

SHREDDED METAL

LOCRIAN LICKS

In the previous issue, I talked about the Dorian mode and how it is often underutilised as a melodic source for metal riffs. However, for this column I'd like to talk about a scale that is commonly used in metal – the Locrian mode. Locrian is the seventh mode of the major scale. Of the seven major modes, it's the 'odd one out' since rather than an overall major or minor tonality it has a b5 degree and is a diminished mode. Locrian contains the very dissonant b2 and b5 (tritone) degrees, and as such, frequently gets used in heavy metal due to its sinister sound. However, if I had to hazard a guess, I'd say that more often than not it's employed simply because the notes sound cool and not by consciously thinking of the Locrian mode and music theory.

EXERCISE 1

Locrian is built by playing the same notes as a major scale, but changing the root note to the seventh degree. This changes the pattern of tones and semitones in relation to the tonic and builds a completely different scale. Essentially, you count up seven notes in the major scale and make the seventh the tonal centre. Even easier, just move down a half step (as shown in Exercise 1). Here we have an F major scale (Ionian) on the first string over an Fmaj7 chord. If you play the same notes but start and end on the seventh degree (E) over an E diminished triad or an Emin7b5 (half diminished) chord, you get E Locrian. The formula for Locrian is: 1-b2-b3-4-b5-b6-b7. All those flats may seem confusing, so it may be easier to think of it as natural minor with a b2 and b5 (or just Phrygian with a b5).

Exercise 1 shows two scales on a single guitar string (first string). The first scale is F Ionian (F major), starting on F (13th fret) and ending on F (13th fret). The second scale is E Locrian, starting on E (12th fret) and ending on E (12th fret). The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (Bb), and a time signature of 4/4. The scales are written as eighth notes. Below the scales, the fret numbers are listed: 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13 for F Ionian, and 0, 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12 for E Locrian. The word 'TAB' is written vertically on the left side of the fret numbers.

EXERCISE 2

This is a typical thrash riff based off E Locrian involving power chords and palm muting. While diatonically the E5 tonic chord should be an E(b5), it's common to substitute a regular power chord in its place. Overall, we would still consider the riff to be Locrian-based.

Exercise 2 shows a thrash riff based off E Locrian. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a time signature of 4/4. The tempo is marked as 150 bpm. The riff consists of five measures of eighth notes, each followed by a palm mute (P.M.) symbol. The notes are E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C#6, D6, E6, F#6, G6, A6, B6, C#7, D7, E7, F#7, G7, A7, B7, C#8, D8, E8, F#8, G8, A8, B8, C#9, D9, E9, F#9, G9, A9, B9, C#10, D10, E10, F#10, G10, A10, B10, C#11, D11, E11, F#11, G11, A11, B11, C#12, D12, E12, F#12, G12, A12, B12, C#13, D13, E13, F#13, G13, A13, B13, C#14, D14, E14, F#14, G14, A14, B14, C#15, D15, E15, F#15, G15, A15, B15, C#16, D16, E16, F#16, G16, A16, B16, C#17, D17, E17, F#17, G17, A17, B17, C#18, D18, E18, F#18, G18, A18, B18, C#19, D19, E19, F#19, G19, A19, B19, C#20, D20, E20, F#20, G20, A20, B20, C#21, D21, E21, F#21, G21, A21, B21, C#22, D22, E22, F#22, G22, A22, B22, C#23, D23, E23, F#23, G23, A23, B23, C#24, D24, E24, F#24, G24, A24, B24, C#25, D25, E25, F#25, G25, A25, B25, C#26, D26, E26, F#26, G26, A26, B26, C#27, D27, E27, F#27, G27, A27, B27, C#28, D28, E28, F#28, G28, A28, B28, C#29, D29, E29, F#29, G29, A29, B29, C#30, D30, E30, F#30, G30, A30, B30, C#31, D31, E31, F#31, G31, A31, B31, C#32, D32, E32, F#32, G32, A32, 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C#316, D316, E316, F#316, G316, A316, B316, C#317, D317, E317, F#317, G317, A317, B317, C#318, D318, E318, F#318, G318, A318, B318, C#319, D319, E319, F#319, G319, A319, B319, C#320, D320, E320, F#320, G320, A320, B320, C#321, D321, E321, F#321, G321, A321, B321, C#322, D322, E322, F#322, G322, A322, B322, C#323, D323, E323, F#323, G323, A323, B323, C#324, D324, E324, F#324, G324, A324, B324, C#325, D325, E325, F#325, G325, A325, B325, C#326, D326, E326, F#326, G326, A326, B326, C#327, D327, E327, F#327, G327, A327, B327, C#328, D328, E328, F#328, G328, A328, B328, C#329, D

EXERCISE 3

If you're unfamiliar with the mode, here are two fingerings to get you started – a basic 'box' pattern for E Locrian, as well as the same pattern extended into a three note per string fingering. Ultimately, you can use any fingering for any of the major modes as long as you keep the root note the same.

Exercise 3 shows two musical patterns for E Locrian. The first pattern, labeled "E Locrian 'box' pattern", is a 5-note scale (E, F, G, A, B) shown in a 5-string box fingering. The second pattern, labeled "E Locrian 3 note per string pattern", is an extended 15-note scale (E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E) shown in a 3-note-per-string fingering. Both patterns are written in E Locrian (one flat) and include guitar tablature (TAB) with fret numbers.

EXERCISE 4

This is an ascending hammer-on/pull-off Locrian lick that could be used over the riff from Exercise 2. Note how it ends on a sustained b5 to really bring out the 'evil' sound of the Locrian mode. However, Locrian is just one scale choice here. In a metal context, you can pretty much get away with using any scale you like over this type of riff.

Exercise 4 shows an ascending hammer-on/pull-off Locrian lick. The lick is written in E minor (Em) and 4/4 time. It features a series of ascending eighth notes, followed by a sustained B-flat (b5) at the end. The notation includes guitar tablature (TAB) with fret numbers and a "full" pickup mark.

Listen out for Locrian on your favourite thrash and death metal albums, and try coming up with your own Locrian riffs and solos. Until next time, keep shredding!