
Beyond Chord Melody, Volume II

A Modal Framework for Jazz Improvisation

This book operates on a simple premise: I believe *you can learn to improvise jazz* on the plectrum-tuned banjo/guitar—or at least, *play and sound* like you’re improvising.

The skill set required for jazz improv is the same as for *any* high level, serious music style. All ‘Western’ (European/American) music consists of the same 12 notes, and the same ‘five lines and four spaces.’ Improvement as a musician will serve you well in *any* genre. This material will work with *any* instrument of course (music is music), but it is specifically tailored to the ‘traditional’ plectrum banjo/plectrum guitar tuning (C-G-B-D). The overriding point here is to learn to play the things that players of other instruments already take for granted, *on this tuning*. Notes on paper or in our head do us no good if we don’t know *where to find them* or *how to play them* on our instrument!

The plectrum banjo is not known for playing ‘lots of notes.’ The popular belief is that it is a chordal instrument *only*, that single-note lines are just not possible or practical (or even *appropriate* or *desirable*). The few players who *have* figured it out are seen as inimitable geniuses—not role models. Obviously, this myth must be overcome in order to succeed.

I have gained a lot of *knowledge and experience* through my 50 years of playing the plectrum banjo, but my dream of lots-of-notes improvised jazz always eluded me. I never could find a learning path that worked for me—so I developed my own! Now that I have ‘cracked the code’ for myself, most of the advice and education that I had previously received finally makes sense! Good-old-fashioned practice and study is the *true* underlying ‘secret’ of course, but you need to practice and study the *right things*!

Jazz musicians either just ‘*have it*’ by *instinct* (as a lucky few do), or *learn and develop it* through book-learning and practice. Figuring out what ‘*it is in the first place*’ is the trick; then we need some kind of framework to *develop it*. *A Modal Framework* represents what is working for *me* in my personal quest. This book is meant to fill the educational need for those of us who *don’t* have *it* by instinct, or who simply want to improve their craft.

Though I’ve always *heard* cool stuff in my head, I lacked the necessary skills/knowledge to play it on the banjo. After *decades of wishing* I could just ‘*let it happen*,’ I finally realized *and admitted* it was not going to be ‘instinctive’ for me—that *I* was going to have to *make it happen*. In the apparent absence of ‘natural’ jazz improv skills, I realized I needed to first develop the physical/mental skills to at least *imitate* single-note improv.

The Modal concept has come to mean two slightly different things to me: **#1**, Modal theory provides a logical and functional framework of musical knowledge and technique. **#2**, the individual parts of that framework are *modular* ‘building blocks’ that can be assembled in many different ways to fit various musical situations.

Most jazz improv method books show a theoretical framework scale and *nothing more*, and then expect us to invent something based on it. They assume that we already have a solid ‘scale-based’ learning framework (*trained musicians* usually do). If you are like me though—a self-taught chord melody banjoist with little or no scale experience—the scales *by themselves* are meaningless! *They* do not make jazz; the musician’s *imagination* does.

Based on my decades of experience and observation (and frustration!), I can tell you this: Unless one is a musical savant who can just ‘let it happen’ without actual effort or knowledge, one must put in some serious *work* to achieve this goal. The first and hardest step is to honestly and humbly admit “*I just ain’t got it!*” After that, it simply becomes a matter of defiantly saying (and *committing to*) “*but I’m gonna get it!*”

So, how *do* we develop single-string technique on the plectrum banjo? I won’t lie or sugar-coat it: *there is no ‘easy’ way!* A devotion to scales and arpeggios—those evil tools of torture employed by mean music teachers—is the only logical, *proven* path forward!

It's easy to look at something difficult and say "*it's just not worth my time.*" Or, as happens often in the jazzier-wannabe world, "*why do I need to learn **this** stuff? Can't I just **let** it happen? Isn't that what **true** jazz improvisation is all about?*" Well obviously, if one has a 'gift' for it, then no book is needed! If we *don't* have it though—and are willing to admit it—we must do *something* to get it. **Anything** is better than nothing, so why not do the work that will give us the physical ability *and* make us a better all-round banjoist?

If you are 'waiting for inspiration to strike,' you better hope it happens soon! Every day spent wishing for a miracle is another day lost to the time-proven potential of hard work and study. Rather than *dream of letting it happen*, we need to *commit to **making** it happen*. If you are anxious to do that, turn to **Part 1**. If you want to better understand my motivations and inspirations though, keep reading. Here are some of the book's guiding themes:

Chord Shape Dependence (CSD)

If *chord shapes* (as in chord melody or strumming) are all we know how to play on the plectrum banjo, then we have our work cut out for us! Jazz improv requires strong *single-string* skills—in *both* hands. This is *not* an easy prospect for a CSD sufferer like me!

A habitual 'default' reliance on chords/strumming (Buddy Wachter calls it 'chord malady') will truly get in our way. To succeed with this material, we must overcome this dependence. Speaking from personal experience, *the struggle is real!* But, *there is a path forward.*

'Horn-Style' Jazz

This is a term from the 1930s: it means to play single-note lines like a horn player does. They cannot play *chords* on their instruments of course, so they must study *scales* and *arpeggios* to learn about them. The first jazz guitarists overcame *their* CSD by copying the horn players (Louis Armstrong especially)! This was a revolutionary breakthrough—mostly forgotten today—that allowed them to elbow their way into the 'front line' on an equal footing, and thus *evolve* right alongside the horns. I hesitate to use the jazz guitar as our primary example; I believe *we also* need to go back to the *original* inspiration of the horns.

The banjo missed that evolutionary boat in the early 1930s, having practically disappeared at the time. It would be interesting to know if any banjoists *tried* to follow suit, but just weren't accepted into the club. We'll never know, because *there are none in the modern jazz history books!* It's not too late for *us* to change '*future history*' though!

Jazz Sound Concept

I refer to 'lots of notes' quite often in this book; the kind of jazz I like—and *want to play*—has a *lot of notes!* Before one can get *physically* comfortable with this frantic paradigm, we must learn to *hear* it and *not be afraid* of it. In short, we must develop a *lots-of-notes* 'sound concept.' I am a Classically-trained clarinetist; the clarinet is one of the most agile of the wind instruments, and therefore is expected to play lots of notes. I am simply learning to apply my clarinet sound concept to the banjo for the purposes of jazz.

Logically, if we want to *hear* 16th notes, we must learn to *play* 16th notes! If you are not used to hearing them, it does take an adjustment. Besides being an obvious physical workout for *both* hands, *playing* lots of notes will get us used to *hearing* them.

To illustrate another aspect of the 'jazz sound concept': when I play or hear a *banjo*, I naturally hear and play the loud, brash music associated with it. When I started playing plectrum *guitar*, my playing changed (though it's tuned exactly the same); I was now hearing a smooth *jazz guitar* sound when I played. When I get truly stuck on an idea, I work it out on the guitar, but I am increasingly able to play in a jazzy style on the banjo as well. My goal is to augment the banjo's overall sound image by reconciling it with a *jazzy* sound.

If you have not tried a plectrum guitar, I highly recommend it. Another benefit of it is that you can play it in more styles; folks won't realize it's actually a banjo, and will more-readily accept it. Of course, the banjo's public image is another thing I hope to help change.

Natural vs. Learn-ed

Many of the originators of jazz—and many of the biggest stars throughout jazz’s history—were *untrained naturals who didn’t need a book*. Many, but certainly not *all!* I won’t allow the fact that a *small minority* of musical savants exist to sway me from writing a book for the *vast majority* of us who are *not* savants! We can’t let *their* enviable example stop us from doing the work that *we* need to do.

It’s been proudly pointed out to me many times over the years (as ‘advice’) that “*so-and-so didn’t know how to read music, and look what they accomplished!*” [intended meaning: “*Why should we have to?*”] My unspoken response to this is “*do you have that gift?* [most don’t] *Well then, don’t push it on others who lack the gift, but could learn to do it!*”

Despite the popular and persistent ‘native-skill’ myth, *many* (arguably *more*) great jazz musicians have come from the ‘Classically-trained’ side. They got their musical ‘chops’ from the centuries-old library of Classical music and technical studies required in their rigorous training. The successful influx of learn-ed musicians into jazz has caused the artform to become increasingly complex, often *requiring* the rigors of Classical training just to keep up.

‘Natural’ or not (and *like* it or not), the basic building blocks of music *will always be scales and arpeggios*, or what else would *any* musician play? Music as we know it wouldn’t (*couldn’t*) exist without their framework! Just because a natural *claims to know nothing* about them doesn’t mean he/she doesn’t *instinctively use* them! Without the structure they provide, the resulting ‘music’ would be simply unrecognizable to our ears, no matter how gifted the player is. The important distinction is in how this framework is learned: ‘*Came by it naturally*’ and ‘*learned it from a book*’ have the same end result!

Naturals will scoff and tell us not to bother with ‘*all that theory stuff*.’ “*Just play what you feel*” they’ll say. That’s easy for *them* to say; *they apparently don’t need it!* It is human nature to seek the path of least resistance: the natural’s promise of *results without effort* is tempting, but is a frustrating dead-end path for most of us.

The thing that most folks don’t see about jazz musicians is their back story. How did they get to that lofty pinnacle of spontaneous invention? Fans—especially *outside* of the music world—are so intent on finding *effortless genius* that they discount the years of *hard work* that went into their final product. We don’t *see* that part, because it is done mostly in private. I have much more respect for those musicians who *admit* that they had to work hard!

My point is, we shouldn’t limit *our own* potential, just because somebody told us not to bother! Someday when we’ve *learned* all the stuff that a lucky few just ‘get,’ then *we too* can cut loose, ‘forget’ our humble beginnings, and act like it’s no big deal! To *play like a savant* is a worthy goal, but if we are *not* one, it’ll take more than ‘*just let it happen!*’

Anyone who has *tried* to follow their *let it happen* ‘advice’ to no avail (as *I* did for literally *decades*), will know what I’m talking about. It is high-time to realize that *we need to develop ‘it’ first*. Sorry for the lecture: I get a bit passionate about this!

‘Jazz’ vs. ‘Jazzy’

Jazz: ‘*A type of modern music originally developed by African-Americans... Jazz is **usually improvised** (invented as it is played).*’ [emphasis added] Cambridge Dictionary.

Jazzy: ‘*In the style of jazz music.*’ Cambridge Dictionary

I need to make an important distinction between ‘jazz’ and what is found in this book. To counter the inevitable purist argument and condemnation for my daring to propose that I can ‘teach’ anyone to play jazz (beyond ‘just let it happen’), I will not claim this material to *be* jazz, but rather to be ‘jazzy’ (*in the style of jazz*). Will playing these jazzy patterns (which I *can* show you) *lead* one to improvise? Well, *maybe...*

They *will* teach how to wiggle our fingers in a jazzy way (the first step), but still there is no guarantee that it will lead us to *actual improvisation*. That artistic icing on the cake is entirely up to *you* and your *unconscious imagination*—which *only you* have control over.

The popular, dictionary-supported myth that jazz is ‘invented as it is played’ leads folks to believe that the player is some kind of freak who just channels a cosmic jazz radio station. Lucky them: none of that terrible *work* required!

If we set aside that fantasy for a moment and spend some time actually *talking* to jazz musicians though, we will find that *most* of them are well-practiced in musical fundamentals. *Most* have a huge personal collection of stock jazzy patterns already under their fingers, ready to deploy in a seemingly ‘spontaneous’ manner. This hip repertoire took a lot of ‘wood-shedding’ to develop! If they were truly ‘making it up as they go,’ they would never develop a unique, recognizable sound.

We should take heart from this: *we* can follow the same hard-work path if we so choose! Don’t think you can’t play jazzy music just because you think you ‘have no imagination!’ That was certainly *my* unknowing excuse for many years. *Technique* and *knowledge* are most-likely to be the *actual* missing ingredients. If we *don’t* develop *them* to begin with (one way or the other), what will *imagination* do for us, except to cause frustration?

Importantly, the patterns in **Part 2** will not *sound* like jazz unless we play them with ‘jazz feeling.’ We can make *almost anything* sound like jazz simply by ‘jazzing it up.’ ‘Messin’ around’ with simple, familiar melodies (from *any* genre; i.e., nursery/campfire songs and TV theme songs) is a great place to start. Then, the patterns we learn will begin to ‘inform’ our playing and give it a much broader, more-interesting range.

“Rules are made to be broken!”

Absolutely, and that is jazz in a nutshell! *However*, one must *know* the rules before they *can* be broken, again, either through instinct or by book learning. Though I use it a lot, ‘musically-correct’ is a very subjective term! A big part of jazz is letting it flow freely, *mistakes and all*. I can’t help but believe though, that if we *consciously* train ourselves to play *correct* notes at the *correct* times *by default* (‘correct’ as defined by the age-old rules of Classical harmony—which we still follow today), we will be more likely to play ‘good’ notes in the *unconscious* heat of improvisation. Wrong is wrong; right is right.

In General

Nothing is 100% true in music (see my comment above)! For every ‘fact’ that I state here, there are folks who can (and *will!*) successfully argue the opposite. I use this term a lot in this book, especially when there are multiple approaches to the same subject.

Conclusion

Why such a ‘serious’ approach to such a ‘simple’ instrument as the banjo? Well, *in my opinion*, the plectrum banjo has long been held back as the progressive musical instrument it *could be* by its popular reputation for sing-along simplicity and *throw-the-banjo-in-the-air* entertainment. It remains simple simply because that’s how it is *presented*.

Mind you, there is nothing ‘wrong’ with that fun, smiling paradigm! I love pizza-parlor sing-along jam sessions just as much as the next person. *But I want more*, and I believe the *banjo needs more* to survive and progress. I’m not interested in *maintaining* the ‘banjo status quo’; I want to *go beyond it*. As a progress-minded *musician*, I value *musical skill* over *entertainment skill*. I would much rather *listen to music* than *watch* entertainment!

I am simply presenting the banjo in all of its complex classical/jazz glory—complexity that is *already there* under our fingers, just waiting to be discovered! Want to help change the banjo’s reputation for simplicity? Strive to become the kind of player who takes folks by surprise! “*I didn’t know that kind of music could be played on the banjo!*” I’ll take that quiet, thoughtful compliment over a rousing, entertainment-derived standing ovation *any day!*

On a simplicity > complexity spectrum scale (1-10), I would rate this material about a 6. Just getting our fingers and mind moving in the general direction of jazz can be the hardest step, but beyond that lie *unlimited depths* of complexity/difficulty! I’m just getting started on my *own* journey, and this book reflects that. *There will be much more to come!*

Introduction: Jazz Improvisation

In general, I'm talking about 'Modern Jazz' here: Bebop (1940s) and forward. That is, *not limited* to the banjo's most-famous era (1920s), but including concepts and techniques from *throughout* jazz's history. Some of the most-important and most-commonly used of these happen to come from 'modern' jazz—to begin with, *Modal theory!* To a large extent, *jazz is jazz*; methods and ideas that work in one genre will work in another.

If we want to explore the nuances of a particular genre, the best advice is to listen to and copy the best players from that genre. In *any* case, we need a solid musical foundation *before* that will do any good. That is this book's purpose: developing a practical framework.

Ragging the tune: Melodic Improvisation

Jazz improv started off simply enough: players 'jazzed up' the melody with syncopated rhythms and arpeggiated fills. This was known as 'ragging the tune' (a reference to Ragtime being 'ragged,' or sloppy music—where it got its name). In modern parlance this is known as 'melodic improvisation.' The improvisation is based on the melody and is simply a *variation* of it. I will always believe that 'knowing the melody' comes first and foremost. Also, keep in mind that the casual banjo *listener* will appreciate the *melody* the most of all.

Playing over the chords: Harmonic Improvisation

By contrast, '*harmonic* improvisation' is playing scale/arpeggio-based patterns that 'outline' and 'imply' the *chords* (the harmonic structure) with little or no regard for the melody. This style reached its first full fruition in the Bebop era and has dominated since. The harmonic emphasis changed the course of jazz, because there is so much more you can do with it than with just the melody. This was the true 'coming of age' for jazz: many techniques and structural elements introduced at that time have since been standard practice.

Most jazz musicians today freely mix ragging the tune with outright harmonic improvisation, regardless of what genre they happen to be playing. There are countless variations of this mix possible.

Banjo Music

As a proud banjo '*traditionalist*,' I also believe we need to maintain and represent 1920s banjo tradition. I aim to give the banjo a path into modern jazz, but I would never suggest that we should play *nothing but* single-note improv. I just want it to *supplement* the great things the plectrum banjo *already* does, and help to *expand* the definition of 'banjo music.' On a personal note of encouragement, my understanding and playing of the traditional banjo has grown dramatically through my single-note work and study of modern jazz concepts.

“Play it with feeling!”

“In art as in lovemaking, heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal and so does heartless skill, but what you want is passionate virtuosity” [emphasis added] John Barth

The main difference between playing 'just a bunch of notes' and playing 'jazz' is in the feeling. A skilled jazz musician can (and does!) take simple scale/arpeggio-based patterns and turn them into high art, simply by infusing them with jazz feeling. We might call it '*ragging the harmonic pattern*.' This jazz feeling is often referred to as 'swing.'

I'll introduce a couple of methods of exercising and developing swing feeling, but the difficulty in *learning* it (if one doesn't *naturally* have it) is that it *cannot* be shown by written music. It must be felt. *Listening to and imitating a lot of jazz* is the *best* way to develop it. If you are not an avid jazz listener already, *now* is a good time to start!

I have provided slow recorded examples to aid in learning the physical part, and real-time 'live' examples to help learn the feeling part. There are also backing tracks in various tempos to play along with.

I am only *one* musician though. I like to think I have pretty good jazz feeling, but I will sound different from the next guy/gal—so listen to a lot of players!

Hear, Sing, Play (ear-training)

Great jazz musicians share an important trait: they all have ‘big ears!’ This is not a *physical* trait (well, sometimes it is!), but an ‘*ability to hear music really well*’ trait. Jazz improvisation is all about *interaction*—interaction with other musicians, and with the music itself. We will struggle to interact with *anything* without trained/evolved hearing skills. The ideal end-state of working this book is simply the ability to ‘hear it and then play it.’ I am convinced that just about *anyone* can learn to hear music!

The biggest challenge to ear improvement is simply realizing we need it in the first place! After that, we must find a ‘program’ to follow for improvement, and then *get started on it*. Learning and practicing scales and arpeggios is an oft-neglected aspect, and is certainly the *best* place to start. They put music into an easy-to-follow, *known* pattern—one we are already familiar with (whether we’ve played them or not) just by having grown up *hearing* Euro/American music, which is literally *built* from them.

Hear: Music is above all else an *aural* artform; it is something we do with our *ears*, not our *eyes*. If we do not hear music in our head, then we have to *get it in there* somehow. Besides listening to *lots* of music (the *most important* exercise), singing and playing are the tools we use to do that. The same exercises that stretch our *fingers* to new things are meant to stretch our *ear* to new sounds. Play an exercise several times, then close our eyes and try to hear what we just did (in our ‘mind’s ear’). We can also listen to the recorded examples over and over.

Sing: Singing is an oft-neglected key to hearing. Our ear drums and voice box are very closely connected physically. Cover your ears and hum, and you’ll hear *and feel* what I mean. Therefore, singing is paramount to hearing. The voice was the *first* musical ‘instrument,’ and is still the most important. Notice I didn’t say ‘singing *well*.’ All we’re concerned with here is making the physical connection between our ears and voice box and matching the pitch; *quality* is a moot point. If we can make *sounds* with our voice (i.e., *talk*), we can learn to sing well enough for our purposes.

Sing along with the basics from the start, and then continue as the patterns get more and more complex. Singing while playing is a popular advanced improv technique; the eventual goal is that the voice leads the way, and our *fingers simply follow along*.

Play: Thanks to *written* music (or TAB in this case), we have a great way to work on the other two aspects. Playing allows us to self-produce and hear the music that is on the page and is thus a great tool to use for developing those skills.

Keep these points in mind as you *play* the exercises. *Sing* them at the same time, and always strive to *hear* them in the absence of actual sound (in your mind’s ear).

“Just let it happen!”

Oh, if I only had a *nickel* for every time I’ve been told *this*... Close your eyes and imagine: *Playing without having to think, or even ‘knowing’ the song that you are playing; just ‘letting it happen’ with no conscious control; closing your eyes and spontaneously reacting to the music around you; having an ‘out-of-body experience,’ where you hear yourself playing but don’t have any conscious control over what you are doing.* You get the drift.

This rarified level of ‘unconscious spontaneous invention’ is *my* personal goal. Imagining and visualizing what it must be like is an important step toward it. Just *reading* these examples helps *me* to visualize it! In a nutshell, *true* jazz improvisation *is* the art of letting it happen as described above. The catch is that there has to be *something inside of us* (physically and mentally) to constitute ‘it.’ There are two major paths to this enviable stage of easiness:

‘You either have it, or you don’t.’

Those who *have it*—the musical savants—are an exceedingly rare bunch. Music for them is like falling off a log. They don’t seem to require much in the way of study or hard work.

They seem to operate with little or no knowledge. The music is literally *unconscious* for them, and they can just let it fly without even *knowing* what ‘it’ is! *Imagine that!* ‘Naturally’ (but *unfortunately*), they become examples for the rest of us to follow. This is a dangerous thing! It is too easy to see them as ‘proof’ that *we* don’t need ‘any of that theory stuff’ (the *hard* work): “*So-and-so didn’t need a book; why should I?*” Or the opposite, as a *discouragement*: “*It doesn’t ‘just happen’ for me; I guess I’m not cut out for it.*”

Fortunately—for us *non-savants*—the second, *much-more common* path to the let-it-happen ideal is the path of hard, *conscious* work and study. It has worked for *countless* musicians throughout time, and will *continue* to work for the *rest* of time. Truth be told, ‘learned’ musicians often get farther in music than the *lazy naturals*, simply because they develop a good work ethic rather than relying solely on their ‘God-given gift.’

The gift *by itself* can only take us as far as it’s outer limits—something that took *me decades of wheel-spinning* to finally realize. At one time, I fantasized that my musical gift (such as it is) would naturally lead me to jazz improv, instead of having to resort to hard work. It stopped well short of that ideal though. If I could get those years back, I would *ditch the fantasy and start the hard work* a lot earlier in life! The only difference between a ‘gifted’ and ‘well-trained’ musician is that one has to work and study harder than the other. Heck, *anyone can do that!*

Who Is This Book For?

During the three years of writing this book, I asked myself that question many times. Is it for beginners? Intermediates? Experts? The only answer I can come up with is “*yes.*” I believe that all levels can get something from it.

I would recommend to an outright beginner that they also study a more basic method; let the exercises in this book be a supplement. As I said before, I believe we need to continue to honor and represent the history of the instrument while we look for ways to take it in new directions. If we don’t know the ‘old,’ how can we play something truly ‘new’ (*new compared to what?*)? So, a beginner should also learn to play Chord Melody.

Of course, previous banjo skills would make this material easier! The better one *already is*, the more one will get out of it. No matter how ‘good’ one may be though, if one has no experience or natural skill in single-note improvisation, one is a ‘beginner’ at it and must approach it from that angle! Pride can easily get in the way of ‘unlearning the old’ and ‘learning something new.’

Personal Example

I have spent my adult life trying to ‘find myself’; music has been at the forefront in that effort. An important aspect of that has been *learning how to learn*—in spite of my stubborn resistance to learning (“*teach me if you can! I dare you!*”). Therefore, I believe I know myself and my own motivations very well. I have certainly learned a lot about *learning*.

There is no method out there that can ‘guarantee’ our success; learning is *entirely on us* as individuals. The methods outlined in this book have worked (and continue to work) for *me*, but there is no guarantee that they will work as well for *you*. My personal experience and example are all I have to offer; I offer it with the sincere belief that it *will* work for you.

Calling this a ‘*teaching* method’ would be a misnomer, and would put the onus on *me*. I prefer to call this a ‘*learning* method’; that way, the onus is where it belongs—*on you*. That’s why I encourage you to contact me if you run into difficulty. An important part of my college teacher training was in ‘learning styles.’ We each have our own unique way of learning; perhaps I can modify a lesson to *your* style to help it make sense.

So, grab your banjo and turn the page. You can do this! By the way, you’ll want to have the original *Beyond Chord Melody* handy for easy reference. I have included a digital copy on the provided CD, plus I have posted it for free on *The Banjo Snob* (www.banjosnob.com).

Note: I will now switch over entirely to the more-personal and directive ‘you.’