

Improvisation: PLAYING THE BLUES

by Jamey Aebersold

The Blues is a musical form that jazz musicians have always embraced because it allows them the opportunity to express emotion and everyday feeling and intellectual concepts which are often learned by studying another player's style and conception. Most beginning improvisers use the Blues as a springboard to other jazz forms. Many band directors and private teachers feel there is not too much to playing a decent blues solo. They feel that you learn the blues scales of the key the blues is in and just sorta' improvise what you feel over that scale sound. They probably think this is what they are hearing when they listen to jazz players on radio or records. I admit, they do hear some of that, but, if you check out the major jazz influences, you will begin to hear much more than just the blues scale.

In this article I would like to point out things to watch for in the blues that will make your playing more rewarding, convincing and musical. We should begin by asking you to sing (with your voice) several choruses of blues along with a record. A play-a-long recorded version of blues would be excellent because you don't have to listen to a soloist--you are the soloist. I suggest taping yourself so you can listen to yourself back and then, with your instrument in hand, try playing the phrases that you just sang! I contend that what we sing is often closer to the REAL YOU than what comes out of our instruments. On our instruments, we are inhibited and limited by our lack of knowledge of the instrument. If this is so, and I truly believe it to be so, the musician who knows his instrument well will have a much better chance of conveying the music that is contained within his brain to you the listener. When you are trying to play on your instrument what you just sung, be sure to play with the same inflections, articulation, dynamics, etc. If you are used to listening to jazz music, your vocal solo will probably be fairly recognizable to one who listens to this kind of music even though your voice may crack and sputter at times. Practice singing when you are driving by yourself or walking to school or to the office. Practice singing within your mind while lying in bed or waiting for a bus. Put your mind to use and it will instantly start paying you dividends in that you will be able to recognize phrases others play and this will enable you to put those ideas in motion on your chosen instrument. I have heard many fine jazz musicians say they have done much practicing away from their instrument. They mentally practice, and when they finally put their instrument in their hands it is as though they have already played the musical idea. In closing this paragraph on singing, I would like to point out that many musicians refer to a particularly beautiful musical phrase or solo as singing, even though the musician is playing an instrument. For example, "Coltrane was really singing."

The blues can have many different chord progressions. For instance, rock, gospel, soul, country and other simpler forms of blues music don't use the same chords as say, a Wayne Shorter blues, although they can if they want to. Usually, when you start beefing up the chords (harmony) one feels the song becoming more and more jazz influenced. When you start changing the chords to a gospel tune it just won't sound the same and the people who listen to that type of music will probably not be satisfied because the music is no longer what it used to be. Since jazz is an evolutionary art form the various chord modifications and alterations are welcomed and have become a part of the energy that has kept it alive.

The basic 12 bar blues originally used what we call three chords. They are: a dominant 7th built on the root, a dominant 7th built on the fourth, and a dominant 7th built on the fifth of the key you are in. Example: a blues in the key of F uses these three chords - F7, Bb7 and C7. The order of occurrence is in a twelve bar sequence and can look like this:

||F7 |F7 |F7 |F7 |Bb7 |Bb7 |F7 |F7 |C7 |Bb7 |F7 |C7 ||

There are variations ad infinitum to the chord progressions which can be used over a blues. A few of the more popular are as follows (key of F). NOTE: When two chord symbols appear in the same measure, each chord gets two beats.

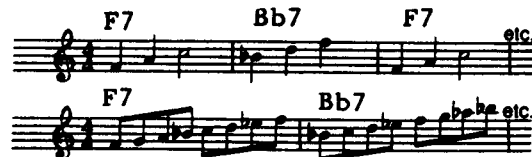
A.) ||F7 |Bb7 |F7 |Cmi F7|Bb7 |Bb7 |F7 |D7 |Gm9 |C7 |F7 |Gmi C7 ||
B.) ||F7 |Bb7 |F7 |Cmi F7|Bb7 |B^o7 |F7 |Ami7 D7 |Gm |C7 |Ami7 D7 |Gmi C7 ||
C.) ||F7 |Bb7 |F7 |Cmi F7|Bb7 |B^o7 |F7 |Ami7 D7 |Gm C7|Dbmi Gb7|F7 D7 |G7 C7 ||

One that Charlie Parker used on "Blues for Alice" uses descending root movement coupled with a cycle of fourths (upward). This is sometimes called Bird Blues:

||F |Emi A7 |Dmi G7 |Cmi F7 |Bb7 |Bbmi |Ami |Abmi |Gmi |C7 |Ami D7 |Gmi C7 ||

Enough for the various chord progressions that can be used. If you need more info, checkout Dan Haerle's book *Jazz- Rock Voicings for the Contemporary Keyboard Player* (available from Aebersold Jazz). He lists 17 different progressions ranging from very simple to very complex.

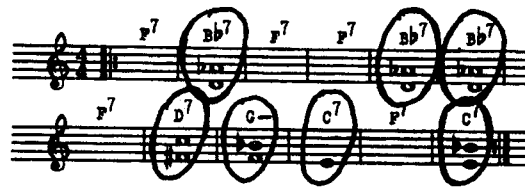
When beginning to practice the blues, I feel it necessary to get the feel of the roots, then the first five notes of each scale, then the triad (root, 3rd & 5th), and finally the entire scale. Here is what that would sound like:



When two chords appear in one measure you have to alter the rhythm of the pattern or condense the number of notes in your pattern. No matter what song you are working on, use the above method for getting acquainted with the harmonic movement of the tune. I have heard two of the top jazz trumpet players in the country say this is the first thing they do when looking over a new piece of music that they are going to solo over. It makes good sense because it gets your ear accustomed

to the various scale and chord sounds in advance of the actual soloing. I strongly advise using this method of practice when approaching ANY new song.

The most important points in the blues progression, and these are often totally neglected by young improvisers, are the measures circled below:



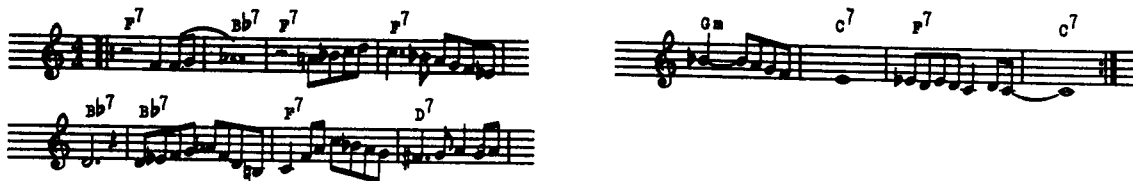
It might be good to improvise on the 3rd or 7th of each chord in order to get the sound and feel of the harmony in your mind. Using just the 3rd and 7th will sound like this (notice the half-step melodic motion from the first chord to the second):



I urge you non-piano players to practice the example above with your left hand, one octave lower than written, and try playing scalar exercises with the right hand so you can hear the basic harmony (3rd & 7th) in the left hand while running patterns or soloing in the right hand.

Most all good wind players have a knowledge of the keyboard and can play blues in several keys. It is much easier to solve harmonic problems while LOOKING at the piano keys than it is to see it on a sax finger table or trumpet valves.

It is a good idea to lead into the 3rd or 7th by half step. This strengthens the harmony. Notes that are good choices at the beginning of measures are listed below:



The Blues scale can, of course, be played at any time during the chorus. The notes of the blues scale often clash with the given harmony but that is what makes it sound like the blues! If it didn't clash in the beautiful way it does, we wouldn't call it a blues. Be careful not to confine your soloing to just the sound of the blues scale and in so doing overlook possibilities of variety by employing the other scales such as minor and dominant. The blues scale in the key of F is: **F Ab Bb B C Eb F**

CONCLUSIONS:

1. Play what you hear in your head. Use tape recorder to record your voice and transcribe it on your given instrument.
2. Sing with your voice while driving, showering, walking, etc. Think about the intervals you are singing. Are you singing bits and pieces of scales or chords?
3. Listen to jazz players play the blues.
4. Check out Volume 2 "Nothing But the Blues" play-a-long book and CD set. If you already have this volume, have you tried playing with all the tracks or have you just played the blues in Bb and F? Time to move on!
5. Remember leading tones are the 3rd and 7th usually. These tones should be emphasized in order to bring out the harmonic movement from chord to chord.
6. Use everything you have learned about melodic construction when playing on a blues. Don't just play on the blues scale. That sound can wear pretty thin in the hands of a novice but can sound fine when interspersed with phrases from the original harmony.
7. Transcribe a solo or a portion of a favorite solo and play it on your instrument with the same inflections as the recorded version. The jazz tradition has been passed down by imitation and you can benefit greatly by transcriptions.

WHAT DOES "TO HEAR" REALLY MEAN?

1. "To Hear" gives confidence in performance, practicing, teaching, composing and life in general.
2. "To Hear" gives more enjoyment as a listener. He/she hears at a deeper level of appreciation and understanding and this level grows as the years pass!
3. "To Hear" will earn you appreciation as teacher/performer because your playing and your teaching/coaching will reflect your EAR'S knowledge. You'll say and play things which reflect your knowledge and this can be extremely helpful to others in their musical quest.
4. "To Hear" instills independence, in a good sense. It helps dispell the "myths" of jazz and open one's creative channels. "To Hear" removes burdens and barriers.
5. "To Hear" makes one feel worthy of becoming part of the whole. It provides a certain amount of security and confidence which allows us to approach with assurance the springboard of one's "inner music." "To Hear" removes insecurity which allows the mind to function properly, in its natural state.
6. "To Hear" ultimately means freedom!

THE BLUES SCALE AND ITS USE

The blues scale consists of the following: Root, b3rd, 4th, #4th, 5th and b7th.

EXAMPLE: F blues Scale = F, Ab, Bb, B, C, Eb, F

When playing a twelve bar blues in the key of Bb, use the Bb blues scale: Bb, Db, Eb, E, F, Ab, Bb

The blues scale can also be used over minor chords when the minor chord is sounded for 2, 4, 8, or 16 measures or longer. EXAMPLE: If D minor is sounded for eight measures, you may use the D blues scale: D, F, G, Ab, A, C, D

When playing in minor tonalities you may choose to alternate between the dorian minor and the blues scale, both having the same root tone. EXAMPLE: If D minor is sounded for eight measures, play D minor (dorian) or play D blues scale or alternate between the two scale sounds.

The blues scale is used to convey a "Funky," "Down-Home," "Earthy" or "Bluesy" sound/feel. Rhythm and blues players use this scale extensively. Don't run it into the ground by overuse! Experiment with the blues scales listed below and apply them to recorded tracks on your play-a-long recordings.

After you become familiar with the blues scale as I have it listed, you may want to add tones to the scale which give the scale sound more variety. *Added tones are underlined.* EXAMPLE: F blues scale = F, G, Ab, A, Bb, B, C, D, Eb, F

This scale sounds strange when played straight up or down. Jazz players usually play bits and pieces of the scale or make up licks utilizing certain notes of the scale. You will eventually want to transpose this scale to all twelve keys for practice. For now, learn it in Bb and F concert.

THE TWELVE BLUES SCALES (Treble & Bass Clef)

The image displays the twelve blues scales in both treble and bass clefs. The scales are arranged in two groups of three staves each. The top group is labeled 'TREBLE CLEF' and the bottom group is labeled 'BASS CLEF'. Each scale is represented by a single staff with a treble or bass clef, a key signature, and a sequence of notes. The scales are: C, Db, D, Eb, E, F, Gb, G, Ab, A, Bb, B. The notes are written in a sequence that typically starts with the root and moves up and down the scale, often including the #4th and b7th notes. The scales are written in a way that shows the characteristic 'bluesy' sound of the scale, with the #4th and b7th notes often being emphasized.

Variations On Blues

by Jamey Aebersold

My last article dealt with the Blues (12 bar Blues), so, I would like to follow up with variations on the blues progressions that have been in common use in the jazz idiom. The term "three chord songs" are usually referring to the simplest of blues progressions. If you are in the key of F the three chords which form the basis of the blues in that key are F7, Bb7 and C7. F7 is called a roman numeral I chord. The Bb7 is called the IV because it is built on the fourth scale step of the F7 scale and the C7 is called the V chord (usually called a V7 chord) because it is found on the fifth scale step of the F7 scale. A three chord tune could also be called a song that uses only I, IV, and V chords.

As blues evolved in the hands of the jazz musicians across the country by way of the radio and record player, more and more musicians played blues and naturally some would take liberties with the chord structure and alter the chords to match what they were hearing in their mind's ear. As the various alterations were passed from musician to musician they became part of the blues structure.

I have listed 17 different blues progressions found in Dan Haerle's book *Jazz/Rock Voicings for the Contemporary Keyboard Player*, published by Studio P/R, Inc.,

The progressions read from left to right!

The ones at the top are the easier, simpler progressions. As you move down the page they become more altered and present more of a challenge to the up and coming jazz player. It is best to practice with one complete progression until you feel comfortable with it, then, move on to

the next one. You may also want to substitute a measure in one blues with the same measure in another blues below or above. Number 14 is one that Charlie Parker used on a blues called Blues for Alice and another called Laird Bird. Number 16 uses a steady stream of minor chords (II) moving to dominant 7th chords (V7) usually called II/V7-s or, a series of II/V's. Experiment with the various progressions using the exercises I showed you in the Nov. 1-Dec. 15 issue.

Begin slowly so you can hear the root progression clearly. In time your mind will remember it and you can move more rapidly. Try to memorize each progression as you are working on it. Memory is a key process in improvising! Listen to jazz players on records and see if you can hear when they are substituting chords or scales or licks or patterns over the basic three chord progression. The Masters do it all the time and with such ease that often our ears don't even realize they have deviated from the basic progression being played by the rhythm section. You may want to check out Volume 2 "Nothin' But Blues" in my play along book and record series. It contains eleven different blues progressions played by the rhythm section and you can play and practice along with them. Bass players and piano players can even turn off one channel of their stereo and substitute themselves for the player on the record. It is a great way to practice with a professional rhythm section.

In order to play blues you have to listen to people who play blues. Listen to the finest players, always!

EXAMPLES OF BLUES PROGRESSIONS (In the Key of F)																		
by DAN HAERLE																		
Read from left to right	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12						
1. F7	F7	F7	F7	F7	Bb7	Bb7	F7	F7	C7	C7	F7	F7						
2. F7	F7	F7	F7	F7	Bb7	Bb7	F7	F7	C7	Bb7	F7	C7						
3. F7	Bb7	F7	F7	F7	Bb7	Bb7	F7	F7	G7	C7	F7	C7						
4. F7	Bb7	F7	F7	F7	Bb7	Bb7	F7	D7	G7	C7	F7	C7						
5. F7	Bb7	F7	F7	F7	Bb7	Bb7	F7	D7	Gmi7	C7	F7	Gmi7 C7						
6. F7	Bb7	F7	F7	F7	Bb7	Eb7	F7	D7	Db7	C7	F7	Db7 C7						
7. F7	Bb7	F7	Cmi7	F7	Bb7	Eb7	F7	Ami7	D7	Gmi7	C7	Ami7 D7 Gmi7 C7						
8. F7	Bb7	F7	Cmi7	F7	Bb7	Eb7	Ami7	D7	Gmi7	C7	Ami7	D7 Gmi7 C7						
9. F7	Bb7	F7	Cmi7	F7	Bb7	Bmi7	E7	F7	E7	Eb7	D7	Gmi7 C7 Bb7 Ami7 D7 Gmi7 C7						
10. F M7	Emi7	A7	Dmi7	G7	Cmi7	F7	Bb7	Bb7	Ami7	D7	Abmi7	Db7	Gmi7 C7 Dbmi7 Eb7 F7 D7 Gmi7 C7					
11. F M7	Emi7	Ebm7	Dmi7	Dbmi7	Cmi7	Cb7	BbM7	Bbmi7	Ami7	Abmi7	Gmi7	C7	Ami7 Fmi7 Gmi7 Gb7					
12. F M7	BbM7	Ami7	Gmi7	Gbmi7	Cb7	BbM7	Bbmi7	Ami7	Abmi7	Gmi7	Gb7	F M7	Abmi7 Gmi7 Gb7					
13. F M7	BbM7	Ami7	Gmi7	Gbmi7	Cb7	BbM7	Bbmi7	Eb7	AbM7	Abmi7	Db7	GbM7	Gmi7 C7 Ami7 D7 Dbmi7 Gb7					
14. F M7	Emi7	A7	Dmi7	G7	Cmi7	F7	BbM7	Bbmi7	Eb7	Ami7	Abmi7	Db7	Gmi7 C7 Ami7 D7 Gmi7 C7					
15. F M7	Emi7	A7	Dmi7	G7	Gbmi7	Cb7	BbM7	Bmi7	E7	Ami7	Abmi7	Db7	Gmi7 C7 Bb7 Ami7 D7 Gmi7 C7					
16. Fbm7	B7	Emi7	A7	Dmi7	G7	Cmi7	F7	BbM7	Bbmi7	Eb7	AbM7	Abmi7	Db7	GbM7	Gmi7 C7 Ami7 D7 Gmi7 C7			
17. F M7	Fbm7	B7	Em7	Ebm7	CbM7	BbM7	BbM7	Bmi7	E7	Am7	Ami7	D7	Gm7	GbM7	Fm7	AbM7	Gm7	Gb7

NOTE: Portions of these progressions could be combined with each other to create hundreds of slight variations of the above. Notice that practically all blues progressions follow a similar basic form, which is as follows: First 4 measures - I chord; Second 4 measures - IV chord (returning to a I chord or its substitute); Final 4 measures - V chord (or II-V substitute) returning to a I chord.