Chord Scale Theory is not the best starting point for jazz improvisation.

Chord Scale Theory

While all or most of the current jazz masters are well-versed in chord scale theory, they must also have a deep understanding of the composition from which their statements derive meaning. Scales and modes are now given prominence in jazz pedagogy—to the point of being the primary focus. While chord scale theory can be useful, it is not the best starting point for the student. Many students are frustrated after years of that discipline, finding in the end that their playing just sounds like a bunch of scales. The very talented can overcome this and develop meaningful melodic styles, but all too many cannot. Chord scale theory is an easy refuge for the lazy and uninformed teacher.

If you’re thinking that you especially need these scales to play modern jazz compositions such as Maiden Voyage, Dolphin Dance, and Naima, think again. There's a great deal of melodic and rhythmic motivic material to be mined in such themes, and if there weren’t and you were improvising on a vamp, you could nonetheless create a few of your own and develop them. You can't begin to develop meaningful improvisations until you've narrowed the subject matter down. Lines based on development of the melody will work against any accompaniment style whatsoever. The most effective way to learn a tune is to first learn it without its chords. Practice paraphrasing the melody as though the chords were not an issue; they merely co-exist.

In learning vocabulary, any and all approaches are good. The question is where best to start—priorities. Scales can also be used to gain vocabulary without a rigid chord-equal-scale dogma, but incorporating the melody and its rhythms along with other compositional material is the best way to improvise—the best starting point and the best focal point to bear in mind at any stage. Every other approach should be treated as adjunct to that.

With regard to modern tunes with chord successions, there is no difference between the traditional developmental processes needed in improvising on such material and that of the music of today. While the harmony may be different, lines based on the melody, guide tone line, and root progression are just as relevant over any harmonic style; and lines developed in this manner will work over virtually any harmonic style. Miles Davis, for example, imitated Maurice Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand to create a kind of Impressionist
jazz for over thirteen years. In the process, however, he never forgot to develop
the exposition line and the composition's other salient characteristics in his
improvisations. (See, for example, Filles de Kilimanjaro.) When you are
struggling with a sophisticated Wayne Shorter composition, once the
simplified melody, guide tone line, and root progression are reduced, you will
suddenly get it: Your comprehension of the piece's essential elements and
intent is clear in the very next run-through.