

Blues theory

Actually, there is no such a thing as 'blues theory', at least not like the theory about western tonal music. In jazz theory books, the chapters about blues are often quite small, because blues is in part a feeling, a mood.

Improvisers often stress the need for practicing the blues. It is not so hard to play by ear and it is a great vehicle for self expression. The blues scales have a certain independence which can be used to bridge all kinds of harmonic situations, in either a conscious or unconscious way. Musicians who like to step out of the harmony often use bluesy tools to step back in or to 'justify' their heavy stuff.

Suffering

The blues, originating from slavery, is usually about suffering. This can be found on three different levels:

- The lyrics: they generally cover sad subjects.
- The harmony: strangely enough the Tonic function is represented by a Dominant 7th chord. This way the tension is never completely resolved; neither was the suffering of the slaves.
- The melody contains blue notes: notes that clash with the harmony and are associated with pain rather than with joy and peace.

Poetry of the blues

The 'classic' form of blues poetry consists of three lines.

- The first line often describes a certain – not so pleasant – situation.
- In the second line, the first one is usually repeated. At this point the harmony is changed. Thus, the context of the sentence is changed, keeping things interesting
- The third line is often a conclusion or a confirmation, referring to the situation described in the first lines.

*I'm feelin' lonely, 'cause my baby ain't with me
I'm feelin' lonely, 'cause my baby ain't with me
And if my baby's with me, I still feel lone-lee*

(original lyrics by Bart Noorman).

Harmony of the blues

The framework of most major blues tunes consists of three chords, used in a 12-bar form. Substitutions can be made, other chords can fill up spaces, but the essence of the blues consists of these three chords of the dominant seventh type.

Here below is an example of an unadorned blues pattern in C major:

C7			
F7		C7	
G7	(F7)	C7	(G7)

Minor blues: see below.

The blues scale

The blues scale has its roots in *pentatonic* scales. The pentatonic scale is 'universal'. It is heard in Asia, Africa, and in Western countries. The most common pentatonic scales are *major pentatonic* and *minor pentatonic*. The word penta means 'five'. Pentatonic scales have five notes, and are often written down with an extra tonic in the octave (similar to major and minor scales).

C-major-penta (major third)

C-minor penta (minor third)

Just like major and minor scales, each major pentatonic scale has its relative minor penta, since they are just inversions of each other. C-major penta has the same notes as A-minor penta. In fact, a pentatonic scale is the same as a 'normal' diatonic scale, with two omissions: the 4th and 7th note in major, and the 2nd and 6th in minor.

The scale that was important for the development of the blues was the *minor pentatonic* scale. During the slave trade era many Africans were brought to America. The songs that they sang while working on the land were called work songs (also spirituals and field hollers) and used this minor pentatonic scale.

Bending down one of the notes of the pentatonic scale, (so that it got a little out of tune) added musical expression. Although this is not historically documented, one could say that for slaves bending tones was a way to emphasize their misery, their 'blue' feeling. The note that makes a perfect fifth with the root was the one most commonly bent down.

The flatted fifth developed into a new independent note, added to the original five notes of the minor pentatonic scale. Below, you'll find the of C-blues scale, along with a famous melody that uses both the perfect fifth *and* the flatted fifth.

Note: the flatted fifth is often written as a raised fourth (f-sharp in this example). In some keys this prevents the appearance of double flats, and it also prevents the need to write natural signs in ascending melodies. The downside of this is that its original function as a lowered fifth is no longer apparent.

Moulds

Blues and pentatonic scales have an a-symmetric structure, because there are two gaps in the 'staircase'. With normal major scales, you can easily create all kinds of patterns. The 'gaps' in the blues and pentatonic scales however, make this very difficult. The blues scale works as a kind of mould: 'moulding' a solo in the shape of the scale, up- or downward. It should be said that the tendency to end a phrase downward, towards the root of the chord, is the strongest. It is like gravity.

Combining harmony and melody in a major blues

When you put the C blues scale mentioned above against the C7 chord, two clashes occur: the flatted fifth from the scale conflicts (in a spicy way) with the perfect fifth from C7, and the minor third (#9) clashes with the major third of C7. These clashes enhance the experience as a so called *blue note*. Blue notes sound very strong: they draw so much attention that resolving them upward to their neighbouring chord tone can even sound disappointing (depending on rhythm and phrasing, as always). Resolving them by going down the blues scale often gives them a better flavor.

Other approaches for major blues harmonies

The blues scale mentioned above can be applied throughout the whole chorus. The framework of the blues is so strong that strange clashes like 11ths on dominant chords and a major (!) 7th on the fifth scale degree don't raise eyebrows.

Another possibility is to play the blues scale of the *relative minor key*. The A minor blues scale fits a C major blues fine. However, the perfect fifth of this scale should then be avoided.

You can also give *each* dominant chord its *own* blues scale: C blues on C7, F blues on F7, and G blues on G7. This gives a little more diversity, and is a logical second step for the beginning improviser.

It is possible to play *mixolydian* scales on all three chords. This approach however is not very bluesy, and has nothing to do with the historical background (pain and misery) of the blues.

These different possibilities all evoke their own world. It should be stressed that mixing all these possibilities together is asking for trouble. It is better to stick to one concept. For example, the A minor blues scale on a C major blues harmony has only one blue note in common with the original C blues scale. The a and the flatted fifth of C blues (g-flat) combine very badly.

Minor blues harmony and scales

The primary *minor* blues structure behaves much more like a normal diatonic tune. In fact it can be analyzed according to the normal system of scale degrees. Its twelve bar basic form looks like this:

Cm7 (I)				
Fm7 (IV)		Cm7 (I)		
Ab7 (SubV/V)	G7 (V)	Cm7 (I)	G7 (V)	

From a diatonic point of view, the player can use the C-minor scale everywhere. There are two exceptions: on Ab7 a *g-flat* is appropriate, and on G7 you may want to use a *b* instead of a b-flat.

The C blues scale also matches these chords perfectly. The sound is milder than in the major blues, because the minor third of the scale no longer clashes. The most bluesy note you can pick in a minor blues is the remaining flatted fifth, g-flat.

Like in a major blues, it is also possible to give each chord its own blues scale.

The movie belonging to this document demonstrates most of these combinations in the key of F. Enjoy!