Table Of Contents

Introduction • Starting with the Blues Scales 1
Beginners 1
More Advanced Players 2

Chapter One • Basic Blues Theory 3
Getting Started 3
Problems with the "Blues Scale" 4
There are Two "Blues Scales!" 5
Practicing the Scales 5
Practicing Movement Between Scales 7
Different Rates of Movement 12
Caveat (A Fancy Latin Word for "Warning") 14
Using the Two Blues Scales (First Principle) 15
Vocabulary 21
Answering the "Cliche" Objection 22
Major Blues Phrases 23
Minor Blues Phrases 27

Chapter Two • Changing Keys: Transposition 31

Chapter Three • Stretching the Rules 37
A New Set of Shackles 37
Adding Notes to the Blues Scales 38
Using the "Wrong" Scale 46
Playing Chord Tones 47
Moving an Idea Between I and IV 48
Heading Towards Bebop 49

Chapter Four • Applying the Blues Vocabulary 50
Modal Situations 50
"Bluesy" Tunes 51
Standards 52
Fusion 55
Final Exercises 55
The Big Picture 58

Appendix A • Advanced Examples for Chapter 1 59
Major and Minor Blues Scales in "Real Life" 59

Appendix B • Advanced Examples for Chapter 3 62
"Stretched" Blues Improvising in "Real Life" 62
Extended Use of the Major Blues Scale 66
Extended Use of the Minor Blues Scale 69
Understanding Extended Use of the Minor Blues Scale 71

Appendix C • Advanced Examples for Chapter 4 72
Blues Scales in Non-Blues Improvising 72
Blues Scales in Non-Blues Compositions 73
More Blues Scales in Non-Blues Improvising 76

Blues Song List 79

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Dan Greenblatt & Chuck Sher

About The Author

Saxophonist and educator Dan Greenblatt spent 24 years on the jazz scene in Seattle, where he was best known for his performances and recordings with bassist/composer Chuck Metcalf and with the Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra. In these groups he worked with all of Seattle's top jazz musicians, such as Jay Thomas, Marc Seales, Randy Halberstadt, and Don Lanphere, as well as many national artists including Quincy Jones, Clark Terry, Ernestine Anderson, George Cables, Arturo Sandoval, Jimmy Heath, and Frank Wess. As an educator, Dan was the saxophone and improvisation coach for ten years for Seattle's award-winning and nationally recognized jazz programs at Washington Middle School, Garfield High School and Roosevelt High School.

Greenblatt moved to New York in 2002 to teach at LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts. He joined the faculty of the Jazz & Contemporary Music Program at New School University in 2003, and became the program's Director of Academic Affairs in 2004.

CHAPTER 1 • Basic Blues Theory

If you want to learn how to play jazz, one of the best places to begin is with the blues. There are several reasons for this.

First of all, the basic Blues form is one of the simplest in all of jazz.

Second, the basic Blues form is extremely widespread. There are hundreds of commonly played jazz pieces based on the Blues structure, and it also is central to most other forms of contemporary music. So when you learn how to improvise on the Blues, you are dealing with something familiar and you learn something that will be of continuing value.

Finally, the basic Blues form is extremely flexible, with many variations, and it is a form to which you will return throughout your development as an improviser. Rather than leaving the Blues behind as you get more sophisticated, you bring the Blues along with you on your path of development.

Getting Started

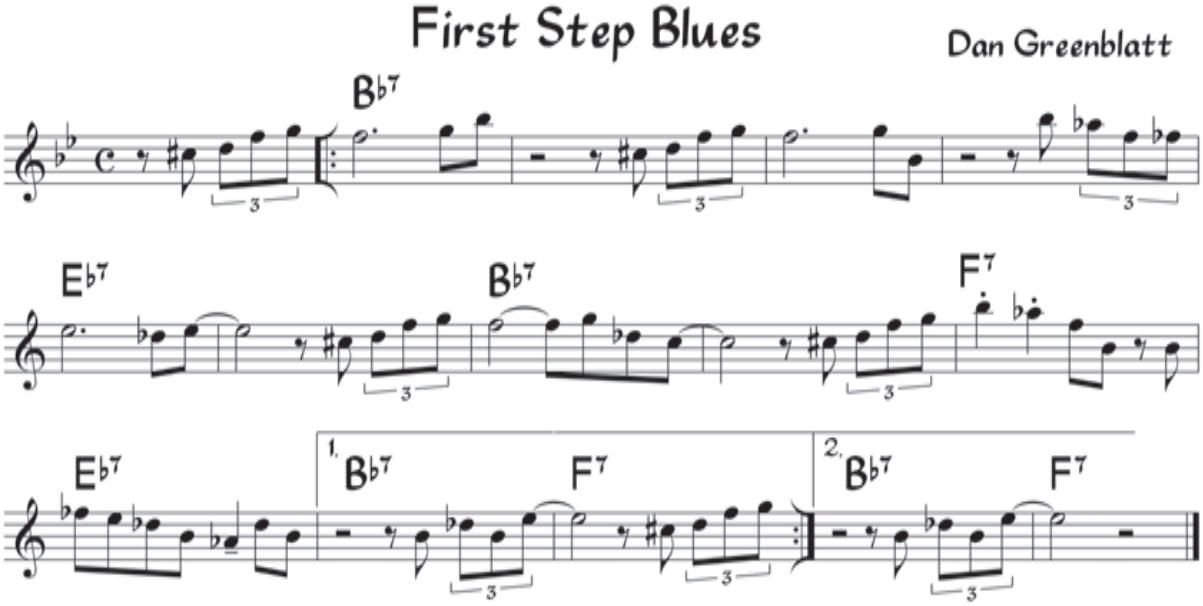
EXERCISE #1

Let's start with a fairly simple Blues at a relaxed tempo, the "First Step Blues." Read through the melody a few times at a comfortable tempo. Then listen carefully to how the melody is played on the saxophone track (**CD Track #1**, first two choruses).

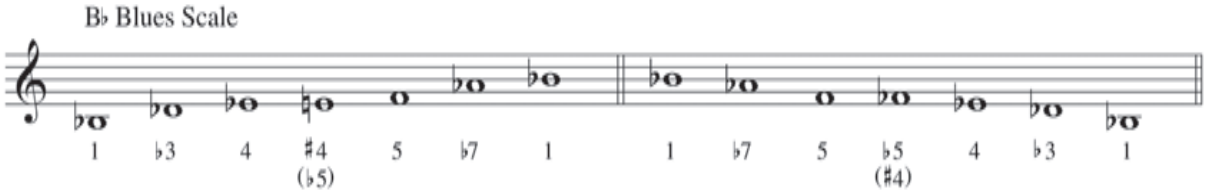
Finally, try to play the melody along with the rhythm section by turning off the saxophone track on the left channel. Try imitating the swing feel and the quarter-note articulation from the saxophone track.

CD Track #19 has both Bb and A tuning notes, if you need them.

[*Note for horn players*: In the Bb version of this book, some exercises will fit better with the range of the trumpet and some with the range of the saxophone. Please adjust the octaves for yourself, if necessary.]



After the melody, the rhythm section continues to play the Blues form for several choruses, and then the saxophone comes back in with the melody at the end. That middle section, with the rhythm section playing the Blues form, is your chance to do some improvising. But the big question is, "What notes should I use to improvise with?" The most common answer is "use the Blues Scale" in the key of the tune. In the key of Bb, it looks like this:



The "Blues Scale" provides the beginning improviser with several things of value. For one, it greatly simplifies the problem of playing on the chord changes. You simply stay on the same scale throughout your solo, and ignore the changes. Moreover, the "Blues Scale" has a familiar, "down-home" sound, so you can capture a "blue" mood almost without effort.

Problems with the "Blues Scale"

There is a major problem with this typical advice, however, which is that aspiring improvisers using this approach almost always sound bad. There are two main reasons for this.

First of all, the "Blues Scale" is missing too many important notes. This makes it a very limited vehicle, unable to carry the variety of phrases and moods that allow you to create contrasts and develop a story-like improvisation. The biggest missing note in this scale is the major 3rd, and also missing are the 2nd and 6th notes of the major scale. So the common six-note "Blues Scale" effectively handcuffs you, paints you into a corner. The effort to simplify ends up oversimplifying.

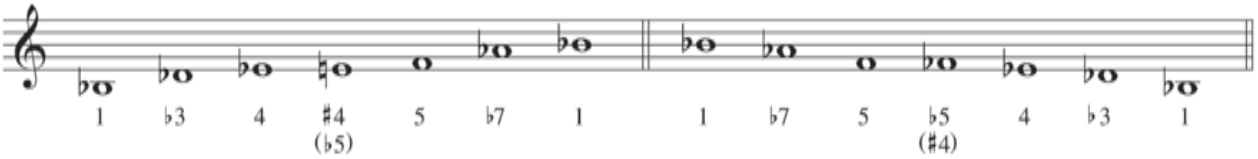
The second reason that "Blues Scale" solos generally sound bad is that they contain no motion, no harmonic movement. Almost all jazz involves "playing the changes," where your improvisation reflects the harmonic motion of the song. Exclusive use of the "Blues Scale" provides a fundamentally static approach to a fundamentally dynamic art form.

The vast majority of beginning improvisers, however, are not ready to absorb the complex system of chords and scales that evolved jazz musicians use. So the puzzle becomes one of developing an approach that is simple, but not too simple, which retains the advantages of the "Blues Scale" without missing the other good notes, and which gets you playing changes without requiring you to digest the entire system of Western Harmony.

There are Two "Blues Scales!"

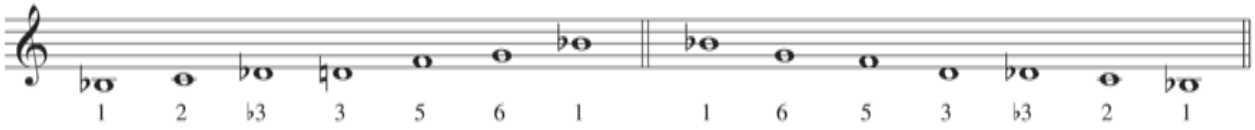
The solution to the puzzle is that there are really **two** basic Blues Scales that are commonly used by jazz improvisers, rather than one single scale. One is the Blues Scale we already looked at. Because of its b3rd, this scale has a decidedly minor sound, so from now on we will refer to it as the "Minor Blues Scale."

B♭ Minor Blues Scale



The second Blues Scale has a decidedly major sound because of the inclusion of the major 3rd (even though it also contains the minor 3rd as well). We will call this scale the "Major Blues Scale." In the key of Bb, it looks like this:

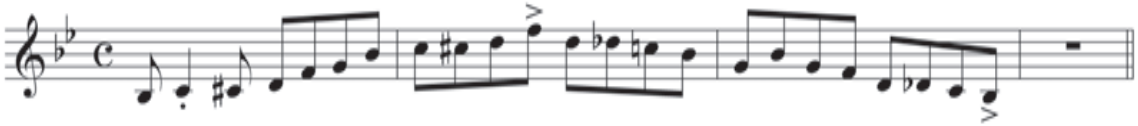
B♭ Major Blues Scale



Practicing the Scales

EXERCISE #2

First you need to thoroughly learn and memorize the notes in these two scales, including the whole range from the lowest to the highest notes you can play on your instrument. As one method of really learning the scales inside-and-out, we encourage you to compose scalar exercises that both rehearse the scale notes and simultaneously have a satisfying melodic contour. For example, try this one-and-a-half octave version of the Bb Major Blues Scale:



EXERCISE #3

Here is a sample way to practice the Bb Minor Blues Scale, again with a line that has some melodic interest: