

AEOLIAN—THE MAJOR MINOR

The Aeolian mode is the old A-minor mode—“A” because this note is its historical keytone; “minor” because of the nature of its scale, which follows the scheme $1-\frac{1}{2}-1-1-\frac{1}{2}-1-1$. If you read the Aeolian’s fixed scheme backward, you’ll see it is the reverse of the Mixolydian. The Aeolian is the most forceful of all the minor modes. The first note of the Aeolian’s scale begins on the first fret, and the tuning is like this:

(X+1)
(X+5)
X
X

The Aeolian is minor because the third note in its scale forms a minor third with the keytone. The Aeolian has a minor sixth, too, and its melancholic tone lends itself to creative, lyrical phrasing.

Its drawbacks stem from the nature of its minor tonality. Open strumming produces a disquieting “when-is-the-second-shoe-going-to-drop?” feeling that demands resolution. Many of the notes in the scale have this same effect. Playing notes on the middle and bass strings becomes strange, since you no longer have major tone drones behind the unisons. To play on the middle or bass string, you must be careful to play each string by itself, because they do not blend with the unisons.

Some tunes you can play in the Aeolian are “Shady Grove,” “Charlie’s Sweet,” “John Henry,” “The Cuckoo,” Richard Fariña’s “The Falcon,” “Cluck Old Hen,” “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen” and some of your favorite blues songs.

THE DORIAN MODE

Originally tuned to D, the Dorian has a slightly major-sounding tonality but is considered a minor mode. The Dorian is used in traditional folk music more often than the Aeolian because it is very easy to tune from the major Ionian to the minor Dorian.