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Exploring modal subversions in alternative music

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Introduction

The concern of this article is with a particular set of harmonic practices that rock musicians, particularly those who participate in the domain of guitar-oriented 'alternative' rock, have been using with noticeable frequency in the last ten years. I am also interested in discussing the concept of the *power chord* (a term I shall explicate more clearly below) as a device in rock that has facilitated the above-mentioned set of harmonic practices

The observations made in this paper come out of a previous research inquiry of mine into the devices which alternative musicians use to differentiate their music from other styles of mainstream rock. Also, the pursuit of this topic is partly a response to Allan Moore's admonition that 'there is as yet very little concern for theorizing analytical method in rock music', and his call for a 'mapping-out of those harmonic practices that serve to distinguish rock styles . . . from those of common-practice tonality . . . and jazz' (Moore 1995, p. 185).

There has been some rather pointed criticism recently of musicological analyses of popular music (see Shepherd 1993; Frith 1990) on the charge that analysing music's purely sonic dimensions (i.e. melody, harmony, rhythm, structure, etc.) does not really help us understand musical communication. Speaking as a songwriter, however, I would argue that many musicians in rock are indeed concerned with harmonic progression (or 'the changes', to use the vernacular term) as an important device or jumping-off point in the process of songwriting. It also seems reasonable to suggest that harmonic progression is a contributing factor in the affective power of a song, although its importance here is likely to be variable and quite open to debate.

Detractors of rock music have long derided rock's harmonic practices as simplistic and unremarkable, and early musicological work on the topic did little to dispel such perceptions (e.g. Bobbitt 1976; Winkler 1978).[1] This view, however, results from underestimating the degree to which rock is a syncretic, eclectic and even parasitic style. During rock's forty-year history, various musicians in this genre have incorporated stylistic influences from rhythm & blues, country, jazz, Tin Pan Alley, Celtic and English folk, African and Afro-Caribbean music, and various styles from Western concert music. As a result of this 'stew' of diverse influences, an individual rock artist may have recourse to blues modality, tonic–dominant tonality, Celtic-flavoured modality, and so on. Indeed, as Philip Ennis says, 'rocknroll [sic] allowed every performer to draw on the full musical resources of pop, country, and rhythm and blues. Their songs, lyrics, instrumentation, and performance styles, everything from Broadway's grand songwriting tradition to the

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lowest downtown hootchie-cootchie act, became grist for rocknroll's mills.' (Ennis 1992, p. 253) This eclecticism may account, in part, for a certain harmonic and scalar flexibility that has characterised rock and other related twentieth-century urban vernacular styles.

After taking into account rock's eclecticism and syncretisms, one is led to ask: Are there any techniques of rock harmony that, perhaps as a result of cross-pollination or synthesis, have emerged as distinctive or unique? The goal of this paper is to deal with one technique that appears to be distinctive: the copious use of 'third relations' (or 'cross relations') in power chord-oriented rock resulting in the obscuring of the sense of mode, occurring especially in grunge and related forms of alternative music. The intention here is not to suggest, by any means, that all alternative musicians do this, and I do not wish to detract from the wide range of harmonic and riff-oriented systems which alternative musicians can and do opt to use. Rather, I wish to make a case for a set of similar harmonic circumstances that appear to suggest an incipient 'post-diatonic' flexibility with regard to scale and modality.

I should note here that the term 'alternative music' refers to those substyles of rock which claim late-1970s punk and 1980s underground ('indie') rock as their precursors, ideologically and/or stylistically. These substyles include grunge (e.g. Nirvana, Soundgarden), dream pop (e.g. My Bloody Valentine), industrial (e.g. Skinny Puppy), gothic rock (e.g. Bauhaus) and punk singer/songwriters (e.g. Liz Phair), and these substyles have all been frequently placed under the umbrella term 'alternative' by both fans and journalists (as noted in Felder 1993, pp. 1–3). These substyles share both an ideological and sometimes stylistic concern with signifying as 'different', on musical, social and generational grounds, from a perceived pop mainstream. This concern with 'difference' is explained in greater detail in Felder (1993), Kruse (1993) and Arnold (1993). However the term is defined, the stylistic features I am concerned with occur in guitar-oriented styles of alternative rock, and therefore synthesizer-driven alternative styles such as industrial and gothic rock are not included in my sample.

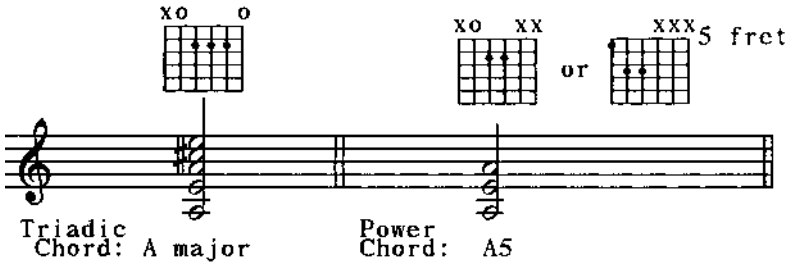
The timbral origins of the power chord

The notion of 'hard' or 'heavy' rock music began around the mid-1960s, when certain guitarists developed a preference for increasingly 'dirty' or distorted guitar timbres. Some notable examples of early hard rock include the work of Eric Clapton in Cream, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page in the Yardbirds and Jimi Hendrix, as well as some of the heavier songs by The Beatles (such as 'Taxman', 'Helter Skelter', and 'Revolution'). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the first generation of heavy metal bands (e.g. Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple) had made a highly distorted guitar sound a staple of their musical styles, and it became inseparable from the field of hard rock (as noted in Walser 1993, pp. 41–4).

The addition of distortion to a guitar sound, which is the result of overloading the guitar's signal going through an amplifier, has the profound effect of increasing the harmonic complexity of the resulting soundwave. Distortion significantly increases the amount of audible upper partials, creating a very thick tone. As a result of this timbral complexity, it became possible, and even desirable, for guitarists in hard rock to simplify their chordal sonorities. Many guitarists thus eliminated thirds from their chords, since the sound of the open fifth through distortion

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generated a soundwave that was rich and complex enough to be satisfying (Example 1).



Example 1

It is clear, then, that the power chord contains a built-in ambiguity: it is neither major nor minor. In most heavy metal and hard rock, this ambiguity was not played up to a large degree, with the modality usually being firmly established through context. For instance, if a power chord on A (hereinafter referred to as 'A5') was followed at some point with a C♯5 chord or an F♯5 chord, the A5 would sound tacitly 'major'. Similarly, if an A5 drone was established by the guitars and the singer were to sing a C♯ in his/her melody line, the A5 would again sound tacitly major. Robert Walser, in his book on heavy metal, observes that the firm establishment of a mode (phrygian, aeolian, dorian, etc.) was an imperative in many metal songs, and that musical affect and meaning were imparted through these distinctly outlined modes (Walser 1993, pp. 46–8). Thus, the harmonic ambiguity of the power chord in metal was not typically used to generate ambiguity in modality.[2]

Nevertheless, the power chord did enter into use as an alternative option for sonority in Western popular song. There arose special contexts in which open fifths just sounded 'right' inside a certain progression. In such a progression, the 'filling in' of a major or minor third in the chord(s) would alter, or perhaps ruin, the affect of the phrase. Listen, for instance, to the verse progression of Black Sabbath's 'Paranoid' (E5–D5–G5–D5), and then imagine how it would sound with full triads (E minor–D major–G major–D major). The modality is theoretically the same, but the difference in harmonic colour inexorably alters the affect.

Third-relations and modal subversion

Heavy metal's predilection for explicit modalities is not shared to the same degree by grunge bands and other guitar-oriented alternative acts. In fact, it seems that a number of grunge acts (such as Nirvana, Mudhoney and Soundgarden) and other artists from across the alternative rock field (My Bloody Valentine, Liz Phair, and others) play with the modal ambiguity of the power chord to great effect. In such music, the major–minor distinction between modes is blurred considerably through the use of *third relations* (sometimes called *cross relations*), which involves changing chords by moving up or down in increments of a third, and usually contradicting an established modality. For instance, if a song starts on A5 and an A major modality is established (likely through a C♯ in the vocal line), then a sudden move up of a minor third to C5 (with a C♮ now contrasting the previous C♯) creates an apparent third relation – and a contradiction of the established major modality. This is what is meant by the term 'modal subversion'.

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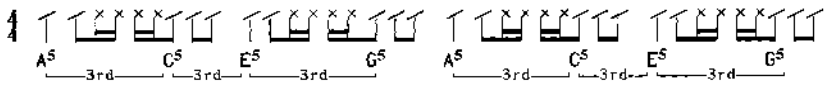
The concept of the third relation is not something that theorists of harmony have devoted a great deal of attention to, especially in comparison to fifth relations, which are considered paradigmatic to tonal organisation. The lesser degree of stability associated with third relations allows for a greater degree of rapid tonal or scalar *flexibility* in comparison to a fifth-oriented progression. The parent genre of rock music, the blues, contained scales with exactly this flexibility, especially with their major and minor thirds, and major and minor sevenths. There was a potential for cross-relation-type progressions such as I–♭III or V–♭VII.

Thus, from the start, rock had the potential for this kind of modally flexible style to develop. Even as rock's blues subtext grew weaker, I believe it is fair to say that this potential remained ingrained in the musical language of rock. The use of cross-relations, or modal subversion, for musical effects surfaced in psychedelic music (notably in Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit', and The Beatles' 'Strawberry Fields Forever'), as well as in 1970s progressive rock (one of the primary riffs in Rush's 'Hemispheres', for instance, is an F♯7–A9 progression). In 1990s alternative rock, the range of third-related progressions is wide indeed, varying from simple, blues-reminiscent examples to an extreme of modal flux.

1. Simple modal subversion

A simple but instructive example of this idea occurs in the Mudhoney song 'In the Blood'. The verse section of this song features a riff based on the progression B♭ major–Csus4–C major (full triads, surprisingly) which establish a C-majorish (mixolydian) modality, followed by a chorus containing oscillations of E♭5 and C5. The sudden shift in mode seems to be the 'hook'[3] of the song, again giving the cross-relation prominence.

A more complex, but still straightforward, example of this process occurs in Nirvana's song 'Rape Me' (Example 2). In this song, there are three consecutive third relations (A5–C5, C5–E5, E5–G5). At first glance, there do not seem to be any modal ambiguities – all the chords relate to A pentatonic minor. However, the vocal line (containing C♯s over the A5 chords and G♯s over the E5 chords) suggests that the implied progression is A major–C major–E major–G major, thus calling the modality into question twice – that is to say, the vocal line's C♯ is 'countered' by the guitar's C5, the vocal line's G♯ is 'countered' by the guitar's G5.

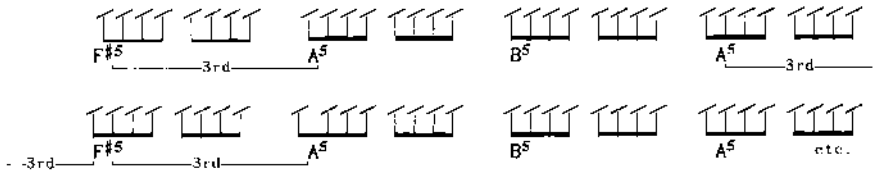


Example 2. Nirvana, 'Rape Me'.

Nirvana's repertoire in particular is filled with many apparent cross-relations, comprising a salient feature of their songwriting style. It often seems that the moment at which the expected modality of a song is called into question by the appearance of a cross-relation comprises the song's 'hook'.

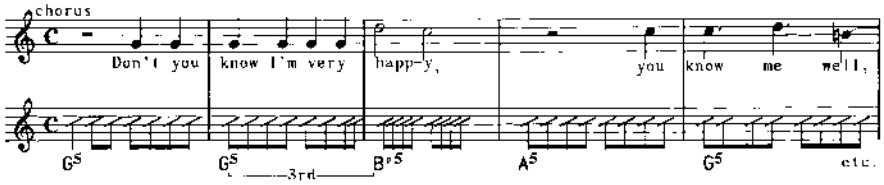
In any case, a 'simple modal subversion' may be defined as a progression that first establishes a mode, and then introduces a chord that contradicts that mode. Another instructive example of this concept occurs in 'Only Shallow', a song by the British group My Bloody Valentine (Example 3). The song's I–♭III–IV (F♯5–A5–B5) progression is not itself unusual in a rock context – it is quite common in blues-

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Example 3. My Bloody Valentine, 'Only Shallow'.

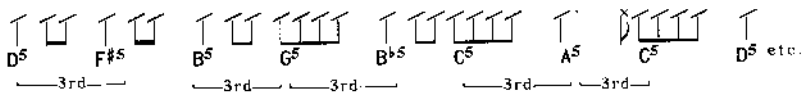
influenced styles – but there really is no sense of a blues styling to this song. The vocal line (due to the appearance of A♯ over an F♯5) clearly sets up an F♯-majorish context so that the A5 becomes a mode-subverting cross-relation. A comparable example of this occurs in the chorus of Liz Phair's 'Mesmerizing', which uses a I–♭III–II–I progression and hovers ambiguously between a G minor-type mode and a G major-type mode (Example 4).



Example 4. Liz Phair, 'Mesmerizing'. Words and music by Liz Phair © 1993 Sony/ATV Tunes LLC. Used with permission.

2. Complex modal subversion

This section is concerned with progressions involving third relations in which the sense of mode is not simply contradicted at some point, but is moderately vague throughout the course of the progression. The introduction to the song 'Lithium' by Nirvana provides a fine example of this level of modal subversion (Example 5). In 'Lithium' there are five almost consecutive instances of progression in thirds, the first two of which establish an apparent major modality, while the next third relation (G5–B♭5) seems to move the music into a minor realm. The appearance of ♭VI (B♭5) and ♭VII (C5) chords in the context of a 'major'- sounding key area is often explained away by theorists in the Western art tradition as modal 'mixture', or the borrowing of chords from the parallel minor key. Such a view treats the chords as exotic or aberrant decorations without any real structural importance. This does not seem to be the case with the above progression, which forms the underpinning for all the verses and choruses in the song. Instead, the cross-relations



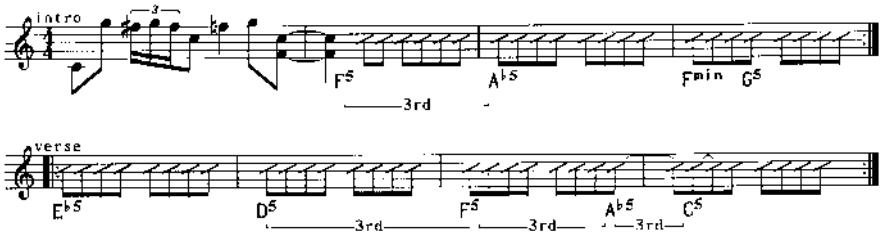
Example 5. Nirvana, 'Lithium'.

and ambiguous sense of mode seem to play an important role in the song's affect.

Soundgarden's 'Head Down' features a series of rising third relations that seem essential to its unbalanced, drooping affect (Example 6). The ambiguous quality of the power chord sonority appears to allow the rising sequence of D5–F5–

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A♭5–C5 (which contains an odd tritone relationship between D and A♭) to pass smoothly. What is particularly interesting here is the manner in which the syncopated A♭5–C5 progression functions as a cadence or phrase ending, leading either into the riff or into the bridge, in which C5 is implied as a major chord. Another popular Soundgarden song, 'Black Hole Sun', uses this kind of complex modal subversion to much the same end.

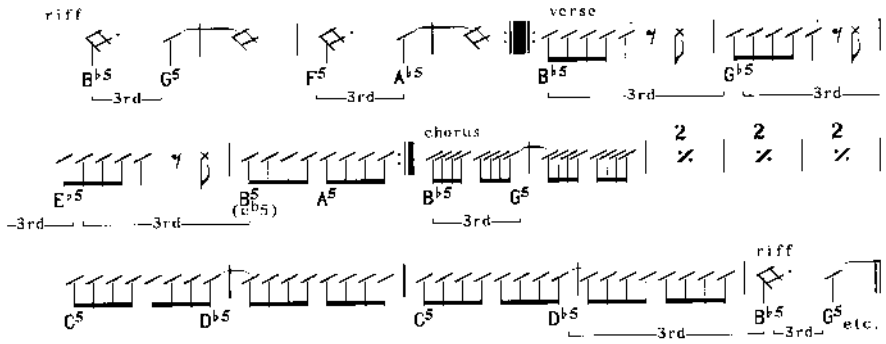


Example 6. Soundgarden, 'Head Down'.

3. Extreme modal subversion

The following examples lie at the upper extreme of complexity in the use of modal subversion. In these examples, the sense of mode is extremely ambiguous. Returning to Nirvana, the song 'In Bloom' features a rather rich set of chord change (Example 7). Here again, we get a great number of third relations, and the sense of mode is even more obscure. To analyse this, one might suggest that the opening riff establishes a mixolydian modality, the verse seems to modulate from aeolian into a modified phrygian, and the chorus moves ambiguously from a B♭ major-type mode to a minor mode. However, with the chords moving consistently in thirds, the song does not sound as though it is really moving from one established modality to another, but is instead in a state of constant modal flux. Furthermore, if one were to fill in these chords to make them complete triads, it is not clear which should be major and which should be minor. It seems, rather, that the ambiguity of the power chord is itself responsible for the conception of this kind of progression.

A similar observation might be made of some of Mudhoney's riffs. Mudhoney use rapidly passing third relations as part of creating an anarchic impetus in some of their songs. The riff from Mudhoney's 'Shoot the Moon' is a prime example of this, a rapid sequence of C5–B5–A5–F♯5–G5–E5. The progression in this riff starts



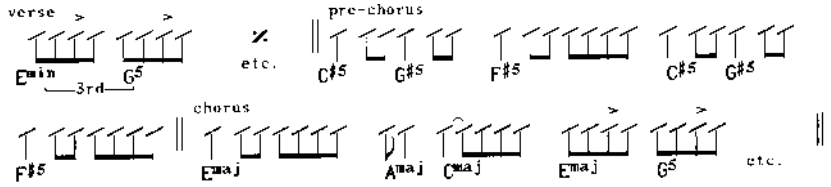
Example 7. Nirvana, 'In Bloom'.

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on C5, ends on E5, and places some emphasis on A5 and F♯5. But with these third relations (C to A to F♯, followed by G to E) going by so quickly, it is difficult to gain any sense of the 'tonic', and none of the above chords seem very satisfying as a resting place. This, then, is a very successful modal subversion – one's sense of modality is almost completely suspended.

4. Third relations on a larger scale

This section deals with surprising changes of mode between the larger sections of songs. Nirvana's 'About A Girl' makes use of third relations on both a large-scale and a small-scale level. The opening riff oscillates between E5 and G5 (establishing E minor), while the pre-chorus verse moves very clearly into C♯ minor. The chorus takes us back to E, this time a major sounding area due to the G♯ sung in the voice, and we hear the progression E–A–C–E (Example 8). Thus, third relations are present in terms of the key areas between sections (E minor to C♯ minor) and in the main chorus progression (implied A major–C major–E major), which comprises a modal subversion.



Example 8. Nirvana, 'About A Girl'.

The final example is 'Lose My Breath' by My Bloody Valentine. Harmonically and modally, this song contains a couple of odd features. The verse sections are in C phrygian (as suggested by the vocal line), and here the guitar simply sustains a pulsating strumming pattern on C5. The bass guitar, meanwhile, plays a B♭ pedal tone, and then drops a seventh to C, creating a surprising contrast of dissonance and consonance. The chorus then moves into G♭ ionian mode, a tritone away from C. While there are no third relations here, the distant tritone relation between the modalities of the verse and chorus is nonetheless a very bold gesture and begs mentioning.

Conclusion

It should be clear at this point that the tendency to use harmonic third relations as modal subversions is firmly entrenched in the songwriting styles of certain guitar-oriented alternative rock musicians. This concept does not apply to all alternative groups and songs, but it does occur frequently enough that it may constitute a sort of incipient idiom – an idiom that, for the most part, seems most prevalent in this milieu of rock.

It has been established that the harmonic ambiguity of the open-fifth power chord plays a role in facilitating the modally ambiguous progressions in the above-mentioned songs. But beyond this, why do bands like Nirvana, Mudhoney and My Bloody Valentine choose to employ these kinds of progressions? It is possible that these progressions act as a distinguishing characteristic, one of the musical aspects that mark the music of these bands off from that of artists in other genres. I am not

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suggesting that this is a conscious process in which the musicians deliberately think, 'Let's write progressions in thirds'! Rather, it is more likely that the musicians simply use their ears and intuition to invent riffs and progressions that are recognisably 'different' from what is heard in most heavy metal and other forms of rock and popular music. That is to say, the musicians are trying to change the balance between those musical elements that have continuity with established musical practices and those elements that create a discontinuity with established musical practices. The results, in some cases, are the kinds of modal subversions examined above, which stand in general contrast with the 'gothic' modalities of much metal, the blues progressions common in rock, and the bright major-key modalities of much top 40 pop music.

As an area for future research, one might ask how the modal subversion is perceived as 'subversive'. My suspicion is that modal variances are perceived tacitly and are compared with internalised expectations of musical norms which the listener may or may not be able to consciously or verbally articulate. In the case of guitar-heavy rock, where an expectation of rigidity in modal structures is likely, modal flexibility may register tacitly in the listener's mind as something different in the 'overall sound' of a song – like an unexpected spice in otherwise familiar food. In the musician's mind, the act of subverting the modality of a progression may be a conscious choice, even if the nomenclature for it may not be known or of concern. The analyst, like the musician, might perceive the modal subversion as a conscious choice, but goes on to isolate it as a pattern and name it.

Another question for future debate is whether the use of third relations and modal subversions constitute an incipient harmonic style or whether these are simply small-scale aberrations in an otherwise strictly diatonic musical language. My sense is that they *do* suggest an emerging harmonic technique, but it is likely that, as rock's history continues to unfold, it will take time and further research to fully answer this question.

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'Head Down' written by Ben Shepherd © Copyright 1994 Stupidditties (ASCAP). All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Endnotes

1. Winkler contextualises his analysis of popular music thus: 'What is its harmonic syntax? The question may seem naive; don't we know all too well how pop music goes? Its harmonic language is that of classical European tonality, only more simple-minded. Our ears are daily assaulted by its harmonic common-places, ready-made formulas, easy clichés. We have to live with this stuff; must we study it as well?' (Winkler 1978, p. 3) Bobbitt states that 'the harmony of rock is an anachronism', and goes on to claim that 'harmonically speaking, the rock message is ingenuous and unsophisticated. The chordal vocabulary is uncluttered . . . The low-tension sonorities are easily identified and hardly innovative.' (Bobbitt 1976, pp. 3–4)
2. Walser's musical sample of heavy metal ends at 1990, about the same time that alternative rock breaks through to the mainstream of pop. My comments, and Walser's, do not attempt to cover the harmonic idioms of metal after 1990.
3. The 'hook' of a song refers to a distinctive feature or moment in the song which is particular memorable or easily appropriated (i.e. 'catchy'). Good songs are often said to have strong hooks.

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