

Developing the Student Jazz Musician through Playing the Blues

Anthony Denaro

Pace High School

The twelve measure blues progression can easily be utilized to teach a multitude of lessons on music theory, jazz articulation/style, and improvisation in your classroom. Because of its versatility, the blues should be thoroughly covered in jazz performance ensembles ranging from middle school to the college level. In this article, I discuss a simple method to introduce the twelve measure blues progression, and how it can be taught in a manner that will help further develop the jazz improvisation skills of each of your students.

Begin by providing each of your students (do not exclude the drummer) a copy of an accurate twelve measure blues form in the key of Bb. There are many harmonic variations on the blues, so it is suggested that the educator begin with the variation that is one of the most commonly found in jazz music:

<i>Chord Progression:</i>		<i>Key of Bb concert:</i>
I/IV/I/I/	→	Bb7/Eb7/Bb7/Bb7
IV/IV/I/I	→	Eb7/Eb7/Bb7/Bb7
ii/V/I/V	→	Cmin7/F7/Bb7/F7

It is important to utilize a harmonic variation of the blues that includes a minor ii chord in measure nine. This will set you up for future lessons covering the Dorian minor scale and ii/V/I chord progressions. Provide your students with a self generated or a preprinted blues progression sheet that clearly and accurately details the chord symbol, chord tones, and scale of each measure.

Before you begin, it is important to ensure that each member of your rhythm section fully understands his/her individual role and purpose within both their section and the full ensemble. In short, the bassist typically provides a walking bass line that will maintain tempo and provide a harmonic foundation for each chord. The drummer aids in maintaining the tempo, however should focus more on groove, filling “empty musical space” (drum fills), and creating complementary rhythmic variety for the ensemble and/or soloist. The pianist and guitarist contribute by completing the harmonies that the bass player is outlining. In jazz music, this is referred to as “comping.”

Allow your students to immediately start playing. Instruct the band to play whole notes on the “root” of each chord/scale in each measure while the rhythm section plays in a medium tempo swing groove. The “root” is the same as the tonic of each chord/scale. Playing the root in each measure will allow your musicians to start hearing how and when the harmonies

change as the form progresses. To establish tempo and style, have the rhythm section play one chorus of the blues first and then cue the band in on “root whole notes” for the second chorus. For the third chorus, ask just the saxophones to play with the rhythm section, trombones on the fourth, and finally the trumpets on the fifth chorus. You are establishing an instrument order for each of the following exercises: tutti, saxophones, trombones, trumpets.

Teach simple number patterns next. Sing a simple numerical pattern sung on an equally basic rhythm. One example would be 1-2-1, in a quarter, quarter, half note pattern (see below). Ideally you would begin with simple number patterns, and would later progress to the more complex. There is a different scale that can be played in each measure, so students will need to use their blues progression sheets to determine exactly which notes they will play in each measure of the form.

SIMPLE NUMERICAL PATTERNS - EX. 1, 2, 1

Follow the same warm up structure as before: tutti, saxophones, trombones, trumpets. Expand and change your numerical patterns, but keep them simple. Introduce eighth notes, and sing the pattern exactly as how you want it to be played. This is an excellent tool for teaching proper jazz articulation and style.

Teach your students how to outline chords next. This exercise is very similar to what a bass player is doing when they “walk” a bass line. Ask the students to play the root, 3rd, 5th, and 7th notes of each scale in each measure. This can be done in quarter notes. If you wish, have students play the root, 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th, 7th, 5th, and 3rd when encountering two measures on the same chord (ex. Measures 3 & 4, 5 & 6, 7 & 8).

OUTLINING EACH CHORD - "CHORD TONES"

Make sure that your students are correctly outlining dominant 7th chords, and not major 7th chords. The 7th scale degree should be lowered a half step for the dominant. Repeat the format of tutti, saxophones, trombones, and trumpets for outlining each chord.

Playing scales is next. Teach the dominant 7th scale (Mixolydian mode of a major scale) and how it relates to a major scale. Teach the minor scale (Dorian mode is typically used in jazz music) and how it relates to a major scale as well as other types of minor scales. Ask your

students to play the entire scale ascending in eighth notes for each measure. When the same scale is used for two consecutive measures, have students play up to the 9th and back down to the 2nd before moving to the next measure. Isolate each measure at first, and make sure that your students understand what scale they are playing in each measure of the blues progression before moving on.

SCALES

B^b7 E^b7 B^b7 B^b7 CONTINUE PATTERN...

As your students master this, begin to incorporate varied slurs and articulation patterns on each scale. Continue with the structure of tutti, saxophones, trombones, and trumpets for this exercise.

Teach the blues scale next. The blues scale can typically be used in any measure of the blues and will still sound good. Because of this, young and inexperienced players will generally use this scale as a crutch, which limits their ability to develop a variety of harmonic ideas and patterns as the chords change. Provide your students with the musical tools for improvisation (root, chords, and scales) first. Once they have developed a basic understanding of the musical language for jazz improvisation, allow them to then add color to their solos through the blues scale.

Play the blues scale ascending and descending in 8th notes. They will do this three times in one 12 measure chorus of the blues. To give the scale even more of a bluesy feel, I will ask the students to add the following two notes onto the end:

BLUES SCALE

B^b7 E^b7 B^b7 B^b7 REPEAT 2x

Now turn them loose and let them solo! Here are a few examples of how one might initially approach teaching jazz improvisation with any level of ensemble.

One note solos

It is just as it sounds. Give the students an appropriate note (the root always works well) and see what they come up with. Suddenly their brain is free from worrying about playing chords, scales, and patterns. Encourage your students to explore a variety of articulations, note lengths, and rhythmic contrast.

Two note solos

Add a note to the exercise above and repeat. Using two consecutive notes in the blues scale will work best.

Pentatonic scale only

Teach the major pentatonic scale to your students. Get them to learn this scale in other keys as well. Although it is only a simplified version of the actual blues scale, you may want to explore teaching the minor pentatonic scale as well.

Chord tones only

Allow your students to solo only within the chord tones in each measure. This will force them into learning which notes will always sound the best in each measure, and how the chord tones in one measure can be connected to those in the next. This exercise is difficult at first, but will really encourage your students to develop their harmonic language on their instrument.

Blues scale

They will be begging for it by this point. Encourage them to use only pieces of the blues scale in between more chordal and scalar type patterns. You will most likely be surprised at what you hear.

Eighth notes only

This is a tough one. Challenge your students to play an entire solo consisting of running eighth notes. They may use any combination of chords and scales, but must avoid any other rhythm. Such an exercise will aid in their ability to start developing and connecting longer musical ideas as the harmonies change in each measure.

Additional possibilities

Bebop scales

Teach a descending dominant bebop scale. The raised 7th of the dominant bebop scale is an excellent introduction to teaching students that notes outside of the key CAN be played, but only if they lead to a note within the key. The raised 4th of a Lydian dominant scale can be used to address this concept as well.

ii/V progression

Get your students to identify this common two chord progression in the blues, as well as in any additional jazz standard. Students will need to understand that there is one scale that can be played over two different chords (three chords in a major ii/V/I – not applicable to the blues because of the chord in measure 11 is a dominant 7th chord and not a major 7th chord). Chord tones change, but the scale itself remains the same.

Get creative!

Challenge your ensemble with varying tempi and grooves. Develop a routine warm up that consists of roots, chords, and scales. Be sure to encourage everyone to give jazz improvisation a try. When you hear them play something that you like, let them know on the spot. Your students will watch you, and soon will be shouting out words of encouragement for each other.

Get really creative and allow sections to come up with a simple background pattern that can be played as someone solos. Alternate back and forth between a soloist with the rhythm section and the drummer by himself every four measures (trading fours). My students love it when I call for an entire instrument section to solo all at once, or even when I ask for the entire band to solo all at once. Just be sure to have your earplugs handy for those!

What is the best part of utilizing a twelve measure blues progression in your jazz ensemble rehearsal? It gets the students excited about music, and excited about playing their instrument. This absolutely needs to be our main priority when teaching music. Get creative, listen to this music as much as possible, and share that passion with your students every single day. They will be truly thankful if you do.

Please feel free to contact me if you should have any additional questions or concerns regarding the content of this article. I can always be reached at denaro.anthony@gmail.com.