

Arts Education 10, 20, 30 – Music Monday

What Is The Blues?

Arts Education 10, 20, 30 Curriculum Area

Music Strand

- Examine how musicians' and composers' work and ideas about music have changed over time and will continue to change
- Demonstrate critical thought and support interpretations and opinions when responding to music
- Examine environmental, historical and social factors and issues that have influenced developments and innovations in music
- Identify how music can transmit or question cultural and societal traditions, values, and ideas.

Watch the following clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnyY5HS7Tbg>

Watch parts or all of the following videos and discuss main ideas:

A History of Blues Part 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRwXVnt0i3k>

A History of Blues Part 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xr3bIHqeAoU>

A History of Blues Part 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8b33OusOiM>

Watch BB King...listen to the story within the blues.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIW4ARVbhrw>

Terms or concepts for students to research & define:

Work Songs

Spirituals

Jim Crow Laws

Gumbo

Plantations

Old Africa and Old Europe

Sample questions for discussion:

What is The Blues? What do we know about or associate with The Blues?

What was happening in history when The Blues were making their mark on North America?

What comparisons can be made between racial prejudices that existed in American in the past to American today? How about in Canada historically and in

present day?

How do The Blues tell stories?

How do The Blues relate to music today? (ie: storytelling in Hip Hop)

Listen to the story told by Saskatchewan Hip Hop artist InfoRed in "I Remember."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGCQUQsVjZk>

Read Teaching The Blues by Paul Abraham (attached below)

Task:

Students work in pairs or small groups to write lyrics and music for their own blues songs or Hip Hop songs reflective of their own story.

Teaching the blues

[View Related Images](#)



By **PAUL ABRAHAMS**

Published: October 26, 2015

Views: 2,660

A moment after writing the title of this article, up popped an image of John Lee Hooker smiling and shaking his head. "Nobody can teach you the blues. Blues is a feeling, something you have to live." I tried explaining that I'm a jazz piano teacher and that it's part of my job but the image faded.

So where do we start? If you've read my previous articles or are one of my students, the following message will come as no surprise: no matter how many books you read or the amount of teachers you learn from, nothing will replace two activities: playing with other musicians and listening to the jazz and blues masters. So, onwards!

In my last article I bypassed the fruitless attempt to define jazz and will do likewise with the blues, but we can still amuse ourselves by googling it. Here's the first quote I came up with:

Melancholic music of black American folk origin, typically in a twelve-bar sequence.

I'd argue that it's not necessarily melancholic and we'll discuss the form later in this article. But I now want to address the subject of this article: teaching the blues.

When a potential student asks to be taught to play blues piano I have to admit to a rather grouchy response. "I teach jazz and, for me, blues is a part of jazz and jazz is a part of the blues." Actually, I'm not convinced that this is strictly true. But for teaching purposes I find it unhelpful to separate them into two distinct compartments. If we have to take a stab at separating them, it could be said that, say, Muddy Waters is in the blues camp. But as soon as we try attaching a 'jazz only' label to jazz musicians it becomes nigh impossible to assert that their music has no connection with the blues. There is, perhaps, less of a blues influence in the playing of Bill Evans than, say, Oscar Peterson. It could also be said that some European jazz has evolved through influences other than the blues.

I see my job as preparing students for a variety of blues tunes that they are likely to encounter at a gig. As this is an article rather than a book, I'll just be focusing on varying blues structures rather than chord choices, scales, licks etc.

Blues structures

A blues sequence can take on a number of guises, varying in time signature, length and chord structure. Here are some examples.

A basic blues

A basic blues contains 12 bars and 3 chords: I, IV and V. These chords are unusual in that they are non-functioning dominant 7s. In other words, rather than pointing to their tonics (1) these dominant 7s stand in their own right.

The image displays three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, each containing four measures of whole rests. Above the rests are chord symbols indicating the harmonic progression:

- Staff 1: C⁷ (bar 1), (F⁷) (bar 2), C⁷ (bar 3), C⁷ (bar 4).
- Staff 2: F⁷ (bar 5), F⁷ (bar 6), C⁷ (bar 7), C⁷ (bar 8).
- Staff 3: G⁷ (bar 9), F⁷ (bar 10), C⁷ (bar 11), (G⁷) (bar 12).

The next example is a more 'jazz' version of this sequence, where, at bars 9 and 10, the V and IV chords are replaced with II—V. This is the sequence for Duke Ellington's C Jam Blues:

1 C⁷

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains four measures, each with a whole rest. A chord symbol 'C⁷' is positioned above the first measure.

5 F⁷ C⁷

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains four measures, each with a whole rest. Chord symbols 'F⁷' and 'C⁷' are positioned above the first and third measures, respectively.

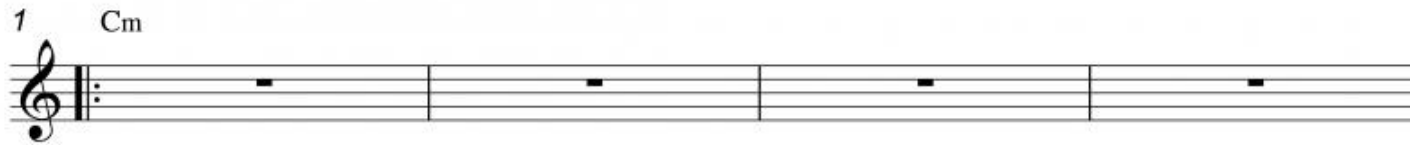
9 Dm⁷ G⁷ C⁷

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains four measures, each with a whole rest. Chord symbols 'Dm⁷', 'G⁷', and 'C⁷' are positioned above the first, second, and third measures, respectively. The staff ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

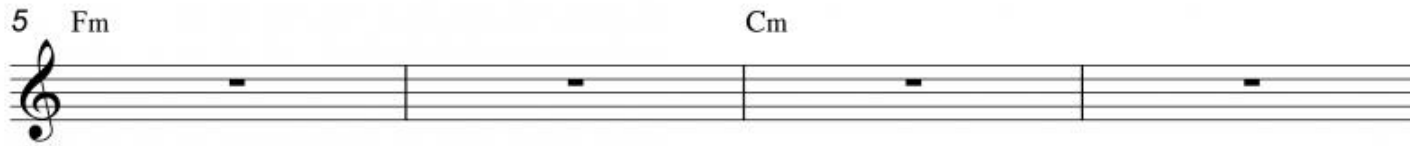
Minor blues

But a blues isn't always in a major key. Here's the sequence for Coltrane's Mr P.C. (At bar 9 the chord Ab⁷ could be replaced with its tritone substitute D7(b⁵).)

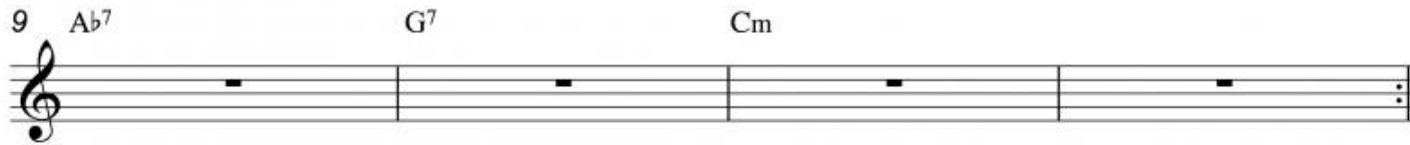
1 Cm



5 Fm Cm



9 Ab⁷ G⁷ Cm



I should point out that when I describe the above sequences as 'basic' I'm referring to the amount of chords rather than suggesting that they are in any way inferior or easier to perform. Take a listen to Coltrane's version of "Mr P.C." as a case in point.

Blues in 6/8

So far my examples have been in 4/4 time but All Blues by Miles Davis is in 6/8. Here's the piano accompaniment to his melody:

Piano

5

9

G⁷

C⁷ G⁷

D⁷(#9) E^b7(#9) D⁷(#9) G⁷

Once again, notice the subtle harmonic twist in bars 9 and 10.

A blues sequence can be in a variety of time signatures, including 3/4, 5/4 and 12/8.

Bebop blues

In C Jam Blues (above) a II-V sequence was introduced in bars 9 and 10. In the 40's the Bebop players took this to its logical conclusion, giving the sequence a complete makeover. Firstly, chord 1, the dominant 7, was replaced with a straight major chord. This was then followed with a series of descending II—Vs.

Here is one variation of this more complex sequence:

1 F⁶ Em⁷ A⁷ Dm⁷ G⁷ Cm⁷ F⁷

5 B^b7 B^bm⁷ E^b7 Am⁷ D⁷ A^bm⁷ D^b7

9 Gm⁷ C⁷ Am⁷ Dm⁷ Gm⁷ C⁷

This sequence works with many bebop blues sequences. One example is Charlie Parker's Blues For Alice.

8-bar blues

All the examples so far have been 12 bar sequences, but this length can vary. Here is an 8-bar blues that would work with Ain't Nobody's Business.

1 B \flat D⁷ Gm B \flat ⁷ E \flat E^{o7}

5 B \flat F⁷ B \flat G⁷ C⁷ F⁷

This is by no means an exhaustive list of blues variations but, hopefully, demonstrates that there is more to the blues than 12 bars and 3 chords.