and Phrygian scales. I marked the 2nd note in red and the 6th note in green to have them stand out from the underlying pentatonic pattern:

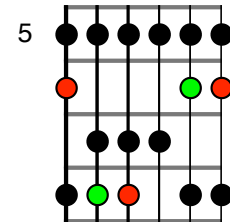
Dorian



Aeolian



Phrygian



The basic shape is still the same, and the only thing we have to do to change mode is to move around the red and green dots. These dots move at most one single fret (a semitone) from mode to mode (some of them actually change string for ease of playing). At a first glance this may seem complicated, but believe me, you'll have this under your fingers in a very short time.

Here's how to learn these patterns in the easiest way, without sweating too much. Let's assume you want to learn to improvise in Dorian. All you have to do is improvise in the minor pentatonic, as you did up to today, and occasionally hit one characteristic note, especially the 6th note (in green in the diagrams). For a backing track, you can use just a simple A minor chord played repeatedly. Now, do not rush it starting with the whole pattern, take it easy. The smart strategy to learn is to focus every day on a different note. For instance, if you are studying Dorian the first day focus on the 6th that is on the 2nd string, 7th fret. For that day your goal is to hit that note and make it "sound" good inside your licks. The second day add another note, say the 2nd on the 1st string, 7th fret; for this day play this note and yesterday's one inside your improvisation. The 3rd day add another note, say the 6th on the 4th string, 4th fret. In few days you'll know the whole pattern without effort.

Done this, take a piece of paper and a pen, tab down all five pentatonic shapes and add the characteristic notes for the Dorian mode. Then practice each position adding one note at a time, like before. With a small step every day you will be able to play the Dorian mode effortlessly in one or two months - and learning the other two modes will be much easier, since you already know where to find the characteristic notes.

After a while, playing over a single A minor chord becomes quite boring. Here there are some spicy modal chord progression that you can use instead. You can choose the most comfortable tempo and feel, and you can arpeggiate or strum at will. Record them on a tape or on your computer, or have a friend playing them while you improvise (then swap the roles). Remember to have fun improvising!

A Dorian:

		Am	D ^{add9} /A	C/A	D ^{add9} /A
E	0		0	0	0
D	1		3	5	3
C	2		2	5	2
B	2		4	5	4
A	0		0	0	0

A Aeolian:

		Am ^{add9}	F [△] /add#11	C ^{add9}	G
E	0		0	3	3
D	1		0	3	3
C	4		2	0	0
B	2		3	2	0
A	0		3	3	2
			1		3

A Phrygian:

		Am ⁷	B ^b △	Am ⁷	F
E	0		1	0	1
D	1		3	1	1
C	0		2	0	2
B	2		3	2	3
A	0		1	0	3
					1

A final note: sometimes you really dig the sound of a modal scale, sometimes you just can't bear it. Don't stop experimenting. There *are* rules that if followed make these scales sound good, but at the moment you are better off trying the modes by yourself and absorbing their sound by experimenting. In a future article I'll cover some additional tips to improve your modal improvisation. Stay connected!