

SUSSING OUT THE BLUES

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Most learning players approach a blues by combining the following two approaches:

1. Using figures from the blues scales over quite straight old-fashioned blues harmony.
2. Using bebop scales and language over elaborated “jazz blues” changes.

There’s another way to go about things, though, and it’s characteristic of McCoy Tyner’s approach (as heard on albums such as *Inception*, *Nights of Ballads & Blues*, *The Real McCoy*, *Time for Tyner*, *Reaching Fourth*, etc).

BACK TO BASICS

The first thing to recognise is that in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was something of a backlash going on against the highly complex, elaborated chordal structure of bebop. Players such as Monk, Tyner and Coltrane played a lot of blues, and they generally went back to basics – not much more than the old three-chord trick, although often with variations of those three chords.

We can propose a very basic blues structure that Tyner in particular made a lot of use of:

Blues in Bb

:	Bb7		Eb7		Bb7		Bb7alt	
	Eb7		/		Bb7		/	
	F#7		B7		Bb7		F7	:

The II-Vs and extended cadences beloved of bebop players are totally absent. This is very much the basic old-fashioned blues progression – but with one clear modern twist. Bars 9-10 would usually read Cm7 – F7. Tyner very often uses tritone substitutions of both and plays them as dominants.

So what we have is a very basic, “slabby” chord progression. This presents a challenge to players used to bebop – the progression seems rather static and doesn’t allow for all the II-V tricks and extended harmony bebop players may be used to. Faced with this simplicity, a lot of players go back to basics and start running blues licks like crazy.

Tyner’s sound is notable for not doing this. He occasionally uses a “blue” note – the flat 3rd, but he hardly ever plays figures from the blues scales. His approach is much more modal, *scale-based*, and the scale he overwhelmingly favours is the straight Mixolydian that you’d expect over dominant chords.

WHAT EXACTLY IS THE TONIC CHORD ON A BLUES?

Before we go further, there’s a question we need to ask – just what is the I chord on a blues? There isn’t a simple answer – the home chord on a blues doesn’t fit very well with our traditional understanding of a tonic chord.

Crucially, the I chord on a blues is a dominant, but it’s a dominant that doesn’t function as a V chord – ie, it doesn’t want to resolve anywhere.

It's also ambiguous between major and minor – the 3rd can be either, or both. If we play the 3rd as minor, we'd be happy to emphasise the 4th: lines hung around 4th, 3rd, root and b7th are totally idiomatic to the blues sound. What a lot of people don't realise is that we can also emphasise the 4th of the scale in exactly the same way if we're playing the 3rd as a *major*.

Tyner does this all the time – have a little play around with this principle for a bit if you don't believe me. You'll hear Tyner's distinctive sound if you construct little riffs using 4th, major 3rd, root and b7th over a dominant chord. The 9th and 5th can also be used.

The surprising upshot is that, over the I chord of a blues, the 4th note of the Mixolydian scale not only *isn't* an "avoid" note, it's actually favoured – you can regard it as a chord tone.

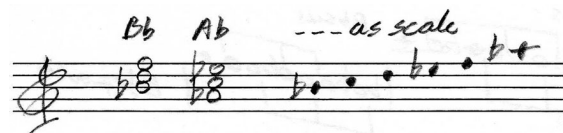
Incidentally, this applies to the IV chord in a blues as well. Tyner usually goes even further and isn't shy to emphasise the 4th on the cadence chords as well – the tritone-altered chords in bars 9-10.

A SHORTCUT – HEXATONIC SUS SCALES

I've remarked elsewhere that a certain modern sound is achieved by broadly treating all dominant chords as sus chords. This is the case in standard II-V-I situations, but it also applies when we're dealing with tonic blues chords. This approach works well in this context because one way of looking at a sus chord is as a dominant where the 4th is promoted from an "avoid" note to a desired chord tone.

A nice quick way into the sus sound is to use a hexatonic scale. Hexatonic scales are derived by combining the tones of two mutually exclusive triads. The most commonly used hex scale for a sus sound combines major triads on the root and b7th of the chord. So:

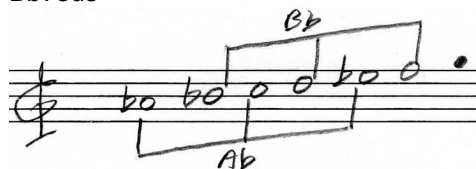
Bb7sus



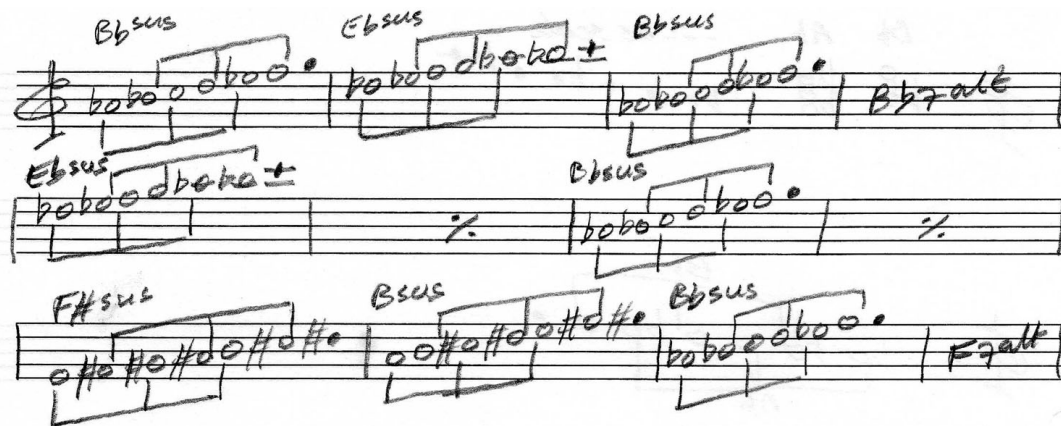
Focusing on combining tones from these two triads gives you all kinds of ways of suggesting the sus sound – allowing you to give strong weight to the 4th of the scale.

It's as well to practise these hexatonic sounds rigidly, just sticking to the triads, but when playing for real you can be more flexible – play the whole scale, but focus on the two triads as a sort of structural overlay, in order to give prominence to the desired tones:

Bb7sus



We can produce a kind of scale map using this approach, which I find makes a good visual aid when practising this sound:



We get into the sound of the prominent 4th by focusing on triad pairs over each dominant chord:

Bb7sus:	Ab / Bb
Eb7sus:	Db / Eb
F#7sus:	E / F#
B7sus:	A / B

ON THE OTHER HAND

McCoy typically accompanied these solo line with fourth voicings in the left hand. If you're using to using rootless LH voicings, you can quickly get into this sound by just leaving out the second from bottom voice.

Try this approach out over the basic blues chords in Bb, F and Eb. Tyner's blues heads sometimes involve more complex changes (*Blues for Gwen*, for instance) but he usually solos over very straight changes. Try it out also over other blues that are still simple, but use other variations for the basic chords, such as Miles' *Freddie Freeloader*, Coltrane's *Cousin Mary* and some of the structures on the album *Coltrane Plays the Blues*.

Best of luck with this approach. Free to e-mail me with any (preferably constructive) comments at jlyon@opus28.co.uk.

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