

What About Modes?

There are many improvisation methods on the market today. When I published the CD-ROM version of *The Art of Improvisation*, I was amazed at how many new works had been published in the last few years. Many of them rely strongly on two things that *The Art of Improvisation* doesn't rely so strongly on: patterns and modes. I do include a few chapters on patterns, but I generally don't discuss modes much. Why not?

A Load of Modes

The concept of modes goes way back to the Greeks, with their seven modes (Ionian through Locrian). The most common modes used in jazz are Ionian (major), Dorian (minor), Lydian (major with a sharp 4), and Mixolydian (dominant). But there is also the concept of *modality*, which means interchanging up to 7 modes at any one time. For example, the notes in C Ionian are the same as D Dorian, E Phrygian, F Lydian, G Mixolydian, A Aeolian, and B Locrian, so you could play any of those 7 modes over a C Major chord.

A Few Good Modes

Modes are easiest to use in a static sense, not when you have to decide between a load of them for each chord symbol. For example, use the C Lydian for C Major, the D Dorian mode for D minor, and the C Mixolydian for C dominant. *The Art of Improvisation* explains the easiest and most effective modes to use for each chord symbol.

Another use for modes comes in simplifying chord progressions (see Chapter 1J). You can use a C Major or D Dorian or G Mixolydian all the way across a ii-V-I in C Major. But here we use modes to reduce complexity, not to add to it.

Keep It Simple

So why not emphasize modality? My preference is to keep things simple. Imagine the decision-making process you'd go through juggling up to 7 modes per chord symbol! Even if you cut the choices way down, such as using Lydian on the 3rd degree of a minor scale for example, it's still not an easy task. Modality does help you emphasize color tones, but you can emphasize color tones just as well in flexible scales – so why add a layer of complexity?

Another reason to keep it simple: you need to develop 3-way vision, which takes a tremendous amount of concentration and flexibility (but also has huge payoffs in improvisation). If your concentration is being drained or hindered by juggling modes as well, it's just that much harder to see where you're going in real time.

That's why I don't emphasize modality but do emphasize flexible scales. With flexible scales you get the benefits of color tones and constantly shifting scale positions, without the need to move the landscape left and right by interchanging modes. And that leaves you all the more room to concentrate on what to do with those scales.