

# **Modal Jazz and Related Techniques for Improvisation**

a jazz unit curriculum by Chad O'Brien

## Unit Overview

Modal jazz is one of the most accessible genres of jazz, especially for beginning improvisers. Characterized by simple forms and slow harmonic rhythm, modal jazz and its derivatives provide an ideal setting for early jazz instruction. Using this deliberately elementary style as a vehicle, students can explore and develop their creativity, master idiomatic rhythmic and melodic vocabulary, and become more confident improvisers all while learning about an important movement in music history, improving instrumental technique, and having fun improvising together. But while the repertoire may be simple for students, modal jazz presents unique challenges to the teacher.

Too often, educators mistakenly make learning chord-scale associations the primary objective of this content; instead, understanding and demonstrating these relationships should be considered only a beginning approach to modal improvisation. More advanced skills such as motivic development, using changes in intensity to musically shape a solo, implying substitute chord changes (especially predominant and dominant), communicating among the ensemble, and even playing “out” should take priority in instruction. This approach encourages students to experiment improvising with different techniques in addition to the more traditional goal of exploring diatonic melodies and harmonies. The end result is more professional sounding solos in which the student is telling a story through her music, making choices to express her own unique voice.

### Regarding this unit

This unit is intended for intermediate instrumental music students. At this point, students can sing and play melodies, bass lines, and harmonies to folk songs and are familiar with solfege in major, minor, mixolydian, and dorian. They read, write, and improvise using tonic, dominant, and subdominant in the keys required for this unit. Ideally, though not required, students have worked through *The Blues: Your First 10 Jazz Lessons* to develop fundamental skill improvising and playing in the jazz style. They have the executive skills needed for all repertoire.

In addition to the twelve core lessons in this unit, I have included 3 optional “stretch” lessons. I use this extra time to expand the scope of this unit to cover more standards. As I tell my students, this provides a more realistic representation of the life of a professional musician: composing, transcribing, studying theory and history alongside performance, and dedicating more practice time to specific tasks. If time does not allow the inclusion of these lessons, I encourage you to revisit them in later years or include them but reduce the repertoire to only two songs.

After this unit, students are equipped to pursue a multitude of different types of jazz. Personally, I move from this to teaching simple jazz standards (Autumn Leaves, Blue Bossa, etc.) and ii-V-I's; you could also move on to bossa novas, hip-hop and R&B, or even more modal jazz and funk! The possibilities are endless but are sure to include improvisation at a high level.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 1 - So What

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the dorian scale and the melody to So What in Concert D dorian with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise melodies in Concert D dorian
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (modality, dorian, scale pattern, cool jazz)
- Students will understand historical context of the repertoire

### Procedures

- Listen to Kind of Blue recording of So What and introduce historical context (10)
- Teach, by rote, melody to the A section of So What (singing, then playing) (10)
- Play scale patterns on the Concert D dorian scale and explain/demonstrate how they can be used to improvise over So What (10)
- Students improvise in this way (10)

### Assignment

Play through the melody to So What and improvise with the play along track using dorian scale patterns.

Enrichment: Compose three of your own scale patterns: one that starts on tonic, one that starts on the third, and one that moves by both steps and other intervals.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 2 - So What

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the melody to So What and scale patterns on the Concert D and Concert Eb dorian scales with and without sheet music
- Students will play over the AABA form, demonstrating an understanding of both the bridge and the top of the form
- Students will be able to correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (AABA, bridge, top of form, etc.)

### Procedures

- Review melody to So What and scale in Concert D dorian (singing, then playing) (10)
- Play Concert Eb dorian scale and patterns, then transpose melody (10)
- Assign parts for response chords and play the entire arrangement (10)
- As a group, play scale patterns over the form (10)

### Assignment

Practice the Concert D and Eb dorian scales and patterns. Play through the arrangement of So What and play scale patterns over the form with the play along track.

Enrichment: Transpose your scale patterns to Concert Eb dorian and play them over the form.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 3 - So What

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the arrangement of So What as well as the Concert D and Eb dorian scales and patterns with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the AABA form, demonstrating an understanding of both the bridge and the top of the form
- Students will improvise cohesive, motivic solos to explore compositional techniques
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (motif, motivic development, cohesion, etc.)

### Procedures

- Review/Perform the arrangement of So What, playing scale patterns in unison over the form (15)
- Have students pick a scale pattern and practice manipulating it intuitively in improvised solos; after each solo, assess/discuss how well each student stuck to her motif (20)
- Introduce vocabulary for specific compositional techniques: transposition, augmentation, diminution, inverting, retrograde, etc. (5)

### Assignment

Practice the arrangement as well as improvising with the So What play along. Use scale patterns to practice motivic development; use the techniques from class and try to find new techniques of your own to develop ideas.

Enrichment: Research the significance of motivic development throughout music history. Suggested starting points (google these phrases): Fortspinnung, leit motifs, music composition techniques, motivic development in music, etc.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 4 - So What

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the arrangement of So What as well as the Concert D and Eb dorian scales and patterns with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the AABA form
- Students will improvise cohesive, motivic solos to explore compositional techniques
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (inversion, retrograde, transposition, augmentation, diminution, rhythmic displacement, etc.)

### Procedures

- Review/Perform arrangement of So What, using scale patterns to improvise solos (15)
- Discuss the meaning of the compositional techniques listed above; have students improvise solos by manipulating familiar patterns with one technique at a time (25)

### Assignment

Practice the arrangement as well as improvising with the So What play along. Use scale patterns to practice motivic development; use the techniques from class and try to find new techniques of your own to develop ideas.

Enrichment: Research the significance of motivic development throughout music history. Suggested starting points (google these phrases): Fortspinnung, leit motifs, music composition techniques, motivic development in music, etc.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 5 - So What

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the arrangement of So What as well as the Concert D and Eb dorian scales and patterns with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise cohesive, motivic solos over the AABA form
- Students will know the history of innovation in jazz history, specifically the primary styles (swing, bebop, cool jazz, hard bop, free etc.) and the impact of Miles Davis

### Procedures

- Presentation: History of innovation in jazz and the role of Miles Davis with listening examples (25)
- Review/Perform arrangement of So What (15)

### Assignment

Talk to your parents, grandparents, and other older members of your family about Miles Davis. Ask if they were aware of Miles Davis in the 1950s and 1960s, if they listened to his music, and if they knew he was innovating within the jazz idiom.

Enrichment: Using dorian scales, compose your own AABA modal jazz tune.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 6 - Little Sunflower

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the Concert D dorian scale, major scales in Concert D and Eb, and the melody to Little Sunflower with and without sheet music
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (AABBAA, ionian, straight eighth feel, etc.)
- Students will understand historical context of the repertoire

### Procedures

- Listen to original recording of Little Sunflower and introduce historical context (10)
- Teach, by rote, melody to Little Sunflower; review Eb and D major scales as necessary (singing, then playing) (15)
- Play scale patterns on Concert D dorian, Eb major, and D major scales over AABBAA form (15)

### Assignment

Practice Concert D dorian, Eb major, and D major scales and patterns. Play the melody of Little Sunflower and play scale patterns over the form with the play along track.

Enrichment: Analyze all three scales to identify a) all common pitches and b) all half step resolutions (e.g. B in D dorian to Bb in Eb major). Then, try to use these notes to transition from one scale to the other, first unaccompanied then with the play along.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 7 - Little Sunflower

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the Concert D dorian scale, major scales in Concert D and Eb, and the melody to Little Sunflower with and without sheet music
- Students will be able to discuss how musical devices (dynamics, range, articulation, rhythmic density, phrase lengths, etc.) vary in intensity

### Procedures

- Review Concert D dorian, Eb and D major scales, and melody to Little Sunflower (15)
- Teach introduction and A section harmony; perform Little Sunflower using scale patterns to improvise (15)
- Discuss (demonstrating when necessary) how different musical devices can be more or less intense (e.g. high range is more intense than low range, loud more intense than soft, marcato more than legato, etc.) (10)

### Assignment

Practice Concert D dorian, Eb major, and D major scales and patterns. Play Little Sunflower and use scale patterns to improvise over the form with the play along track.

Enrichment: Can you think of any other musical devices besides those we discussed in class that contribute to intensity? List as many as you can; listen to music for inspiration!

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 8 - Little Sunflower

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the Concert D dorian scale, major scales in Concert D and Eb, and the melody to Little Sunflower with and without sheet music
- Students will be able to discuss how musical devices (dynamics, range, articulation, rhythmic density, phrase lengths, etc.) vary in intensity
- Students will be able to use musical devices to deliberately build and release intensity

### Procedures

- Review Concert D dorian, Eb and D major scales, and melody to Little Sunflower (10)
- Perform arrangement of Little Sunflower using scale patterns to improvise (10)
- Discuss how different musical devices can be more or less intense; have students improvise, deliberately varying intensity with one technique at a time (20)

### Assignment

Practice Concert D dorian, Eb major, and D major scales and patterns. Play Little Sunflower and work on building and releasing intensity with one technique at a time with the play along track. Then, combine techniques to maximize tension/release.

Enrichment: Listen to a few of your favorite improvised solos and track the level of intensity; draw the shape (narrative arc) of their solo.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 9 - Little Sunflower

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the Concert D dorian scale, major scales in Concert D and Eb, and the melody to Little Sunflower with and without sheet music
- Students will be able to deliberately build and release intensity in improvised solos by using musical devices (dynamics, range, articulation, rhythmic density, etc.)
- Students will communicate/coordinate intensity between soloist and accompaniment

### Procedures

- Review/discuss how different musical devices can be more or less intense; have students improvise, deliberately varying intensity with one technique at a time (10)
- Draw the classic story arc (introduction, rising action, climax, denouement, etc.); demonstrate how then have students imitate that shape in a solo by manipulating intensity. Try other, more complex, shapes (as time allows) (20)
- Perform arrangement of Little Sunflower (10)

### Assignment

Practice improvising solos over Little Sunflower that follow a specific preplanned shape (narrative arc). Listen to a few of your favorite improvised solos and track the level of intensity; draw the shape of their solo and use that for your own solo.

Enrichment: Use your knowledge of methods of varying intensity to improve the tune you wrote for lesson six or write a new modal tune with these techniques in mind.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 10 - Green Chimneys

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the Concert Cb major and Concert Ab relative minor scales, and the melody to Green Chimneys with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the AABA form of Green Chimneys using scale patterns
- Students will understand historical context of the repertoire

### Procedures

- Listen to original recording of Green Chimneys and introduce historical context (10)
- Teach Concert Cb major and Concert Ab relative minor scales (10)
- Teach, by rote, melody to Green Chimneys (singing, then playing) (10)
- Perform Green Chimneys; have students improvise solos using scale patterns (10)

### Assignment

Practice Concert Cb major and Concert Ab relative minor scales and patterns. Play the melody of Green Chimneys and improvise solos using scale patterns over the form with the play along track.

Enrichment: Are there any other notes outside of the scale that sound good? Explore these sounds in your improvisation with the play along track.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 11 - Green Chimneys

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the Concert Cb major scale as well as Concert Ab relative, melodic, and harmonic minor scales, and the melody to Green Chimneys with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the AABA form of Green Chimneys using scale patterns
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (color tones, melodic and harmonic minor, harmonic landscape, etc.)

### Procedures

- Review Concert Cb major and Concert Ab relative minor scales and patterns and the melody to Green Chimneys (10)
- Perform Green Chimneys; have students improvise solos using scale patterns (10)
- Play (read) Concert Ab melodic and harmonic minor scales and patterns (10)
- Perform Green Chimneys; have students improvise solos, mixing the different minor scales over A sections (10)

### Assignment

Practice the Concert Cb major scale and Concert Ab relative, melodic, and harmonic minor scales and patterns. Play the melody of Green Chimneys; improvise solos mixing the different minor scales over the A sections of the form with the play along track.

Enrichment: Think about other scales that you have played in class. Find scales other than those we played today that can work over Green Chimneys.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 12 - Green Chimneys

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the melody to Green Chimneys, the Concert Cb major and major blues scales, and the relative, melodic, harmonic minor and minor blues scale in Concert Ab with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the AABA form of Green Chimneys using scale patterns

### Procedures

- Review the melody to Green Chimneys, the Concert Cb major and major blues scales, and the relative, melodic, harmonic minor and minor blues scale in Concert Ab (20)
- Perform Green Chimneys; have students improvise solos, first focusing on different scales one at a time, then mixing the different scales (20)

### Assignment

Practice all the scales and scale patterns we have learned for Green Chimneys. Play the melody of Green Chimneys; improvise solos first focusing on different scales one at a time, then mixing the different scales over the form with the play along track.

Enrichment: Rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how tense each scale sounds over its respective section (and over the “incorrect” section for increased tension). Improvise solos over Green Chimneys, purposely building and releasing tension by switching between these scales.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 13 - Green Chimneys

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the melody and harmony to Green Chimneys as well as arpeggios on Eb7alt and Gb7 chords with and without sheet music

### Procedures

- Review the melody to Green Chimneys; then, listen to the Wynton Marsalis version from Live at the House of Tribes (15)
- Teach the harmony for this recording and perform the head (10)
- Write and play arpeggios on Eb7alt and Gb7 chords; start by just playing chord tones, then practice resolving to tonic with proper voice leading (15)

### Assignment

Practice the melody, harmony, and all the scales we have learned for Green Chimneys. Practice arpeggiating the Eb7alt and Gb7 chords and resolving to tonic first out of time, then in time.

Enrichment: Find new ways to arpeggiate the dominant chords from class and practice resolving to each of the different scales we have learned for Green Chimneys.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 14 - Green Chimneys

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the melody and harmony to Green Chimneys as well as arpeggios on Eb7alt and Gb7 chords with and without sheet music
- Student will improvise solos over the form of Green Chimneys, using dominant chords to increase tension and resolving tonic with proper voice leading

### Procedures

- Review as needed, then perform the melody to Green Chimneys (10)
- Write and play arpeggios on Eb7alt and Gb7 chords; start by just playing chord tones, then practice resolving to tonic with proper voice leading (10)
- Perform Green Chimneys; improvise solos by playing scales and patterns over the form and using dominant arpeggios to build and release tension (20)

### Assignment

Practice the melody, harmony, and all the scales we have learned for Green Chimneys. Improvise solos over the form with the play along track; play scales and patterns over the form and use dominant arpeggios to build and release tension.

Enrichment: Listen to the Wynton Marsalis recording of Green Chimneys and follow along with the solo transcription. Highlight the dominant licks and note how they resolve.

## Modal Jazz Unit - Lesson 15 - Green Chimneys

### Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) an arrangement of Green Chimneys
- Student will improvise solos over the form of Green Chimneys, mixing different scales, arpeggiating dominant chords, and playing “out” scales to build and release tension

### Procedures

- Review as needed, then perform arrangement of Green Chimneys improvising solos using all techniques learned in this unit (15)
- Explain, then demonstrate, playing and resolving “out” notes to build and release tension (10)
- Perform arrangement of Green Chimneys improvising solos using all techniques learned in this unit (15)

### Assignment

#### Prepare for Unit Assessment

Enrichment: Playing “out” notes will greatly increase tension but can sound random and unintentional. Find a few triads and pentatonic scales that contain “out” notes to make your melodies more cohesive and convincing.

## Resources

### Repertoire recordings

Miles Davis "So What"

- Kind of Blue (original): <https://youtu.be/yIXk1LBvlqU>
- Live TV broadcast: <https://youtu.be/zqNTItOGh5c>

Freddie Hubbard "Little Sunflower"

- Backlash (original): <https://youtu.be/OtB8dEuEmNM>
- Live from Ancona Jazz Festival: <https://youtu.be/IAfGMW0vbPk>

Thelonious Monk "Green Chimneys"

- Underground (original): <https://youtu.be/4C-uJw1AiPA>
- Wynton Marsalis Live at the House of Tribes: [https://youtu.be/2\\_CXpkrO-n4](https://youtu.be/2_CXpkrO-n4)

### Play alongs

So What - [https://youtu.be/J2\\_bx-q9EmA](https://youtu.be/J2_bx-q9EmA)

Little Sunflower - <https://youtu.be/bp-Dsw9d32k>

Green Chimneys - No play along available (use iRealPro/Band in a Box to create one)

### Suggested references and sources

*Developing Musicianship through Improvisation* by Christopher D. Azzara and Richard F. Grunow

*Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series - Teacher's Guide for Winds and Percussion* by Richard Grunow

*Ready, Aim, Improvise!* by Hal Crook

*How to Improvise* by Hal Crook

*The Jazz Theory Book* by Mark Levine

# So What

Miles Davis

D Dorian

The first system of music is in 4/4 time and D Dorian mode. It consists of three staves. The top staff (treble clef) contains two measures of whole notes: D major triad (D-F-A) and D minor triad (D-F-Bb). The middle staff (bass clef) contains two measures of whole notes: D major triad (D-F-A) and D minor triad (D-F-Bb). The bottom staff (bass clef) contains a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and a half note D.

The second system continues the D Dorian mode. It consists of three staves. The top staff (treble clef) contains two measures of whole notes: D major triad (D-F-A) and D minor triad (D-F-Bb), followed by a first ending (1.) and a second ending (2.). The middle staff (bass clef) contains two measures of whole notes: D major triad (D-F-A) and D minor triad (D-F-Bb), followed by a first ending (1.) and a second ending (2.). The bottom staff (bass clef) contains a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and a half note D.

Eb dorian

The third system of music is in 4/4 time and Eb Dorian mode. It consists of three staves. The top staff (treble clef) contains two measures of whole notes: Eb major triad (Eb-G-Bb) and Eb minor triad (Eb-G-Ab). The middle staff (bass clef) contains two measures of whole notes: Eb major triad (Eb-G-Bb) and Eb minor triad (Eb-G-Ab). The bottom staff (bass clef) contains a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes F, G, Ab, Bb, C, D, Eb, F, and a half note Eb.

The fourth system continues the Eb Dorian mode. It consists of three staves. The top staff (treble clef) contains two measures of whole notes: Eb major triad (Eb-G-Bb) and Eb minor triad (Eb-G-Ab). The middle staff (bass clef) contains two measures of whole notes: Eb major triad (Eb-G-Bb) and Eb minor triad (Eb-G-Ab). The bottom staff (bass clef) contains a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes F, G, Ab, Bb, C, D, Eb, F, and a half note Eb.

D Dorian

Three staves of music for guitar. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The top two staves show chords and rests. The bottom staff shows a melodic line with a 7th fret barre and a 7th fret bend.

Three staves of music for guitar, similar to the first system. The bottom staff shows a melodic line with a 7th fret barre and a 7th fret bend.

D Dorian scale

Eb Dorian scale

Two single-staff musical examples. The first shows the D Dorian scale (D, E, F, G, A, Bb, C) in treble clef. The second shows the Eb Dorian scale (Eb, F, G, Ab, Bb, C, D) in bass clef.

Scale pattern ideas

etc.

A single-staff musical example showing a scale pattern in treble clef.

etc.

A single-staff musical example showing a scale pattern in treble clef.

etc.

A single-staff musical example showing a scale pattern in treble clef.

etc.

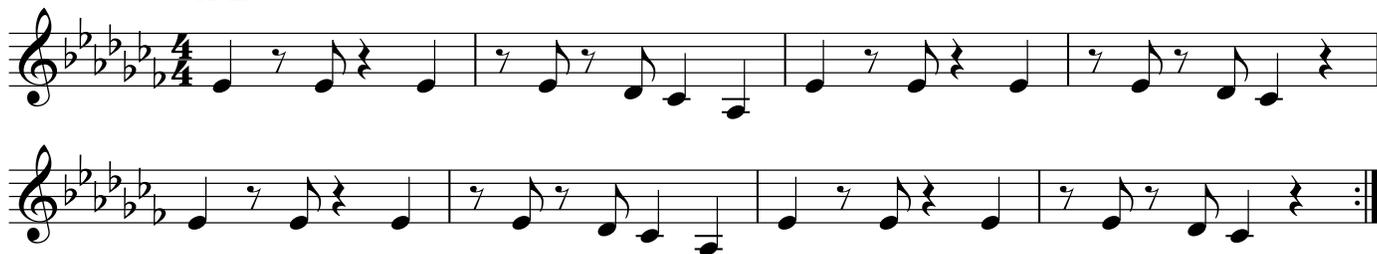
A single-staff musical example showing a scale pattern in treble clef.



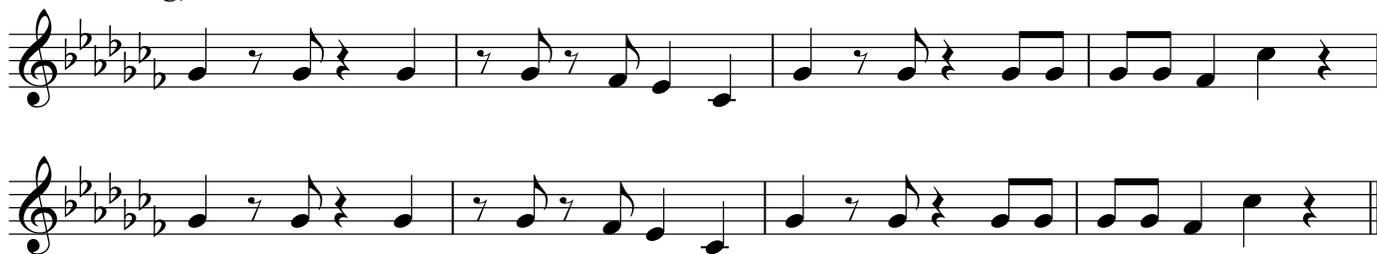
# Green Chimneys

Thelonius Monk

Abm



Cbmaj7



Abm



Ab relative minor scale

Cb major scale



Ab melodic minor scale

Ab harmonic minor scale



Ab minor blues scale

Cb major blues scale



Eb7

(color tones)

Gb7

(color tones)

