

Modal Chord/Scale Formulas and other Fun Shortcuts

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Just a beginning note, this is not meant to replace the reasons why all of this stuff works...you should read up and really understand that too as I don't extensively describe that here since the whole point is to get around just that!

Basically, scales that I tend to "think in" when playing are *Major*, *Mixolydian*, *Melodic*, *Harmonic*, *Natural (Aeolian)*, and *Dorian* minors. You could of course reduce all of this to *Major* and *Melodic/Harmonic* minors, but when I was first starting out, my teacher had me practice scales/arpeggios thinking in *Major*, *Mixolydian*, *Dorian*, and *Melodic* minor because those are the four "biggies" with *Harmonic* minor coming in 5th. If you know those scales, almost every other scale can be thought of in terms of one of those. Some of the ways in which I think may seem odd, but I'll share anyway just in case it gives anyone any ideas. For example, for many of my chord voicings, I tend to see them as dominant 7th shapes (such as A&B rootless voicings) since that's what I learned first (as I'm sure many do.)

What I've tried to do here is to provide the most common chords that are likely to come up in typical jazz tunes, and these are just some of the ways you can think of and voice/improvise over them...there are many other possibilities of course!:

CMaj7: (*Ionian/Major* or for #11 sound, *Lydian-Major* up a Perfect "P"5th)

C7, C7sus4, C7#11: (*Mixolydian-Major* down a P5th) (or to add a #11 sound, "*Lydian b7*," "*Lydian dominant*," "*Overtone*"-think *Melodic Minor* up a P5th.) For sus4 voicings, one trick I use is to think of the *Dorian* minor shapes that I've memorized and think of them up a P5th. So in this case, for C7sus4, I'd be thinking Gm7 *Dorian* (F-A-Bb-D). Of course, it's probably easier to just think of C7 and move the E to F, but that's my weird brain. For C7#11, I think of *Melodic minor* up a P5th just like the scale, so G-maj7 in this case.

Cm6, C-maj7: (*Melodic Minor* as m6 usually implies a major 7th. *Dorian* can work, but I find it to be more appropriate for m11 and m13.) A voicing trick I use for minor6 is to think of the dominant 7th voicing up a P4th...so F7 here. If you want minMaj7, think of F7#11.

Cm7: *Dorian*, (or *Major* down a 2nd-but just memorize *Dorian*...you need it a lot.) For voicings, you can think of a Maj7 voicing up a minor 3rd. So, Ebmaj7 here. It's probably best to give these and the *Dorian* mode its own category and home in your brain though.

C Phrygian, C7susb9#13: (also sometimes written as **C7susb9#5** and many other ways-just think *Major* down a Major 3rd-OR-even better-if you've got *Dorian* down, think *Dorian* down a major 2nd.) This is a good way to voice the chord too, i.e. think Bbm7/C.

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C13susb9: (also known as “*Javanese*”...similar to *Phrygian*, just replace the b13/#5 with a natural 6/13. Think *Melodic minor* down a major 2nd.) For voicing, it’s almost the same as *Phrygian*, just think Bb-maj7/C.

Cm7(b5): (*Locrian*-think Major up a ½ step OR for *Locrian sharp II/natural II*, think *Melodic minor* up a minor 3rd.) *What I tend to do here is to preserve the m3 interval by thinking of Locrian as being Dorian up a m3 and Locrian #2 being Melodic minor up a m3.* For voicings, I tend to use McCoy type voicings replacing the b3rd with the 4th AND I think of the voicing as the same as a dominant 7th voicing a major 3rd down. So in this case, I’d be thinking Ab7.

C7#9#5, C7b9#5: (“*Altered*,” “*Diminished Whole Tone*,” “*Super Locrian*,” “*Ravel*”- think *Melodic minor* up a ½ step.) This scale will also throw in the #11. For voicings, the tritone substitution comes in handy, and I think of dominant 7th chords a tritone or Aug4th/Dim5th up or down. Here it’d be F#7/Gb7.

C7b9#5: (“*Phrygian dominant*,” “*Major Phrygian*,” “*Jewish*,” “*Spanish*,” “*Gypsy*,” “*Ahavoh Rabbah*,” “*Balkan*.” Similar to *Phrygian* except the 3rd scalar degree is raised a ½ step. Regardless of what you call it, playing *Harmonic minor* up a P4th works well. The very first note, in this case an F, is more or less an avoid note, so you may want to start on the second.) See above for voicings.

- For all the shortcuts, even though you are thinking of completely different scales, you ultimately want to be able to start and end the scales on the root of the actual chords. For example, in all of these examples, you would be starting on C and ending on C, but thinking of/using the different scales in between. This way, you are truly playing all of these different scales which I’ve named, but you’re thinking in completely different ways!