

Keyboard

Modal Improvisation for Jazz, Fusion, and Rock Soloing

BY [JEFF LORBER](#) October 25, 2013



Approaching improvisation from a modal perspective is another tool you can harness to help you play through chord changes. In the same way that Tin Pan Alley and Broadway show tunes from the 1940s with a preponderance of *ii-V* progressions and modulations influenced the development of bebop, the more relaxed modal music of 1960s jazz brought about a new way to write melodies over chords that didn't change as often. For the most part, any jazz composition where there's a particularly *spacious* approach to chord changes—as well as songs that are very diatonic without a lot of modulations—can be approached modally. Miles Davis approached modal playing in a more “cool” and detached manner as compared to John Coltrane, who explored it with great intensity. The modal movement of the 1960s left a lasting impression that is still felt in jazz, R&B and pop music today.

1. Modal Improv Basics

Modal improvisation involves the relationship between chords and scales. The mode that applies to the *Cmaj7* chord is a major scale, and is known as the Ionian mode. If you start a scale from *D* in the same key signature, you'll get what's known as the Dorian mode, as seen in **Ex. 1**. As you can see, the Dorian mode has a flat third and flat seventh.

Musical notation for Cmaj7 and Dmin7 chords and scales. The top staff shows the C major scale (Ionian mode) and the Cmaj7 chord. The bottom staff shows the D Dorian mode (D minor scale with a flat third) and the Dmin7 chord. Both scales are written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb).

Cmaj7

Dmin7

2. Modal Improv Patterns

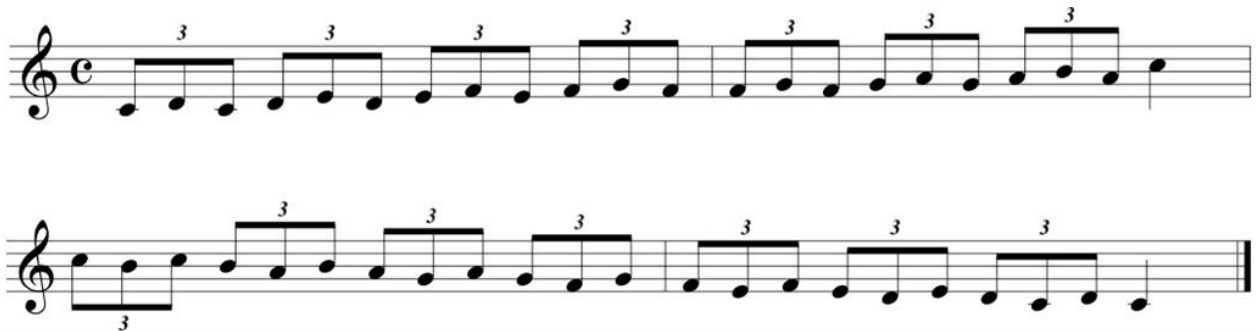
Let's put these modes to work by building patterns to improvise with. **Ex. 2a** is a basic pattern based on the Ionian mode.



Ex. 2b is the same pattern written out for the *C Dorian* mode, which would fit over a *Cmin7* or *Cmin9* chord.



Ex. 2c is a very similar pattern with a different rhythmic approach. Remember that rhythm is key when it comes to the patterns you choose to play.



Try this one in the Dorian mode as well. **Ex. 2d** is a similar pattern in *F Dorian*. Make sure to practice these patterns in all 12 keys.



3. Melodic Modal Patterns

Ex. 3a is a pattern in the C Ionian mode that's more *melodic* and less scalar.



Ex. 3b is a similar one in C Dorian.



4. Scalar Modal Patterns

Ex. 4a is a D Dorian *scalar* pattern in thirds that works great over a *Dmin9* chord. Ex.



4b is a variation of it.



5. Modes on the Move

The written-out solo in **Ex. 5** shows how modal patterns can work even in a song with a lot of changes. A modal solo works here because your ear connects the tonality of the mode with the basic *F#* minor tonality in that section of the song.

F#min9 A 13 G#min9 G13#11 F#min9 A 13 Dmaj9 C#7#9b13

F#min9 A 13 G#min9 G13#11 F#min9 A 13 Dmaj9 C#7#9b13

F#min9 A 13 G#min9 G13#11 F#min9 A 13 Dmaj9 C#7#9b13

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One, Two, Three: “Combining modal techniques with pentatonic and *ii-V-I* patterns arms you with three effective improvisational approaches that will aid in building interesting and musical solos,” says acclaimed jazz-fusion keyboardist, composer and producer Jeff Lorber. Jeff’s latest release is *Galaxy*. Find-out more at lorber.com.