

The 3-3-3-3 Scale by Ron Hinkle

In *Modal Framework for Jazz Improvisation*, I stated that the 4th string is hard to incorporate into scale patterns due to the tuning in 5^{ths} between the bottom two strings. So, I avoided them in favor of patterns on the top three strings, which are quite easy. Arpeggios are of course easy to play on all four strings.

In my experimentations with scale patterns on the tenor banjo (tuned entirely in 5^{ths}), I realized the reason for my difficulty: I was playing them with a 4-4 fingering pattern. Using all four fingers *is* fairly awkward. Using three fingers is much less awkward, so why not apply that to the bottom two strings as well?

The result is a “3-3-3-3” scale (3 notes on each string, which you can easily see in the TAB); it now covers an octave and a half, all in one position. The tradeoff is a larger skip between the 4th and 3rd strings, but the overall pattern is much-less awkward to play.

In the interest of expanding the practical scale range of the plectrum banjo, they are well worth incorporating into your knowledge/skill base. Here they are (in the key of F to better fit the fingerboard); I didn't include fingerings because that should be obvious:

The image displays eight tenor banjo scale patterns, each consisting of a musical staff and a corresponding guitar-style TAB. The scales are arranged in four rows, with two scales per row. The scales shown are: F Ionian, G Dorian, A Phrygian, Bb Lydian, C Mixolydian, D Aeolian, E Locrian, and F Ionian. Each scale is written in a key signature of one flat (F major/D minor). The TABs show fret numbers for each string, with the starting note on the 3rd string circled. The patterns are designed to be played on the top three strings of the tenor banjo.

Following Modal logic, you can easily see that each scale also incorporates a regular 3-3-3 scale on the top three strings (starting note circled): F Ionian > Bb Lydian; G Dorian > C Mixolydian; A Phrygian > D Aeolian; Bb Lydian > E Locrian; C Mixolydian > F Ionian; D Aeolian > G Dorian; and E Locrian > A Phrygian. This is similar to the arpeggio logic from the book.

Using those 3-string scales as the base, you could also think of the bottom three notes as a downward scale extension. I find that the more ways there are to think about something, the more ways there are to connect them together—making the whole thing easier to learn and remember.