

The Modes

The concept of modes in music might seem intimidating initially, but it's actually quite straightforward. Essentially, **we start and end on a note that is not our usual root**. In fact, you might already be familiar with one mode without realizing it. The modes all have Greek names, which may sound foreign, but focus on what we're actually doing rather than the names.

What is a Mode?

A mode is simply playing the notes of our major scale, but instead of starting on the 1st note (the root), we start on any other note within the scale. This starting note becomes the new “home” or tonic. The pattern of the major scale remains the same, but it begins from this new note. By changing our starting point, just like we saw with playing the minor scale versus playing the major scale, we can open up a new palette of emotions.

The Mode we already know

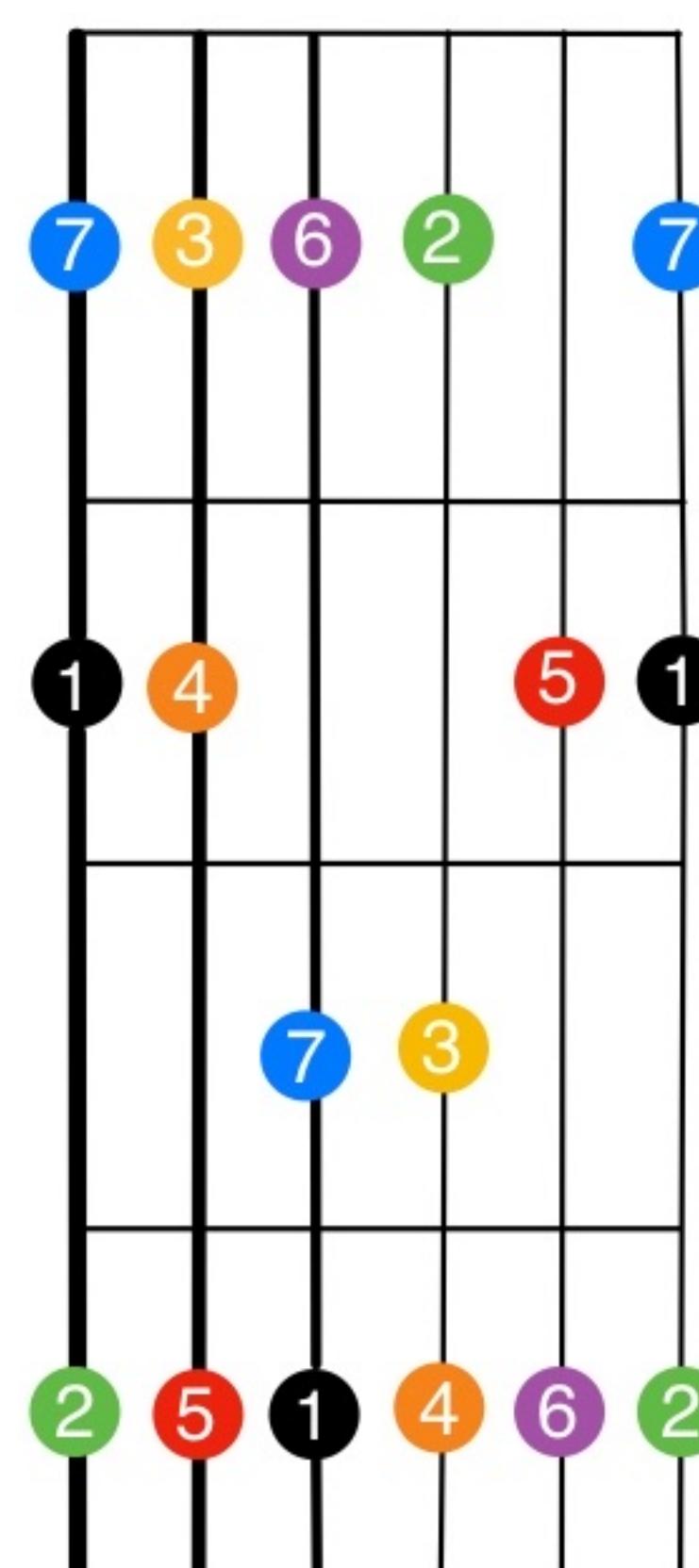
We already know our minor scale. We call it the Aeolian mode and it is just our major scale but we start it on the 6th note. For example, in the C major, the 6th note would be A (C D E F G A). This gives us A minor or A Aeolian.

How do Modes work?

Let's say we have two chords: G major and A major. If we emphasize the A major chord, making it feel like the home chord, we create a mode. Normally, in the key of D major, G and A are the IV and V chords. By focusing on A major as our “home”, we're using a mode, in this case A Mixolydian.

Mode Names:

- Ionian** 1st Note (major scale)
- Dorian** 2nd Note
- Phrygian** 3rd Note
- Lydian** 4th Note
- Mixolydian** 5th note
- Aeolian** 6th note (our minor)
- Locrian** 7th note



Remember this simple mnemonic:

I
Don't
Play
Lousy
Music
Any
Longer

Ionian
Dorian
Phrygian
Lydian
Mixolydian
Aeolian
Locrian

Let's look at an example in the key of C to further solidify our point:

Ionian	C D E F G A B C
Dorian	D E F G A B C D
Phrygian	E F G A B C D E
Lydian	F G A B C D E F
Mixolydian	G A B C D E F G
Aeolian	A B C D E F G A
Locrian	B C D E F G A B

Modal Chord Progressions

The interaction between chord degrees stays the same for modes. The Locrian mode is notoriously hard to write a stable feeling chord progression in, so we will not bother with it. Let's look at some common modal chord progressions for the rest:

Dorian:

ii V

Ex: "Any Colour You Like" and "Breathe" Pink Floyd

ii IV V

Ex: "Supersonic" Oasis

ii I ii ii IV V ii

Ex: "Scarborough" Simon and Garfunkel

ii IV I V

Ex: "Mad World" Tears for Fears (ii V for chorus)

ii iii IV iii ii

Phrygian:

iii IV

Ex: "Would?" Alice in Chains

iii IV iii V

Ex: "Start" The Jam

IV iii

Ex: "Symphony of Destruction" Megadeth

iii IV

Ex: "Black Napkins" Frank Zappa

Lydian:

IV V IV

Ex: "Flying in a Blue Dream" Joe Satriani

IV V

Ex: "Dreams" Fleetwood Mac

Mixolydian:

V IV

Ex: "Fire on the Mountain" Grateful Dead

V ii ii vi

Ex: "Clocks" Coldplay

V ii IV vi

Ex: "Times Like These" Foo Fighters

V ii IV V

Ex: "Flagpole Sitta" Harvey Danger

V IV V

V IV I V

Aeolian (Minor):

vi V IV V

Ex: "All Along The Watchtower" Bob Dylan

vi vi7 vi vi7 iii

Ex: "Street Spirit Fade Out" Radiohead

vi I V

Ex: "Time" Pink Floyd

vi ii iii

Ex: "Since I've Been Loving You" Led Zeppelin
Also called Minor Blues and written as i iv v

vi I IV vi

vi ii

vi iii

Pedal tone:

vi IV/vi ii/vi vi

Ex: Key of C - Am F/A Dm/A Am

vi V/vi vii/vi vi

Ex: Key of C - Am G/A Bdim/A Am

Soloing With Modes

We are very familiar with the Ionian (major scale) and the Aeolian (natural minor scale). However, there are a few other modes. Luckily, there is no need to learn any new scales.

Recall that when we harmonized the major scale, the chords built on the 2nd, 3rd, and 6th degrees were all minor. The Dorian (2nd), Phrygian (3rd), and Aeolian (6th) modes are all centered around minor because they feature a flat 3. For the minor scale, we played the minor pentatonic scale. Since the pentatonic scale has no half steps, it means the pentatonic doesn't strictly define a mode. This means the minor pentatonic will fit perfectly over minor modes such as Dorian, Phrygian, and Aeolian, and the major pentatonic will fit over major modes like Ionian, Lydian, and Mixolydian.

Understanding all of this information might seem like a lot, which is why people can find it intimidating. Let's clarify everything with an example to show how the modes work.

Let's continue with the previous G and A chord progression.

Chord progression: G to A

Step 1: Determine the parent scale

This is just the key or the major scale we are basing everything off of.

This example is the key of **D**, so it would be the D major scale.

So we are essentially doing a IV V progression

Step 2: Determine the mode

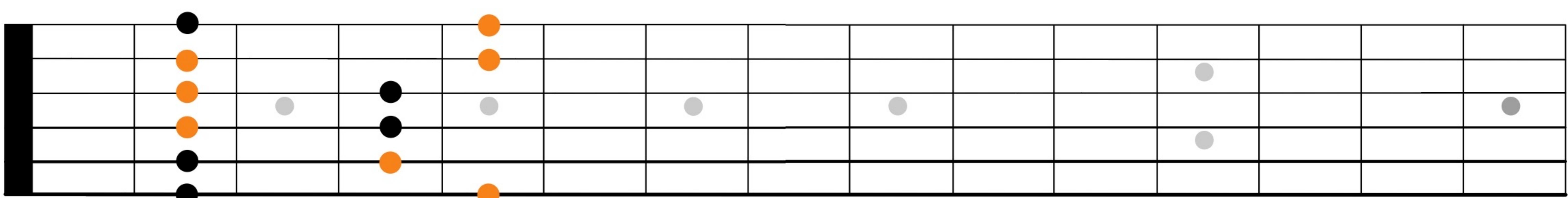
In the chord progression we will treat A as "home" by focusing and playing the A chord longer than the G.

Since A is the home and the chords fit the key of D, we are in A mixolydian, because A is the 5th of D.

Step 3: Apply the pentatonic

Since A Mixolydian is a major mode, we will use the A Major Pentatonic Scale

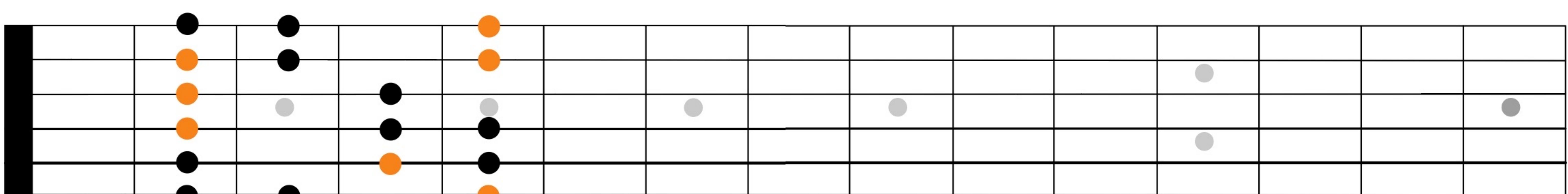
We are free to choose any of the positions we want



Step 4: Apply the full diatonic scale

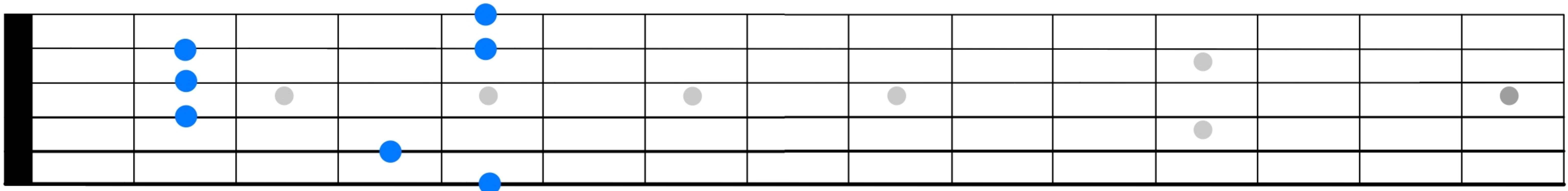
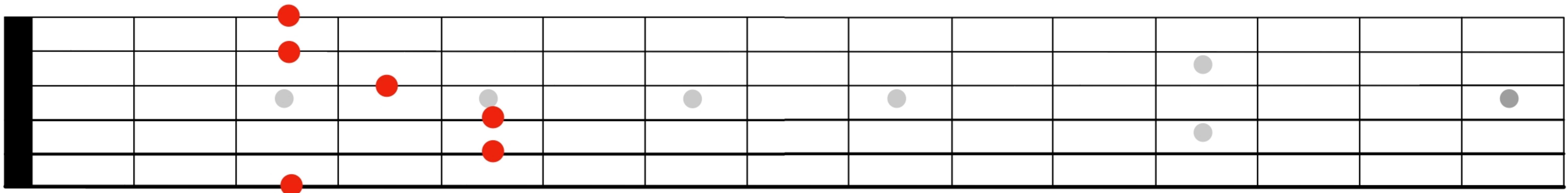
The diatonic scale would be the scale of the key, which was the key of D.

Notice how this is our C shape major scale.

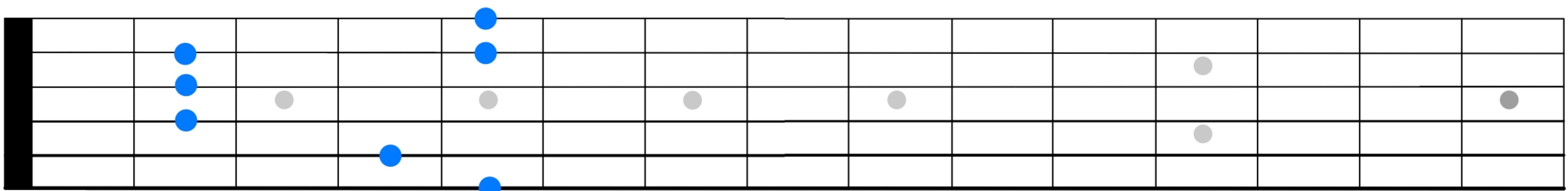
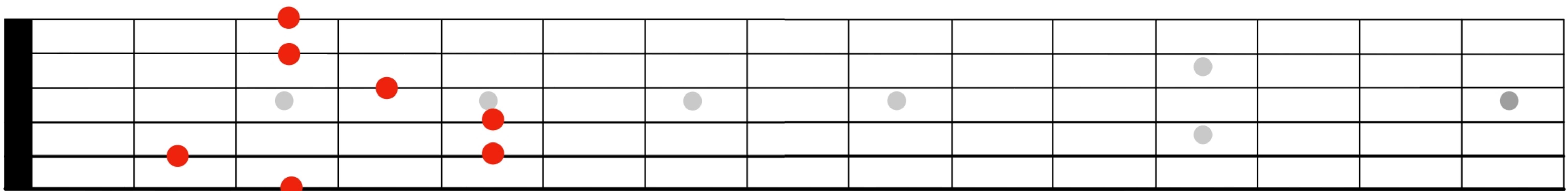


Now, we follow our same soloing mind set process

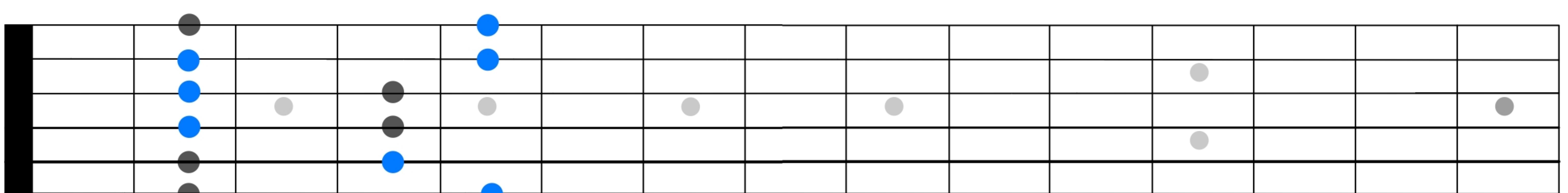
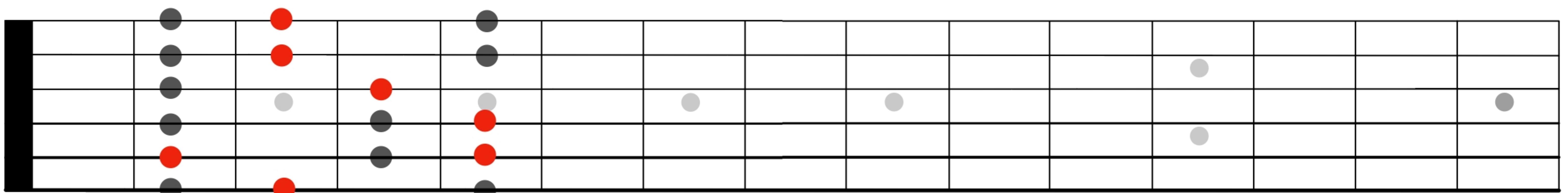
Step 1: Find chords in the area



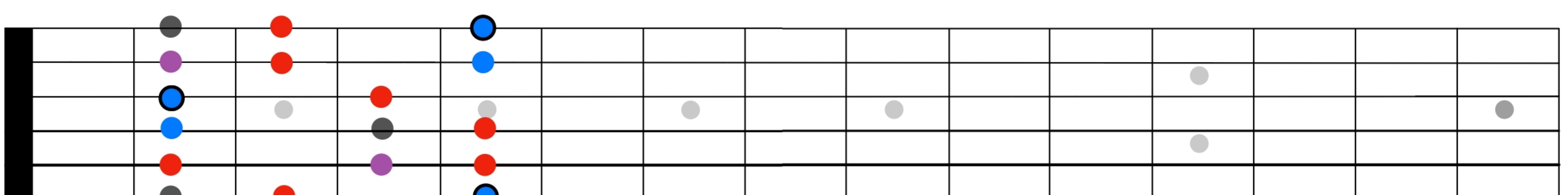
Step 2: Play full arpeggios



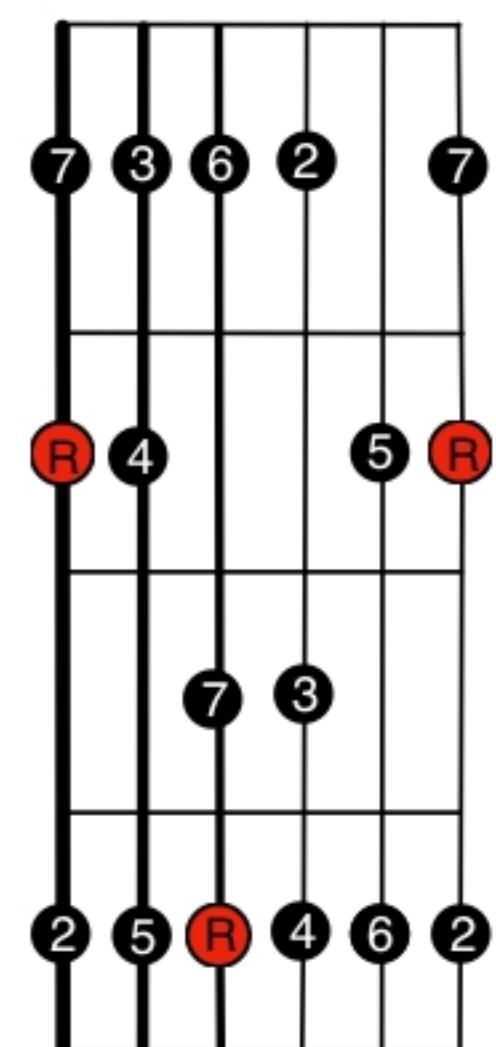
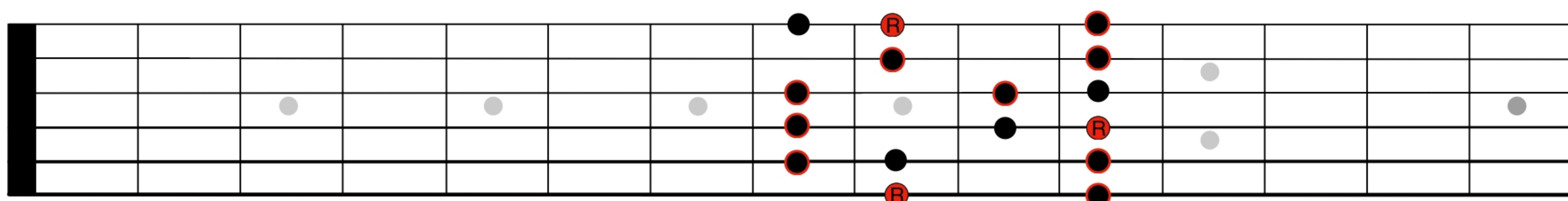
Step 3: Play pentatonics focusing on arpeggios



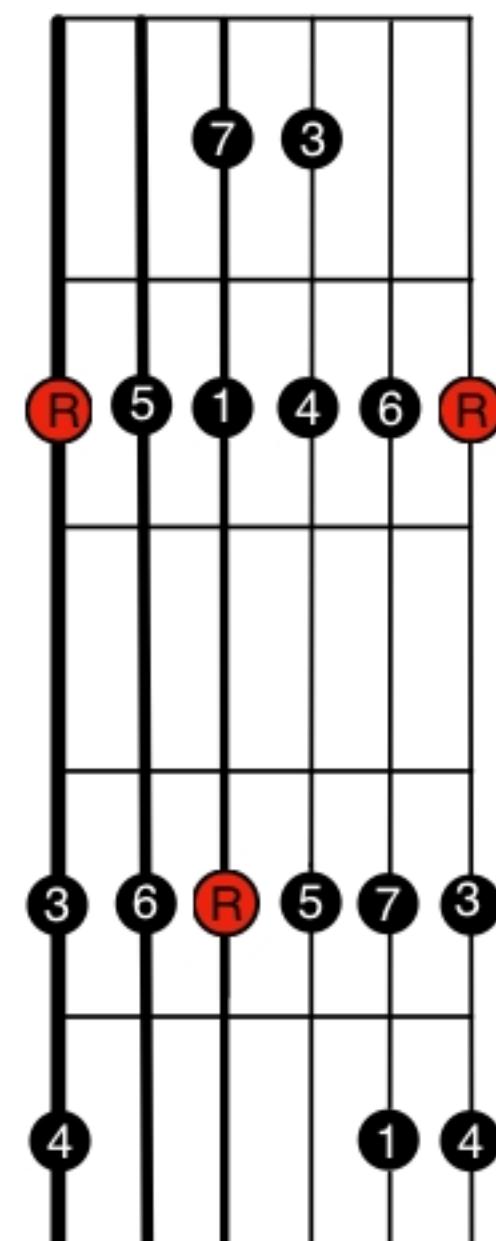
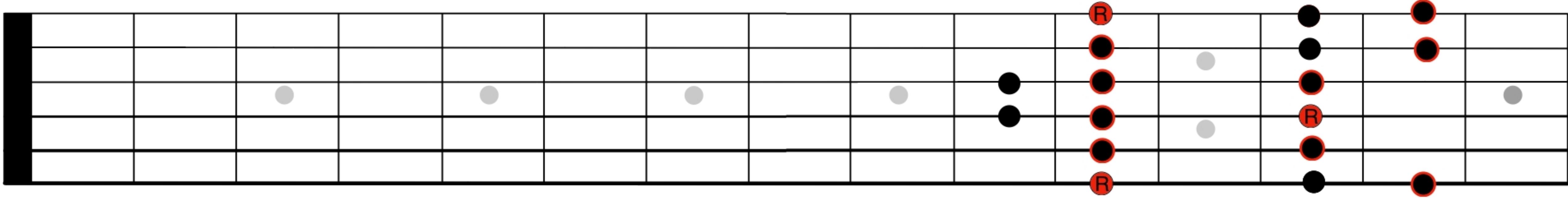
When we combine the arpeggios over the pentatonic, some [notes of the arpeggios do not fit](#) perfectly over the pentatonic shape. Those notes are important because they will bring out the sound of the mode for us.



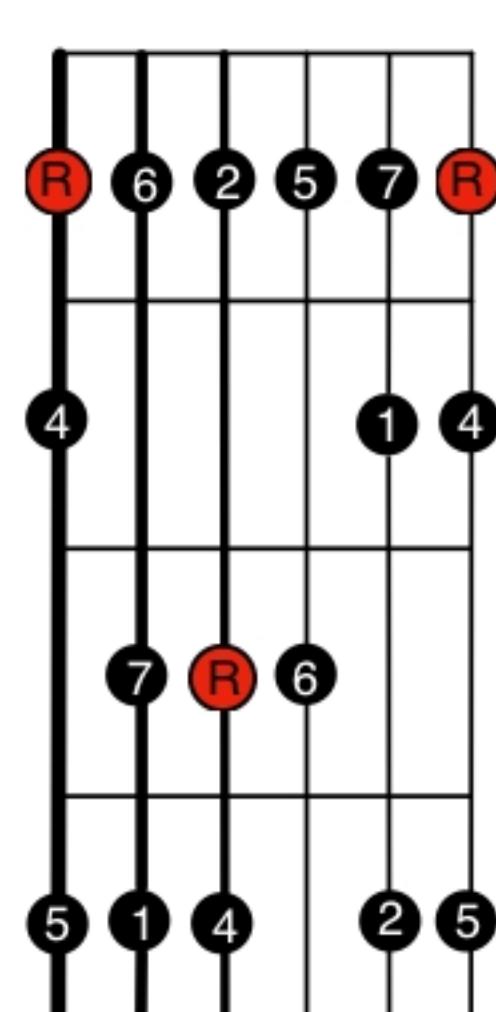
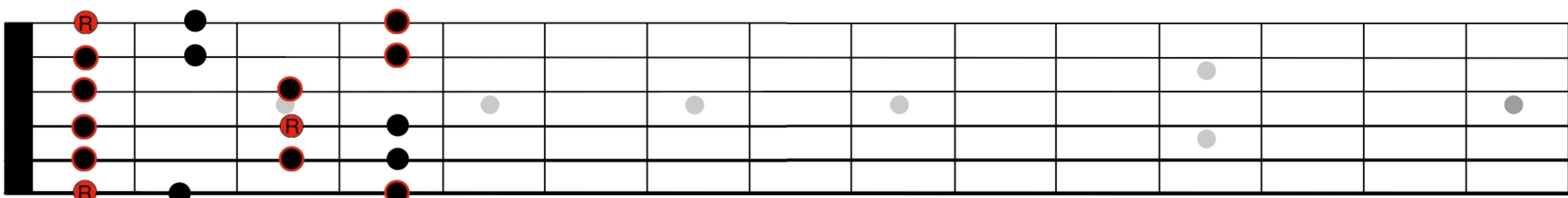
Ionian - E Shape



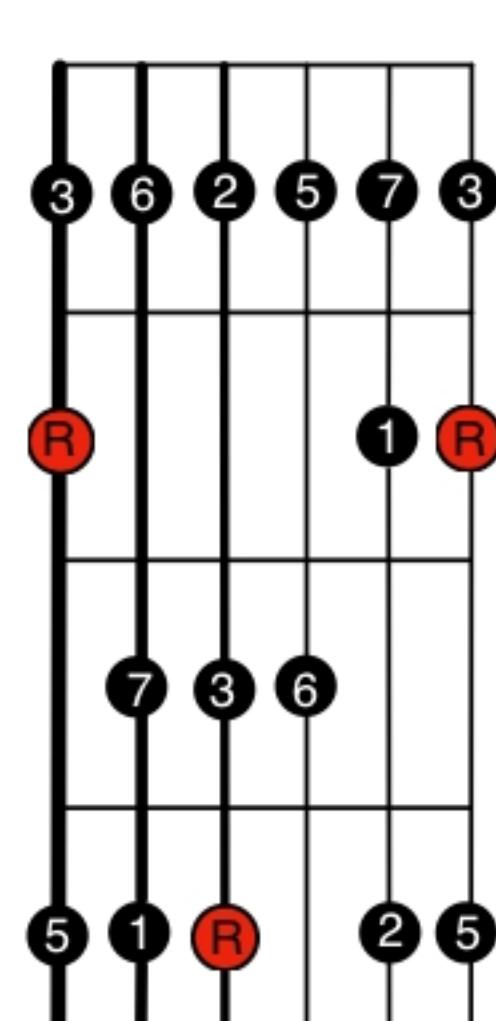
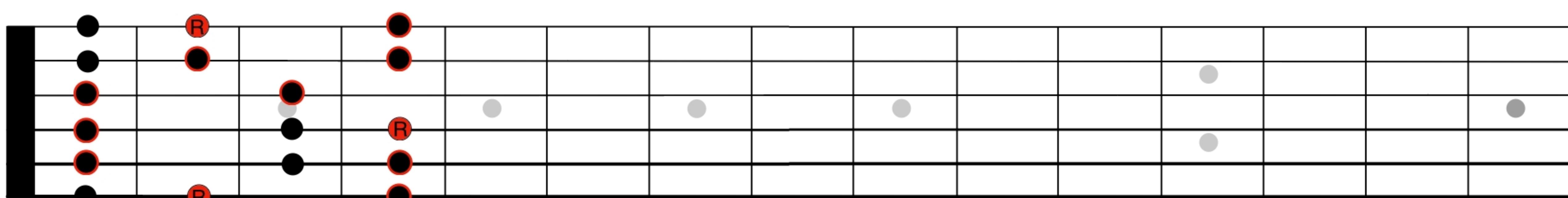
Dorian - D Shape



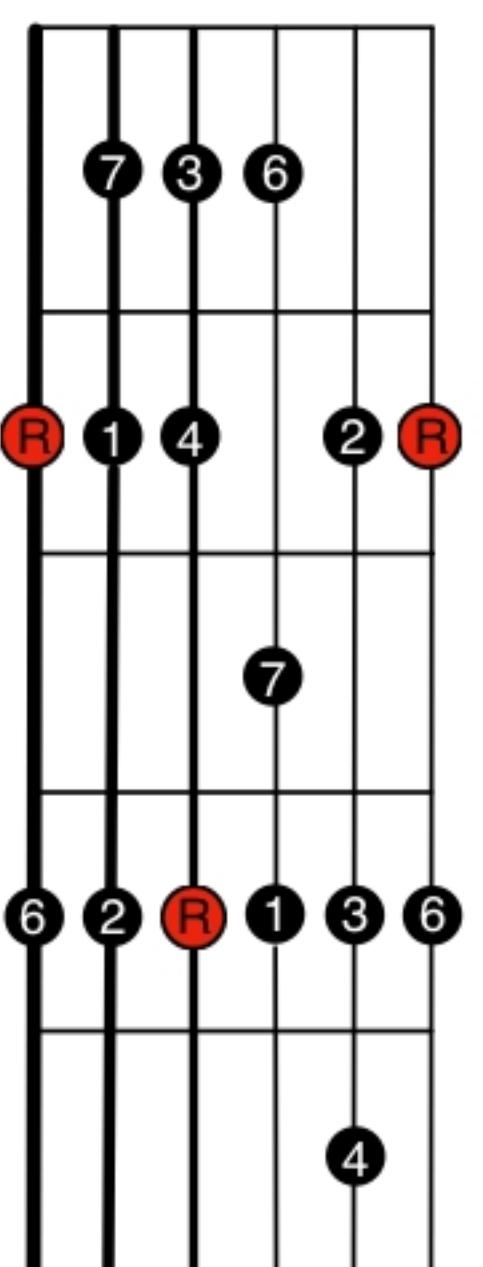
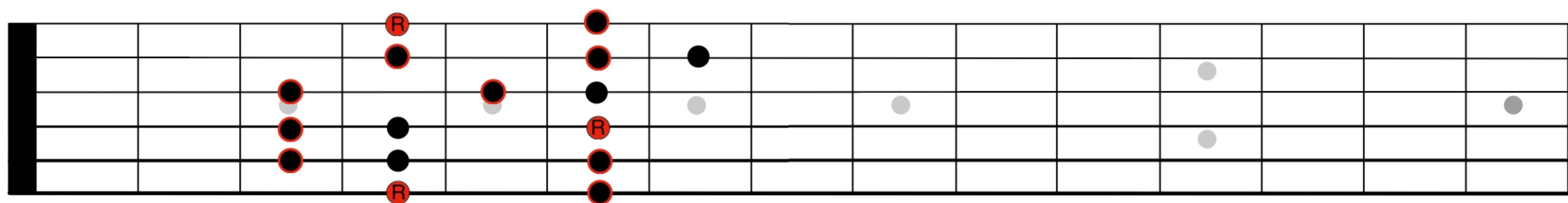
Phrygian - C Shape



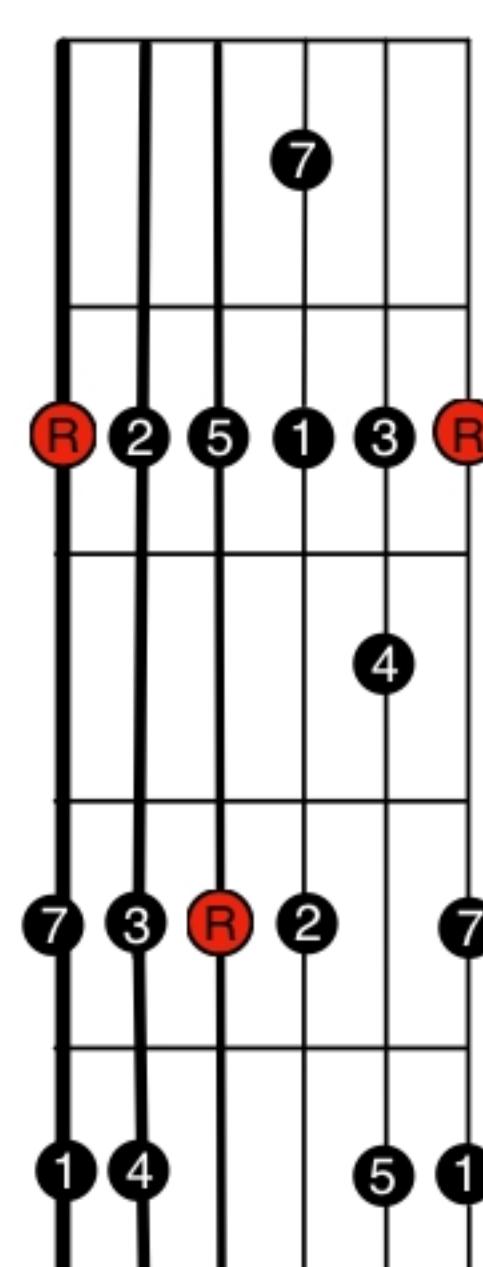
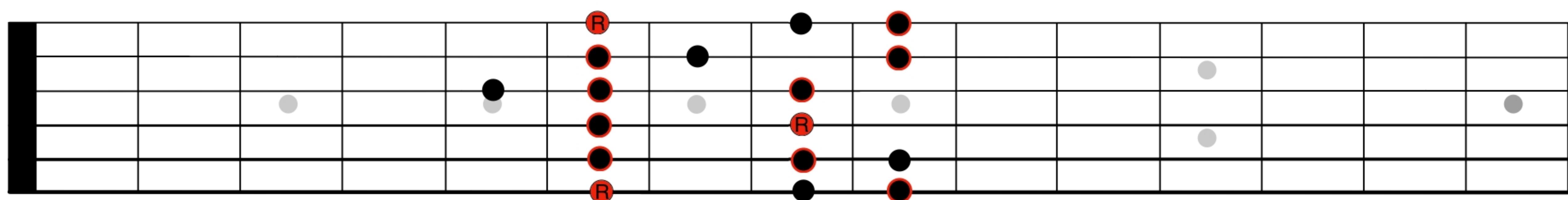
Lydian - C Shape



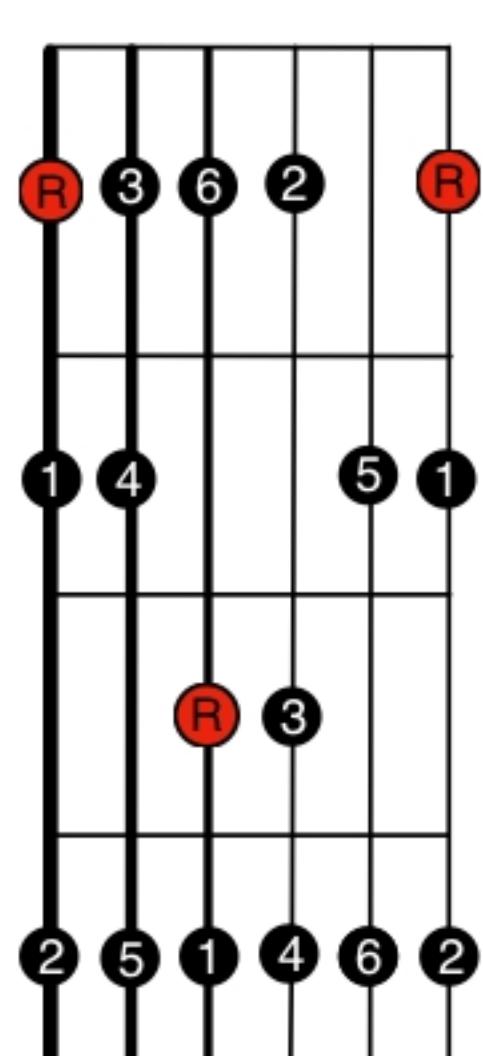
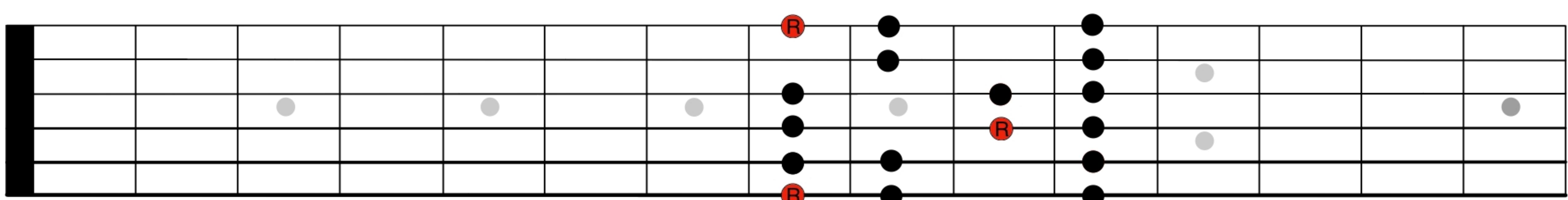
Mixolydian - A Shape



Aeolian - G Shape



Locrian - E Shape



The Modes Scales

What we can do to understand the modes start with our pentatonics. The pentatonics, again, have no half steps. We just have to know the intervals of the pentatonic and add on the intervals that make up each modal scale.

Major Scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Major Pentatonic: 1 2 3 5 6

Minor Scale: 1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7

Minor Pentatonic: 1 b3 4 5 b7

These are the notes to replace or add to their respective scale:

Dorian	Minor	maj 6 (minor has b6)
Phrygian	Minor	b2
Lydian	Major	#4
Mixolydian	Major	b7
Locrian	Minor	b2 b5

Tones that give the particular mode its sound:

Dorian 6
Phrygian b2 b6

Lydian #4
Mixolydian b7
Locrian b2 b5 b6

Rank of brightness of the different modes and their general feelings:

Lydian - Mysterious but happy (video game music usually based off this mode)

Ionian - Happy, Optimistic

Mixolydian - Smooth

Dorian - Melancholy, but hopeful

Aeolian - Deep sadness

Phrygian - Tense

Locrian - Dark and malevolent

Helpful Hints:

- When creating a chord progression using modes, it's best to avoid emphasizing the tonic (1st degree) of the original key. For example, in our G and A chord progression, try to avoid the D chord or lingering on it too long. Staying on the D chord too long can make it sound like you're reinforcing the original key (D major), which can detract from the exotic feel of the mode you're trying to highlight.
- When making a chord progression, hitting those chords that are not typically in the key will make the progression sound very "modal."

The Modes Map

Major

Ionian

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Major Pentatonic

1 2 3 5 6

Lydian

1 2 3 **#4** 5 6 7

Mixolydian

1 2 3 4 5 6 **b7**

Minor

Aeolian

1 2 **b3** 4 5 **b6** **b7**

Minor Pentatonic

1 **b3** 4 5 **b7**

Dorian

1 2 **b3** 4 5 **6** **b7**

Phrygian

1 **b2** **b3** 4 5 **b6** **b7**

Locrian

1 **b2** **b3** 4 **b5** **b6** **b7**

Harmonic Minor

1 2 **b3** 4 5 **b6** **7**

Melodic Minor

1 2 **b3** 4 5 **6** **7** - Ascending the Scale

1 2 **b3** 4 5 **b6** **b7** - Descending the Scale

Blues Pentatonic

1 **b3** 4 **b5** 5 **b7**

Blues Scale

1 2 **b3** **3** 4 **b5** 5 6 **b7**