



## The Vertical and Horizontal Approaches of Bass Playing

by John Falstrom

**Intro:** In music, there are two ways to approach the chord changes in a song. They are called "The Vertical Approach" and "The Horizontal Approach." Here's how it works:

**The Vertical Approach** - This is the role of the bass guitar in a song. The vertical approach is where your bass lines are dictated by the root of the chord you are playing. As a bassist, you must follow the chord changes in a song and create something musical from the root of the chord. For example, if a song is in the key of G major, and the chord you are playing is a G major chord, you would then improvise a bass line from the G major scale (aka, the Ionian Mode). If the next chord in the song moves to a C major chord, you would then improvise a bass line from the C Lydian Mode. (Say) the next chord then moves to an E minor chord, you would then improvise a bass line from the E natural minor scale (aka, the Aeolian Mode). Finally, (say) the next chord moves to an A minor chord, you would then improvise a bass line from the A Dorian Mode. The vertical approach is the history of what a bass player plays in a song.

**The Horizontal Approach** - This approach is where your bass lines are not dictated by the root(s) of the chord changes, but rather by just playing the notes in the key that the song is in i.e. you are free to play any mode in the key that the song is in. Let's take the same four chord changes from the vertical approach (above), and you'll see what I mean. The chords are G major to C major to E minor to A minor. You, as a bassist, can choose any mode in the key of G major and improvise on this same mode against the chord changes, e.g. you can play a G major scale (Ionian Mode) against all four of the chord changes. You can play a C Lydian mode against all four of the chord changes. You can play an E natural minor scale (Aeolian mode) against all four of the chord changes. You can play an A Dorian mode against all four of the chord changes. You can also play the other three modes (B Phrygian, D Mixolydian, and F# Locrian) against all four chord changes in this song. As a bassist, the horizontal approach is incredible for soloing, riffs, and bass lines.

**Summary:** It's quite obvious that having total command of The Modal System is a "must have" to understand what the vertical and horizontal approaches are all about---I believe that the modal system is the "pinnacle" (most important area) of the music theory there is ---if you don't know and/or understand the modal system, I would definitely start your journey with the modes today. Enjoy it, it's quite a magnificent journey indeed.

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