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# MODAL JAZZ?

## What the heck is that?

By Pat Harbison

"Modal" is one of those words that every jazz critic, fan, and musician seems to use liberally. However, it seems as if very few people can come up with a solid and clear definition. Most everyone associates the term with a certain sound, period, or style of jazz but few can explain what they mean.

When Jamey announced he was preparing a Modal Jazz play-a-long one of his colleagues said, "You won't sell many copies of this one. The term modal jazz will scare people away!" I was surprised at this (and so was Jamey). However, in asking students (both young and older) I discovered that a lack of understanding of what musicians mean when they talk of playing modal jazz was central to the anxiety and uncertainty many feel in approaching this music.

The most common use of the term modal in music outside of jazz is in reference to ancient music. Modal scales can be found in writings on music theory by the ancient Greeks. The early Christian church developed music for worship that was based on medieval interpretations of the work of these ancient Greek music theorists. Therefore, many of the modes have Greek names such as Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, and Locrian. This is also why the aforementioned scales are sometimes called "church modes."

Logically, this has led many people to assume that modal jazz uses primarily the modal scales or church modes. While it is true that modal jazz uses all of those scales, some quite extensively, those are by no means the only scale sounds used in this music. Most jazz (and most all Western music) from Louis Armstrong to Dave Douglas (and beyond...in either direction) could be considered to be based on scales, including (but not limited to) the "church modes."

So, what makes modal jazz different?

## Defining Modal Jazz

When jazz musicians describe a piece as a modal tune they are usually referring to the length of time spent on each individual chord/scale sound...what musicians call the harmonic rhythm. Prior to the widespread development of modal jazz, the tunes jazz musicians played would feature chords that changed anywhere from every two beats to every two measures. Only rarely would a tune feature chords lasting as long as four measures. The harmonic patterns to these tunes (standards, swing tunes, bebop tunes, etc.) would be called chord progressions because the chords were connected in familiar ways and tended to follow certain principles of succession held in common by classical music, folk music, and other kinds of music from the Western world.

A G7 chord wanted to resolve to a C chord. Chords traveled together in formulaic groups such as ii- V7 I or iii- vi- ii- V7 I. The chord progressions of tunes are also often called the chord changes or simply the changes.

With modal tunes the changing of harmonies slows down. Chord/scales last for 4 measures, or 8 measures, or in some cases there might only be one or two chords in an entire tune.



In some cases that performance might last for a half hour or even longer. The effect of this is far more extensive than one might think on first consideration. Having fewer scales to consider and slower moving chord changes simplifies some aspects for the improvisers and makes other aspects more challenging. It also shifts the improviser's focus (and the listener's) to some particular aspects of the music and away from others.

Because each chord lasts for a long time, the chords tend to lose their tendency to resolve. A G7 chord that lasts 16 measures doesn't seem to care whether it is followed by a C chord. Harmony becomes more an issue of musical color rather than a way station on a trip towards the anticipated tonic chord. This increased focus on color and decreased focus on resolution creates a new way of hearing the music for both the listener and the improviser.

For a pianist or guitarist comping, it might have been adequate for tunes with fast moving chord progressions to have a small number of formulaic chord voicings. If a G7 only lasts 2 or 4 beats and is usually preceded by D-7 and followed by CMajor it doesn't take a lot of varied chord voicings to sustain interest. The motion of one chord to another and the sense of resolution makes up for the lack of variety. On the other hand, when G7 lasts for 16 measures a pianist quickly exhausts the possibilities if they only know a few voicings for the chord. A new approach had to be developed to deal with modal tunes.

For the soloist improvising the melody, a similar challenge is presented. When playing on fast moving chord changes a soloist can simply outline the chords and link them together with a variety of relatively simple licks and patterns that fit the progressions (ii- V7 licks, turnarounds, change running, etc.). Even if the melodic materials are fairly ordinary, there is a level of interest, direction, tension and release, etc. provided by the motion and resolution of the chords. A modal tune does not have this kind of motion, tension, and resolution built into the chord pattern. The improviser must find other ways to make the music interesting by increasing the focus on rhythm, lyricism, dynamics, and find alternative ways to create harmonic interest where it is not provided by the given chords.

The above changes in musical focus resulted in a shift in the focus of improvising soloists and accompanists from chords to scales. Of course, whether they were aware of it or not, most all jazz improvisers from all periods of the music use both chords and scales. Musicians from the 1930s and '40s mostly thought of "making the chord changes" but they also always used scales as well.

It is possible to go back and analyze the solos and compositions of chord-oriented jazz styles in terms of scale applications. Similarly, musicians who play on modal tunes or whose stylistic orientation is based in later jazz use chords as well as scales. It is just that the idea of scales as a tool for improvising and composition has greater relative emphasis than in earlier styles.

### **A Brief History of Modal Jazz**

From at least the late 1920s until the late 1950s the majority of jazz performances were organized around a certain set of assumptions and practices that helped give the music structure and allowed musicians to improvise together coherently. Harmonies were organized around the principles of Western functional harmony. Tunes were almost always in 4/4 time. The roles of the various instruments were limited by their traditional roles.





# 27. Reverse Miles



By Jamey Aebersold

CD 2, track 11

PLAY 6 CHORUSES (♩ = 206)

Swing

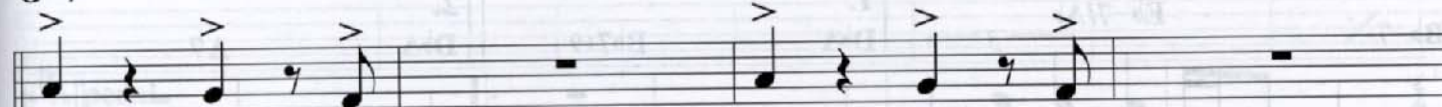
G-7



G-7



G-7



G-7



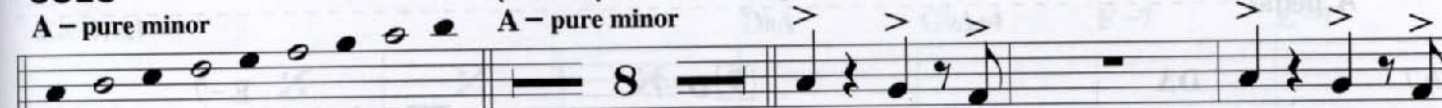
SOLO

A - pure minor

(SOLO)

A - pure minor

G-7



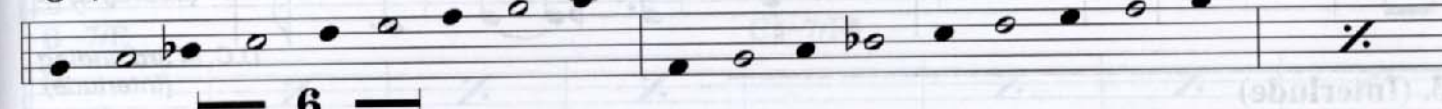
G-7



SOLOS

G-7

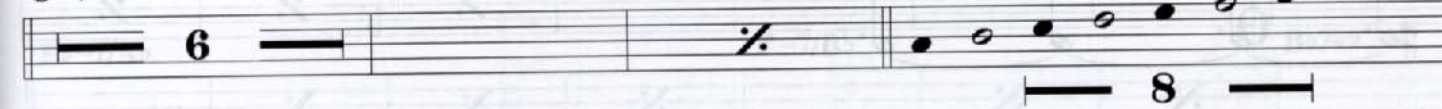
FA



G-7

FA

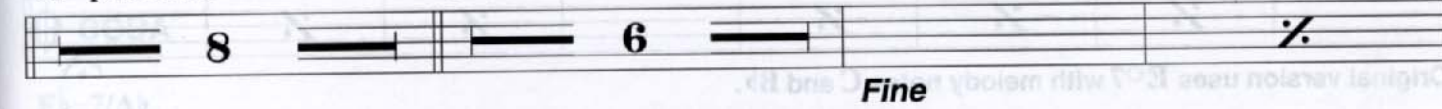
A - pure minor



A - pure minor

G-7

FA



Fine