

Parallel Modulation

Parallel modulation is in essence, changing key over the same tonic.

By conventional definition, this would be a key change from a minor to a major / major to a minor key over the same tonic.

Example:

E major to E minor

A minor to A major

C# major to C# minor

A more contemporary usage of this technique takes this principle a little further, it means that you can change key more than once when the same chord is sounding. It is a very 'modal' approach to note selection. Some Joe Satriani fans may have heard him talk about a thing he calls Pitch Axis.

Pitch Axis is this modal extension to traditional parallel modulation over a chord.

Why would you want to do this? I hear you all ask in horror.

The reason is to add subtle and sometimes more extreme tonal colouration.

We've been talking previously about modulation via the V chord during a perfect cadence.

Parallel modulation does not work within the constraints of such a formal event. It is a much freer method and was really pioneered by 'high Romantic' period composers [late 1800's] and later taken to greater extremes by Jazz musicians. From around the late 1990's, rock / metal "shred" guitarists began to adopt this approach more and more adding their own slant on this powerful and expressive music tool.

Parallel modulation can be used during improvised solos, composed set pieces and even melodies [vocal included] because it is simply another 'note selection' option.

Imagine playing a guitar solo over a chord progression and you encounter a key change. This means that if the chord progression changes key, your solo has to change with it. Jazz musicians refer to this as "playing the changes". Parallel modulation is in essence the reverse, a means of 'playing the options' that are open to you whilst the same chord or root note is sounding. It works on the principle that a chord can be thought of in terms of being a member of more than one key. Think back to the chord types that are created by a major scale.

I = major, II = minor, III = minor, IV = major, V = major, VI = minor, VII = minor b5

So if we look at a minor triad you can see that it can be chord II, chord III or chord VI of a major scale.

Example: Using the chord Am it can be seen to fit into a major scale in three different chord positions. Each of these positions can be thought of in modal terms:-

II in the key of G [this would be A Dorian]

III in the key of F [this would be A Phrygian]

VI in the key of C [this would be A Aeolian]

This means choice.

Imagine playing a solo in the key of Am

Normally you'd play entirely using the notes from Am.

Alternatively you could be playing modally and using something like A Dorian.

Parallel modulation says "why limit and confine yourself?"

Why not play in Am and introduce notes from the key of G to make your solo momentarily Dorian

A is the 2nd note in the key G major

Am is chord II in the key of G major

The 2nd mode derived from G major is A Dorian

The notes in the key of G are G, A, B, C, D, E, F#

The chord Am is A, C, E

The Am chord fits into the scale

So this scale is a perfectly legitimate choice

This adds a new dimension to the solo due to the introduction of a different note value.

A Dorian is essentially an Am scale with a major 6th

Note VI in the key of Am is F, note VI in A Dorian is F#.

The Dorian mode will sound less minor than the Am scale and therefore has a slightly 'happier' vibe.

The switch between the modes can occur even for a just a fleeting moment.

You can switch back and forth as much as your taste and judgement see fit.

it's your solo

it's therefore up to you

The example above shows the inter-changeable modes over a minor triad. This is also true for the modes that fit over a major triad. For example. Lydian, Mixolydian and Ionian can be switched around over a major triad.

Try working out what modes you could use over the chord of Amaj.

Now here is where it gets better. All us riffers are partial to using the X5 'power chord'.

Take a look at the chords of the major key.

The 1st six of them contain the perfect 5th interval.

your options have just doubled

Example:

The 'classical' approach to this would be to switch on the same tonic.

So the music is in C and then you [the whole band] would change key to Cm [or the other way around Cm to C]

I actually like doing this from time to time. It can make a song completely change direction.

A more modern approach using modes would be more like this:

Imagine you are playing a solo and there is a section of four bars of the Em chord.

You could play the first two bars in Em and the second two using E Dorian [which are the notes from the key of D major]

Or

You are playing over two bars of C major.

You could play in C for a moment, switch to C Lydian [using the notes from the key of F major] and then switch back to C.

So is that it? Nah let's take the idea further.

Moving beyond parallel modulation we can enter into 'Melodic Substitution' and this is where the real fun is.

Melodic Substitution

With this technique you can now treat each chord how you like as though they all come from different key centres.

The trick is to not only know the chord progression you are playing over, but also to know the options that are available over each chord.

Of course there are actually a massive number of scales and modes available so learning and trying to apply them all is simply too much at first. So to make a nice start, just stick with the three modal options over the major chord and the three options over the minor chord. Take time experimenting to find out what they sound like as you switch between them. The other more exotic and strange scales and modes you can learn one by one and gradually introduce them into your growing repertoire.

Here's an example with triads from the key of Em.

Em ' ' ' | Am ' ' ' | C ' ' ' | D ' ' ' |

We could shred our little hearts out all night over this using nothing but the Em scale.
It'd sound fine too. Nothing wrong in this approach at all.
There are however many more options.

Here's one way that I'd attack this progression.

Em: I'd wade right in with E Dorian [from the key of D]

Am: I'd treat it as though it's in Em [using the notes from G, the relative major to work it out]. From a modal perspective this turns out to be A Dorian but I don't think of it that way. To me this feels like returning to the key of Em where the sounding chord is Am. This particular switch of modes is actually a very pretty effect.

C: Staying in Em would sound nice here but I could also switch to C Mixolydian to get 'out there' a little more.

D: well, staying in Em would sound very nice here too. However, D Dorian [from the key of C major] can add a highly effective twist. Because the overall key is Em, the usage of the C major scale will have an E Phrygian effect even though the sounding chord is D.

What you are seeing is that I am exercising my right of freedom of choice over each and every chord.

This introduces tremendous tonal colouration and variety even though the chord progression is stuck firmly in the key of Em.

Now with power chords, the options increase even more.

Example: E5 ' ' ' | D5 ' ' ' | C5 ' ' ' | A5 ' ' ' |

E5 can be:

I of E [E Ionian], II of D [E Dorian], III of C [E Phrygian], IV of B [E Lydian], V of A [E Mixolydian], VI of G [E Aeolian]

D5 can be:

I of D [D Ionian], II of C [D Dorian], III of Bb [D Phrygian], IV of A [D Lydian], V of G [D Mixolydian], VI of F [E Aeolian]

and so on

Record this little progression, work out all of the combinations on paper.

Experiment like crazy, and listen hard to see what they sound like.

Some will stand out and blow you away. Others will make you shudder "jeez I ain't playing that again"

But that is ok. The main thing is, working out your options, finding out what you like and what you don't by experimenting.

With time, you'll get to know what you like to do at the drop of a hat.

Doing this sort of thing will add a completely new dimension to your playing.

Many of your old licks will get a new lease of life because they are shifted with respect to the tonic and therefore have different tonality

To hear this playing method in practice I recorded a little thing called PRM Boxter which can be found on my website – www.paul-clark.com

There are only a handful of X5 chords. The riff is based upon Satch: Summer Song so it has a nice vibe and plenty of pace. All of the tonal diversity is caused by Parallel modulation and Melodic Substitution used in great abundance.

At first this will seem like too much to cram into your head let alone apply ad hoc.

Like anything else, the more often you apply it the more memorable and therefore the easier it becomes.

This is a serious and powerful art to master

Happy Shredding