

## Modern Theory

*with Reg Barber*

In this issue we will look at some improvising approaches that will help you use different modal tonalities in your solos, and hopefully help you understand modes and tonality better. To become good at improvising you require an understanding of music theory, ear training, and the creation of muscle memory through repetition of technical exercises. If you want to improve your improvisational skills, then you need a practice plan that encompasses all of these areas. It's the sum of all these parts that makes you good at improvising.

I recommend to all my students that they break up their practice time into four parts so they can equally cover all of these areas. The first area of practice is technique, which is to create muscle memory of scales, arpeggios, triads and double stops. Muscle memory is crucial if you want to play fast or improvise well. Constant repetition of technical exercises will allow you to recall scale passages or arpeggios instantly, while thinking about what key or chord you are playing over, at the same time as you listen to what is being played around you.

Ear training is the next area of practice. This means listening to other guitarist's solos and writing down or transcribing what they are playing. Transcribing other people's solos will allow you to build up a library of ideas that you can tweak to make your own. If you have never transcribed before then start small with just one phrase or a couple of notes, then work your way up to transcribing whole solos and songs. If you can't read music learn how to it. It doesn't take long to learn and a good starting point is Hal Leonard's Guitar Method Book 1. Buy this book and practice for ten minutes a day - you'll be reading in no time.

The third area of practice is to develop your understanding of music theory. Understanding major scale harmony is the starting point as it helps you understand how chord progressions work. Understanding the major scale is also the first step in understanding how to use the modes when improvising. Modes are essentially the major scale starting and finishing on any other note than the first note of the major scale. Chord progressions can also be modal, if you have a chord progression finishing on a chord other than the I chord of the key then you have a modal progression. This issue we will take a look at some modal chord progressions and use some modes to solo over these progressions.

The fourth area of practice is to improvise and record yourself while you do it. Listen back to what you have done and find your own voice through self-evaluating. Jam with as many people as you can in as many different styles as you can – being great at technical exercises is important, but interacting with other musicians is an entirely different skill and it needs just as much practice.

### EXERCISE 1

A great way to get started with modal soloing is to solo over modal progressions. Exercise one is in the key of C major but the chord progression starts on a Dm7 chord and uses a G7 chord. Record a loop of the progression for a minute or two and practice the D dorian scale, the second mode of C major, over your loop.

### EXERCISE 2

Exercise two is a four-chord progression based on E Phrygian, the third mode of C major. Play a C major scale over the progression and you will hear that all of the notes work. Play E Phrygian mode over this progression and you will hear that by resolving your phrases to E you have captured the tonality of Phrygian mode.

### EXERCISE 3

As you can probably hear from the previous two exercises, if you have a modal progression it makes sense to use the same mode as the chord your progression resolves to. Example three is a modal progression based starting on the V chord of C major. Using G mixolydian mode, the fifth mode of the C major scale, you get a nice resolution to a G note. Try using the other modes, along with the C major scale, and you will end up using a lot of the fretboard as well as creating some phrases that you may not normally come up with. This is a great way to break out of a playing rut or come up with something new.

Standard tuning

♩ = 120

S-Gt

Dm7

G7

*mf*

1

2

T  
A  
B

10 12 13

10 12 14

10 12 14

12 13 15

12

13 15 13 12

15 - (15)

Standard tuning

♩ = 120

S-Gt

Em F G Em

*mf*

T  
A  
B

0-1-3 0-2-3 0-2-3 0-2-4 1-3-5 1 3-5-3-1 5 (5)

Standard tuning

♩ = 120

S-Gt

G7 Fmaj7 G7 Fmaj7

*mf*

1 2

T  
A  
B

3-5-7 3-5-7 4-5-7 5-6-8 5 7-8-7-5 8 (8)