

Beyond the Blues Scale

SCMEA Professional Development Conference

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Introduction

Thank you for joining me this afternoon to explore some ways that young improvisers can learn to expand their vocabulary to include more than just the blues scale. To be clear, the blues and everything that it represents is at the very heart of the jazz tradition (and all popular music, for that matter), and that includes the blues scale itself. The scale is a perfect entry point to learning to improvise: it is generally easy to learn, is fun, sounds cool, has a limited range, allows for easy call-and-response exercises, and “works” over the whole progression.

I am not advocating abandoning the blues scale by any means. Rather, I seek to help you guide your students to dig deeper into the jazz tradition and be able to more clearly communicate the harmonic framework of the blues progression (or any tune), so that the blues scale and its beautiful inflections will have the greatest impact on the listener. Improvising is often about making **choices**, and I hope that the blues scale will be one of a number of great choices your students can make. Great solos include both horizontal/linear (scalar) shapes **AND** vertical (chordal) shapes **AND** great voice-leading/connection. Scales often present too many choices for improvisers, and not every note in a scale sounds good in every rhythmic position.

In recent years, we have enjoyed a number of terrific clinics here at our conference that emphasized the importance of listening to jazz and transcribing great solos. This **IS** the most direct way to absorb the jazz language and to develop vocabulary, and I wholeheartedly encourage this approach to learning the craft of jazz improvisation. Today, I want to get a bit more specific about the inner workings of the blues progression to give you explicit ways of helping your students.

The Blues Scales

Most students (including us!) begin their journey as improvisers by learning “The Blues Scale:”



We are instructed to use this scale exclusively over the entire chord progression, something that helps us get up and running quickly. It also serves to build some early confidence.

In reality, the scalar approach to the blues is more complicated than the scale above. In reality, there are two blues scales that we can use. We’ll call the one above the “minor blues scale,” since it includes and emphasizes the minor third. There is also a “major blues scale:”



I like to use these scale shapes interchangeably, for the following reasons:

Minor Blues Scale

- Best communicates the expressive and emotional qualities and the spirit of the blues through the use of the blue notes (the notes “outside” of the key)
- I like this shape best over the IV chord because of the presence of the Ab in the Bb7 chord and the scale – I feel like it has the most impact here.

Major Blues Scale

- I use this shape when I play more commercial types of things in places where I want the blues sound, but in a more diatonic way. It matches a little more cleanly with the harmony.
- I like this shape best over the I chord (and potentially in the key of Bb over the Bb7 chord)

Listen to your favorite jazz musicians of all styles and see how and when they use these shapes.

The Blues Progression

The chord progression for the blues is normally (but not always) 12 measures in length, and generally features the I, IV, and V chords. There are **many** exceptions and alterations to this, but we will stick to the basics today. Here is the most basic blues progression:

Here is the standard progression favored by jazz musicians today, enhanced by much more harmony, especially the use of the ii-V-I progression in the latter portion of the progression:

The image shows three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, each with four measures. The first staff contains chords F7, Bb7, F7, and Bb7. The second staff contains chords Bb7, F7, Am7, and D7. The third staff contains chords Gmi7, C7, F7, D7, Gmi7, and C7. The last two measures of the third staff are highlighted with a double bar line and labeled as a turnaround.

It is this second version of the progression that we will work with today, since it is the progression that your students encounter when they play jazz audition. Jamey Aebersold features this progression in his play-along books, specifically Volume 1 and 54.

Harmonic Approaches to the Blues

We will start by identifying the most important notes of any chord: the third and seventh. These are often referred to as the *guidetone lines*. Notice the close relationships of the guidetone lines on the blues progression in the example below. They provide the voice-leading and allow us to play a solo that goes through the progression.

The image shows three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, each with four measures. The first staff shows the third and seventh notes for F7, Bb7, F7, and Bb7. The second staff shows the third and seventh notes for Bb7, F7, Am7, and D7. The third staff shows the third and seventh notes for Gmi7, C7, F7, D7, Gmi7, and C7. The notes are written as whole notes on a five-line staff.

Of special interest is the relationship between A and Ab through the first 7 measures of the progression:

Three staves of musical notation showing a 12-measure blues progression. The first staff has measures 1-4 with chords F7, B^b7, F7, and a whole note. The second staff has measures 5-8 with chords B^b7, F7, A^m7, and D7. The third staff has measures 9-12 with chords G^mi7, C7, F7, D7, G^mi7, and C7.

An easy way for students to start playing a solo that communicates the harmony of the progression would be to play off of that relationship. With young improvisers, I often have them work the A-Ab connection for seven measures, and then fill in the last five measures of the progression with the minor blues scale. Here is a sample chorus utilizing this approach:

Three staves of musical notation showing a sample chorus. The first staff has measures 1-4 with chords F7, B^b7, F7, and a whole note. The second staff has measures 5-8 with chords B^b7, F7, A^m7, and D7, with a "Blues scale to the end" annotation. The third staff has measures 9-12 with chords G^mi7, C7, F7, D7, G^mi7, and C7.

From here, the plot thickens and things quickly become more intricate (and likely difficult for student and teacher alike), yet represent the next logical harmonic step. In measures 9-11 of the blues progression, we encounter the ii-V-I progression, a hallmark of many songs played by jazz musicians. To be successful in the long term, being able to navigate through the ii-V-I progression is essential. However, from the cerebral perspective, it requires a good bit more music theory, and that can be a barrier for some students.

Here are two basic approaches to the ii-V-I progression, one involving the first five notes of the modal scale for each chord (dorian, mixolydian and major, respectively), and one involving simply the triad of each chord. Finding good ii-V-I vocabulary isn't especially difficult. Recordings provide infinite options, of course, but we can jump start things by using some patterns from the Jamey Aebersold Volume 3 play-along (*The ii-V-I Progression*).

Two musical staves illustrating ii-V-I progressions in the key of F major. The first staff shows the first five notes of the modal scales: Dorian for Gmi7, Mixolydian for C7, and Major for F7. The second staff shows the triads for Gmi7, C7, and F7.

Perhaps the most important measure in the blues progression is measure 8, and this is where Bebop musicians really thrive. We find a ii-V here, too, one that involves a secondary dominant leading to the ii chord in the key. In the key of F, the F# of the D7 chord in measure 8 is essential because it is outside of the key we are in. I often instruct students to simply start with this easy ii-V line:

A musical staff showing a ii-V progression in the key of F major: Ami7 followed by D7.

Notice that the length of the ii-V in measure is half that of the full ii-V-I progression in measures 9-11 – we need to acquire and ingrain vocabulary for both instances.

Here, then, is a chorus combining these approaches, with a blues scale ending:

A musical staff showing a chorus combining the two approaches from the previous staves, ending with a blues scale.

Using a combination of the blues scales and these harmonic approaches (and more) will help students play more interesting, varied solos that effectively communicate both the harmonic infrastructure of the blues (or any tune) and the spirit of the blues itself.

Practicing

Practicing improvisation is different in many respects than practicing traditional written music. Here are some things to consider:

1. **Repetition** – Improvising is about making immediate choices. The material we choose to play must be automatic so that it is available to us when we want to play it. I encourage slow practice to initially learn something, and fast practice to really ingrain things.
2. **“Plug and Play”** – “Plugging in” a shape might feel artificial, and it will be at first, but it is a good way to start playing good vocabulary sooner. “Sonny Rollins played this over this chord!” If it’s good enough for Sonny Rollins, it should be good enough for us! In time, more organic ideas will emerge, but to start with, I want my students to feel good about what they are playing, so if they know it sounds good, they should use it.
3. **Practicing Improvising!** So many students simply work on memorizing lots of lines/licks/patterns/shapes, but then fail to implement what they learned, and their solos sound the same. We need to use what we practice! And we need to practice improvising, preferably with other musicians, but even with play-alongs or unaccompanied.

Thank you so much for coming this afternoon!

I hope some of this material helps you inspire your students to learn to dig deeper with their soloing!

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Matt Olson, Saxophonist

Equally at home as a jazz and classical saxophonist, Conn-Selmer Endorsing Artist **Matt Olson** is Professor of Saxophone and Director of Jazz Studies at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. He hails from Racine, Wisconsin, and holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Illinois, and a Master of Music degree in Jazz Pedagogy and Bachelor of Music degree in Saxophone Performance from Northwestern University. Matt's teachers have included Frederick Hemke, Debra Richtmeyer, Mike Kocour, Don Owens, Paul Bro, Ron Bridgewater, Tom Wirtel, Thomas Matta, and Jonathan Helton.



Matt's professional work includes performances with Randy Brecker, Kurt Elling, Benny Carter, Chris Potter, Wayne Bergeron, John Fedchock, Jason Marsalis, Byron Stripling, Jeff Coffin, Ken Peplowski, Kevin Mahogany, Doc Severinsen, Ryan Keberle, Andy Martin, Wycliffe Gordon, Chris Vadala, Manhattan Transfer, Aretha Franklin, Natalie Cole, Bernadette Peters, Lou Rawls, Michael Feinstein, Johnny Mathis, Ben Folds, Bob Newhart, Wayne Newton, the Temptations, the Four Tops, children's entertainer Shari Lewis, the Chicago Jazz Ensemble, the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, and the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra. His performances have taken him to the Montreal Jazz Festival as well as to Chicago's Jazz Showcase and Orchestra Hall.

Matt is a founding member and co-leader of the *Unbinged Sextet*, a collaborative jazz sextet dedicated to the recording of original compositions. The group features educators from a number of key music schools throughout the United States. *Unbinged's* two recordings on OA2 Records, *Clarity* (2015) and *Don't Blink* (2017), have received worldwide radio airplay and numerous positive reviews. Matt's new organ trio record *789 Miles* will be released on OA2 Records in 2019.

Matt has been part of commissions that resulted in new works for the saxophone by composers Frank Ticheli, John FitzRogers, Christopher Dobrian, Don Owens, and Roscoe Mitchell. He has presented performances and master classes at numerous national and regional conferences of the North American Saxophone Alliance and the World Saxophone Congress. He has also been a featured guest artist at Northwestern University, Arizona State University, the University of Chicago, the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, the University of Idaho, and high schools throughout the United States. He has published articles in both *Downbeat* magazine and *The Saxophone Symposium*, and eJazzlines publishes Matt's original compositions for large jazz ensemble.

Matt is active nationally as a clinician and adjudicator. He has presented clinics at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, the Jazz Education Network Conference, and the South Carolina Music Educators Association conference. He was previously the instructor of saxophone for the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities and a summer instructor for the National High School Music Institute at Northwestern University. He also conducted one of two 2005 South Carolina Band Directors Association All-State Jazz Ensembles.

Contact Matt via email at Matt.Olson@furman.edu, and find more information about him, including a number of educational handouts, online at www.MattOlsonMusic.com.