

# 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.

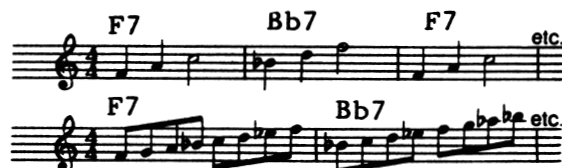
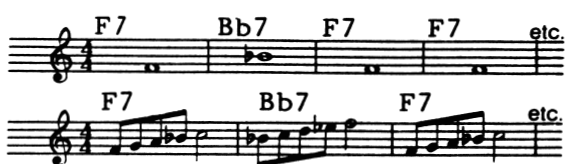
- A.) ||F7 |Bb7 |F7 |Cmi F7|Bb7 |Bb7 |F7 |D7 |Gm9 |C7 |F7 |Gmi C7 ||  
B.) ||F7 |Bb7 |F7 |Cmi F7|Bb7 |B<sup>o</sup>7 |F7 |Ami7 D7 |Gm |C7 |Ami7 D7 |Gmi C7 ||  
C.) ||F7 |Bb7 |F7 |Cmi F7|Bb7 |B<sup>o</sup>7 |F7 |Ami7 D7 |Gm C7|Dbmi Gb7|F7 D7 |G7 C7 ||

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.

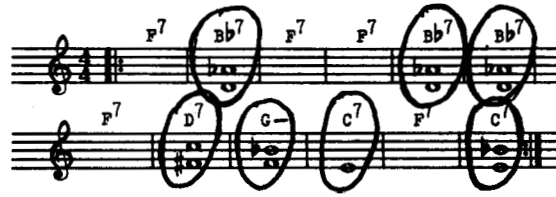
When beginning to practice the blues, I feel it necessary to get the feel of the roots, then the first five notes of each scale, then the triad (root, 3rd & 5th), and finally the entire scale. Here is what that would sound like:



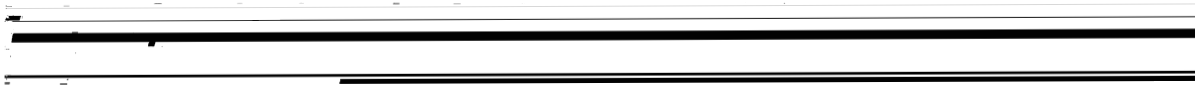
When two chords appear in one measure you have to alter the rhythm of the pattern or condense the number of notes in your pattern. No matter what song you are working on, use the above method for getting acquainted with the harmonic movement of the tune. I have heard two of the top jazz trumpet players 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!