

What is Modal Jazz?

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Defines and discusses the term "modal jazz." Contends that it is useful to sort out the three strands of modal improvisation, modal accompaniment, and modal composition, and examines some of the problems, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in applying the term "modal" to each. Notes that in terms of improvisation, soloists do not necessarily limit themselves to the seven pitches of a mode for a given harmony. Concludes that many of the defining and fundamental characteristics of modal jazz have more to do with composition than improvisation or accompaniment. Discusses the new harmonic possibilities with modal jazz.

FULL TEXT

Keith Waters

What *is* modal jazz? Jazz historians usually have no trouble identifying Miles Davis' 1958 recording of "Milestones," and his 1959 recordings of "So What," and "Flamenco Sketches" (*Kind of Blue*) as important points of departure for modal jazz. In addition to Davis, historians are quick to cite John Coltrane as the other early representative of modal jazz, usually beginning with Coltrane's 1960 recording of "My Favorite Things," and including "Impressions," "India," up through Coltrane's 1964 landmark recording *A Love Supreme* . Following this first wave of modal jazz, other musicians, including Davis' and Coltrane's sidemen—pianists Herbie Hancock and McCoy Tyner, and saxophonist Wayne Shorter—continued and extended the modal innovations pioneered by Davis and Coltrane.

But while it is relatively easy to identify *who* , it is still difficult to identify specifically *what* modal jazz is. General discussions of modal jazz rely on descriptive terms such as static harmony, ambiguous harmony, the use of "sus" chords or chords built in fourths. More analytical presentations typically call attention to roughly four related characteristics: 1) the use of extended pedal points; 2) the suppression or absence of standard functional harmonic progressions; 3) slow harmonic rhythm, in which 4, 8, 12, 16, 32 or more measures may consist of a single harmony; and—significant for the use of the term "modal"—(4) the association of a seven-note scalar collection (the mode) for each harmony, providing a source of pitches for improvisation



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miles davis (r) and john coltrane (c) were early representatives of modal jazz. ray avery archives or accompaniment.

Some of the problems and ambiguities of the term "modal" seem clear from the list above. Do these characteristics describe *improvisation*, related to a soloist's available note choices? Do they describe *accompaniment*, related to the harmonies provided by the comping instruments? Or do they describe *composition*, related to the original melody and chords of the composition itself? Clearly these ideas of improvisation, accompaniment, and composition are closely related; but they don't necessarily refer to the same thing. And some historians and theorists have even called into question the adequacy of the term "modal," since the characteristics itemized above—the characteristics associated with modal jazz—don't all specifically have to do with the use of a modal scale. At any rate, it may be useful to sort out these three different strands of modal improvisation, modal accompaniment, and modal composition, and examine some of the problems, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in applying the term modal to each.

Modal Improvisation

The antecedents for modal and scalar improvisation have been traced to a number of places, including George Russell's theoretical book, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* (first published in 1953). Pianist Bill Evans' recordings with Russell in the mid-1950s may have introduced Evans to Russell's theories, and Miles Davis later acknowledged the influence that Evans' knowledge of chord/scale relationships had on him. Evans himself wrote the liner notes to Davis' *Kind of Blue*, and there briefly discussed the notion of chord/scale relationships. Miles Davis also cited arranger Gil Evans' 1958 arrangement of "I Loves You Porgy" as providing a source for the idea of improvisation based upon a single scale.

One of the main problems in using the term "modal" to refer to improvisation is that soloists do not necessarily limit themselves to the seven pitches of a mode for a given harmony. As anyone who has attempted to transcribe the "So What" or "Flamenco Sketches" solos of Davis, Coltrane, or Adderley from *Kind of Blue* is aware, it usually doesn't take long before the soloist uses pitches outside the given mode. In a famous 1960 interview in *Down Beat*, Coltrane even acknowledged that one of the attractions of playing over Miles Davis's slower-moving harmonies was the possibility of superimposing two or three different chords above the given chord in his solos. Coltrane's solos over his celebrated modal compositions "My Favorite Things," "India," and "Impressions" rarely remain for long bound by a single mode. The end of Coltrane's solo in "Acknowledgement," from *A Love Supreme*, departs drastically from a modal conception: Coltrane transposes the four-note motive (F, Ab, F, Bb) onto all 12 possible pitches. Clearly, few of the improvisations of the classic modal jazz repertoire strictly adhere to a mode. The mode seems to provide a possible source of pitches for improvisation, but not necessarily the only source.

Modal Accompaniment

Many of the characteristics associated with modal jazz describe accompaniment rather than improvisation. These techniques include, for example, the use of characteristic harmonies by the comping instrument—"sus" chords, chords built in fourths, "slash" chords (for example, A-7/D)—or extended pedal points. But do these ideas relate to the use of a mode, since we typically think of modality in a linear sense?

In some ways, harmonic comping can be related to a modal foundation. Modes can be expressed harmonically in two ways—we can think of these perhaps as "successively" or "simultaneously." Example 1 shows an example of the statement of a mode through successive chords. In Bill Evans' chordal accompaniment to the melody of "So What" the two successive chords state all seven pitches of the D Dorian

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mode. In a number of Herbie Hancock's modal compositions from the mid-1960s, Hancock's comping uses all seven pitches of a mode simultaneously. Example 2 shows mm. 9-12 of the improvisational section to Hancock's composition "Little One" (*Maiden Voyage*). The chords progress from D[sharp] Phrygian to F[sharp]7sus. The first chord is based upon D[sharp] Phrygian, the second upon F[sharp] Mixolydian—both chords use the same seven pitches for their respective modes. While the bass moves, the chord above remains the same, and for both chords

Hancock plays all seven pitches of the mode simultaneously. (Note too, that the voicing for the F[sharp]7sus chord uses both the fourth-B-and the third-A[sharp]-of the chord. Here the third is stated *above* the fourth: this is a typical voicing of a sus chord in this context. Maybe a more accurate chord label is C[sharp]-13/F[sharp].) Not all harmonic comping states the modes in this complete a manner. For example, in Hancock's "Maiden Voyage," the comping beneath the melody for the A section uses only five pitches of a pentatonic scale. Example 3 illustrates this. The A-7/D uses five pitches (D, E, G, A, and C); so does the C-7/F (F, G, Bb, C, Eb). But this expands as the piece moves into the B section. The voicing for the Bb-9/Eb increases to six pitches, and finally the last chord of the B section, C7sharp;-13/F[sharp], uses all seven pitches of the mode. Although each of the harmonies can be related to particular seven-note modes, only the final chord of the B section (C[sharp]-13/F[sharp]) states all seven pitches of the mode. (Hancock's comping is much freer behind the soloists.)

While it is easy to accept the idea of modal accompaniment when the comping instrument states all the pitches of a mode successively or simultaneously, the chords used in "Maiden Voyage" show some problems in using the term modal, since the comping doesn't state a complete mode. (Another problematic example is from Miles Davis's recording of "Flamenco Sketches," since beneath the D Phrygian section the pianist states D major and Eb major triads, consistently using F[sharp] rather than the F natural of D Phrygian.)

Another inconsistency arises in some compositions that use pedal points. Example 4 shows the chords above the Bb pedal point in Booker Little's composition "Bee Vamp" (*Eric Dolphy at the Five Spot*, vol. 1, 1961). Notice that while the pedal point remains the same, the harmonies rapidly shift above, and all four chords are stated within four measures. Here there is no sense of mode or modal stability, and we hear only transpositions of the same chord above the static pedal point. In this instance, certainly, it is difficult to relate the notion of mode to this use of pedal points.

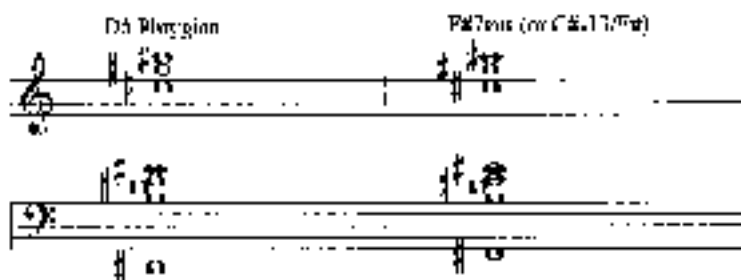
Modal Composition

Many of the defining and fundamental characteristics of modal jazz have more to do with composition than to improvisation or accompaniment. Modal compositions called into question

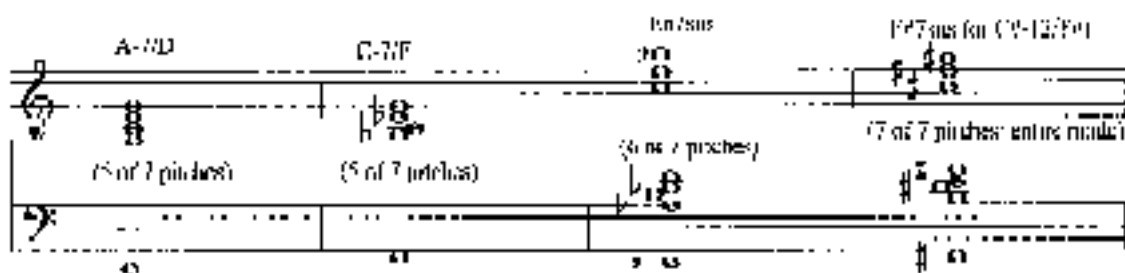
Ex. 1. Successive chords state entire mode (from "So What")



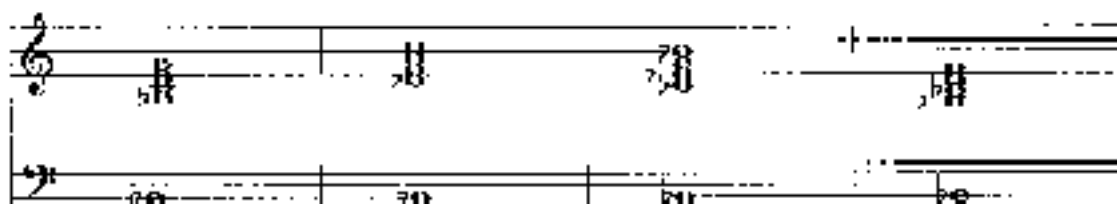
Ex. 2. Simultaneous chords state entire mode (from "Blue Over")



Ex. 3. Moving from incomplete to complete modes (from "Maiden Voyage")



Ex. 4. Triads over fixed pedal point (from "Blue Vamp")



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many of the fundamental assumptions about harmonic progression by suppressing or abandoning functional harmony, by slowing down the harmonic rhythm (allowing a single chord to occupy four or more measures), and by replacing standard harmonic progressions with different harmonic possibilities. The use of the terms "static" or "ambiguous" harmony in describing modal jazz result directly from these compositional techniques.

Modal compositions abandoned the standard ii-V and ii-V-I harmonic formulas, removing the sense of forward progression associated with functional harmony. Nevertheless, in practice, it is always possible to find some exceptions, particularly with harmonic substitutions or alterations, so this element is not always completely clear-cut. For example, in Miles Davis' "Flamenco Sketches," as the modal area shifts from D Phrygian to G Dorian,

pianist Bill Evans changes the D-based harmony to D⁷ (altered), which then resolves in standard fashion to the following G minor harmony. Over the extended D Dorian section in "Joshua" (Miles Davis, *Seven Steps to Heaven*, 1963), pianist Herbie Hancock occasionally inserts an A⁷ (altered) in between statements of the D minor harmony. In addition, we can describe some harmonic progressions in modal jazz as weakly functional, such as when the Gb⁷ sus chord resolves back to F in Herbie Hancock's composition "Little One." (The Gb⁷ sus chord here replaces the more functional Gb⁷ that ordinarily operates as a dominant substitute to F.)

New harmonic possibilities emerged with modal jazz. Some of these harmonies could be related to modal foundations, such as the use of Aeolian harmonies (sometimes indicated as Maj⁷ harmonies in first inversion, such as Dbmaj⁷/F) or Phrygian harmonies. In addition, the use of upper structure harmonies above a pedal point-slash chords (such as A-7/D), and sus chords became much more common. It is certainly possible to find examples of sus chords earlier in jazz practice, yet in modal jazz these harmonies typically do not operate functionally.

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We can also see an interesting development that took place between the first wave of modal composition and the following generation. While Davis and Coltrane typically took their harmonies from modes of the diatonic scale (Dorian, Phrygian, etc.), Hancock, Shorter and others developed harmonies that were derived also from other scalar sources, including the modes of the ascending melodic minor (chords such as Maj⁷ [sharp] 5), and the diminished or octatonic scale. In these modal jazz compositions, these harmonies typically were not used in a functional context.

Along with these new harmonic possibilities, some problems of chord labeling seemed to arise (and chord labeling remains problematic). Herbie Hancock's 1964 copyright deposit (at the Library of Congress) of the Bb lead sheet to his composition "King Cobra" highlights some of these problems. Within the same composition, Hancock uses slash chords (DD/Cm, DD/Am), a chord labeled by mode (F[sharp] Phrygian), and upper structure harmonies WITHOUT the bass pedal point that is present on the recording (writing Dm⁷ to Ebmaj⁷ instead of Dm7/G to Ebmaj⁷/G). These various approaches to labeling nontraditional harmonies shows Hancock coping with (and shaping) the emerging harmonic language in this transitional time.

Even this brief examination of modal jazz reveals some of the difficulties, inconsistencies, and problems of the term and its use. For one thing, some of the characteristics associated with modal jazz do not have to do with the use of modal scales. In addition, some writers are not always clear in indicating whether the significant features of modal jazz are based upon improvisation, accompaniment, or composition. Barry Kernfeld has suggested that the term "modal" is such a misnomer that it be replaced by the term "vamp" style. According to our discussion above, we can see that Kernfeld considers this music to be defined more by accompaniment and composition than by improvisation. Mark Gridley's *Jazz Styles* relies on composition as the defining feature of modal jazz by suggesting that modal jazz is synonymous with infrequent chord changes.

At best, modal jazz is a general rather than absolutely specific term—a combination of elements of improvisation, accompaniment, and composition. And undoubtedly, modal elements may be mixed in with non-modal elements within a single composition. We can probably all identify compositions that use non-functional and slower-moving harmonies (harmonies that we would consider modal) side-by-side with more functional and faster-moving progressions—Booker Little's "Bee Vamp," Victor Feldman's "Joshua," and Wayne Shorter's "Witch Hunt" are just three ready examples.

As jazz pedagogy has developed and crystallized in the past three decades, scale/chord relationships have formed its core. For most improvisational textbooks, all chords have an associated scale, so to most aspiring jazz players, all jazz is to some extent modal, since chords and scales are considered equivalent. This dominant chord/scale pedagogy shows how powerful some of the innovations of modal jazz were. On the other hand, because of this

pedagogical approach, it is probably now impossible for us to fully appreciate the dramatic shifts that took place in the late 1950s and 1960s. The improvisational, accompanimental, and compositional solutions that took root—departing in fundamental ways from what had occurred before—remain at the core of jazz practice and pedagogy today.

Keith Waters is currently Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He has written on numerous topics pertaining to jazz analysis and pedagogy. With Henry Martin,



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he has co-authored a jazz history textbook that will be published by Wadsworth Publications in 2001. As a jazz pianist, Mr. Waters has played throughout the United States, Europe, and in Russia and has appeared in concert with James Moody, Bobby Hutcherson, Chris Connor, Sheila Jordan, Eddie Harris, and others.

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