

Blues scales and sliding notes

Many people who start learning about jazz want to learn the various blues scales. There are many types of blues scales, one of which we'll learn here, but first, it's helpful to understand the history of the blues as it relates to blues scales.

The fact is there are no set blues scales. What we define today as blues scales are actually rough approximations of the sounds that were being sung by the slaves who came from Africa. African music in general differed greatly from Western music in that some of their scale structures had smaller increments between scale steps – and even that differed depending on the region or tribe that they came from. As their music started to become more widely known, people tried to organize their melodies into scale structures that the Western mind and ear could understand.

As musicians experimented in blues improvisation with these new scales, they discovered that there was quite a bit of flexibility in the scales. For example, they realized that they could sometimes use a combination of scales in a given tune. They also found out that they could use notes that weren't strictly in the scale. In fact, most common blues licks don't use notes that are strictly from any one blues scale. With this chameleon like flexibility, it's good to know the scales as a reference point, but also good to remember that they're never above using the ear as the most important reference point.

We'll talk more about that in another lesson, but let's look at the one of the most commonly used blues scales, the major blues scale. In the key of G, this would be a G pentatonic plus a minor 3rd, or G, A, Bb, B, D, E. This scale tends to work well with folk songs in major keys because it consists of most of the notes from a major scale, but with just enough of a blues note to add a blues feel.

Sliding notes can add both a blues touch and interest to the improvised solo. A sliding note is a blues note that slides to – or resolves on the major note. An example would be playing Bb, B, G. They're fairly easy to do on string instruments (and fun, too), but on piano, some keys are easier than others. If the b3 is a black key, it's easy to slide to a white key, but a bit more tricky if the b3 is a white key and you have to slide up to a black key (for example, in the key of D). If you'd like to get a little more context to this, you can do a search on "sliding notes blues" on YouTube and get dozens of tutorials on it.

For the instructions this week, try the following:

- 1) Play along with Four Strong Winds and in the solo, use the G Major blues scale. Try to incorporate some sliding b3 to 3 (Bb to B) in your solo.
- 2) Experiment with mixing it up, moving from the key of G to the G Major blues scale.
- 3) Another blues note that is not in either scale, is the Db. Try including Db sliding into D.

Remember that because of the flexibility of the blues scales, you might find some notes out of the scale that sound good to you, so feel free to experiment.