



The Blues Vocabulary

An Instructor's Guide for Teaching Beginning Blues Improvisation

By John Mark Piper

Step 1.

The following method introduces improvisation to students in a blues style. By gradually introducing improvisation in a melodic context, students can learn each note's sound in melodic expressions rather than rambling up and down a scale in search of music. The "vocabulary method" can be accomplished in a single 30-minute lesson. After which, the student can spend a life time mastering the more creative and harmonic aspects of the blues in all keys.

The blues vocabulary method begins with the three most defining notes of the Blues; 5, flat 7, and 1. In the key of Bb, those notes are, (beginning with the lowest note first) F, Ab, and Bb. The objective is to learn to improvise creating simple melodies successfully first while being accompanied by a teacher or using an accompaniment CD such as Jamey Aebersold's "Blues in All Keys".

The only rules are:

1. The notes should be played in rhythm with the accompaniment.
2. The created melodies must make musical sense. In other words, it shouldn't just be random hit and run button pushing.

It's also helpful for the teacher to trade choruses with the student especially if the student is having difficulty getting started or is struggling to create sensible melodies. After the first three notes are firmly in the student's vocabulary, one note at a time is added in a natural melodic evolution. This concept helps students learn the meaning of each note before adding new sounds to their vocabulary. Before advancing to new notes, they must be able to use current ones in an expressive melody, similar to learning a new word in a sentence when expanding one's language. The following is a sample of an improvised statement over Bb blues using F, Ab and Bb.

12 Bar Blues in Bb: Sample Improvisation

Chord progression for the first 12 bars:

- Bar 1: B \flat 7
- Bar 2: B \flat 7
- Bar 3: B \flat 7
- Bar 4: B \flat 7
- Bar 5: E \flat 7
- Bar 6: E \flat 7
- Bar 7: E \flat 7
- Bar 8: E \flat 7
- Bar 9: B \flat 7
- Bar 10: B \flat 7
- Bar 11: B \flat 7
- Bar 12: B \flat 7

Step 2: After the student is able to use the first three notes creatively in a melody, the b3 (Db in the key of Bb) may be added.

New note: Memorize the sound and learn to use it in a musical statement.

Chord progression for the second 12 bars:

- Bar 13: B \flat 7
- Bar 14: B \flat 7
- Bar 15: B \flat 7
- Bar 16: B \flat 7
- Bar 17: E \flat 7
- Bar 18: E \flat 7
- Bar 19: E \flat 7
- Bar 20: E \flat 7
- Bar 21: B \flat 7
- Bar 22: B \flat 7
- Bar 23: B \flat 7
- Bar 24: B \flat 7

Please note: It is important for students to understand that it is often necessary and desirable to play through chord changes linearly, even if some of the melody notes aren't perfectly harmonious with the chord tones. The blues vocabulary method stresses melodic continuity, strong enough to carry it through the chord changes in a "compare and contrast" expressiveness. As the student progresses, more detailed options will emerge that will offer other harmonious options for their melodies but in the beginning, it is important to emphasize linear thinking.

Step 3.

After the sound of the b3 is clear and useable, adding the 4th degree (AKA 11th) is a very natural, linear next step.

Sample Blues Improv using the fourth degree:

Sample Blues Improv using the fourth degree. The notation is in B-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff (measures 25-28) has chords Bb7, Eb7, Bb7, and Eb7. The second staff (measures 29-32) has chords Eb7, Edim7, Bb7, and G7. The third staff (measures 33-36) has chords C-7, F7, Bb7, C-7, and F7. The music features various blues licks, including eighth and sixteenth note patterns, and a triplet in measure 34.

Step 4: Adding the flatted fifth to your vocabulary is very fun but requires a bit more thinking to make work well in improvisations. Take note of which measure it works best in and how to use it in various ways. Think of different examples of popular songs that use this distinctive sound such as "Smoke On The Water". Singers are notorious for it's over use in popular songs.

Sample Blues Improvisation in Bb adding the flatted fifth

Sample Blues Improvisation in Bb adding the flatted fifth. The notation is in B-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff (measures 37-40) has chords Bb7, Eb7, Bb7, and Eb7. The second staff (measures 41-44) has chords Eb7, Edim7, Bb7, and G7. The third staff (measures 45-48) has chords F7, Bb7, C-7, and F7. The music features various blues licks, including eighth and sixteenth note patterns, and a triplet in measure 46.

Step 5: Adding the ninth

49 B^b7 E^b7 B^b7

53 E^b7 $E\dim7$ B^b7 $G13$

57 $C-7$ $F7$ B^b7 $G7$

Step 6: Adding the 13th or 6th degree

61 B^b B^b6 B^b7 B^b6 B^b7 B^b6 B^b B^b B^b6 B^b7 B^b6 B^b7

65 E^b7 $E\dim7$ B^b7 $G7b9$

69 $C-7$ $F7\#9$ B^b7 $G7$ $C-7$ $F7$

Step 7: Some notes in the blues require adjustment as the harmony changes. One of the most common adjustments is the major 3rd (D in the key of Bb). When the chord changes from I7 to IV7, the D will sound incorrect if it is played on the Eb7 chord in the wrong context. This is because the D (major third of the Bb chord) conflicts strongly with the Db (b7 on the Eb7 chord). However, the reverse (playing the Db over the Bb chord) is expressive sounding most of the time and is easier to make sound "correct". This is because the Db works within the structure of the Bb7 harmony, functioning as a sharp nine (#9) color tone or tension in the upper structure, but the D in the harmonic context of the Eb can only function as a major 7 which directly conflicts with the dominant 7th or flat 7 functionality of the chord.

Sample Blues improvisation in Bb with Major Third moving to flat seven (Guide tones)

Guide tones adjusting to accomodat changing harmony.

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Step 8: The Eighth Bar

The eighth bar in a blues is most often simply setting up a cadence to go back to the beginning of the form. This is most often done using the VI7, also known as V7/II- (pronounced "Five-seven-of-two"). It's called the "five-seven-of-two" because it is the dominant chord of II-. In the key of Bb, that is the G7 going to C-7. This is typical dominant motion because the leading tone (the note B) is "dominating" the harmonic movement toward C-7. The note "B" in the eighth bar of the Bb blues is an important and expressively defining sound of the G7. Many of the notes already added to the blues vocabulary take on a different personality or expression in the eighth bar because of the changing harmony. This bar should be examined methodically, and possibly used as a teacher's aid introducing more sophisticated jazz harmony to come.

85 Bb7 Eb7 Bb7

89 Eb7 Edim7 Bb7 G7

93 C- F7 Bb

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John Mark Piper is a vibraphonist/drummer/composer and teacher residing in the Dallas, Texas area. Piper served as artist, clinician, endorsee and consultant for Musser/Ludwig percussion instruments from 1996 to 2002 and is the designer and creator of the Musser/Piper vibraphone.

Piper is currently a Local Education Artist for Pearl Drums and Adams Musical Instruments, and endorses the John Piper Signature Mallets by Mike Balter, AKG Microphones and Pro-Mark drum sticks. A collection of John's original vibraphone pieces is published by Studio 4 Music (distributed by Alfred Music Publishing). John is author of the highly acclaimed sight/reading and music series books "The Shapes and Patterns of Music - Volumes I, and II" and "The Shapes and Patterns of Rhythm" and the "Shapes and Patterns of Rhythm with Melody". John's CD, "Just a Step Away" has become a landmark in solo vibraphone recordings. John's current focus is **PIPER'S LOFT, INC.** which specializes in educating beginning and intermediate students.

Piper's Loft is accepting the challenge to further the art and integrity of music education and performance by offering private and semi-private music lessons in percussion and improvisation theory lessons for all instruments. The Piper's Loft concept guides students toward the artistic elements of music education and performance above those of physical education and competition. The Piper's Loft concept strongly supports the principle that allows young students the option to choose their instrument and private lesson teacher with healthy support from their parents. John believes that no student should be denied the opportunity to explore their choice of instrument simply because there are too many other students with the same interests. Piper's Loft is dedicated to each student's individual needs and respects their other interests and talents as well. For more information, visit www.PipersLoft.com.

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