



*By Carl Verheyen - GJD Contributor*

As many of you already know from listening to my music, my improvising concept is totally based on the use of intervals and melodic material to create lines. The more lines you have in different major, minor or dominant keys, the more money in the bank you have to draw on when improvising in those keys. Stringing together the lines you've worked out is step one in an improvised solo. To paraphrase John McLaughlin: "We play the things we know until we're warmed up and in the groove enough to play the things we don't know." This is when the incredible, soaring feeling of complete control as well as reckless abandon takes over.

But how do we apply these personally composed and fingered lines to music, especially music that asks us to improvise over a series of chord changes? That's where the modes come into play. And for me it all comes down to one important concept: CONTEXT.

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Let's start with the Dorian mode. This is a minor scale based on the second degree of a major key. That means in the key of C major, we begin on D, the second note of the scale and play only the notes in the key of C, but from D to D. The scale turns out to be D E F G A B C D and with a minor 3rd it is definitely minor. It's all the white notes on a piano, beginning on D.

For the sake of example, transpose this scale to A minor Dorian mode. We get A to A in the key of G because the A is the second degree in the G major scale. The scale is A B C D E F# G A. Here is where my concept of context begins to make sense. That scale works great for chords that are diatonic to the key of G major. An easy way to understand the word diatonic is to apply the meaning "built from." Chords that are diatonic to a certain mother key are simply stacks of notes built from the mother key's scale, usually in 3rds. The A minor Dorian mode works perfectly well over progressions like the following because all the chords are diatonic to the mother key of G major.

I: Am7 | D7 | Am7 | D7 :|

I: Am7 | Bm7 | C | D7 :|

I first learned this scale back in high school listening to the Allman Brothers Band playing "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed" and the Doors long version of "Light My Fire." I had no idea that the G major scale (when harmonized in 3rds) would yield the chords Gmaj7 Am7 Bm7 Cmaj7 D7

Em7 F#m7b5 and Gmaj7. Eventually however, I figured it out and all of a sudden I realized I was playing over changes, even though they were all in the same key.

So now I have this cool Am scale that sounds great over those chords. But then I heard Jimmy Page play the solo on "Stairway to Heaven" and I realized that, even though the solo was in A minor, the context had changed so radically that my Am Dorian mode didn't work. The chord changes he plays over are:

I: Am G | F /// | Am G | F /// :|

The big old glaring F# note, the 6th of my new found Am Dorian mode scale clashed terribly with the F chord in bar 2 of the progression. Clearly it was the wrong scale to play.

At that point I found there were other modes, and the next most important minor mode was the Aeolian mode or natural minor. This mode comes from the 6th degree of a major scale and is built off the relative minor of a major key. So in the key of C major, follow your fingers up to the 6th degree of the scale and you'll land on an A. The Aeolian Mode (or natural minor as it is also called) is simply A to A in the key of C. You get: A B C D E F G A. Notice that the 6th degree in this scale is an F natural, not an F#. Also notice that each of the chords in the above "Stairway to Heaven" progression are spelled out with within this scale: A C E is the A minor triad, G B D is the G triad and F A C is the F triad. This is the scale Jimmy Page uses for his classic solo.

Jimmy was a very accomplished studio musician before starting Led Zeppelin and his knowledge of music theory was obviously quite advanced. Whether he related his lines to the mother key and consciously played off the VI, V and IV chords in the key of C is anybody's guess. Your ears tell you immediately that the Am Aeolian mode is right, and I believe that's what music theory is for: To explain why the things you do that sound good.....sound good!

I believe it is essential that every serious musician spends the short time it takes to harmonize the major scales in all 12 keys. You should instantly know that the VI chord in Db is a Bbm7 and the III chord in B is a D#m7. It will raise the level of all aspects of your musicianship: Ear training, improvisation, transposition, transcribing, songwriting and even song memorization. Next month I'll tell you how to take 1 hour and go through the entire process in all 12 keys. It is the best thing you can do for yourself to better understand music theory as it applies to the guitar.