

Modal Arpeggios for the Tenor Banjo: Part 1 by Ron Hinkle

“You know, I have always **heard** that arpeggios are important; the problem is, I’ve never known how to learn them, much less practice them.” Ever had that thought pop into your head? Yeah, *me too* (same with scales, of course). They *are* kinda boring, and once you’ve done them (once), then what? Well, what you need is a system to make it practical and interesting, because if you don’t learn *and practice them ad nauseum*, they won’t do you *any good—so why not start now?* The more you practice them, the better you’ll get at them, and the more you’ll realize why they are so important. Getting to the self-evident stage is the tough part. The Modes provide just the system you need for learning and practicing them, and then—with a bit of imagination—actually *using* them. They—along with scales—are the backbone of Jazz improvisation; that is the ultimate goal.

Let me put it this way: Scales and arpeggios do not constitute jazz improvisation, yet you would be hard-pressed to improvise intelligently without the technical framework they provide (unless you’re just a “natural”). Rather than say you should learn and practice them “*because I said so,*” it would be better if you just bite the bullet and *do them*, and then tell me after it’s all said and done if it was worth your time and effort or not (I believe you’ll find they are).

Anyway, the Modes are a series of seven unique scales built on the seven notes of a Major scale; here they are in the key of C. By the way, everything in this lesson is in C; the *other 11 keys* offer their own challenges, but for now, I will stay with the “people’s key” just to get a useable lesson on the books (don’t worry, I’ll provide plenty of clues on how to apply them to all keys).

Don’t be afraid that these will be beyond your ability and/or understanding; I believe that if you have played for even a little while, they will be well within your reach! In fact, if you are a beginner, these will get you started on the right foot (instead of just learning simple chords to strum along with); I believe that no matter how advanced you are (or become), you will find something of value here. Pay strict attention to the TAB and the fingering indications; even if you *do* read standard notation, the TAB is paramount to this lesson (the TAB staff lines represent the strings—bottom line = bottom C string, etc. The numbers on the line refer to the fret number; so, the first four notes of the first scale are on the 4th string, frets open, 2, 4, and 5). The fingerings should be pretty self-evident once you’ve gotten a little way in: [MP3 #1.]

The image displays seven modes of the C major scale, each with a treble clef staff and a guitar-style TAB staff below it. The modes are arranged in two rows. The first row contains C Ionian (Major), D Dorian, and E Phrygian. The second row contains F Lydian, G Mixolydian, A Aeolian (Minor), and B Locrian. Each mode is shown with a treble clef staff and a guitar-style TAB staff below it. The TAB staff shows fret numbers (0-5) and fingering numbers (1-4) for each note.

I won’t go into a bunch of detail about these scales here; just notice that they each sound a bit “different but related.” That’s because they are all technically “C” scales—just starting and ending on different notes with no sharps or flats. I’ll tell you right here that you could practice these diligently for the next several years (as I have) and continue to learn new stuff about them (and continue to get great physical and aural exercise from them)! The important thing for now is to *hear* the differences; practicing them *in sequence* will lead you to be able to *hear*

them in sequence (the key to understanding and getting the most out of the arpeggio exercises). And yes, do memorize the names! They are handy for reference and for speaking intelligently with trained jazz musicians.

One more thing before we get to the Modal arpeggios: We must look at the “Jazz 7th” chords (two octaves), but in the context of arpeggios (where they are much easier to hear and understand). Realize that chords and their related arpeggios consist of the same notes. Here they are; play along as you read. #1 is a standard C Major arpeggio for reference; #2 is C Major 7 (Cmaj⁷); #3 is C Dominant 7 (C⁷); #4 is C Minor 7 (Cm⁷); #5 is C Minor 7 flat 5, aka Half-Diminished (Cm^{7(b5)}); #6 is C Diminished (C^o). You will see all but the Diminished chord in the Modal arpeggios; those will be covered in a separate lesson. [#2.]

Remember, the TAB will show you how to play them (and thus *hear* them), even if you don’t yet read music or understand the theory. Understanding will follow (it may take you years of study to really get it, but who cares; you’ll be headed in the right direction—and will get there a lot quicker than if you *didn’t* start now!).

Now we get to the real meat of the lesson; Modal Arpeggios! Play this now (only TAB #1 for the moment): [#3.]

Rather than modify a C arpeggio, I have used the first notes of the Modal Scales to start each arpeggio. Notice there are no accidentals; just like the scales, these are all “C” arpeggios, just starting on different notes and using only the notes of a C scale. If you can sing, sing the first note of each one as you play the arpeggio; this will emphasize the relationship (if you can’t sing, have a friend play the note, either on a banjo or piano). Obviously, you should practice this *a lot!*

Next, we must reconcile the Modal Arpeggios with the Jazz 7th chords and with the Modal Scales, so, play through all three again and look for the relationships (it can be confusing at first, until you have your ah-ha moment). Hopefully you see that C Ionian = CM⁷, D Dorian = Dm⁷, E Phrygian = Em⁷, F Lydian = FM⁷, G Mixolydian = G⁷, A Aeolian = Am⁷, and B Locrian = Bm^{7(b5)}. These relationships hold in all 12 keys, by the way.

Now it starts to get interesting; go back and play the Modal Arpeggios using TAB #2 now. Take note of the different fingering pattern (this is also a good illustration of how important TAB is to the lesson!):

Notice that they (the *same* notes) are now entirely on the 4th and 3rd strings, and how consistent (read, “easy”) the fingerings are. The *real* significance is this: #1 takes advantage of “open” strings; #2 is entirely in “closed” positions (no open strings, except of course for the first CM⁷ arpeggio). Not relying on open strings means that you can play these *in any key*, simply by moving to the appropriate area of the fretboard; I’ll show you some examples of this in **Part 3**. And, if you have not been playing long, I’ll bet you’ve never played above the 5th fret; well, now you have! Being able to play and understand *all strings/frets* is essential to banjo mastery!

The tenor banjo is tuned entirely in “fifths”; i.e., C up to G is a 5th, G up to D is a 5th, and D up to A is a fifth. This makes it an amazing instrument for Modal Arpeggios! Let me show you what I mean; start the arpeggio series on the G⁷ (open 3rd and 2nd strings), and go all the way up from there (staying on those two strings): [#4.]

Musical notation for TAB #4, showing arpeggios for G⁷, Am⁷, Bm^{7(b5)}, and Cm⁷ on the 3rd and 2nd strings. The notation includes a treble clef with a '8' indicating the octave, and a bass line with fret numbers and string indicators.

Chords and fret numbers shown: G⁷ (0-4, 0-3, 0-4, 0), Am⁷ (2-5, 2-5, 2-5, 2), Bm^{7(b5)} (4-7, 3-7, 3-7, 4), Cm⁷ (5-9, 5-9, 5-9, 5).

It should be obvious by now that this will happen on the 2nd and 1st strings as well: [#5.]

Musical notation for TAB #5, showing arpeggios for Dm⁷, Em⁷, Fmaj⁷, and G⁷ on the 2nd and 1st strings. The notation includes a treble clef with an '8' indicating the octave, and a bass line with fret numbers and string indicators.

Chords and fret numbers shown: Dm⁷ (0-3, 0-3, 0-3, 0), Em⁷ (2-5, 2-5, 2-5, 2), Fmaj⁷ (3-7, 3-7, 3-7, 3), G⁷ (5-9, 5-8, 5-9, 5).

Additional notation for TAB #5 includes an 8^{va} marking and a dashed line above the staff, and a second system of notation for Am⁷, Bm^{7(b5)}, Cm⁷, and Dm⁷ on the 2nd and 1st strings.

Chords and fret numbers shown: Am⁷ (7-10, 7-10, 7-10, 7), Bm^{7(b5)} (9-12, 8-12, 8-12, 9), Cm⁷ (10-14, 10-14, 10-14, 10), Dm⁷ (12-15, 12-15, 12-15, 12).

The 8^{va} above the standard notation means to play the notes an octave higher; it is used to eliminate excessive ledger lines and make it easier to read. Of course, if you're following the TAB, *who cares?* Aren't you glad you learned how to read it? Let me say this about TAB: Some see it as a "crutch" which will keep you from learning to read standard notation. It is that *only if you allow it to be!* I see it as a "learning aid," which—while allowing for easier learning by showing you where to put your fingers—can also help you to learn to read music. Since I espouse a "life-long-study" approach ("*play-in-a-day*" is nothing but a dead-end sales pitch designed to take your money—kinda like "*lose weight without diet or exercise!*"), I highly recommend learning to read standard notation! *Any language is easier to learn and master if you can read the writing!*

Okay, off my soapbox for now! Important points:

1. The arpeggios can be played in more than one place on the fretboard. You can combine the different locations in any way you need to for the musical situation at hand. The better you know those locations (ahem, *practice!*), the easier they will be to play. **Part 3** will have exercises designed to highlight this.
2. There are no accidentals involved (except for in the C Jazz 7th chords). This means that all of the Modal arpeggios shown "function" in the key of C; if you see an accidental (as in the Jazz 7th chords), it means they function in a different key. That is beyond the scope of this lesson; I will discuss different keys in a separate lesson.
3. With the way the tenor banjo is typically taught, you are mostly limited to the first 5 frets of the fretboard, and are reliant on open strings. Modal arpeggios "allow" you to play all the way up the fretboard, showing how logical this tuning is; plus, they are really no more physically difficult than anything you'll find in a beginning-level lesson. Without the "limitation" of open strings, playing in other keys is simply a matter of moving the same thing to a different area of the fretboard. Having played the exercises, you'll be able to say "*been there, done that,*" and will be more likely to want to learn more about the full fretboard.
4. You must learn to hear the differences in the arpeggios, not just as individual, stand-alone entities, but as a series. The series will always be—regardless of key—Major 7, Minor 7, Minor 7, Major 7, Dominant 7, Minor 7, Minor 7b5, Major 7. Put numbers to it: Notice the first (1, or Roman numeral I), fourth (IV), and fifth (V) are Major, and the rest are Minor. The I, IV, and V (aka Tonic, Sub-Dominant, Dominant) are most likely the first three chords you learned (C, F, and G⁷); that's because they are the most important to music. The vast majority of the world's music (the Blues for example) consists of only those three chords!

Learning to hear the differences between the individual arpeggios and to hear them as a series is the key to understanding this whole lesson, and is ultimately what will allow you to "play by ear." If I played them for you, it should make sense to your ear; you should be able to hear if I played one out of place or with a mistake. If it does already sound right (which they should, since our music is based on them), then you should realize that there is a name for it; learning the theory behind these naturally-occurring things will allow you to go beyond them, and into things that are *not* so self-evident. This is called "progress!" Progress will eventually equal "evolution."

That's all for now; **Parts 2 & 3** will introduce several Modal Arpeggio patterns. These patterns are meant to give your fingers and your ear a workout, and to provide a strong physical/mental foundation for jazz improvisation. You should have **Part 1** memorized before taking on **Part 2**.

Modal Arpeggios for the Tenor Banjo, Part 2 by Ron Hinkle

In **Part 1**, I introduced you to the basic Modal Scales and Arpeggios in the key of C, and the Jazz 7th Chords/Arpeggios. In **Part 2**, we'll get much deeper into the subject with "extended" arpeggios, and a few arpeggio "resolutions." Just as in **Part 1**, please do not be scared away by all of these big words; what can sound like a difficult concept is actually quite easy to play (just put your fingers where the TAB tells you to!). They are certainly easier to *play* than they are to *understand*, so let your fingers blaze the path for your head to follow (give your head something to work on while you're getting a finger workout). These would be impossible to show using diagrams, and if you don't know how to read standard notation, what then? That's why the TAB is there! Let it show you how to do it without worrying about all that other stuff.

Extended Arpeggios

One thing I didn't emphasize much in **Part 1** was the makeup of the C Modal Arpeggios; they are built from the 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 7th degrees of the corresponding C Modal Scales (as are the chords, of course). So, Ionian scale = CM⁷ chord/arpeggio, D Dorian scale = Dm⁷ chord/arpeggio, E Phrygian scale = Em⁷ chord/arpeggio, F Lydian scale = FM⁷ chord/arpeggio, G Mixolydian scale = G⁷ chord/arpeggio, A Aeolian scale = Am⁷ chord/arpeggio, and B Locrian scale = Bm^{7(b5)} chord/arpeggio. The 1-3-5 is known as a "triad," and the 7 is an "extension." The triad and extension together create a "tetrad" (4-note "Jazz 7th" chord); think of it as the "base."

I'm sure you have heard of "9th" chords, and perhaps you have heard of "11th" and "13th" chords. These are built with further extensions beyond the 7. If you count upwards from there in odd numbers, you'll come up with 9, 11, and 13 (15 is the root note two octaves up, and thus doesn't exist). These are known as the "upper extensions" (beyond the first octave); when played together as in a chord, they actually require a few small modifications (note omissions) to keep from clashing; of course, we can only *play* four notes at a time, so something *has* to be left out anyway! I don't get much into the chord theory here though; this lesson strictly concerns the arpeggios.

Rather than try to explain further, I'm going to *show* you all of the extended arpeggios. They will probably sound a little weird and disjointed to you at first until you get used to the sound. They use the 4th/3rd string arpeggios as the base, and add on the rest of the extensions on the 2nd and 1st strings: [#6.]

The image displays two systems of musical notation for extended arpeggios in the key of C. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. The notes are numbered 1 through 13, representing the degrees of the scale. Below the staff is a guitar tablature (TAB) showing the fret numbers for each note on the 4th, 3rd, 2nd, and 1st strings. The first system shows arpeggios for Cmaj7, (Dm7), Dm7, (Em7), Em7, (FM7), Fmaj7, and (G7). The second system shows arpeggios for G7, (Am7), Am7, (Bm7b5), Bm7(b5), (CM7), Cmaj7, and (Dm7). The 8va symbol indicates the octave.

And now for further explanation:

- Notice the numbering: 1-3-5-7-9-11-13; this logic-in-3rds (called "tertian harmony," which traditional Euro/American music is based on) is applied to all of the extended arpeggios.

- Notice the second chord name in parenthesis; at the same time as those notes are “extensions” of the base chord/arpeggio, they are still *also* stand-alone arpeggios. In fact, you can take *any four* of the notes (consecutive) of the full extended arpeggio and name it. For example, within the fully-extended CM⁷, you will also find four-note Em⁷ (E-G-B-D), G⁷ (G-B-D-F), Bm^{7(b5)} (B-D-F-A), and Dm⁷ (D-F-A-C) arpeggios (see if you can find them now). This helps to explain the concept of “substitute chords”; superimpose an extended triad/tetrad over the existing harmony to add “color” (within limits and rules, of course—beyond the scope of this lesson). Yes, it seems *complicated* upon first glance, but it really is that *simple!*
- Every extended arpeggio uses *all seven* of the notes of the C scale! Instead of “stepwise” as in a scale though, they are stacked in 3rds, resulting in these easy 2-finger shapes. Because of this, they can be used in much the same way as a scale; the aural effect is largely the same. The tenor banjo is even better at arpeggios than it is scales; it makes sense to capitalize on this fact for jazz improvisation.
- The bigger the interval is (the distance between the root and the extension), the further the ear must *stretch* to hear it as “correct.” However: If you played a C and a B together (Minor 2nd), it would clash for sure; play them an octave apart though (Major 7th), and they sound great together. The same goes for all of the extensions; separation allows them to work. “Ear training” is necessary for being able to hear and appreciate modern jazz; learning to *hear* the upper extensions is the first step to learning to *use* them. The Modal Arpeggios are the easiest way to do that; in a chord, they can be too easily hidden from the ear.

The concept of using the upper extensions (aka “extended harmonies”) as represented by these simple arpeggios was a revolutionary innovation of the Bebop era (specifically Charlie Parker, the “Mozart” of jazz)—*so* revolutionary that jazz historians consider Bebop to be the beginning of the “modern era” (pre-1940s jazz is referred to as “pre-modern”). I know many folks *think* they don’t *like* Bebop or Charlie Parker (only because they don’t *understand* it)! My thoughts on it: While it’s *not my favorite* style, I certainly recognize and *appreciate* the contribution modern jazz concepts have made to the artform. Many things we take for granted today—and *use* in everyday jazz—simply *did not exist* prior to Bebop! Besides, the Bebop era was 80 years ago; it’s time to drag ourselves and the banjo up to the middle of the 20th century! We talk a lot about “modernizing” the banjo; well, here’s a user-friendly opportunity to do just that!

Arpeggio Resolutions

Learning the Modal Arpeggios alone will not necessarily lead you to practical application; we need to go one step further. I call this concept “arpeggio resolution” (I use the word “resolution” loosely here; you will not find this particular application in any method book, but it makes sense. I made it up, as far as I know!). The simplest resolution is to play the four notes of the base arpeggio, and finish with the next-octave root; for example, C-E-G-B-C. Play these now (again, they should be played ascending and descending): [#7.]

The image displays two rows of musical notation for tenor banjo arpeggio resolutions. Each row contains four measures, one for each chord. The notation includes a treble clef, a 3/8 time signature, and a bass line with fingerings. The chords and their resolutions are as follows:

- Row 1:**
 - Cmaj7:** Notes C4, E4, G4, B4, C5. Fingering: 0, 4, 0, 4, 5.
 - Dm7:** Notes D4, F4, A4, B4, D5. Fingering: 2, 5, 2, 5, 0.
 - Em7:** Notes E4, G4, B4, D5, E5. Fingering: 4, 0, 4, 0, 2.
 - Fmaj7:** Notes F4, A4, C5, D5, F5. Fingering: 5, 2, 5, 2, 3.
- Row 2:**
 - G7:** Notes G4, B4, D5, F5, G5. Fingering: 0, 4, 0, 3, 5.
 - Am7:** Notes A4, C5, E5, F5, A5. Fingering: 2, 5, 2, 5, 0.
 - Bm7(b5):** Notes B4, D5, F5, A5, B5. Fingering: 4, 0, 3, 0, 2.
 - Cmaj7:** Notes C5, E5, G5, B5, C6. Fingering: 5, 2, 5, 2, 3.

An important point to make right here: If you play this up and down in 8th notes, you will hit a strong note on the downbeat of the following measure; this is known as a “target” note. Hitting an appropriate target is an important concept for making scale and arpeggio patterns “line-up” with the metric accent of the music and take you where the music *intends* to take you (translation: targets are good!). Play example #1 now: [#8.]

Compare this with example #2; play it now: [#8.]

In the second example, there is a chord change halfway through the measure. Hopefully you hear the marked difference between the two examples. Because it happens so quickly though (complete with resolution back to the base chord), you could get away with either one; if you think about it, the notes of the Dm⁷ also act as extensions of the Cmaj⁷ (etc.), and are therefore “correct” for the Cmaj⁷! Training your ear to hear these things is perhaps the most important goal of this whole lesson.

This represents the second method of “resolving” arpeggios; go up to the repeated root, then play the downward arpeggio for which that note is the 7 (i.e., C-E-G-B/1-3-5-7 [Cmaj⁷], C-A-F-D/7-5-3-1 [Dm⁷], C/1). Now we’re literally *going somewhere* harmonically! Being able to hear and instantly process these rapid-fire chord changes is an important key to being able to hear and react to jazz; much modern jazz changes chords every two beats.

Let’s apply this logic to all of the arpeggios, shall we? Notice I have shown two ways to do this (and remember, you can move to the inside two strings with the G⁷ and up, creating a third way). In the second TAB example, simply slide your pinky up and your index finger down to complete the cycle; you will see a lot more of this shifting in the upcoming exercises. This in itself is a great finger/ear exercise. Play these now: [#9.]

8

G⁷ Am⁷ G⁷ Am⁷ Bm⁷(b⁵) Am⁷

8

Bm⁷(b⁵) Cmaj⁷ Bm⁷(b⁵) Cmaj⁷ Dm⁷ Cmaj⁷

Now, we put it together into one continuous exercise covering three octaves, forward and backward; I show it taking greatest advantage of open strings (first and last four bars), but I'm sure by now you realize there is more than one possible path to follow: [#10.]

8

Cmaj⁷ Dm⁷ Em⁷ Fmaj⁷ G⁷ Am⁷ Bm⁷(b⁵) Cmaj⁷

8

Dm⁷ Em⁷ Fmaj⁷ G⁷ Am⁷ Bm⁷(b⁵) Cmaj⁷ Dm⁷

8^{va}

8

Cmaj⁷ Bm⁷(b⁵) Am⁷ G⁷ Fmaj⁷ Em⁷ Dm⁷ Cmaj⁷

8^{va}

8 Bm^{7(b5)} Am⁷ G⁷ F^{maj7} Em⁷ Dm⁷ C

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

You have probably noticed that I have put in the chord symbols on every exercise, even though this should be self-evident by now. I do this because you really need to internalize this ubiquitous series of chords; in the next resolution exercises, I will mix them up quite a bit.

But first, I want to show you an important “shifting” exercise. This does not count as a “resolution” because I am simply extending the arpeggio, just in a different way; pay strict attention to the TAB. Work toward absolute accuracy when shifting positions; start slowly and deliberately, and gradually work up your speed: [#11.]

8 C^{maj7} Dm⁷ shift 4th finger shift 1st finger

0 3 0 3 4 1 4 1 1 4 1 4 1 4 1 4 1 0

0 4 0 4 7 4 7 4 2 5 2 5 9 5 9 5 2

8 Em⁷ F^{maj7}

4 7 4 7 10 7 11 7 5 9 5 9 12 9 12 9 5

8 G⁷ Am⁷

0 4 0 3 7 3 7 4 2 5 2 5 9 5 9 5 2

8 Bm^{7(b5)} C^{maj7}

4 7 3 7 10 7 10 7 5 9 5 9 12 9 12 9 5

Things to note:

- Yes, there are simpler open-string paths you can take, but the whole point of this exercise is to learn to shift to other positions.
- Strive to play it seamlessly, as if your hand was big enough to cover the distance without shifting.
- Except for the first CM^7 and the G^7 , the fingering is the same for all the arpeggios (1st and 4th fingers). This has strong implications for playing in all keys (not relying on open strings).
- In the arpeggio pattern exercises coming up in **Part 3**, I will use finger numbers to show the shifting. The dash and words mean the same thing but will be unnecessary.
- By now, you should be noticing visual patterns in the physical distances between notes, and the resulting “shape” of each arpeggio. As your ear catches on, these distances/shapes should become automatic; your ear hears what must be done to play each arpeggio correctly, and your fingers simply react. You eventually want to also be able to *see* the chord symbol and know instinctively what those distances are.

We now get to what I consider to be the most interesting and practical resolution. Instead of finishing with the repeated root, we now take the last note down to the 6th degree of the scale and play the appropriate upward arpeggio. So, C-E-G-B-A-C-E-G. Play these now: [#12.]

The image displays two systems of musical notation for guitar arpeggios. Each system consists of two measures of music. The first system shows the following chords: Cmaj7, Am7, Dm7, Bm7(b5), Em7, Cmaj7, Fmaj7, and Dm7. The second system shows: G7, Em7, Am7, Fmaj7, Bm7(b5), G7, Cmaj7, and Am7. Each measure includes a treble clef staff with notes and a guitar TAB staff with fingerings. The TAB staff shows fingerings for the notes in the arpeggio, with some measures showing alternative fingerings for the last two notes.

You’ll notice the awkward fingering in the first TAB of the last two measures; I left them in to show the alternative to the “closed” pattern of the second TAB. This is why fingerboard knowledge is so important; strive to make the alternatives automatic.

I’m not sure if I know how to explain the theory behind this, but it sounds good, right? If not, give it time to rattle around in your ear for a bit. It sounds good to *me*; now I just have to figure out how to sufficiently explain it to others—which I will attempt to do in **Part 3** (remember, I’m still learning this stuff too).

In **Part 3**, I will introduce the concept of “function,” as in “*how does this arpeggio function in music?*” and thus “*how do I use it in music?*” Then we will put them into actual use with various arpeggio patterns, meant to give your fingers and ear a workout and give you practical patterns to use in improvisation.