

# BLUES SCALE BASICS

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The blues is a style and a tradition all of its own, which existed before jazz and continues to exist outside jazz. The blues was, however, a formative influence on jazz and that influence continues to permeate many styles today. The extent to which you choose to incorporate blues into your jazz playing will go some way to defining your individual style.

## BLUE NOTES

Central to the blues sound is that of “blue” notes. The blues originated as a vocal tradition and it is characterised by certain tones being flatted – but not in agreement with the equal-temperament scale. These can be thought of as half-flatted inflections, and they occur on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> degrees of the scale:

## IN THE KEY OF C



The dominant 7<sup>th</sup> does not imply that the chord is a V in motion towards another chord – rather, we can usefully consider the I chord in a blues to be a dominant chord.

Most instruments can generate these half-flat sounds, but the piano has to use tricks to approximate them:



The second two versions involve softening the sound of the sliding note by hiding it underneath a higher tone.

Even on instruments that can get these half-flat blue notes, the fully flatted tone is often played. It is effective because it resonates against the unflatted note in the harmony:



Note how “bluesy” some of the full scales sound, because they contain combinations of the “blued” and “unblued” tones we’ve been looking at:

C7b9

x x x x x

C7alt

x x x x

C∅

x x x

However, the standard tonality of the blues is the straight dominant (Mixolydian) scale with the blue notes as optional tones:

+ +

This entire structure breaks down neatly into gapped scales, each of which addresses a single blue tone in detail. Some people refer to these as major and minor blues scales:

C Major Blues Scale

x x

C Minor Blues Scale

x x

Note that these are the major and minor pentatonic scales with an added note – the flat 3<sup>rd</sup> on major and the flat 5<sup>th</sup> on minor. They are also the same structure a minor third apart:

#### C Minor Blues Scale



#### A Minor Blues Scale



Most people simply think of there being one blues scale – the minor – and work by combining the home (minor) blues scale with the (minor) blues scale a minor third below. This is easy to remember since the two roots are in a relative major/minor relationship.

### MAJOR AND MINOR BLUES

Traditional blues is, interestingly enough, almost a modal kind of music. This means that we tend to apply the relevant blues scales *of the key in which we're playing*. The clashes that occur over the chords of the blues progression are largely overridden by the blues scale sound.

So C (minor) and A (minor) blues scales can be used over all the chords in a basic major blues – C7, F7 and G7, although some care is needed when using the E natural over the F7 chord. The best results come from combining the two scales.

C (minor) blues scale can be used over all the chords in a minor blues – Cm, Fm, DØ, G7b9. In a minor blues, the third of the key is always minor, so the A (minor) blues scale (the one which contains E natural) isn't used.

### USING THE BLUES SCALE IN OTHER CONTEXTS

The blues scale can be used in any context, on any tune.

Over C7, play C and A (minor) blues scales.  
Over Cm7, play C (minor) blues scale.

Over a major chord we simply substitute a dominant and play what we would play over a C7.

Again, we tend to play the blues scale of the key centre we're in at that point in the tune. So, over a II-V-I-VI (or part of it), we would play the blues scales associated with the I, rather than blues scales on the component chords. For instance:

Play C and A minor blues scales over the whole of  
Dm7 G7 CΔ A7b9

Play C minor blues scale over the whole of  
DØ G7alt CΔ A7alt

Note that you don't have to use the blues scale to sound bluesy. All you have to do is play within any given jazz scale and "blue" one or other of the key notes by flattening (or half-flattening) them.

## **TASTE AND JUDGMENT**

Some people get a bit carried away with the blues scale and tend to overuse it. A commonly used (albeit rather un-PC) analogy is to compare the blues scale to swearing – in which context overuse quickly becomes wearing.

The blues scale is a very effective and flexible tool – but take care not to let this become an excuse to be lazy and rely on it too much.

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Best of luck, and feel free to e-mail me with any queries or comments at [jlyon@opus28.co.uk](mailto:jlyon@opus28.co.uk).

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