

Writing Modal Progressions

Hey I Thought Modal Harmony Is Static?

In fact, it is. The key to writing good modal harmony is to actually not have it progress at all. We simply need to create a static harmonic structure that supports the mode that we want to use. There are a few ways people do this. One way is to find in each mode the notes that kind of make up its personality. For example, if you check out the formula for a Lydian mode in the “Understanding Modes” lesson available for free at www.GuitarLessons365.com, you will see that it is basically a major scale with the 4th scale degree raised a half-step. So obviously the #4 scale degree is crucial to creating a Lydian type sound. So a lot of players when wanting to create a Lydian type harmony to solo over will use a major type chord with a #11th in it for the harmony. For those who don't know about chord extensions. The #4th scale degree is the same as the #11th just an octave lower. We will have a lesson on extensions soon so I won't go into it now. But basically that chord actually sounds like the Lydian mode and it sounds great underneath Lydian mode scales.

But the method I will show you today doesn't involve finding all the tones that are essential to a particular modes sound. It will actually give you all of those and more by simply doing the same thing for each progression. The reason you want to use these larger chord forms to solo over is that they actually sound like the mode that you are trying to learn to hear and use. So if you have a harmony that sounds like the mode you are using, you can get much better at learning which notes to lean on so to speak to really give the mode it's intended sound. Eventually you will just need a one note foundation and you will be able to bring the character of whatever mode you want over it out, without needing a full harmony. Kinda like I did in the visualizing modes lesson with just a low E note underneath me. But for now, it is best to hear these harmonies while you are soloing so you can really get the character of each mode down.

Pre-requisites OOOHH NOOO!!

Don't worry I want make you do to much reviewing, but if you can make sure that you are familiar with your major and minor triad inversions that would make you absolutely fly through this method. I have a full series on learning all of your triad inversions available for FREE at www.GuitarLessons365.com, so it would be best if you could get those down before doing the lesson. You will thank yourself later, because we will be using those major and minor triad inversions almost exclusively in the video lesson for this tutorial. You should also review your writing major key progressions lesson, because your knowledge of the chords of a major key is also very essential. OK, lets get down to the good stuff!!

Finding Your Parent Key

The most critical thing in writing a modal progression is to be able to figure out your parent key. We covered this in the “Understanding Modes” lesson, but as a quick review, you need to understand that G Dorian is in the Key of F Major and A Lydian is in the Key of E Major. So that is definitely the first step in this process, you have to be able to confidently figure out your parent key for ANY mode that you want to play.

Locate The Pillars Of The Key

The foundation of all western music can be broken down into one chord progression. That chord progression is I, IV, V. If you can recall from your major key chord progression studies, those are the major chords that are found in every major key. The I chord is always major, the IV chord is always major and the V chord is always major. In modern music theory courses we refer to those 3 chords as the pillars of a key or primary chords if you will. The reason is that the I chord is obviously the tonic of the key, but in order to really establish a tonality or key you have to have a progression from IV to V to I or V7 to I. You can see that the only place in a major key where there are two major chords just a whole-step apart is the IV and V. So in modern ear training classes they try to get you to be able to recognize when you hear those two major chord types side by side like that and it will completely give away the key. But lets not get to far ahead of ourselves yet. There will be plenty of eartraining studies on the site in the near future. But for now I just want you to understand the importance of the I IV V chords. In fact, in modern music theory they are considered the primary triads, and all other chords in the key are considered secondary triads. And when we use those secondary triads they are just considered substitutions of the I IV V chords.

Laying The Foundation

We will be using our IV V chords to create a modal progression, but like we said before, we still need the overall harmony to remain static. We do this by simply keeping the root of the mode you are wanting to play, as the root of the harmony underneath. So if your are playing A Lydian, you need to have a constant A going as the root of the harmony at all times. This will be easy to see as we build our first progression. So lets get started.

Lets Build A House!!

The first step in building any house, besides the ridiculous permits and everything, is to build the foundation. That will be easy enough for us. Simply put, the foundation to our modal progression, will always be the same note as the root of the mode. So if we wanted to build a nice foundation for A Lydian, we will use the note A as our foundation for the modal progression.

Put Up The Pillars!!

The second step in building our modal progression is to locate the right pillars so the house doesn't fall down taking your prized Eric Johnson Signature Model Strat with it. UHHGHH, it just gives me the shivers. Anyway, so we need some good pillars for our A Lydian mode. If you can recall from before, we now need to locate the Parent Major Key for A Lydian. So knowing that Lydian is the 4th mode of the parent key all we have to do is count backwards to one. So we have A/4th, G/3rd, F/2nd and E/1st. So by counting backward we got down to our parent key found at the one. But you have to make sure you have the right E key. We just counted backwards with no regards for the letter names actually being correct, we just wanted to get down to E. But now you need to make sure that they original A that we started from is actually found in the Key of E major. It is so we are fine, but if we actually wanted Ab Lydian instead, then counted down to E, we will find that Ab isn't in the Key of E. We would use the other E key instead of Eb in that situation. This will all get much easier the more you work with keys. The "Understanding Keys" lesson available from www.GuitarLessons365.com will help out a lot in that regard.

So now that we know the Parent Key of A Lydian is E Major, we need to quickly figure out what the IV and V chords are for that key. Hopefully if you have been through the major key chord progressions studies on the main site, you will know that the IV and V chords in the Key of E Major are A major and B Major respectively. We are now going to use these two chords in our progression.

Putting It All Together

After we have our foundation and pillars, we are ready to put them together to create our modal progression. All we have to do is play a chord progression back and forth between A major and B major while constantly keeping an A in the bass even under the B major chord and we will have a modal progression that sounds like A Lydian. You would actually write this chord progression on paper like this.

A Lydian Modal Progression

A to B/A – back and forth

This means A major to B Major with A in the bass.

You should now try this in as many modes and keys as you can. Here are a few modal progressions for different modes and keys, lets see if you can figure out how I created them all.

A Dorian

C/A to D/A – back and forth

B Phrygian

C/B to D/B – back and forth

C Mixolydian

Bb/C to C – back and forth

B Aeolian

G/B to A/B – back and forth

B Locrian

F/B to G/B – back and forth

Add Some Spice To Your New Progressions!!

Yeah I know, using the same IV V progressions over the root of the mode can get a little boring. So we can now spice it up a bit by using some secondary triads. The secondary triad for the IV chord is the ii minor chord and the secondary triad for the V chord is either the iii minor chord or vii diminished chord. You can now experiment and replace the IV or V chords with their secondary triads to occasionally give the modal progression a little less predictability while at the same time retaining the proper modal static harmony. Just make sure that you always keep the root of the mode in the bass of the chords no matter what triads you use on top. That will make everything static. Be sure to watch the video lesson on modal chord progressions, so you can see how I will use those major and minor triad inversions we talked about earlier together with the root of the mode, to create modal progressions on the guitar that you can record and then go back and improvise or compose over. :) Until next time...

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