

THE BLUES WEEK ONE

The Blues comes from a strange place because it was invented as a result of slavery. Africans forced into servitude had very different musical roots than their captors. So as a consequence there was born a mixture of African and European music that became known as “The Blues.”

Today we take the sound of the “devil’s music” for granted and a whole industry has grown up around it. Most things from the history of it’s main characters to the recorded music is sold. It is remarkable, given that this is such a simple format played by social outcasts, that The Blues still exists at all. In fact it is an amazing set of coincidences that brought a forgotten Blues hero back from the dead to grow the Blues scene as we know it today.

Robert Johnson died in the 1930’s some say from poison others that he was shot. He had a reputation as a womanizer which got him into trouble on lots of occasions. Johnson was also surrounded by a mythology which saw him selling his soul to the devil to be able to play the Blues as well as he did. In fact Johnson plays upon this myth by writing a song called “Crossroads Blues” which documents how he did this. But it was in 1961 when he was almost forgotten that his music, recorded in 1936/7 by the English born Don Law, was fortuitously re-released under the title “King Of The Delta Blues.” For some reason a small group of white middle class english boys would pick up on this music and bring it back to the attention of the world.

Principle amongst those young men was Eric Clapton who made it his life's mission to play The Blues. Others that heard the call where Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck and Keith Richards. Also amongst these Blues fans was Alexis Korner whose love of the music led him to invite the Blues men of the 50’s over to the UK thus kickstarting what has become known as “The British Blues Boom” of the 1960’s. This trend ended with British Blues acts such as Cream and Led Zeppelin selling Blues music back to the American public who had ignored their own home grown artists for years.

So we have the scenario where English musicians revive a music invented by slaves. A music that is not played in their own country and ignored in its country of origin America. Of course they go on to be big stars and also take some of the black blues guys with them which is how it should be. Ironic that the English start and finish this process.

THE FORMAT

The Blues has been formalised and has rules that must be adhered to to respect the sound of the music. Chief amongst those rules is the “12 Bar Blues” format that has been used since at least the early 1900’s and continues today.

The basic format for a 12 bar Blues is

G	G	G	G
C	C	G	G
D	C	G	D

There are of course many variations too numerous to go into here and i’m guessing freely available on the interweb.

Where do these chords come from well they come from the Major scale which may be a surprise to you. Remember The Blues is a mixture of genres and has some of it’s roots in hymns. Most church music would be composed by European composers who used the same scales as we do today.

The example above is in the key of G and uses three chords G, C, D. This format is also known as the 1,4,5 sequence. Here is how to find that sequence write the notes of your scale and number them like this

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
G	A	B	C	D	E	F#

Now take the 1 the 4 and the fifth note (G,C,D) and use those as the roots of your chords. These would be Major chords to get the minor chords we have to rewrite our scale as a Natural minor which users the same notes. This scale is known as the “relative minor” to find it we start on the 6th note of the Major scale.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E	F#	G	A	B	C	D

Now to find a minor Blues we take the 1, 4, and 5th note and make minor chords Em Am Bm.

Notice that the notes of the scale have not changed they are just rearranged.

THE BLUES SCALE WEEK TWO

So far it may come as a surprise that we have used the Major scale to make blues music. You may be asking how does this sound like The Blues ? The answer is it doesn't we need the Blues scale which I show here in E minor.

1	2	3	4	5	6
E	G	A	Bb	B	D
1	b3	4	b5	5	b7

The Blues scale is a six note scale which uses five notes from the Natural minor scale and adds one other note. This extra note is sometimes referred to as the "Blue Note" but in fact is a flat fifth from the root of the scale. It has a dissonant sound which comes from the Diminished scale. The idea being that the original Africans who used this scale could hear more dissonant tones than we could and so this note got added to the already mournful sound of Natural minor to create another sound entirely. Then other thing that makes the sound of the blues is in the delivery of the notes. That is in bending up to a note or sliding into a note from a semitone above or below. This was something that was not done until the advent of "The Blues."

The scale above has five positions on a guitar and can be used over a minor blues progression with ease. So E minor blues scale fits perfectly over a Blues in E minor or 1-4-5 in E minor which is Em, Am, Bm.

minor Blues progression variation where the 4 chord is in Bar two.

Em	Am	Em	Em
Am	Am	Em	Em
Bm	Am	Em	Bm

Another interesting thing about the use of this scale is that when we bend a note normally the bend has to be to another note in the scale. In blues music however it is acceptable to do micro bends that appear to have no musical value in terms of notes. That is they cannot be named at least in our western system. When listening to early British Blues recordings this is one of the elements that is missing from the performance.

THREE DIFFERENT APPROACHES WEEK THREE

The Blues scale can be used in three different ways even though we use the same patterns on the guitar we can move them around to make slightly different sounds. We have already familiarised ourselves with the minor Blues using E minor as our Key. But there is also a related Major key of G Major which is the same notes but starting on a different note in this case G.

To recap here is our Natural minor scale (not blues scale)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
E	F#	G	A	B	C	D

Here is the Major scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
G	A	B	C	D	E	F#

In fact the minor is made from the 6th degree of the Major.

If we take the 1-4-5 we get three Major chord G, C and D which can form the basis of a Major Blues progression.

So if the Major and Natural minor scales have the same notes and the minor Blues scale is taken from the minor scale, it would follow that the Major Blues scale has the same notes as the minor Blues scale.

here is the Major Blues scale

1	2	3	4	5	6
G	A	Bb	B	D	E

This scale can be used over a Major Blues progression in G. Notice that the “Blue Note” Bb is now a minor 3rd.

On Guitar we can use the same patterns we learned for our minor blues scales for Major as well as minor. These are the two simplest ways to use a Blues scale but please notice that we are not using Dom7 chords in our Major Blues. Whilst in the minor blues progressions it is fine to add the fourth note to our chords, so we get Em7-Am7-Bm7, it is not so good to add them to a Major Blues. To understand how to do this we have to use the mystical “Third Way” which is not so mystical but i’m sure that there is a book that uses that title somewhere.

THE THIRD WAY WEEK FOUR

The third way of using the Blues Scale comes from the minor side of things. We take the minor chords of Em, Am, Bm and substitute Dom7 chords.

E7	E7	E7	E7
A7	A7	E7	E7
B7	A7	E7	B7

We can use our E minor Blues scale over this progression which then throws up some more dissonant tones.

Here is the E minor Blues scale

1 2 3 4 5 6
E G A Bb B D

Played over a E7 we get these intervals

1 b3 4 b5 5 b7

Played over a A7 we get these intervals

5 b7 1 b9 9 4

Played over a B7 we get these intervals

4 #5 b7 7 1 b3

The dissonant notes such as b9 and b5 come from Diminished harmony and #5 comes from Harmonic / Melodic minor.

So as you can see this is far more harmonically rich than just the other two choices which really only have one "Blue Note." Add to this micro bends etc and you have a very dissonant sound indeed.

If you thought the Blues was simple well in fact it is but you can take it to another level if you understand how things work.

So to recap we have three ways in which our minor Blues scale will work.

1/ As a minor scale over a minor chord sequence with or without 7th note (Em7, Am7, Bm7)

2/ As a Major scale over a Major chord Sequence (G, C, D) no 7th note in chords. E minor scale functions as a Major scale. The Major chord sequence can be used as either Major or Hybrid because the Major chords do not have any 7th note you can pretend that they do.

3/ As a Hybrid scale over a Dominant 7 chord sequence (E7, A7, B7)

TURNAROUNDS WEEK FIVE

Turnarounds are simply a musical device used to literally turn a 12 bar sequence around from the end back to the beginning.

Below is the simplest form of Turnaround where the Turnaround is one bar long at the very end of the 12 bar sequence. (T = Turnaround) This would usually take the form of emphasising the five chord (D) by playing 8th notes a device which Status Quo used a lot.

G	G	G	G
C	C	G	G
D	C	G	T

More usual is the two bar Turnaround

G	G	G	G
C	C	G	G
D	C	T	T

Turnarounds can be in single note form or chordal form and can also be used as the intro to the song. Below we have two bars before the song starts which are in fact the Turnaround that is found at the end of the sequence. These two bars are only played once and the song repeats from the first G after the first run through.

SILENT BAR	SILENT BAR	T	T
G	G	G	G
C	C	G	G
D	C	T	T

USING THE BLUES SCALE IN OTHER CONTEXTS WEEK SIX

So far we have talked about the Blues it's chords and it's scale in a blues context. Of course the chords are not unique to the Blues and can be used in any musical situation. You would be forgiven for thinking that the Blues Scale can only be used for the Blues but that is not the case.

In many cases the Blues Scale and it's shorter brother the Pentatonic Scale are the only scale that is used. Many high profile players stick to using these scales over any type of song they come across.

Remember the Pentatonic Scale is just a shortened version of the Major / Natural minor Scale. The Blues Scale is just a Pentatonic Scale with an added dissonant note. So the Blues Scale can be used any time a Major or Natural minor scale can be used.

Then there is the more sophisticated way of playing the chord or "Playing over changes." This means taking each chord in a sequence and playing a scale that fits over that chord regardless of the key of the song. The easiest way to implement this with the Blues Scale is to use the Blues Scale over minor chords with the same name. So if there is an Em chord play E minor Blues Scale etc. This approach can also be used for Major chords the easiest way to do this would be over Dom7 chords. So if we have a G7 chord simply play G minor Blues Scale.

The best way to implement playing over changes is to learn your Major Scales which then opens out your sonic pallet even more. But the humble Blues Scale should always have a place in your arsenal. In fact the Blues is the bedrock of modern music and has infiltrated our consciousness if we know it or not. It's a long way from Africa to Chicago but who could have believed the influence this music we call the Blues would have on us. Given the circumstances I would say that it is nothing short of miraculous.