LESSON 10.
BLUES PRACTICE & BLUES SCALES.

10.1 Melody. *The blues scale.*

If we can reasonably relate any data or available material to a specific, identifiable group we impart a MEANINGFULNESS to the selection. Scientists like Aristotle and Linneaus based their work on classifying observation data into categories to establish patterns which helped understanding and meaning.

When a collection of musical pitches have some reasonable ASSOCIATIVE value, we describe such a pattern as a SCALE. The selected pitches of a scale have a 'meaning' because they result in a CHARACTERISTIC SOUND which we can RECOGNISE.

In lesson 1 we identified the major scale and the chords that can be built from it as the foundation of our traditional sense of tonality. The first eight lessons were confined to the major scale and this familiar tonality. ‘Tonal’ music dominated western classical music from around 1650 to 1900, and still remains the most important musical tradition. Prior to1650 'modes' other than the major and minor scales were common, see lesson 1.1, and the ‘functional’ harmony built on the chords of the major scale was absent, see lesson 7.2. After 1900 ‘atonality’ became common in what is still called 'classical' music and the traditional ‘tonal centre’ tended to be avoided as composers experimented with sequences of notes where no one note was dominant.

In the last lesson we introduced another scale, the pentatonic scale, which is significant in ‘folk’ music because of its SIMPLICITY and FLEXIBILITY to sound ‘right’ in many different musical environments.

In this lesson we introduce the BLUES SCALE.

The blues scale has its roots in the African / American music dating back to the days of slavery, it is probably the result of Negro adaptation of the pentatonic scale, it consists of the pentatonic with 2 added notes. The added notes are –

- The minor or ‘BLUE’ 3rd
- The minor or ‘BLUE’ 7th

Ex.1. shows the scale on C, F and G.

The third degree of this scale, which is the flat third of the minor scale, is called a blue note. In vocal music, it is often sung somewhere between an Eb and an E. In instrumental music, various techniques are employed to achieve the same effect, such as stretching the string while playing an Eb on a stringed instrument, ‘lipping’ down an E on a wind instrument, or striking both the Eb and E simultaneously on a keyboard instrument.

The flatted seventh is also a blue note, and in the same way is not always sung or played exactly on the ‘notated’ pitch.

Variations on the blues scale that exclude the natural third, sixth and ninth, but include a flat fifth, and the fourth can be used as well. In fact the flat 5th has now become ‘established’ as a 3rd blue note. Note that if the flatted fifth is omitted from this variation, the resultant scale is the minor pentatonic scale. See 10.4 below. The minor pentatonic scale is often used as a substitute for the blues scale, and vice versa. See lesson 11.

These blues scales are the basis of vast quantities of modern musical material, the form and sound is readily recognisable and used extensively in jazz and popular music –

IT IS VITAL FOR ANYONE WHO WISHES TO IMPROVISE IN THE BLUES IDIOM
TO HAVE THESE BLUES SCALES AT THEIR FINGER TIPS.

The original scale on C, F and G from Ex.1 should be transposed to all other tonics, or at least those which are in most common use.

Aural recognition of the CHARACTERISTIC SOUND of the scale can be developed by the practice and memorising of the patterns in Ex.2 to 5.

Unessential notes can be added, but, once again remember that indiscriminate use will DESTROY THE DESIRED EFFECT. However, various tricks and grace notes are common. See Ex.4.

Although individual ‘style’ will develop through the use of certain clichés and preferred ‘best licks’, the blues feeling is a general effect recognised immediately when the blues scale is played with the blues progression in the jazz rhythmic idiom. Refer back to 9.1 and 9.3.

The key point is worth repeating – if the blues scale is used with rhythmic patterns which are typical of the jazz idiom and with typical blues progressions, see 10.2 below, –

THE BLUES ‘FEELING’ WILL AUTOMATICALLY EMERGE.

The advice on sticking to the notes of the chosen scale is important in relation to all scalic material that will be presented in this course. Remember that the SELECTIONS have been made to bring out certain definite CHARACTERISTIC SOUNDS. Disregarding the specific note selection must defeat the original purpose!! Remember simplicity and lessons 4.3 and 7.3.

Many musicians, through constant listening, have been able to make these note selections by ear at the subconscious level. Generally, however, this method is not as efficient as conscious study and technical knowledge, see 4.6, and progress will be unnecessarily slow and painful!

10.2 Harmony. ***The importance of the ‘blues’ 7th chord.***

The term ‘blues’ is a somewhat overused word, describing a general ‘style’ of music with a more specific category of chord progressions, as well as its colloquial meaning of a particular mood, as in the phrase ‘I've got the blues’.

The blues as a STYLE has a rich history that was alluded to in lesson 7.6 and ‘the jazz tradition’. The basic twelve bar blues form has been mentioned several times previously because, in its original form it is still played very frequently in traditional jazz, rock and R & B music. In the basic form only three chords are used: the I chord, the IV chord, and the V7 chord, see the last lesson 9.1.

While the blues progression can be played in any key, the most popular keys among jazz musicians seem to be F, Bb, and Eb, whereas rock musicians often prefer E, A, D, or G. This has a lot to do with the way instruments are ‘tuned’. Popular jazz instruments such as the trumpet, clarinet and the various members of the saxophone family are usually ‘tuned’ in Bb or Eb This means that the notated ‘C’ played for these instruments actually SOUNDS a Bb or Eb on the piano or 'concert' instruments. The EASIEST FINGERINGS for these instruments favours playing in that particular instruments key of C, which actually sounds Bb or Eb, depending on the design tuning. Guitars tend to dominate rock music, and guitars are tuned to favour the keys containing sharps. That is the easiest fingerings are for notes of the sharp keys. Music written for these instruments is therefore ‘transposed’.

Don’t let this ‘transposing’ issue confuse you, all instruments must SOUND identical notes when played. Your ear will tell you that the notes are the same. It just so happens that, for example, when a trumpet is manufactured the open ‘no valves’ note is a Bb concert on the piano.

Over the years the basic three chords of the blues progression have been modified to add interest and variety. See 10.2 below.

An initial important modification to the progression is often heard when ALL the chords are played as dominant SEVENTH chords, although they are not actually FUNCTIONING as dominant chords in that they do not resolve onto a tonic. Neither do they resolve onto the ‘next’ 7th of the circle of 5ths, they are not functioning as the ‘forward urge’ chords that we studied in lessons 1 to 8. These ‘pseudo’ dominant 7ths are unusual in other musical styles but in the blues and banjo music they are common.

We can speculate on the origins of the popularity of 7th chords in jazz. Maybe the old banjo players preferred a different 4th note instead of a repeated note with their 4 string chords. Perhaps they found the7th chord fingering familiar and could easily be moved up and down the fretboard producing an agreeable sounds when blue notes were being played. The 7th chords fit

nicely and sound interesting with the blues because the C7 includes the ‘blue’ 7th and the F7 includes the ‘blue’ 3rd. In this way these SCALE notes become part of the chord if we play 7ths. Remember the SCALE dominates in the blues, the harmony fits but it is not the vehicle for improvisation.

Thus, the 7th chord in the blues harmony has a completely different ‘meaning’ than the 7ths we discussed in our earlier studies In the blues it simply introduces one of the scale notes into the accompaniment. Make sure you understand this distinction because otherwise it will confuse you when you are studying sequences; it is no use looking for resolutions of 7th chords in the blues they are not there! The F7 in the blues moves to C7 NOT Bb!!

The G7 is, of course, the regular ‘dominant’ 7th and serves a different, now familiar, purpose - that of encouraging the resolution back to the tonic.

Thus we can suggest a new ‘harmonic rule’ for the BLUES idioms, particularly the 12 bar blues, where the 7th can be added to the major chords on 1 and 4.

See Ex. 6 to 8 which show the blues scale co-ordinated with the12 bar blues harmonic pattern.

As a jazz improviser who is interested in BLUES idioms you should practice on the 12 bar blues pattern until all the components have become PRACTICALLY SUBCONSCIOUS. This involves the following 'know how' and practical routines –

- knowledge of and ‘time feeling’ for the various rhythmic bar patterns given in the course, together with experience in building these into 2 bar and 4 bar phrases, as outlined in lesson 4.4
- fluency in the technical processes of handling the blues scale on your particular instrument, and in transposing it
- experience in ‘feeling’ trajectories in the manner pointed out in lesson 9.3
- feeling for the length of time occupied by each chord, that is the ‘harmonic rhythm’ of the blues, and, consequently, the point of phrase / chord change.

Note that in the same way as the pentatonic scale we studied in the last lesson THE BLUES SCALE CAN BE PLAYED OVER THE ENTIRE PROGRESSION all the notes 'fit' the chords

10.3 Chord progressions. *Blues variations.*

Even with the introduction of 7th chords you may feel that playing the blues scale over the basic three chord blues progression in a jazz setting can get ‘tired and old’ quite quickly? Never mind! One of the beauties of the blues vehicle is its FLEXIBILITY. The only time you will get bored with the blues is if your creativity or instrumental ability is not progressing, otherwise there are infinite possibilities.

To introduce variety the basic chord progression can be altered or enhanced in many ways.

As we noted above playing the 7th chords is the first way of adding interest and variety; so for a start try playing YOUR OWN blues scale improvisations with the progression from Ex.6 and 7 –

C7 / / /	C7 / / /	C7 / / /	C7 / / /
F7 / / /	F7 / / /	C7 / / /	C7 / / /
G7 / / /	G7 / / /	C7 / / /	C7 / / /.

The 12 bar blues harmonic pattern can be considerably expanded and developed adding further interest and variety in all sorts of ways WITHOUT LOSING ITS ESSENTIAL CHARACTER. Many of the possibilities will be dealt with later when we cover the various methods of reharmonisation, but in the meantime, the following pattern, which uses some of the early variations mentioned in 9.1, can be worked on –

C7 / / /	F7 / / /	C7 / / /	C7 / / /
F7 / / /	Fm7 / / /	C7 / / /	C7 / / /
G7 / / /	F7 / / /	C7 / / /	C7 / / /

The big change in the 9th bar and the lesser one in the 5th are still retained and the harmony is still 'enhanced' with 7th chords, but a move to the subdominant has been made early in the 2nd bar. The move to the minor in bar 6 is often seen as is the dominant resolving through the subdominant in the10th bar giving a nice plagal resolution. This is a very common variation.

Starting around the swing era, and almost continually since then, musicians have further developed the blues progression, for example –

C7 / / /	F7 / / /	C7 / / /	C7 / / /
F7 / / /	Cm7 / F7 /	C7 / / /	A7 / / /
Dm7 / / /	G7 / / /	C7 / / /	G7 / / /.

Here we have a MIX of blues progression and the circle of 5ths, including some more of the standard 'dominant 7th type' resolutions. This common adaptation of the progression, is still considered the standard for jazz 'jam sessions'.

Another possibility –

C7 / / /	F7 / Bb7 /	C7 / Gm7 /	C7 / / /
F7 / / /	Fm7 / / /	Em7 / / /	A7 / / /
Dm7 / / /	G7 / / /	C7 / / /	G7 / / /.

The idea of adding II - V - I's to the blues progression can yield many more variations. The possibilities are endless but the CHARACTER of the blues remains.

We should note that these 'enhancements' of the blues progression are based on the familiar principles of chord SUBSTITUTION and chord MOVEMENT.

We should also note that the SUBDOMINANT 7TH IN BAR 5 REMAINS in all these examples; this is invariably the case as the move to the subdominant is the essence of the blues, giving it one of the peculiar characteristics that other songs don't have. Remember the usual characteristic of non blues songs is to move to the 'sharp side' of the circle of 5ths..

It is appropriate at this stage if we introduce the idea of a TURNAROUND. At the end of a song section it is interesting if the forward momentum of the song is enhance by more emphatically finishing the previous section and launching into the new section. We saw how this was commonly done with the imperfect cadence in lesson 2. Turnarounds build on this idea in various ways by leading into the new section through the familiar II - V - I circle.

Thus in bars 7 & 8 and 11 & 12 of the blues and 7 & 8 and 15 & 16 and 31 & 32 of the 32 bar song we often see turnarounds.

10.4 Co-ordination. *Think scales.*

Our co-ordination work must now take on a different aspect as we are primarily playing improvised trajectories using SCALE notes not chord notes. We must THINK SCALES.

Let's recap on the scales we have studied –

Major	C	D		E	F		G	A		B	C
Pentatonic	C	D		E			G	A			C
Blues	C	D	Eb	E			G	A	Bb		C

The pentatonic and blues scales can be mixed in one continuity. Sections of one can be followed by sections of the other.

Two other scales are useful for the blues improviser; the minor pentatonic (or Eb major pentatonic), and the Eb blues. We will say much more about these two scales in the next lesson –

Minor pentatonic	C		Eb		F		G		Bb		C
Eb pentatonic			Eb		F		G		Bb		C
Eb blues		(Db)	Eb		F	Gb	G		Bb		C

Experiment and practice these scales with a blues progression. Try and feel comfortable with the same scale over a moving chord sequence. Listen to the sound and how the characteristic 'bluesy' feeling results? Remember keep it simple, the blues in particular is about feeling and emotion and interpretation …

10.5 Rhythm. ***Setting up the ground beat.***

The more we listen to jazz, the more we understand jazz, the more convinced we are that the swinging jazz performance is about 'SETTING UP' rhythmic counterpoint. Rhythmic lines are played AGAINST one another. In the case of a solo this is the soloist against the rhythm section, in the case of ensembles other melody instruments are involved as well.

The FIRST essential is for the rhythm section to set up a constant four to the bar ground beat. Predominantly this is the job of the drummer but the bass player and banjo / guitar players have helpful roles to play as well. Bands need TIME KEEPERS and a REFERENCE BEATS.

In lesson 5 we gave some examples of the drummer's ride rhythms and we now need to elaborate. The drummer initially has the job of developing a largely UNDIFFERENTIATED four to the bar beat, this is usually done on the 'ride' cymbal. The syncopated effects stressing the 2nd and 4th beats usually come from the front line instruments. If the drummer also accented the off beats the sound would be discontinuous and a produce a 'two beat' feel. Of course, there are times when specific off beat effects are needed from the drummer, but his first job is to develop an even four to the bar.

Please note that we are emphasising the initial role of drumming. Drumming technique can develop into very sophisticated rhythms, but our purpose here is not instrument specific and we do want to stress the importance of a four to the bar explicit or implicit ground beat as a prerequisite for swing.

Nevertheless the ride cymbal expresses a RHYTHMIC LINE rather than a series of 'one note at a time, four bangs to the bar'. The 'line' is altered with 'ghost note' nuances which are designed to impart FORWARD MOMENTUM to the line, see Ex.9 for a typical 4 / 4 ground beat on the high hat. Tap this rhythm out and feel how in this case an 8th note gap can produce a dynamic forward urge which tends to give 'meaning' to the conventional 1st and 3rd beats and the syncopated of beats on 2 and 4. These rhythms have to be subtly played.

Now it is also common to vary this 'embellishment' approach to four to the bar by, for example, using the bass drum on the 1st beat of the bar and, perhaps, the snare on the 2nd, see Ex.10.

However, the 'TYRANNY' OF THE DOWN BEAT must be minimised and the line must be INFECTIOUS and INSPIRING as well as identifying for the other players exactly where they are in the bar. The band must be able to feel the steady beat even if they can't hear it, the drummer has an awesome responsibility!

Although the modern trend is to use the ride cymbal for the basic beat, the snare drum with brushes or sticks can also used for this purpose, as can wood blocks. Variety and experimentation is again important.

Once the fundamental groundbeat has been established the drummer is free, as are all the members of the band, to add APPROPRIATE superimposed rhythms, interjections, 'fills' and 'press rolls using the snare drum, the bass drum, tom toms, cow bells, crash cymbals etc. etc.....

Extra subtleties, weights and variety can be added to these lines in all sorts of different ways, for example –

- the foot operated high hat can be employed to produce the off beat claps which are typical of jazz; think of these as a counterbalance to the subtle emphasis of the conventional downbeats re-establishing smoothness and resulting in an undifferentiated four beat flow
- timings can be doubled or halved without effecting the basic beat

- importantly the drummer will always signal to the rest of the group the start of each four bar section, each solo, each change of texture and dynamic, and finally the ending - remember these signals must be played before the rest of the band start the relevant part of the song
- a good way to think of interjections and fills is as conversational comments; supportive in sympathy with the mood of the song and not interruptions
- omissions can be just as effective as interjections
- ride patterns can be played on the high hat with alternate beats differentiated by opening and closing the hat

All these devices should be thought of as a separate 'lines' played against the bedrock four four on the ride. Again it is important to emphasise the concept of 'LINE', it is a meaningful word, discontinuities should be avoided, the patterns must have a continuous forward drive.

We must stress again that these comments are the essential basics of the drummers job but his skill is in adding interest, variety and inspiration to his lines while still delivering –

- a basic four to the bar ground beat either felt or heard
- signals for the important bar beats and the important four bar sections

It is the sacred duty of the drummer to help to make sure that the rest of the band know where they are at all times!!

10.6 Characteristic timbre. *'Dirty' blues.*

Rhythm, melody, harmony and form are aspects of music which we have covered quite extensively in this course but there is a 5th component which we have not discussed at length which is 'texture'.

Texture or timbre or tone 'colour' or 'quality' is an important aspect of music. Instrumentalists are constantly searching for a good 'quality' of tone. A good or bad tone is, of course, highly subjective but we can all easily recognise tone differences. These differences result from the particular SPECTRUM of sound frequencies produced when a specific pitch is targeted. The distinguishing feature of the same pitch played on a trumpet or on a clarinet is the different overtone frequencies of the particular instrument concerned. Vibrating strings and columns of air have been long established tone generators and are liked because of their peculiar characteristic of producing harmonics as well as the fundamental pitch. It is the harmonics and the specific method of producing the vibrations which give the tone its peculiar quality. These frequencies VARY depending on the type of instrument and the WAY IT IS PLAYED. The production of harmonics and tone is not fixed but can be MANIPULATED by the player.

There are many ways of ARTIFICIALLY modifying the timbre of a pitch to add interest and variety. For example the forcefulness of the attack and release, the extent of the control over the vibration production, the way a vibrato is produced, the speed and method of moving from one note to the next, the acoustics of the immediate resonance environment either the player himself or the room he is in and finally the immediate acoustics can be modified by a host of mutes and echo chambers and more recently by electrical amplification and modification.

In addition to the choice of pitch and scale, jazz musicians have always searched for ORIGINALITY through the 'quality' or 'colour' of the pitches they produce. This is particularly true of the blues idiom where TIMBRE is an important variable for brass and reed players. It is another means of creating an individual style, another string to your bow.

In jazz, timbre is more than 'colour' added to tones by vibrato, glissando, sforzando, trill or legato or staccato attack, it is synonymous with growls, scoops, bends, shakes, smears, whines, moans, flares, falls, pushes, oinks,.....

Brass players employ a wide variety of mutes, cups, hats and plungers to generate various characteristic sounds. Other instrumentalist can be equally inventive in their search for an original sound.

The adjectives used to describe jazz sounds have immense variety – light, cutting, runny, brassy, pinched, bright, fuzzy, thin, fluid, deep, nasal, piercing, full, clear, smooth, raspy, muffled, round, jagged, sharp, hard, throaty, breathy, broad, silky, biting, sweet, blunt, watery, cool, tinny, harsh, airy, sour, lush, velvety, lyrical, gravely, bell like ..... the aim is to inject originality into the music.

The blues have traditionally been a focus of timbral variety. The blues have always been played 'dirty'!

10.7 Written Work.

a) Using the harmonic progression at the end of 10.2 produce 24 bars of blues material in the key of C.

b) Build a similar type of exercise in the key of Eb.

NB. We now move on to the last lesson in part 1 of the course and study a particularly potent way of creating a blues effect.

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