



Playing the Blues

STANDARDS

Addresses the following
National Curriculum Standards
for **Music Education**

Primary: 2, 3, 6

Secondary: 4, 5

Overview

This lesson enables students to gain a broader awareness of the basic blues scale and the harmonic structure of the standard blues progression. Students will be given introductory exercises on blues improvisation and will also investigate the use of bending and sliding pitches and their importance in both the understanding and performance of blues music.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Understand how to correlate Roman numerals with the note names of a scale in a given key.
- Identify the musical intervals of the blues scale as well as dominant, subdominant, and root chords of the blues.
- Transpose the blues progression and blues scale into various keys.
- Identify half-tones not found in a chromatic scale.

RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- **The Blues Teacher's Guide** CD
 - Bessie Smith, "Lost Your Head Blues"
 - Muddy Waters, "Mannish Boy"

Instruments

A piano or alternative instrument (*guitar/accordion*) that can play whole steps, half steps, and chords

Band instruments, xylophones/tone bells, any melodic source for students to use individually (*optional*)

Web Site

- <http://www.emplive.com>

VIEWING GUIDE

Visit www.pbs.org/theblues for index of film segment start times and lengths.

FILM TIE-INS**Defining the Blues**

Red, White and Blues (end of the “Was the UK Blues Scene Significant?” segment, in which a variety of people define the blues)

Introductory Exercise

The blues has often been portrayed as slow, mournful music full of bleak images of personal pain and despair. This exercise asks students to expand their understanding of the genre. Start by asking students what feelings they associate with the word “blue.” After discussing, ask what they imagine blues music might be about. Why do they have these notions? How much of their description has to do with the way the music sounds? With the music’s lyrics? With their understanding of the word “blue” in the context of feelings?

Play Bessie Smith’s “Lost Your Head Blues.” Ask students if this song reinforces or challenges their notions of blues music. Point out that while the song might sound mournful, it actually depicts a bold woman willing to stand up to her husband. Next, play Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy.” What does this song do to students’ preconceptions of blues music? Finally, play an example of “jump blues.” (See the glossary, p.44, for a definition.) By this point, student definitions of blues music should be more nuanced than they were originally. Point out that the blues is a means of self-expression; as such, it naturally includes a wide variety of emotional moods, including sadness, desperation, humor, flirtation, and, very often, happiness. Conclude this discussion by playing the end of the “Was the UK Blues Scene Significant?” segment from *Red, White and Blues*, in which a variety of people talk about what defines the blues. [See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed film information. Short song clips by jump blues performers such as Louis Jordan and Wynonie Harris can be found in Experience Music Project’s Digital Collection at <http://www.emplive.com>.]

After students have explored the music that exists under the umbrella of the blues, inform them that certain musical elements are present in much blues music. To allow them to hear the commonalities in blues songs, play a variety of tracks and ask students to identify these shared characteristics. To reinforce student understanding of essential blues elements, assign them to read the essay in this guide, “*Understanding the 12-Bar Blues.*”

This entire exercise can be wrapped up by having students complete a one-page written response to the question “What are the blues?” Student writings should capture the ideas presented in the lesson.

Focus Exercise

This exercise introduces the blues scale and blues improvisation. The theory of using numbers that correlate to the seven letters identifying note names in music should be introduced if students are not familiar with the construction of an **eight-tone diatonic scale** (i.e., begin with *C=1, D=2, E=3*, and continue up to the octave *C=8*). Play the scale a number of times to allow students to hear the pattern. Next, introduce the notes of the **chromatic scale** by inserting them between the eight-tone scale. Again, the teacher should demonstrate by playing a chromatic scale. If students have their own instruments, they should be encouraged to play both scales as well. To further reinforce student understanding, ask them to sing the scales and at the same time mirror the intervals with hand movements.

Inform students that the blues scale uses some of the same pitches as the eight-tone major scale while adding some others. The blues scale is built around a **pentatonic scale**, which is common in many African music cultures. Begin to introduce this blues scale by demonstrating the notion of bending pitches. Do so by playing the flat 3rd, flat 5th, and flat 7th steps in any given key. Now, incorporate all the pitches that construct a **blues scale** in any given key.

Show, via overhead projector or handout, the notes in a blues scale: the root (1), the flat 3rd (b3), the 4th (4), the flat 5th (b5), the 5th (5), the flat 7th (b7), and the octave (8). Choosing a specific key, have students repeat this scale pattern up and down on whatever chromatic instruments are available. Periodically, students should revert to playing the original eight-tone major scale to train their ear to hear the difference between the two types of scales.

Another characteristic of the blues is improvisation. Inform students that the blues scale is used to construct melody, which is created through variations on the order in which the blues scale pitches are played. The flexible order and duration of the chosen pitches is called **musical improvisation**. Improvisation allows performers to create a different mood or convey a different meaning through their personal choices of notes, tempos, and rhythms.

Walk students through the following exercise, with the goal of using the notes from the blues scale to make up their own phrases (of 12 measures in 4/4 time) on any melodic instrument. Start by having students echo short phrases you play on non-pitched instruments. Once students have mastered the echo, keep playing the same rhythmic phrase while one or two individual students improvise their own rhythm. Continue this call-and-response exercise until all class members have had a chance to improvise. Maintain this call-and-response format, using longer and longer phrases and eventually transitioning into pitched instruments and two-three notes. Once students have mastered diatonic improvisation, move into blues improvisation, using the blues scale and the same technique of echo and call and response.

To help build student competence in blues improvisation and to reinforce the conversational tone of improvising, wrap up by allowing students to try “trading fours” with a partner. Trading fours refers to each player in the duo taking turns improvising on four-bar measures.

In addition to the blues scale and the melodies related to it, the use of a particular harmonic or chord pattern identifies the blues. This exercise introduces students to the three basic chords of the blues. These chords create the vertical harmony that supports the horizontal melodies. Start by presenting a visual example of the music staff, with a root chord (I), subdominant chord (IV), and the dominant chord (V)—the most common chords used in a blues progression. Demonstrate playing these chords in the key of C and have students echo. Then, have students construct these chords in one or two easier keys by changing the identity of the root chord. Inform students that one of the more popular formulas for a blues progression is played using the chords mentioned above in the following pattern: I-IV-I-IV-IV-I-I-V-IV-I-V. Students should be encouraged to play the progression above on chorded instruments, or at least the root note of each chord in the progression if they do not have a chorded instrument. Conclude by introducing the notion of a 7th chord. Show what such a chord looks like on a music staff, using a V7—common to the blues—for your example. Play the V7 and give students a chance to do the same. Finally, have students play the pattern above, substituting the V7 for the V. Discuss how adding the 7th chord changes the sound and how this sound can be heard in the blues.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Assign students to prepare a compare/contrast presentation by listening to a Delta blues recording that uses bended pitches and then performing a stripped-down version of the same song without using the bended-pitch technique. In conjunction with their performances, students should compose a short writing in which they describe how the song’s mood or feeling changes when the bended pitches are eliminated. Possible options for songs include “Cross Road Blues” by Robert Johnson, “Stack O’ Lee” by Mississippi John Hurt, and “Trouble So Hard.”

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Choose a blues song that was not used in the lesson. Assign students to analyze the song, presenting their analysis either orally or in writing. Student analysis should include the following: identification of the root of each chord used in the harmonic progression and any melodic pitches used that are not in the standard blues scale; instances of the use of bended pitch and of trading fours (four measures vocal/four measures instrument); the use of call and response between the singer and his/her own instrument; and a critique of how well the sound of the music matches the content of the lyrics.

Extensions

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

1. The **Focus Exercise** prepared students to combine the vertical, horizontal, and improvisational elements of playing the blues. Begin by having half the students play the root notes or chords of the basic blues progression in 4/4 time, repeating back to the beginning of the progression without dropping a beat. The other half of the class should use the notes of the blues scale to improvise a 12-bar melody that will correspond with the harmonic progression. To assist the students playing the melody, recommend the following formula: play each note of the blues scale as a quarter note. When you reach the top of the scale (8), rest for a beat and then come back down in quarter notes, again resting for one beat before beginning upward again. Three complete scale cycles up and down will be equal to one entire chorus of 12-bar blues or one time through the harmonic progression. *[This will not be true improvisation until the students gradually begin to change the order in which they play the notes of the blues scale and trade the quarter-note rhythm for more varied and individual choices.]*

2. Discuss the role that body language plays in song delivery. How does a performer's physical commitment to a song impact its message? How would students expect someone who is singing about love to look? How about letting loose on Saturday night? Have students listen to several blues songs, and then ask how they would expect the performers to look while singing and playing.

Instruct students that during slavery and in the subsequent Jim Crow South, oppression meant that, in addition to being denied many freedoms, African Americans were expected to make their bodies look subservient in posture. Blacks, when interacting with whites in the Jim Crow South, were expected to have their shoulders slumped over, with their faces looking down. Looking a white person in the eye was considered disrespectful.

Using historic footage from *The Blues* films (clips from any of the films will work), have students cite examples of performers who demonstrate subservient posture while performing. Students should note the content of their song lyrics as well. In contrast, ask students to cite examples where the performers are both direct and confident in their presentation, again also noting the content of their song lyrics. After viewing the films, discuss whether the song lyrics matched the posture. This exercise can be extended by asking students to research the state of race relations in the country at the time of each performance identified in the films. Conclude by asking students to create a visual that depicts the physical posture, lyrics, and accompanying racial climate of three or four performances.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

There are many variations beyond the basic blues progression presented in the **Focus Exercise**. Have students research other acceptable standard progressions and transcribe them. Once at least five progressions have been transcribed, students should play them to hear how they sound. When familiar with the sound of each, assign students to find a blues song that employs each. Selecting these examples should also help students uncover how certain progressions are employed by blues musicians from different regions or time periods. Following their research, ask students to make presentations in which they demonstrate a few progressions, cite examples (and play a recording of them, if possible), and discuss when and where these progressions were commonly employed. Students can start their research at <http://www.station185.com/kronoson/kronosonic/lessons/BluesProgressions.pdf> but should look beyond this site for additional examples.

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Within the 12-bar blues format, students should write an original blues song, using a key employed in previous activities. Direct students to begin by mapping out the chords in each measure (e.g., I–I–IV–I), using the standard blues scale and standard harmonic progression covered earlier in the lesson. Students should next write melodic pitches in the staff above the chords. The use of bended pitch should be encouraged and can be notated by a small “scoop” line either extending upward toward the melodic note or downward from it, depending on the desired sound. Students should have the option of going beyond writing the song down in manuscript by recording their performance on video or cassette tape. If students are not proficient enough in performance, the teacher should play the compositions (melody and harmony separately, if necessary). Lyrics do not need to be a component of this exercise, although an accelerated student may be encouraged to experiment on his/her own.

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings

- Brooks, Lonnie. *Blues for Dummies*. Foster City, CA: IDG Books Worldwide, 1998.
- Jahn, Janheinz. "Blues: The Conflict of Cultures." *Write Me a Few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader*. Tracy, Stephen C., ed. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.

Web Sites

- Alvira, José Rodríguez. *Online Music Theory Reference: Chords*. <http://www.teoria.com/reference/chords.htm>.
- Scales: *The Blues Scale*. CyberfretBass.com. <http://www.cyberfretbass.com/scales/blues/index.php>.