

# Modal Tunes in Old Time Music

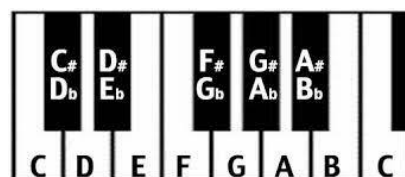
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Most classically trained musicians are very familiar with major and minor musical scales but less so with other scales commonly found in Appalachian fiddle tunes. These “other” scales are sometimes lumped into the general category of “modal” tunes. Modal tunes have a haunting quality (not quite major, not quite minor) and are most plentiful in the areas of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky. This article will try to explain the characteristics of these modal scales and their implications for Old Time (OT) melody players and accompanists.

## The 7 Musical Modes - Theory

Diatonic scales have seven notes, consisting of five whole steps and two half steps. The two half steps are separated from each other by either two or three whole steps. Altogether, there are 7 possible diatonic scale modes, with archaic Greek names, but the most common for the purposes of old time (OT) music are the Major, Mixolydian and Dorian modes. Mixolydian, Dorian and Minor scales are common in Celtic music.

A common explanation of scale modes is to start on one key on a piano keyboard and play a 7 note scale on only the white keys (see Table 1). If you start on the C key, you will play a C major scale. If you start on the D key, the half steps are now in a different position and you will be playing a D Dorian scale. Table 1 describes all 7 possibilities. All of these would share the same key signature – with no sharps or flats.



**Table 1. The 7 Diatonic Musical Modes (scales)**

- **C Major** (aka Ionian) scale – begin on the C key and play the next 6 white keys: C,D,E,F,G,A,B
- **D Dorian** - begin on D key and play the next 6 white keys: D,E,F,G,A,B,C (common in OT)
- **E Phrygian** - begin on E key and uses the next 6 white keys: E,F,G,A,B,C,D (uncommon)
- **F Lydian** - begin on F (uncommon)
- **G Mixolydian** - begin on G (common in OT)
- **A Minor** (aka Aeolian) - begin on A key (common in Celtic)
- **B Locrian** - begin on the B key (uncommon)



Ionian	Dorian	Phrygian	Lydian	Mixolydian	Aeolian	Locrian
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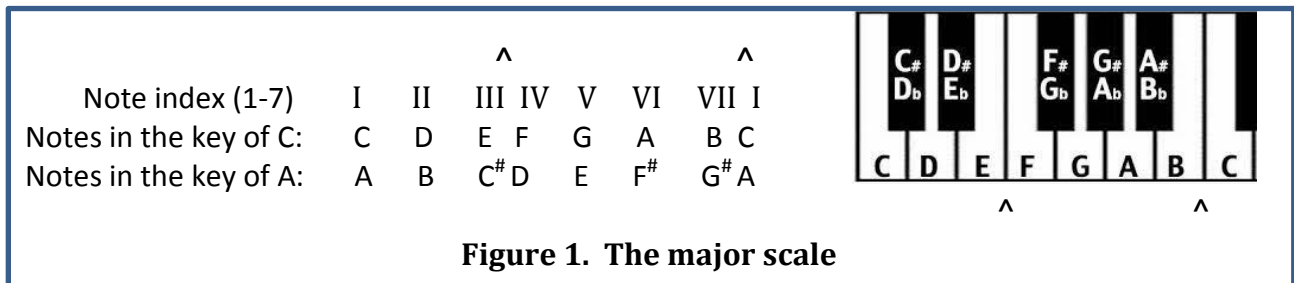
If you are playing an instrument which is limited to the 7 notes of a major scale (such as a penny whistle or bagpipe) you can still play other modes. We can think of mode “families” which share the same 7 scale notes. Table 2 shows these mode families. The first row should look familiar from Table 1 above. The versatile D penny whistle used in Irish music can readily play tunes in A Mixolydian, E Dorian or B minor (see row 2).

**Table 2. Modes in the same row share the same seven diatonic scale notes and key signature**

Major Scale	Mixolydian	Dorian	Minor	Example
C	G	D	A	White Keys on Piano
D	A	E	B	D Penny Whistle
E	B	F	C	
F	C	G	D	
G	D	A	E	
A	E	B	F#	
Bflat	F	C	G	

**An Alternate Description**

A different way to look at modes is to start with the major scale and show how it is related to the other common modes in that same key family (such as A<sub>Major</sub>, A<sub>Mixolydian</sub>, A<sub>Dorian</sub>, A<sub>minor</sub>). First a quick review - A major diatonic scale has half-step intervals between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> notes of the scale, and the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, with whole steps everywhere else as shown in Figure 1 below. The ^ symbol denotes a half-step interval.









**Figure 1. The major scale**

The other scale modes have their half-steps in different relative positions. For example, in the Mixolydian scale, the seventh note is lowered by a half-step (flatted). Or put another way, there is a whole step interval between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the octave notes. The half steps are now between 3-4 and 6-7. Dorian flattens both the seventh and third notes of the scale (half steps 2-3, 6-7). Minor adds the flatted sixth note (half steps 2-3, 5-6).

Since the most common modal keys in old time music are A<sub>Mixolydian</sub> and A<sub>Dorian</sub>, let's use the A major scale as the starting point for some examples. As shown in Table 3, the key signature for A major has 3 sharps (F# G# C#). The notes in the scale are A B C# D E F# G#. The primary or dominant chord in the key of A is called the "tonic" chord – or the I (one) chord. It consists of the first, third and fifth notes of the A scale (A C# E). The other common chords are the IV chord (D) and V chord (E). The other modes in the A family are also shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. The common A scales (modes) used in Old Time Music**

Key	Greek name	Key Signature	“alternate” Key Signature	Scale Notes	Likely Chords
A <sub>Major</sub>	Ionian			A B C# D E F# G#	A D E and possibly B I IV V (II)
A <sub>Mixolydian</sub> “Major Modal”	Mixolydian			A B C# D E F# G (same notes as D major)	A D E G I IV V VII
A <sub>Dorian</sub> “Minor Modal”	Dorian			A B C D E F# G (same notes as G major)	Am G D Em I IV V VII
A <sub>Minor</sub>	Aeolian			A B C D E F G (same notes as C major)	Am Dm Em I IV V

A visually-oriented person might notice a pattern in the key signatures moving from top to bottom in Table 3. To go from A<sub>major</sub> to A<sub>minor</sub> we progressively remove (naturalize) the right-most # symbol in the key signature. A<sub>Mixolydian</sub> drops the G# symbol, A<sub>Dorian</sub> drops the C#. For folks who understand the circle of fifths, this is equivalent to dropping the major key signature in steps of a musical fourth (or raising it by a musical fifth).

Some examples of A modal tunes are listed below. There are also many interesting tunes where the mode is ambiguous or modulates from part to part. Modal tunes in D or G are also possible, but far less common in OT music. Garfield’s Blackberry Blossom is a good example of a tune whose mode depends on who is playing it – you can find versions in major, minor and Dorian modes.

**Dorian:** Highlander’s Farewell, Hog-Eyed Man, Pretty Little Indian, Dust in the Lane

**Mixolydian:** Abe’s Retreat, Icy Mountain, Pretty Little Shoes, Texas, Yew Piney Mountain

**Ambiguous (bi-modal?):** The 28<sup>th</sup> of January, Squirrel Hunters, Davey Come Back and Act Like You Oughta, Da New Rigged Ship (Shetland reel)

Modal tunes are very common in Irish music. Tunes like Drowsy Maggie or Coolie’s Reel may appear to be in E<sub>minor</sub> (one sharp), but are actually in the Dorian mode. E<sub>Dorian</sub> is a convenient key for a D penny whistle or bagpipe chanter because it shares all the same notes as the D<sub>Major</sub> scale (from Table 2). Coolie’s reel can also be played on a G whistle by avoiding the C# note, or by “bending” (sharpening) the C.

## Multiple Modes Use the Same Key Signature

When a classically-trained musician sees a key signature with one sharp, they will automatically think – “that’s a G major scale”. However that same key signature could also denote:  $E_{\text{minor}}$ ,  $A_{\text{Dorian}}$ , or  $D_{\text{Mixolydian}}$  or others (completing the circle - G Phrygian, C Locrian, F Lydian). Similarly, a cursory glance of the key signature might mislead a guitar player and get them into trouble. For instance,  $A_{\text{Mixolydian}}$  has the same key signature as  $D_{\text{Major}}$  (2 sharps), so the guitarist might be tempted to dive in with D as the dominant (I) chord instead of A.

## Notating Modal Tunes

Some score authors notate modal tunes entirely in the major key and show the “modal” notes as accidentals. I do not like this method. I prefer placing a natural sign ♮ in the key signature indicating where the scale differs from the major key (but just on the first staff line, to avoid visual clutter). This is shown in the “alternate key signature” column of Table 3. The  $A_{\text{Mixolydian}}$  key signature would therefore have a natural sign ♮ in place of the # symbol at the G position (two sharps, plus the natural sign). I think this method helps prevent wrong assumptions about key and chords, and may prevent the dreaded “stink eye” from the fiddler. 🙄

## Accompanying OT Tunes

The most likely chords to accompany OT tunes are listed in Table 3. These are a good starting point, but there are always exceptions. If the tune is modal, the first challenge is to determine whether the dominant chord is major or minor. I think using the terms **major modal** (for Mixolydian) and **minor modal** (Dorian) is helpful here; since it nails down the dominant (I) chord. The VII chord will be prominent in any modal tune and often the I and VII chords are all that is needed. Fortunately, the vast majority of OT fiddle tunes are in major keys and employ only three chords – I IV V (1,4,5).

Then just when you thought you had this all this modal stuff figured out, you go to an Old Time jam and some hotshot fiddler rattles off a modal A tune where the mode is ambiguous - Argghhh! What do you do? Possibilities for keys and chords include  $A_{\text{Dorian}}$  ( $A_{\text{minor}}/G$  chords, C natural),  $A_{\text{Mixolydian}}$  ( $A_{\text{Major}}/G$  chords, C#), or a mixture thereof. Examples include *The 28<sup>th</sup> of January*, *Squirrel Hunters* and *Davey Come Back and Act Like You Oughta*. Many of these modal tunes originated as unaccompanied banjo-fiddle duets, before guitar accompaniment was common. In these tunes the third note of the scale is sometimes sharp, sometimes natural. To further confuse the issue, in some old recordings, the fiddler can’t seem to make up their mind and plays a note halfway between sharp and natural. In these cases, a simple work-around for is to avoid the III note in a chord (play just I and V). A banjo player I know calls this the “power chord”. Bass players generally don’t care because that’s all they play anyway.