



Clarifying Jazz Theory

What is a Phrygian suspended chord in jazz music?

article by Michael Smolens ©2022

The most accurate label for the chord that I think the question is asking about would be C7sus(b9).

But let's take a moment to see if the question itself really makes sense, because the very language of music theory frequently invites confusion. Like the fact that non-dominant chords (e.g. Dbma7 in the the key of C) can have a "dominant" function, leading easily to a "tonic" chord (e.g. Cma7, Cmi6/9, etc.). Or a "four chord" could be a chord based on the 4th degree of a scale, *or* a chord built entirely on perfects 4ths! Pretty confusing . . .

Similarly, students can quickly get into trouble when they hear about a scale (in this case, Phrygian) being described as a chord family (in this case, suspended) because it's simply not possible. Scales are just scales, and chords are just chords.

The truth is, there's no such thing as a "Phrygian suspended chord" in jazz. *That's because a player can use any number of scales over a suspended chord*, and here we're going to use the most common type of this suspended chord, C7sus. For example, they could use a Mixolydian scale (b7), Dorian scale (b3 & b7), natural minor (b3, b6, & b7), as well as the Phrygian scale (b2, b3, b6, & b7) because *none of those scales contradict the chord tones*. Obviously, the key of the piece is an important determinant in selecting the best-suited scale.

Now, if you want to intensify the suspended quality of the chord, simply leave out the 3rd degree of the scale when playing over C7sus. If someone wants to use the Phrygian scale over a C7sus chord, they can either include the 2nd degree of the scale in their playing, or not. In fact, you could play a more dissonant scale and still preserve the chord quality, such as an Eb-based pentatonic scale 1–3–4–5–b7 (Eb, G, Ab, Bb, & Db).

In order to play jazz well, you need to learn which scales go with which chords, and conversely, learn what chords can be generated from a given scale. **But learning jazz will be much easier if you describe your scales and chords independently.** It will allow you to take on more complicated pieces (including your own) *without leaving your keys locked in your car :-)*