

THE FOUR BLUES AND MORE

© BY MARK WHITE-WHITMARK MUSIC PUBLISHING

A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE IS A DANGEROUS THING. PARTICULARLY IN THE CASE OF MUSIC THEORY WHERE JAZZ IS CONCERNED! TOO MANY STUDENTS BECOME "EXPERTS" AT BEING ABLE TO RECITE THEORETICAL FORMULAE, BUT LACK THE ABILITY TO UTILIZE THE THEORY IN REAL-LIFE PLAYING SITUATIONS. ENTER THE BLUES, A GOOD PLACE TO BEGIN PLUGGING IN THE THEORY CONCEPTS AND START MAKING MUSIC.

WHY THE BLUES AS A GOOD STARTING POINT? FIRST OF ALL, AND MAYBE MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE BLUES IS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT IN JAZZ'S DEVELOPMENT. WITHOUT GETTING INTO A HISTORY LESSON, LET'S JUST SAY THAT THE BLUES ELEMENT IS A KEY INGREDIENT IN ALL THE GREAT JAZZ PLAYERS' VOCABULARY. AND OF COURSE, BLUES TUNES ARE AN IMPORTANT MAINSTAY IN THE JAZZ TUNE REPERTOIRE. ALL OF THE GREAT JAZZ ARTISTS FROM HAVE INCLUDED BLUES IN THEIR RECORDINGS AND LIVE PERFORMANCES. SECONDLY, THE BLUES IS A COMPACT, EASY TO FOLLOW FORM, WITH HARMONIC MOVEMENT THAT IS FOUND IN MANY OTHER KINDS OF TUNES. THIS MAKES THE BLUES A GOOD STARTING POINT TO APPLY VOICING, COMPING, EAR-TRAINING, AND IMPROV CONCEPTS.

I'VE WORKED OUT A CONCEPT THAT ALLOWS ME TO VIEW BLUES AS BASICALLY FOUR DISTINCT PROGRESSIONS. VARIATIONS CAN BE INSERTED INTO THE PROGRESSIONS FOR DIFFERENT CONNECTIVITY BETWEEN THE CHORDS IN A "MODULAR" SORT OF WAY, WITHOUT STRAYING TOO FAR FROM THE ORIGINAL SET OF CHORDS. (SEE MY "HARMONIC PLUMBING" LESSON FOR SOME OF THESE SUBSTITUTION AND CONNECTION IDEAS.) THERE ARE ALWAYS EXCEPTIONS TO ANY RULE, BLUES PROGRESSIONS INCLUDED. I'LL PUT SOME UNIQUE EXAMPLES AT THE END OF THIS LESSON. ONE CAN ALWAYS FIND EXAMPLES OF NOVEL AND ORIGINAL WAYS TO COMPOSE AND PLAY BLUES, BUT MOST OF THE TIME ON THE GIG, YOU'LL FIND THESE FOUR BLUES PROGRESSIONS TO BE THE "NORM".

THE "BASIC" 12 BAR BLUES WRITTEN IN "F".

The musical notation shows the basic 12-bar blues progression in F major. It consists of three staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The first staff starts with a double bar line and a repeat sign, followed by four measures of eighth notes. Above the first measure is the chord symbol 'F7', and above the other three measures is a double bar line with a repeat sign. The second staff continues with four measures of eighth notes. Above the first measure is the chord symbol 'Bb7', above the second is a double bar line with a repeat sign, above the third is 'F7', and above the fourth is a double bar line with a repeat sign. The third staff continues with four measures of eighth notes. Above the first measure is 'C7', above the second is 'Bb7', above the third is 'F7', and above the fourth is '(C7)' followed by a double bar line with a repeat sign. The piece ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

THIS IS THE MOST BASIC VERSION OF THE BLUES PROGRESSION. EVEN IN ITS SIMPLICITY, HOWEVER, THE ARCHITECTURE FOR THE OTHER VARIATIONS IS ESTABLISHED. I'M TALKING ABOUT A CONCEPT CALLED HARMONIC RHYTHM. THIS IS A FANCY TERM FOR WHERE THE CHORDS OCCUR IN THE TIME. WE'LL FIND THAT THE OTHER BLUES VARIATIONS ARE STILL BASED ON THE HARMONIC RHYTHM ESTABLISHED WITH THE BASIC BLUES.

THE BASIC BLUES IS MADE FROM A PROGRESSION OF THREE CHORDS CULLED FROM THE MAJOR SCALE, THE I, IV, AND V CHORDS. THESE CHORDS CAN BE DIATONIC* FROM THE MAJOR IF TRIADIC, BUT ARE MORE COMMONLY DOMINANT 7TH IN KIND. THESE CHORDS UTILIZE A b7 THAT IS NOT IN THE DIATONIC MAJOR SCALE FOR THE I7 AND IV7 CHORDS BUT IS ADDED FOR THE BLUESY EFFECT. THIS LEADS TO THE UNDERSTANDABLE CONFUSION ABOUT WHETHER TO CALL BLUES MAJOR OR DOMINANT 7TH. YOU CAN LOOK AT IT EITHER WAY, AND INDEED, BOTH ELEMENTS WILL ENTER INTO THE VARIATIONS THAT FOLLOW. THIS IS PROBABLY A GOOD TIME TO MENTION THE EXISTANCE OF MINOR BLUES AS WELL. MINOR BLUES FEATURE I-7 AND IV-7 CHORDS IN ADDITION TO A V7 ALTERED CHORD. THESE CHORDS CAN BE DERIVED FROM 7 TONE MINOR SCALES. WE'LL LOOK AT MINOR BLUES A LITTLE LATER IN THIS LESSON. RIGHT NOW LET'S FOCUS ON THE MAJOR/DOMINANT VERSIONS.

LET'S LOOK AT THE PRECEEDING EXAMPLE AGAIN TO LOCATE THE TRADEMARK ELEMENTS OF THE BLUES.

I'VE BOXED SOME OF THE CHORDS IN THE BLUES PROGRESSION ABOVE TO DRAW ATTENTION TO ELEMENTS THAT ARE COMMON TO ALL THE BLUES VARIATIONS:

1. BLUES ARE PLAYED BY KEY. BAR ONE ESTABLISHES THE KEY BY THE I7 CHORD-IN THIS CASE F7.
2. BAR 5 PROGRESSES TO THE IV7 CHORD.
3. BAR 7 RETURNS TO THE I7 CHORD.
4. BAR 9 USES A V7 CHORD.
5. BAR 11 RETURNS AGAIN TO THE I7 CHORD AND BEGINS THE TURNAROUND FOR THE NEXT REPIITION OF THE FORM. THE LAST TWO BARS IN A BLUES PROGRESSION ARE CALLED THE TURNAROUND FOR JUST THAT REASON.

I CALL THE BOXED CHORDS "HARMONIC PILLARS". THESE HARMONIC PILLARS ARE COMMON TO MOST BLUES PROGRESSIONS AND THEY ESTABLISH THE HARMONIC RHYTHM THAT WE RECOGNIZE AS THE BLUES PROGRESSION. I LIKE TO SAY THAT THE HARMONIC PILLARS HOLD UP THE ROOF TO THE "HOUSE OF BLUES". KEEP IN MIND THAT ALL OF THESE CHORDS CAN BE ANTICIPATED OR DELAYED RHYTHMICALLY, BUT STILL FIT INTO THE BASIC HARMONIC RHYTHM PRESENTED HERE. LET'S LOOK AT THE OTHER VARIATIONS AND OBSERVE HOW THE HARMONIC PILLAR CHORD FUNCTIONS MANIFEST IN THEM.

* A SIMPLE DEFINITION OF THE TERM DIATONIC IS: NOTES/CHORDS THAT ARE EXCLUSIVELY DERIVED FROM THE SCALE OR KEY CONTAINING THOSE PITCHES. C,D,E,F,G,A,B, ARE NOTES DIATONIC TO C MAJOR, Db, Eb,Gb,Ab, AND Bb ARE NON-DIATONIC TO THE KEY OF C MAJOR.

HERE'S A TYPICAL JAZZ BLUES. THE DESCENDING CHROMATIC PROGRESSION AT BARS 7 & 8 MAKES THIS EASY TO HEAR AND TO REMEMBER.

F7 B^b7 F7 C-7 F7
 B^b7 B^b7 F7 E7 E^b7 D7
 G-7 C7 F7 D7 G-7 C7
 (G7 G-7 C7)

NOTICE THE #4 DIMINISHED 7TH CHORD ON BAR 6. THIS IS A COMMON CONNECTOR CHORD THAT FITS IN NICELY WITH THE BASIC PROGRESSION STILL INTACT. THE #4 DIMINISHED CHORD ADDS A TYPICAL "SANCTIFIED" QUALITY ASSOCIATED WITH GOSPEL MUSIC, BUT IS EQUALLY AT HOME IN A SMOKEY JAZZ CLUB. ALSO, THE CHANGE TO A "HARMONIC PILLAR" ON BAR 9 REQUIRES SOME EXPLANATION. C7 WOULD BE THE NORMAL CHANGE. WE'RE USING A G-7 CHORD INSTEAD. THIS IS A TYPICAL CHORD SUBSTITUTION IN JAZZ—USING A II-7 IN PLACE OF A V7. THINK OF THE C7 AS BEING THE V7 OF THE KEY OF F, THEN REPLACE THE V7 WITH THE II-7 OF THE SAME KEY (G-7). AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE G-7 CHORD IS A G7 CHORD, THIS IS KNOWN AS A SECONDARY DOMINANT OR V OF V AND IS A CYCLIC CONNECTOR. THE CHORDS BASICALLY CYCLE UNTIL WE FINALLY GET TO THE C7 CHORD. WE CAN ALSO LOOK AT THIS G7 AS BEING A II7 CHORD, ANOTHER VERY COMMON COMPONENT IN JAZZ TUNES. (FOR MORE DETAIL TAKE A LOOK AT MY "HARMONIC PLUMBING" LESSON. I'VE FINISHED THE BLUES WITH A I -VI- II -V TURNAROUND, A VERY STANDARD JAZZ TURNAROUND.)

THIS NEXT VARIANT IS SOMETIMES KNOWN AS "CHICAGO STYLE". MORE COMMONLY PLAYED IN THE KEY OF G, IT IS TYPICALLY PLAYED AT A SLOW TEMPO. JAZZ PLAYERS WILL USE THIS PROGRESSION IN ANY KEY AND TEMPOS SLOW OR FAST. BARS 7 & 8 FEATURE THE MOST NOTABLE ASPECT OF THIS PROGRESSION, BUT CHECK OUT BARS 3 & 4 TOO! WE CONCLUDE WITH A TYPICAL I-IV-I-V TURNAROUND.

F7 B^b7 F7 G^b7 F7 B7
 B^b7 B^b7 F7 G-7 A-7 A^b-7
 G-7 C7 F7 B^b7 F7 C7

THIS LAST OF THE 4 STANDARD BLUES PROGRESSIONS ILLUSTRATES WHERE THE CONFUSION ABOUT WHETHER TO CALL BLUES MAJOR OR DOMINANT ORIGINATES. KNOWN AS "BIRD" BLUES AND SOMETIMES "WEST COAST BLUES", THIS PROGRESSION WAS MADE FAMOUS IN THE CHARLIE PARKER COMPOSITION "BLUES FOR ALICE". THERE ARE MANY OTHER JAZZ BLUES HEADS WRITTEN ON THESE CHANGES, SUCH AS TOMMY FLANAGAN'S "FREIGHT TRANE". "HIP" JAZZERS USE THIS PROGRESSION TO CHECK OUT THE EARS OF NEOPHYTE PLAYERS.

BAR 1-4 CONTAIN THE SAME BASIC PROGRESSION FOUND IN "CONFIRMATION" AND "THERE WILL NEVER BE ANOTHER YOU". BARS 6 THROUGH 8 CONTAIN WHAT BERKLEE CALLS "CONTIGUOUS II-Vs". ALSO NOTICE THE "HARMONIC PILLAR" ON BAR 7 IS NOW A TONIC FUNCTION SUBSTITUTE III-7 FOR I.

FROM THE BASIC BLUES TO "BIRD" BLUES, YOU'LL NOTICE THE SAME BASIC "HARMONIC PILLARS" OCCURRING IN THE SAME BARS AND TIMING. GETTING TO KNOW THESE 4 BLUES IN ALL KEYS IS ESSENTIAL TO BE A GOOD JAZZ PLAYER. WHEN JAZZERS CALL A BLUES ON THE GIG, YOU'LL FIND THEM MIXING THESE PROGRESSIONS FROM CHORUS TO CHORUS. TO REACT AS COMPER AND SOLOIST, ONE NEEDS TO RECOGNIZE AND RESPOND TO THESE DIFFERENT VARIATIONS BY EAR AND INTUITIVELY. STUDY THEM HARD NOW TO EQUIP YOURSELF FOR THE FUTURE. ALSO, THESE DIFFERENT BLUES PRESENT AN EXCELLENT MEDIUM FOR LEARNING HOW TO EXTEND HARMONIES (TENSIONS) AS WELL AS CHORD CONNECTION AND SUBSTITUTION (HARMONIC PLUMBING). YOU'LL NOTICE THAT MOST OF THE CHORDS ARE WRITTEN IN THEIR MOST BASIC FORM. APPLY TENSIONS. A GOOD WAY TO START IS BY USING THE MORE INSIDE TENSIONS (LIKE #9, #11) ON THE HARMONIC PILLARS, USE THE MORE "OUTSIDE" TENSIONS (LIKE #9 #11) IMMEDIATELY PRECEEDING THE PILLARS. THIS WILL GIVE YOU A GOOD SENSE OF TENSION AND RELEASE TO YOUR CHORD COLOR CHOICES. THIS IS BY NO MEANS A STRICT RULE-YOU CAN FIND EXAMPLES IN RECORDINGS OF THE GREAT ONES USING VERY AGGRESSIVE TENSIONS ANYWHERE. LISTEN TO RECORDINGS AND USE YOUR EARS AND INSTINCTS.

A WORD ABOUT CONNECTIVITY. YOU'LL FIND IN MOST SITUATIONS THAT THESE FOUR BLUES WILL BE THE UNDERLYING CHANGES USED TO PLAY BLUES. CONNECTIVITY (HARMONIC PLUMBING) CAN THEN BE USED TO ACHIEVE MORE VARIETY WITHIN THESE FOUR "MASTER" BLUES FORMS. FOR INSTANCE, WE CAN CONNECT THE THE I7 AND IV7 CHORDS IN BARS 4 & 5 WITH A TRITONE SUBSTITUTION (SUB-FIVE) PRECEEDED BY A II-7 CHORD.

WE MIGHT USE A CYCLE 5 PROGRESSION (SOMETIMES KNOWN AS BACK-CYCLING) IN THE SAME PLACE AGAIN TO CONNECT THE I7 & IV7 CHORDS.

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The staff contains ten measures of music, each with a slash indicating a chord change. Above the staff, the following chords are written: F7 (boxed), Bb7, F7, Bb7, Eb7, Ab7, Db7, Gb7, B7, and Bb7 (boxed).

JOHN COLTRANE AND MANY JAZZ MUSICIANS HAVE CONNECTED BLUES CHANGES BY USE OF 'TRANE'S "GIANT STEPS" PROGRESSION.

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The staff contains ten measures of music, each with a slash indicating a chord change. Above the staff, the following chords are written: F7 (boxed), Ab7, Db7, E7, A7, C7, C-7, F7, and Bb7 (boxed).

HERBIE HANCOCK, CHICK COREA, AND MANY OTHERS FREQUENTLY SUBBED OUT THE PLAIN DOMINANT 7TH CHORDS ON THE BLUES WITH 11-7 FOR V7. THEY ALSO VIEWED THE NEW MIN 7TH CHORD AS BEING THE "I" OF A DORIAN SCALE HARMONIZED IN 4THS. THE BASS WOULD CONTINUE TO OUTLINE THE BASIC DOM 7TH CHORD AND THE COMBINATION CREATED A 7 SUS 4 SOUND. THE RON CARTER COMPOSITION "EIGHTY-ONE" RECORDED BY MILES DAVIS COMES TO MIND AS AN EXAMPLE. THIS EXAMPLE IS THE BASIC BLUES WITH THE 11-7 SUBS MAPPED OUT.

Three musical staves in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). Each staff shows a sequence of four measures with slashes indicating chord changes. Below the staves, dashed lines indicate the original chords being substituted.

- Staff 1: Chords are F7 (boxed), C-7, Bb7, and F7 (boxed). Dashed lines below indicate the original chords: C-7, F-7, C-7, and C-7.
- Staff 2: Chords are C7 (boxed), Bb7, F7 (boxed), and (C7). Dashed lines below indicate the original chords: G-7, F-7, C-7, and C-7.
- Staff 3: Chords are C7 (boxed), Bb7, F7 (boxed), and (C7). Dashed lines below indicate the original chords: G-7, F-7, C-7, and C-7.

ANOTHER COMPONENT FOR VARIATION IS METER. BLUES ARE FREQUENTLY PLAYED IN 3/4, 6/8, 5/4, ETC. THERE ARE MANY RECORDED EXAMPLES, FROM CHARLES MINCUS TO WES MONTGOMERY. WES MONTGOMERY WROTE HIS CLASSIC "WEST COAST BLUES" IN A DOUBLED 3/4 OR 6/4 METER. IT ALSO FEATURED A I7 PROGRESSING TO bVII7 IN THE FIRST TWO BARS. NOTICE HOW IT WORKS WITHIN THE "BIRD" CHANGES. THESE ARE CHANGES FOR THE SOLOS SECTION ONLY. THE HEAD IS PLAYED TO BASIC BLUES CHANGES (EXCEPT FOR THE bVII7 CHANGE ON BAR 2). ALSO DIG THE TURNAROUND!

WEST COAST BLUES-SOLO CHANGES

Chord changes for West Coast Blues (12 bars):

- Bar 1: B^b7
- Bar 2: A^b7
- Bar 3: B^b7
- Bar 4: B-7
- Bar 5: E7
- Bar 6: B^b-7
- Bar 7: E^b7
- Bar 8: E^b-7
- Bar 9: A^b7
- Bar 10: D-7
- Bar 11: G7
- Bar 12: D^b-7
- Bar 13: G^b7
- Bar 14: C-7
- Bar 15: F7
- Bar 16: C-7
- Bar 17: F7
- Bar 18: B^bΔ7
- Bar 19: D^b7
- Bar 20: G^bΔ7
- Bar 21: BΔ7

IN ADDITION TO METER CHANGES ONE CAN STAY PRETTY MUCH WITHIN THE BLUES PARAMETERS BY SLIGHTLY ALTERING THE BAR LENGTH. JIM HALL'S "CAREFUL" COMES TO MIND. THE BASIC 12 BAR FORM BLUES IN THIS CASE HAS BEEN STRETCHED TO 16 BARS. NOTICE THE ^bV17 CHORD ON BAR 13.

Chord changes for "Careful" (16 bars):

- Bar 1: A7
- Bar 2: D7
- Bar 3: A7
- Bar 4: F7
- Bar 5: E7
- Bar 6: A7
- Bar 7: F7
- Bar 8: E7
- Bar 9: A7
- Bar 10: F7
- Bar 11: E7
- Bar 12: A7
- Bar 13: ^bV17
- Bar 14: F7
- Bar 15: E7
- Bar 16: A7
- Bar 17: F7
- Bar 18: E7
- Bar 19: A7
- Bar 20: F7
- Bar 21: E7
- Bar 22: A7

HERE'S A 13 BAR BLUES WRITTEN BY YOURS TRULY FOR ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF "STRETCHING" THE BLUES.

THE MONROE DOCTRINE

© BY MARK WHITE
WHITMARK MUSIC PUBLISHING BMI

Chord changes for "The Monroe Doctrine" (13 bars):

- Bar 1: E^b7
- Bar 2: D^b7
- Bar 3: E^b7(#5)
- Bar 4: E^b13
- Bar 5: E^b7
- Bar 6: E^b7(#5)
- Bar 7: A^b7

A7 Ab7 Gmi7 Gbmi7

Fmi7 Bb7(b9) Eb7 E13

LET'S NOW SHIFT THE TONALITY TO MINOR. MINOR BLUES ARE TYPICALLY 12 BARS IN LENGTH AND FEATURE I-7 AND IV-7 CHORDS.

C-7 F-7 C-7 C7(b9)

F-7 C-7 A7ALT

D-7b5 G7ALT C-7 A7ALT D-7b5 G7ALT

(Ab7)

THE FOUR BLUES, THE MINOR BLUES, AND THE OTHER EXAMPLES PROVIDED HERE SHOULD GIVE YOU A VERY SOLID INTRODUCTION TO PLAYING BLUES IN JAZZ. LEARN THE FOUR MAJOR/DOMINANT BLUES FIRST IN TWELVE KEYS. KEEP IN MIND THAT HORN PLAYERS TEND TO PREFER FLAT KEYS LIKE F, B \flat , A \flat , D \flat , AND E \flat , WHILE GUITARISTS OFTEN CHOOSE "OPEN STRING" KEYS LIKE G, A, E, AND D. BLUES IN C IS NOT UNCOMMON, BUT KEYS G \flat , AND B ARE RARE. THIS RANKING OF KEYS MIGHT HELP YOU "PRIORITIZE" FOR YOUR PLAYING SITUATIONS. ALSO LEARN THE MINOR BLUES FOUND TYPICALLY IN THE MINOR KEYS OF C, F, G, AND A, BUT BE PREPARED FOR ANY KEY. NEXT, START CONNECTING THE HARMONIC PILLARS VIA HARMONIC PLUMBING CONCEPTS. AT THIS POINT YOU MIGHT STUDY SOME OF THE MORE "QUIRKY" BLUES PROGRESSIONS OUT THERE. TRY WRITING YOUR OWN BLUES HEADS AND USE THE BLUES IN GENERAL TO INCORPORATE NEW IMPROV, VOICING, AND COMPING IDEAS. MOST IMPORTANTLY LISTEN TO THE BLUES ON RECORDINGS. TRY TO HEAR WHERE THE CONCEPTS PRESENTED HERE HAPPEN. AND ABOVE ALL, GET OUT AND PLAY THESE BLUES WITH OTHER MUSICIANS. EXPERIENCE TEACHES YOU MORE ABOUT USAGE THAN ANY OTHER SOURCE!