

Modal Jazz

An introduction

"The music has gotten thick," Davis complained in a 1958 interview for *The Jazz Review*. "Guys give me tunes and they're full of chords. I can't play them...I think a movement in jazz is beginning away from the conventional string of chords, and a return to emphasis on melodic rather than harmonic variation. There will be fewer chords but infinite possibilities as to what to do with them."

<http://www.cannonball-adderley.com/miles/miles07.htm>

In 1959 Davis release "Kind of Blue" which had a profound effect on the jazz world. (George Russell was influential in Davis' modal jazz journey.) Prior to this time, jazz musicians were addicted to fast-moving chord progressions (Bebop). Negotiating these tended to create a more vertical approach to line creation.

The more linear approach of modal jazz called attention to the range of colours available in a single chord or scale. As such, modal compositions tend to contain few chord changes and often have a feeling of space, peace, and stasis. Modal performances also tend to be lengthy, lasting as long as 20 minutes or more!

Some common modal jazz compositions to get to know:

- So What (Miles Davis)
- Impressions (John Coltrane)
- Little Sunflower (Freddie Hubbard)
- Maiden Voyage (Herbie Hancock)
- Milestones (Miles Davis)
- Footprints (Wayne Shorter)
- Canteloupe Island (Herbie Hancock)

Apart from these truly modal compositions, many more feature a head with a typical chord progression, followed by an "open" modal improvisation section.

For example:

- Homecoming (Dave Holland)

Other compositions have aspects of being modal, in that they have a feeling of stasis as long periods of time are spent on a chord, but have more key changes than the typical modal tunes listed above.

For example:

- Silver Hollow (Jack deJohnette)

What does Modal Jazz sound like?

Classic modal jazz often has a cerebral, cool and meditative feel to it. However, unlike West Coast cool jazz, the shifting tonal centre and lack of melodic resolution generates a tension and searching quality to the music. These two elements combine to give the music an ambiguous and mysterious feel.

To get a feel for classic modal jazz I recommend listening to “[So What](#)” by Miles Davis. There is no substitute for your own ears.

Types of Modal Jazz

Classic modal jazz

Classic modal jazz compositions contain very few chords, allowing each individual mode to be used for a long period of time. An example of this is “[So What](#)” by Miles Davis, from the album *Kind of Blue* (1959). This only uses two chords during its 32 measure duration – Dm and Ebm. Due to the repetition, these type of songs have a strong sense of key centre.

Modal jazz variations

Some modal jazz compositions contain chords that change as rapidly as say in a bebop tune, every measure or so, but which do not relate to an overall key centre. Often, the harmonies are so complex it is difficult to follow them. This type of music is also called “non-tonal” or “pan-tonal”. An example is Wayne Shorter’s composition “[Limbo](#)” as played by Miles Davis on the album *Sorcerer* (1967).

Modal Jazz Theory

In traditional harmony, chords are selected based on their relationship to the key of a piece. A musician can base his improvisation primarily on the overall key of the piece. A modal chord progression, on the other hand, involves chords that are selected primarily for their individual sound, as opposed to how they relate to the key or each other. Musicians base their improvisations on the scales or modes associated with each chord, with little or no consideration given to the overall key of the piece. Each chord change suggests a new scale and even a new key, or perhaps the absence of a key.

Jazz Modes

Gregorian or church modes are seven scales that were used extensively in music composition during medieval times. When improvising over modal jazz songs, jazz musicians use modes, such as those shown below, which are variations of the original Gregorian scales. It is worth noting that knowing these modes involves more than rendering them in an ascending/descending stepwise sequence. Adept improvisers know all the colours sufficiently well in order that they can step and leap to make and develop motives, and can hear the relativity of every scale degree to every other.

Practicing the modes therefore means moving away from their abstract and simple arrangement as shown below, toward a creative and melodically pleasing approach.

Ionian (same notes as major scale)
starting on the 1st degree of the major scale

Dorian
starting on the 2nd degree of the major scale

Phrygian
starting on the 3rd degree of the major scale

Lydian
starting on the 4th degree of the major scale

Myxolydian
starting on the 5th degree of the major scale

Aeolian (sometimes called "natural minor")
starting on the 6th degree of the major scale

Locrian
starting on the 7th degree of the major scale

What is Modal Jazz?

In a modal jazz piece, the composed melody and improvisations are based on individual scales or modes which are sounded for a prolonged time. The result is a song that contains fewer chord changes and allows more time to explore the nuance of the colours referred to by the sustained chord and scale/mode. Chord progressions tend to be non-functional and exist for the colour of the chords themselves. Chords are often quartal, which releases them further from tonal tertial functional conventions. Pedal-point is often employed also to create a stable reference for overlaid harmonies.