

## Ways of Learning to Accompany

### Just do it? Just do WHAT?

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Because various participants come to this music from widely varying prior musical experiences, attitudes, understandings, and strategies for learning the music also vary widely. By-and-large, effective strategies for learning to accompany break down into two camps: the "learn by doing"/"just play what you hear until it's right" camp and the "figure out why everything works technically and then learn to apply it" camp. Of course both are viable approaches, with their individual strengths and weaknesses, both have exemplary proponents, and a synthesis of the approaches is often the most effective strategy of all.

Right now, though, I want to talk about a few of the conceptions or attitudes that can impede one's progress at learning to accompany (using either method). I'll frame this in the form of common presumptions or myths (format gratefully adapted from poet and Zen Buddhist Gary Snyder's environmental essay "Four Changes"):

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#### **Myth #1: "Learning theory can't help you learn to accompany."**

##### **Reality check:**

It is true that simply learning the technical organization of music theory will not automatically make you a good accompanist. To do that latter, you need practice, conscious and thoughtful work at applying musical ideas to musical situations, and lots and lots of experience at putting ideas into practice.

However, I would submit that a grasp of modal theory *as it is employed by the Irish idiom* is extremely useful. Understanding how modal scales and modal chords work won't make you a better accompanist, but it may do two useful things: (1) it may help you systematize what you know so that you're more flexible with that information and its application, and (2) it may help you understand the concepts behind practical ideas you've stumbled across, so that you can then apply those practical ideas in a wider range of contexts, including some you might not think of without systematic study.

##### **Reason for this myth:**

One problem I have seen in the past is that the diatonic, essentially post-Bach harmonic theory taught in traditional high school and college music theory courses does not provide students with the right tools. Modal music employs different harmonic language, and in addition Irish traditional music, like many other modal musics, has a specific harmonic vocabulary. If as an accompanist you don't know that vocabulary, no amount of formal harmonic theory will be sufficient, particularly if the formal theory actually creates problems when it is insensitively applied in the Irish idiom.

**Solution:**

When you read through a standard music theory text, focus especially on whatever the text has to say about modes, modality, and the construction of modal harmony, particularly as it pertains to Ionian (1-2-3-4-5-6-7), Mixolydian (1-2-3-4-5-6-b7), Dorian (1-2-b3-4-5-6-b7) and Aeolian (1-2-b3-4-5-b6-b7) modes; these are the four modes, two major and two minor, most commonly employed in Irish traditional tunes. For accompaniment purposes, you are especially interested in understanding how chords are constructed and organized in these modes. Hint: some of the best discussions of modes and their harmonic implications will actually come in jazz theory books. Any book on jazz 'comping (accompanying) will include discussions of how to 'comp in a modal setting.

**Reference:**

Celtic Backup for All Instrumentalists has an extensive section on "Understanding Celtic Harmony," which goes into sufficient detail regarding the construction of modal scales and chords, and their application to accompaniment.

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**Myth #2: "The only way to play the right chords is to know the tune's melody cold, and to have previously worked out effective chords." This is usually coupled with Myth #2a: "It's impossible to improvise accompaniments in this music."**

**Reality check:**

There is no question that a student of accompaniment needs not only instructions or rules to follow, but also models to imitate. Imitation is really the only way to get the subtle aural details of an indigenous music correct. And, of course, those models need to be (a) idiomatically suitable (e.g., they need to be stylistically appropriate for Irish music) and (b) logically comprehensible (e.g., you have to be able to figure out the logical organization that governs the model). However, in my opinion it is possible to learn to "hear" (that is, spontaneously analyze by ear) and improvise accompaniments that are suitable, even if a given tune is not familiar. Of course, extensive exposure to the style helps, but so do conscious listening and analytical thinking.

**Solution:**

One needs to develop an understanding of a model for figuring out accompaniments on the fly. However, that model might not need to present comprehensive harmonizations of every tune a student might ever encounter. I've been in sessions where, when a given tune comes up, the

accompanist whips out a notebook and frantically flips pages to find a given page with "his" chords for that tune laid out. I understand the motivation for this (frustration at trying and failing to improvise chords) but it seems almost as cumbersome as frantically flipping pages in O'Neill's in order to be able to play the tune's melody. I'd rather spend my time developing my ears and ideas by study and by playing along with live musicians or recordings. In addition, if you have a reliable and clear explanation of how modal chords work in this music, with the right range of examples, and with clear and understandable explanations for the harmonic choices being made, you can begin to learn to see and hear patterns, and to make harmonic choices in other tunes on your own.

**Reference:**

The "Solution" described immediately above is a primary goal of the Celtic Backup text, which is primarily designed for a fairly analytical approach, particularly if the student is trying to learn in the absence of an experienced teacher. However, any book on jazz accompanying will include lots of useful material, and effective exercises, to teach you how to hear and improvise responses to a tune's chordal expectations. If you use a jazz text, you'll have to translate ideas and exercises, inserting the types of tunes and harmonic situations which are common in Irish traditional music but not in jazz, but the basic harmonic concepts and ways of practicing the skill will be very applicable.

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**Myth #3: "If I can just figure out the right chord progression, for a type of tune or even for a specific tune, I can make it fit almost any other related tune."**

**Reality Check:**

A catalog of "always do this" choices is not the solution. Yet it's a common problem in Irish music accompaniment: backers who force a given chord progression onto a tune. Even if that generic chord progression has an internal logic (which is usually what leads the backer to think that it's "right"), it's very likely that the progression will ignore some of the beautiful, subtle idiosyncrasies that distinguish one tune from another. Just because a chord progression for one reel in D "sort of" works for another, it doesn't mean it's the best choice. And who wants to play everything the same way every time anyway?

**Solution:**

Develop an understanding and a familiarization with the idiom and its harmonic possibilities. Spend lots of time practicing, "testing" ideas; spend lots of time working on developing one's ability to hear the harmonic implications of tunes. Don't neglect time simply spent consciously listening to other great accompanists, and then finding and figuring out the rationale for their chord choices. Remember that Irish music's modal nature can be especially confusing, because chords don't go in the directions that "conventional" harmonic theory expects. You need to work on understanding modal harmony, and then you need to develop and constantly refine exercises that give you experience at putting that theoretical knowledge into practice.

**Reference:**

See other articles on this site for lots of ideas and exercises. Again, Celtic Backup and jazz accompaniment manuals are good resources, as are recordings and live performances of great players. In all cases, work on learning to develop, explore, and expand upon a given idea's possibilities. If you hear a cool substitution in one situation (say, a Bm chord for a D maj chord), figure out why that substitution works, figure out all the tunes using a D chord where you could apply it, then figure out how the analogous substitution works in other keys, practice all of these possibilities, and then try slightly modifying the idea to fit even more situations (say, try a Bb chord for a D min substitution). Always listen analytically, think systematically, and develop rigorous and thorough exercises that help you really assimilate the idea as part of your own growing chordal vocabulary.

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**Myth #4: "No book, teacher, or large amount of practice will teach you how to accompany. You either 'hear the chords,' or you don't."**

**Reality check:**

**Solution:**

**Reference:**

OK, here I'm gonna take exception. Based on my experience as a student and teacher, I do not believe that "no book, teacher, or large amount of practice" will give the student enhanced ability to hear suitable chords as implied in melodies. I believe that a competent teacher, and large amounts of practice, are precisely the factors which can enhance this ability.

As a jazz musician, I'm a product of such myself, and I've observed improvement in students following these courses of study.

I would agree that "you either hear the chords or you don't;" e.g., that it is NOT possible to fake through an Irish tune, because the harmony is too complex and too unlike 3-chord folk or rock & roll songs. I also agree that there are certain fortunate people who genetically, or as a result of very early musical exposure, have a particularly strong ability to hear the harmony implicit in melodic outlines. But it is my firm conviction that ABSOLUTELY ANYONE, using the right kinds of study strategies, can improve the ability to hear suitable chord changes.

I think it's the same area of perception as learning to hear melodies by ear. Some people come by it easily; some people come by it hard. But, in my experience, everyone can improve the ability to do it; in my own opinion, no one's a lost cause.