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Myles Boothroyd
Central Michigan University

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Modal Jazz

Myles Boothroyd
Year II – Central Michigan University

Kind of Blue is the best-selling jazz record of all time, and yet few listeners grasp the meaning of the album—or of Miles Davis's vision of modal jazz. Its release in 1959 revealed modality as an entirely new creative tool that gave musicians unprecedented latitude in developing improvised solos. While most references define the style in terms of static harmonies, a more thorough analysis reveals that Davis founded modal jazz on the underlying goal of melodic freedom. Modal composition relaxed the harmonic constraints that had previously forced players into creating formulaic solos; it also introduced a new degree of rhythmic flexibility that permitted improvisers to think more melodically. Combined with the freedom to choose from a wider range of notes, these factors made modal jazz the perfect environment for melodic inventiveness.

The idea behind modality was not solely the work of Miles Davis. Developed in the wake of a decade of shifting jazz styles, throughout which Davis had constantly sought the ideal setting to express his unique voice, the concept of modal jazz was most strongly influenced by a composer who receives only nominal credit in the majority of written accounts. It was George Russell who set Davis on the path toward *Kind of Blue*, and his ideas

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about tonality laid the groundwork for modal thinking. Russell has certainly not been ignored in academic discussions of music; Ingrid Monson outlines some of the composer's key points and describes how his opinions influenced Coltrane's approach to modal jazz as a reflection of non-Western musical traditions.¹ What is frequently left unexplored, however, is the more fundamental influence Russell had on Davis during the inception of modal jazz. His *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*² inspired Davis to think of new ways to relate to chords and encouraged him to develop a style of music that abandoned the traditional emphasis on horizontal harmonic progression. By exploring Russell's unique theories and his relationship to Miles Davis, one gains a clearer understanding of modal jazz as well as a more complete picture of how *Kind of Blue* was born.

Most jazz musicians are familiar with the fundamentals of modal jazz, and any interested reader can find a basic explanation in every book about jazz styles or Davis's life. While the written sources give a rudimentary description, they fail to define modal jazz in terms of its purpose, settling for a mere outline of its features. A complete understanding of modality requires the recognition that this style is founded on the underlying goal of melodic development. With *Kind of Blue*, Davis finally discovered an approach that provided true melodic and improvisational freedom, something he had been seeking since he began his musical journey.

¹ Ingrid Monson, "Oh Freedom: George Russell, John Coltrane, and Modal Jazz," in *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, ed. Bruno Nettl with Melinda Russell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 158.

² Russell, George. *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* (New York: Concept Publishing Co., 1953). See also: *George Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, available from:

<http://www.lydianchromaticconcept.com/main.html>, Internet, accessed 16 June 2010.

Modal jazz can be defined in a straightforward way: it exists when the rhythm section plays a single harmony for an extended period of time while the soloists improvise based on a scale (or mode) associated with that chord. These two factors—static harmony and improvisation based on modes—are unique to the style. Whereas the bebop and hard bop of Davis’s upbringing were largely focused on ii-V-I progressions and frequent harmonic changes to emphasize an overall sense of forward motion, modal jazz abandons this concept in favour of single harmonies that persist over a longer span of time. This invites soloists to think in terms of modes instead of chords. Suddenly, the improviser can draw from an entire scale rather than focusing solely on the chord tones that define a particular harmony.³ In 1959, this was a drastically different approach from the progression-oriented jazz that had been the norm for nearly four decades.

Kind of Blue was the first album to exemplify the modal style, and while its release cemented Davis’s image as a musical innovator, the influence for its unique approach came from George Russell, who emerged on the jazz scene in the 1940s. By the end of the decade, Russell had firmly established himself as a prominent composer and arranger, and he was already well-

³ My definition of modal jazz is the result of consultation with several sources that shed light on the subject. For additional renderings of this definition, see:

1. Monson, “Oh Freedom,” 150.
2. Ian Carr, *Miles Davis: A Biography* (New York: William Morrow and Co.: 1982), 93.
3. John Szwed, *So What: The Life of Miles Davis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 175-76.
4. Eric Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue: Miles Davis and His Masterpiece* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 134-35.
5. Alyn Shipton, *A New History of Jazz*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Continuum: 2007), 485.
6. Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*, 10th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2009), 265-266.

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acquainted with Davis:

We used to have sessions together. He was interested in chords, and I was interested in chords. We would sit at the piano and play chords for each other. He'd play a chord and I'd say, "Ooh, that's a killer." And then I would play a chord. At one of these sessions I asked Miles what he was looking to accomplish. He told me, "I want to learn all the chord changes. How can I go about doing this?" And I thought about that. I didn't challenge it. At times Miles could be very definite, but at other times he could be really obscure. I just said to myself, "He already knows the changes. What could he need?" Even then Miles was noted for outlining each change, identifying it with the melody. In other words, he wouldn't have even needed the piano player, because Miles' melody was dictating what the chords were. He wanted a new way to relate to chords.⁴

Shortly after these sessions began, Russell was hospitalized for fifteen months with tuberculosis. He began thinking about Davis's question. "I already had the feeling that chords have a scale of unity, and they have a scale closer to them, to the sound of the chord, than any other scale."⁵ Russell was searching for a scale that could perfectly embody the sound of a chord. He knew that Davis had grown tired of endlessly running over chord changes, and this set him on a journey to discover a new approach to improvisation that would abandon the conventional formula of harmonic progression in favour of particular scales, or modes, and their overall sound.

⁴ Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue*, 62.

⁵ Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue*, 61.

In 1945, Russell sat down at the piano with a very specific goal: to find a scale that best captured the “sound” of a major chord. In such a scale, every note would reflect the overall sonority of the tonic triad so that, when used as a source for improvisation, the entire scale would consistently “fit” within the aural flavour of the chord. This simple beginning was foundational to Russell’s development of the *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, an in-depth study that became the first real example of jazz theory.⁶ Since its publication, the *Concept* has challenged the way musicians hear, understand, and interpret Western harmony. While the complexities of Russell’s theory merit a longer and more devoted paper on the subject, the core ideas of the *Concept* are relevant and comprehensible in the context of modal jazz.

Russell’s search for a scale that could embody the sound of a chord required that he shed the expectations of his “Western ears,” which are trained to hear sonorities in terms of harmonic motion. Western music is driven forward by harmonic progression, and listeners are most comfortable when they hear tonicization. The problem with tonicization, however, is that it forces every chord into one of two categories: it is either a tonic, or it is part of a progression toward the tonic. Such a traditional approach forces improvisers to focus on where chords lead, rather than on the chords themselves. This went against Russell’s idea of exploring the sound of individual chords. The approach he had in mind would permit improvisers to create melodies that embody chords in themselves, rather than treating chords as mere tools of harmonic function.

From the start, Russell knew that the major scale would not fulfill this purpose; tonicization, after all, is a key feature of

⁶ Nisenon, *The Making of Kind of Blue*, 50. See also: Russell, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, and *George Russell’s Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* (Internet).

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the major scale. In C Ionian (major), the tonic sounds like a point of arrival and provides the listener with an aural sense of conclusion. This is the result of an implied V⁷-I relationship within the major scale. The tetrachord beginning on the fourth scale degree in C major (F-G-A-B) contains two tendency tones (the subdominant and leading tone) that want to resolve outward to the notes of the tonic triad. When the scale is played from top to bottom, this tetrachord generates a sense of harmonic tension that is released with the arrival of the tonic. Even in its most basic element—the major scale—Western music is grounded by harmonic motion. For Russell, this focus on progression left no room for soloists to explore a sonority within itself.

The answer to Russell's quest came in the form of the Lydian scale. Sitting at a piano, Russell played a C major chord in the left hand while playing the first tetrachord (C-D-E-F) in the right. He noticed that the F sounded out of place; between the four notes, it was the only pitch that seemed to clash with the sound of the tonic triad. Meanwhile, the second tetrachord (G-A-B-C) seemed to fit perfectly, with each note falling comfortably into the chord's overall flavour.⁷ Russell then took the second tetrachord of G major (D-E-F#-G) and played in on top of C major. He perceived the F# as fitting more squarely into the sonority of the chord, while the entire scale of C to C in the key of G major (C Lydian) captured the major tonality of the tonic triad.⁸

Russell's transition from the Ionian to the Lydian mode should not be surprising. The key to eliminating the natural progression within the major scale is to target the pitch that poses a special problem: the subdominant. In the Ionian mode,

⁷ Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue*, 219.

⁸ *Ibid.*

the subdominant is perceived as the seventh of a dominant seventh chord and seeks to resolve down to the mediant, generating harmonic tension until the arrival of the tonic triad. In contrast, raising the subdominant by a half step has a pronounced effect: the fourth scale degree no longer yearns to resolve down to the third. Playing the Lydian scale over the tonic triad eliminates one of the strongest sources of tension that makes the Ionian scale sound as though it must resolve to the tonic triad. Suddenly, there is no sense of harmonic motion. As Russell put it, “The major scale *resolves* into its tonic major chord. The Lydian scale *is* the sound of its tonic major scale [*sic*].”⁹ Russell had accomplished his goal: he had discovered a scale that, when played from top to bottom or used as a source for improvisation, would maintain a major tonality without any sense of harmonic progression.

It might seem that a raised fourth, which tends toward the dominant, would generate harmonic tension in the Lydian scale. The difference here, however, is that the subdominant belongs to the dominant seventh chord of the tonic. In any major scale, the tetrachord that contains both the subdominant and the leading tone contains two pitches that define a dominant harmony. The tendency of this tritone to resolve outward to a major sixth produces the effect of implied tonicization within the major scale. The raised fourth in the Lydian scale, on the other hand, does not belong to a dominant harmony. In another context, it might seek to resolve up to the dominant, but as a standalone pitch, it does not create any harmonic pull. Similarly, once the subdominant is raised, the original tetrachord (the F-G-A-B tetrachord in C major) is left with just one tendency pitch—the leading tone. The Lydian scale eliminates the relationship between two tendency tones that,

⁹ Monson, “Oh Freedom,” 153.

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when paired, imply a V⁷-I progression.

Russell's discovery of the Lydian mode's relationship to its tonic triad was crucial to his *Concept*, for he had found a scale that truly captured the sound of the major chord. When the Lydian scale is played over its tonic triad, none of the notes sound significantly more conclusive than the others, and the sense of tonicization inherent in the major scale is eliminated in favour of a uniform major sonority. This realization was not achieved simply through random experimentation on the piano; it was a logical notion deriving from Russell's concept of the "tonal gravity" of the perfect fifth.¹⁰ In his work, Russell noted that the perfect fifth generated the strongest feeling of tonicization. As he put it, "You can go anywhere in the world and play a fifth. You can ask people to sing the note that sounds the tonal integrity of a fifth, and they are going to sing the lower tone."¹¹ In other words, Russell knew that if he played a perfect fifth for someone and asked him (or her) to sing the tonic, the listener would always select the lower pitch. This indicated a sense of "tonal gravity," a measure of how much the tonic actually sounds like the tonic.¹²

Once he recognized that the perfect fifth created the strongest sense of tonal gravity, Russell conceived of a series of notes based on this interval. He stacked a sequence of fifths from C (C-G-D-A-E-B-F#) and placed the notes in stepwise order.¹³ Russell had just formed the C Lydian scale (C-D-E-F#-G-A-B). He immediately heard that this scale had a "unity" within itself that derived from the tonal gravity of the perfect

¹⁰ "Frequently Asked Questions about George Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization," *George Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, available from <http://www.lydianchromaticconcept.com/faq.html>, Internet, accessed 28 November 2009.

¹¹ Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue*, 220.

¹² "Frequently Asked Questions," Internet.

¹³ Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue*, 220.

fifth. When the scale was stacked, each perfect fifth would collapse onto its lower note and reinforce the role of that pitch as tonic (F# would collapse onto B, B would collapse onto E, and so forth). Finally, the sequence of fifths would end on C, the bottom of the Lydian scale and the last note to sound like a tonic.¹⁴ Russell realized that, when a scale is developed solely from perfect fifths, each note will gravitate toward another note until the scale arrives at its overall tonic. None of the notes sound out of place—each having a perfect fifth to serve as the root below it—and the complete Lydian scale achieves “unity.”¹⁵

The *Concept*'s persuasiveness relies, in large part, on individual perception. Russell had an ear for sonorities lacking traditional Western harmonic tension, allowing him to hear a fit between the Lydian scale and the tonic triad. Regardless of the potency of this particular finding for modern jazz musicians, Russell's *Concept* was foundational to a larger way of thinking about chord/scale relationships that paved the way for a modal approach. His *Concept* squares perfectly with modal thinking, for modal jazz is primarily concerned with capturing the sound of an individual chord, not with harmonic progression.

To understand how the Lydian scale's role in the *Concept* can distinguish between progression-oriented jazz and modality, consider that many jazz instructors today tell beginning improvisers that, in a ii-V-I progression, the student may simply play in the tonic key.¹⁶ Despite this optional focus on a single scale, traditional jazz will still be governed by harmonic momentum. When harmonies are moving toward tonicization

¹⁴ “Frequently Asked Questions,” Internet.

¹⁵ Nisenson, *The Story of Kind of Blue*, 220.

¹⁶ David Valdez, “George Russell’s ‘Lydian Chromatic Concept,’” *Casa Valdez Studios*, available from <http://davidvaldez.blogspot.com/2005/08/george-russells-lydian-chromatic.html>, Internet, accessed 28 November 2009.

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(as in a ii-V-I progression), then playing the tonic major scale over these harmonies will not sound like a reflection of the tonic triad; instead, the forward-moving harmonies underneath will make certain notes of the major scale sound like tendency tones that want to resolve to the tonic triad. Improvising within the major scale unavoidably serves a harmonic, rather than a modal, function, so that the soloist's goal is to outline chord changes.

In modal jazz, however, one chord is played for an extended period of time to eliminate any sense of harmonic motion. Rather than focusing on a chord's destination, modal improvisation seeks to construct a melody that captures the sound of an individual chord in itself. Exploring the scale associated with a particular harmony does not amount to highlighting tendency tones; instead, each pitch provides a unique color that the soloist may explore melodically.

The implications of Russell's *Concept* for modal jazz were clear in Davis's mind before he set out to record *Kind of Blue*. Throughout the 1950s the two men had remained in touch, and in 1958 they met for another discussion regarding harmonies:

One night Miles and I had dinner together, and we had a very serious discussion about modes. At the time, Miles was seriously looking for musicians to replace some of the guys in the band with substance-abuse problems. So we sat down at the piano and played chords. I played a chord for him, and he asked me where I got it. I tried to show him where the chord came from. And he got very interested, because, by that time, I could translate any chord in terms of the Concept, and I could show Miles what its parent scale was; the scale formed a unity with the chord. Then Miles understood it. He saw that in the Concept there

was an objective explanation for the chord. He saw that the traditional music overlooked explanation for the chord. Unity was not a factor. When musicians are talking about harmony, they mean progressional harmony. They were ignorant—and still are—about a vertical concept. The Lydian Concept is based on the unity of chord and scale. That night, when Miles saw how he could use the Concept, he said that if Bird were alive, this would kill him. And it was just what Miles needed for the direction his music was taking.¹⁷

Davis, by this point, had a firm grasp of how the *Concept* could influence a new direction in jazz. He understood Russell’s “vertical concept”—exploring the full range of possibilities, from top to bottom, within an individual mode—that clashed with the traditional way of soloing over a forward-moving, “horizontal” harmonic progression. This was the answer he needed to complete his vision of modal jazz, a setting in which soloists could achieve true melodic freedom.

It has already been said that modal jazz is defined by two characteristics: static harmonies and improvisation based on modes. While this explanation accurately describes the most fundamental aspects of the modal approach, it fails to account for the foundational ideas behind Davis’s work on *Kind of Blue*. Most published sources cap their definitions of modal jazz with a reference to static harmonies, as though a lack of harmonic motion is the ultimate goal. These explanations miss the point, for static harmony is not an end in itself. Instead, it is a means to achieving the underlying purpose of the modal approach: melodic freedom.

For Davis, this was a natural point of arrival. He had

¹⁷ Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue*, 72.

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always been concerned with melody over chord changes; throughout the years, he was noted for developing solos that were simpler and more memorable than those of his contemporaries. In Davis's eyes, the focus of improvisation was the instant composition of a meaningful melody rather than a mere restatement of chord changes:

What I had learned about the modal form was that when you play this way, go in this direction, you can go on forever. You don't have to worry about changes. . . . You can do more with the musical line. The challenge here . . . is to see how inventive you can be melodically. It's not like when you base stuff on chords, and you know at the end of thirty-two bars that the chords have run out and there's nothing to do but repeat what you've done with the variations.¹⁸

In modal jazz, solos would not simply be restatements, with "variations," of a chord progression. Instead, the approach on *Kind of Blue* permitted improvisers to construct meaningful melodies without having to worry about changes. This was the ultimate opportunity for Davis to escape the confines of harmonic progression and focus strictly on melodic development.

Why is modal jazz so conducive to melodic freedom? The obvious answer is that modal improvisation is based, not on chords, but on entire modes, so that "scales serve not as abstractions from practice but as primary creative tools."¹⁹ Soloists are no longer enjoined from exploring non-chord tones, and they can freely compose a coherent melody that

¹⁸ Szwed, *So What*, 171.

¹⁹ Samuel Barret, "Kind of Blue and the economy of modal jazz," in *Popular Music* 25:2 (2006), 195.

targets any one of the mode's seven notes. Players can connect ideas using fluid, scalar passages, and they may bring out unique harmonic colors by focusing on scale degrees other than the root, third, fifth, or seventh. Modal jazz, in many ways, is a culmination of Russell's *Concept*, which was rooted in the search for a scale that could embody the overall sound of a chord. In the modal style, chords are not validated by their harmonic function; they exist as standalone sonorities begging to be explored. In this way, modal jazz provides a setting in which harmony becomes "decorative rather than functional."²⁰

Recognizing the importance of harmonic freedom, however, provides only a partial understanding of the modal approach. Despite its name, modal jazz is not merely characterized by scale-based improvisation and static harmonies. One of the most crucial factors is rhythmic freedom, and while this feature is often overlooked, it was paramount to Davis's underlying goal with *Kind of Blue*. For Davis, modal jazz was the ideal setting for melodic inventiveness. If melody was the goal, it is only logical that players would require harmonic *and* rhythmic freedom, for a melody is defined by both its notes and its rhythms.

The very nature of modal jazz offers extraordinary rhythmic flexibility that is absent from traditional, progression-oriented jazz. When chords change every two beats—as they did in early bebop—there is a strong two-in-the-bar feel that encourages soloists to align their improvisation with the broader harmonic rhythm. Developing hemiolas and executing phrases that conflict with the time signature become extremely difficult when harmonies are changing quickly underneath the solo line. In such a scenario, the improviser would be required to adapt to shifting chords while in the middle of an oddly-

²⁰ Carr, *Miles Davis: A Biography*, 93.

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metered phrase, a tactic that would doubtlessly interfere with the coherence of the performer's melody.

Modal jazz, in contrast, does not have the driving feel associated with regular harmonic progression. While the rhythm section continues to provide a steady beat, so that soloists must maintain a consistent tempo, there is frequently a lack of any particular feel that would require players to tailor their phrase lengths. With static harmony underneath, the soloist may play simple, short phrases; long, lyrical passages; or rapid sixteenth-note runs, interspersed with sudden triplets and quintuplets, to highlight the sound of the chord. In combination with the freedom of selecting notes from the entire scale, these relaxed rhythmic constraints make modal jazz an ideal tool for melodic expression.

Perhaps the best way to develop a complete understanding of modal jazz is to look beyond the definition of what it *is*. The significance of *Kind of Blue* comes not from its static harmonies, but from what the modal approach allows players to do. For Davis, modality was founded on the desire to create an ideal setting for melodic development; in such a setting, harmonic and rhythmic constraints were necessarily loosened to provide soloists with the opportunity to compose freely through improvisation. Players no longer had to follow strict changes that curbed their inventiveness; instead, they could capture the sound of individual chords through the use of modes.

Despite Davis's distinction as the pioneer of modal jazz, the framework for modal thinking owes as much credit to Russell and his *Concept*. Russell's search in the 1950s for a scale of "unity"—a scale that could embody the sound of a chord—was a primary influence on Davis's development at the end of the decade. The *Concept*, which capitalizes on the Lydian scale in order to move away from harmonic progression, paves the way for a modal approach in which soloists explore the sounds of

individual chords. It was Russell's theory of chord-scale relationships that laid the foundation for Davis's realization of modal jazz. By applying Russell's ideas to his compositions on *Kind of Blue*, Davis discovered an approach that broke away from the harmonic restrictions of earlier jazz styles. This latitude was crucial to the development of modal jazz—a style that provided Davis with the melodic freedom he had been seeking all along.

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