

ALTERNATIVE STYLES

THE ROAD TO BLUES MASTERY

by David Wallace

Every violist should have the blues. We can claim more elegies than any other instrument; we have a larger margin for microtones and slides than the violin; we have a range and timbre that can easily evoke a classic blues vocalist.

Playing twelve-bar blues is fun and one of the friendliest entry points into the vast world of musical improvisation. It is also essential for understanding and performing many twentieth century and contemporary genres, including jazz, country, rock—or even standard viola repertoire, like the second movement of the Rochberg sonata.

Here are several strategies I have found successful for learning and

teaching twelve-bar blues. Create your own sequence, find your own way, and discover more approaches as you go:

Internalizing Twelve-bar Blues Form:

Regardless of style, tempo, meter, or chord progression, twelve-bar blues is organized around a repeating pattern consisting of three four-bar phrases. This form must run so deeply through our veins that we can turn on the radio in the middle of a blues and quickly identify what bar is being played. Why? Owning the form builds confidence and sets the stage for creativity. When taking a solo, if you know where you are, it's easier to figure out where you're going.

When accompanying, your mastery of structure and appropriate rhythmic propulsion supports the other performers or singers. And when listening to a performance, you notice and appreciate every detail and how it fulfills or surprises your expectations.

Get some blues “jam tracks” in various styles, and count the form out loud as the recording plays. Say the bar numbers on the downbeats. (“ONE-two-three-four! TWO-two-three-four! THREE-two-three-four! . . . TWELVE-two-three-four!”) Move, dance, and count with fingers to physicalize the form and internalize the pulse.

Start to notice the characteristics of the different measures. For instance, bar nine usually contains

Example 1. Playing the chord roots of the standard Country blues progression in D.

Example 1 shows the chord roots of the standard Country blues progression in D. The notation is in bass clef, D major key, and 4/4 time. The progression consists of three lines of music, each with four bars. The first line has chords D7, G7, D7, D7. The second line has chords G7, G7, D7, D7. The third line has chords A7, G7, D7, A7. A note in the final bar of the third line is marked with a double bar line and the instruction "(SUBSTITUTE D7 WHEN ENDING.)"

Example 2. Basic accompaniment using roots and fifths.

1

5

9

Example 3. Basic accompaniment using roots, fifths, and sevenths.

1

4

7

10

a pivotal new harmony, and bar twelve often has active drum fills to kick off a repeat. What does the bass line do in each bar of this particular track? What about the piano, the guitar, or other harmonic instruments?

Choose one particular blues to practice. Play the chord roots along with the jam track (ex. 1).

Do this until you can do it in your sleep. Vary the rhythm and add syncopation if you like. Add a few double-stop notes to the roots, and start improvising accompaniment patterns (exs. 2 and 3).

Do this with different jam tracks. Explore a variety of tempi and diverse chord progressions. Practice accompanying other musicians. Improvise accompaniments to classic recordings.

The Blues Scale—A Ticket to Foolproof Soloing:

Here's one of my favorite pedagogical secrets about blues improvisation: as long as you are playing a note of the blues scale in the given key of a song, it is impossible to make a mistake! Even if the note theoretically clashes with the chord being played, it will still sound good. I can't explain why; it just works. I like to tell my students that the blues scale is magic, and it's not far from the truth. Below is a one-octave D blues scale (ex. 4):

Example 4. One-octave blues scale in D.



First, play the scale and get to know the finger patterns on the fingerboard. Choose one note from the scale, start a jam track in the key of D, and solo for several choruses using only this note. Focus on generating two- or four-bar phrases with rhythmic interest. Always know where you are in the form.

Once this is comfortable, explore soloing using only two or three notes, and gradually expand until you can solo using the entire blues scale. Aim to create riffs—short little repeating gestures or patterns. Use these melodic ideas to create phrases.

One of the keys to expressive soloing is making the most of the blue notes; that is, the notes of the blues scale that are not in the key signature. Whether you linger on them, repeat them, use them for trills, or save them for just the right moment, they are what make your melody blue. In the above D blues scale, the blue notes are F natural, A-flat, and C natural. Listening to authentic blues musicians reveals that these blue notes are sung or played slightly flat when compared to equal temperament.

When you are confident soloing within these limitations, learn the same scale in other registers and positions. Get to know your blues scales in every key. There are only a few finger patterns to learn, and

fluency develops rapidly.

Advanced tip: when playing blues in a major key, the blues scale of the relative minor will also work and vice versa. That is in a D-major blues, you can solo using the B blues scale, and in B minor, you can borrow the D-major blues scale. Notice how your choice of scale affects the overall “flavor” of your melodic material.

Writing an Original Twelve-bar Blues:

Another great entry point into the blues form is through the poetry, which usually follows an AAB or AA'B form. But that sounds a lot more technical than it actually is—go get a pencil and some paper. Read no farther until you do.

Okay, now write down a sentence that succinctly states a problem.

Write it again. If desired, throw in an additional adjective, comment, or exclamation.

Next, write a third sentence that rhymes with the first two sentences and resolves or comments on the problem.

Congratulations! You have just composed a stanza of blues poetry. Here's an example written by one of my seventh graders:

*When I have to clean the apartment
and my sister won't do nothin'*

*I said when I have to clean the apartment and my sister
won't do nothin'
It makes me wanna go eat some Stove Top Stuffin'!*

And one by his friend:

*I was sad and lonely the day my uncle died.
I was sad and lonely the day my uncle died.
That day my uncle, he took the final ride.*

Now that you've written the first blues stanza, try and sing it in blues style over one of your jam tracks. Just as the second line is textually similar to the first, see if the melody of your second phrase can repeat or develop the melody you sang for your first line. Improvise or compose until you're satisfied with your twelve-bar blues melody. Write it down or play it on your viola. Can you sing it while doubling the melody on viola or playing some fills at the ends of phrases? Expand your song by writing the next stanza.

One of the earliest published blues songs was W. C. Handy's *St. Louis Blues* in 1914. Listen to Bessie Smith's classic recording with Louis Armstrong improvising accompaniment. Notice Handy's use of (and departure from) twelve-bar blues form in this song. What do you notice about Smith's phrasing, inflection, and pitch? How and when does Armstrong contribute with his trumpet?

A Few Words about Style:

As in playing many vernacular genres or non-Romantic classical styles, string players are well advised to cool the vibrato. Rather than use it as an integral part of your tone, think of it as a way to color your phrases and provide more expression at key moments. A slower vibrato may be more idiomatic for the blues, but there is also room for the occasional wild shake. Jazz vocalists and saxophonists make excellent guides.

When sliding into a note, be careful not to overdo it. Slide with light finger pressure, and apply full pressure only when the ultimate pitch is reached. The bow applies a similar approach to pressure. With practice,

you will be able to vary left- and right-hand pressure at will so that you have just the slide you want. Remember that the slide is a means to an end; it's seldom an effect for its own sake.

In blues and jazz, up bows are often lighter than down bows in order to generate swing. The degree of swing largely depends on the genre and the style—for instance, in bossa nova, eighth notes are played rather evenly and less swung. Explore different colors with your bow, and adjust your tone to different styles. *Sul ponticello* can create expressive effects or even evoke the sound of an electric guitar.

Getting Better:

It takes time, practice, and patience to learn any style of music, and the blues is no exception. You or your students may prefer to start in private with nobody looking, but jamming with friends can really fuel inspiration and expedite learning. Take turns playing twelve-bar choruses, or trade two-bar phrases or four-bar phrases in call and response.

Build a repertoire of twelve-bar blues songs, and learn the melodies, or "heads." A diverse list of approachable tunes might include the fiddle standard *Milk Cow Blues*, Duke Ellington's *C Jam Blues*, the Beatles' *For You Blue*, Leiber and Stoller's *Hound Dog*, W. C. Handy's *Beale Street Blues*, Charlie Parker's *Now's the Time*, Jimi Hendrix's rendition of *Red House*, and Miles Davis's *Freddie Freeloader*.

Be aware that not everything that calls itself a blues is a blues. Though the melody has a couple of blue notes, fiddle standard *Crafton Blues* is more closely related to old-time fiddling and ragtime; *Limehouse Blues* is a presto thirty-two-bar swing tune; and despite some dominant seventh chords and blue notes played by the piano on the verses, arguably the bluest thing about Elton John's *I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues* is his sunglasses.

Not every authentic blues is a twelve-bar blues, either. For an ear-opening survey of the many

musical strands that coalesced to form the blues in America, hear Alan Lomax's anthology *Roots of the Blues*, and read his extensive liner notes. Get the sound of early authentic blues in your ear and transfer it to your bow. See if you can add your instrument to field hollers, prison songs, call and response Pentecostal worship, or the slide guitar of delta blues musician Mississippi Fred McDowell.

Learning and making transcriptions, or even composing riffs and solos, will help to refine one's craft and taste. Listen to landmark blues recordings like Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five's *West End Blues*. Take notes about what made each twelve-bar chorus a great solo. Put on a jam track and intentionally try to build an original solo based on one of the tactics you noticed. Take the time to learn one of your favorite twelve-bar solos note-for-note.

Study how performers who play multiple choruses in a row pace themselves. For worthy examples of large-scale solos on the blues, analyze Paul Gonsalves's legendary twenty-seven-chorus saxophone solo on *Diminuendo in Blue* and *Crescendo in Blue* from the 1956 *Ellington at Newport* album or Mark O'Connor's ever-inventive and mind-blowing performances and recordings of his original blues *In the Cluster*. What role do rests, sustained notes, dynamics, rhythmic development, and repetition play?

Pick up a method book or tune anthology devoted to the blues. Enter the world of soloing on the chord changes, which can be a simple or a complex endeavor, depending on the tune or how far down the rabbit hole one wishes to venture. Hal Leonard provides many worthwhile publications, and jazz musicians have turned to method books and tune anthologies by David Baker and Jamey Aebersold for decades. I also highly recommend the *Berklee Blues Improvisation Complete*.

On the strings front, Julie Lyonn Lieberman's *Rockin' Out with Blues Fiddle* provides exercises as well as valuable discography and history about the oft overlooked blues violinists and string bands who should form an integral part of our heritage and collective

knowledge as string players. While not a blues method in itself, Matt Glaser's *Jazz Violin* provides accurate and classic transcriptions of Stéphane Grappelli, Eddie South, Stuff Smith, Svend Asmussen, and more, along with an analysis of riffs and melodic language that are easily adapted to the blues. Martin Norgaard's *Jazz Fiddle Wizard* provides very practical thoughts about soloing with melodic intent and includes blues.

As for blues recordings featuring the viola, Jimbo Ross has several CDs available on his website at: <http://www.bodaciousrecords.com/>. Ross's blues music encompasses far more than twelve-bar blues and also includes electric blues, R & B, soul, and funk.

The blues truly can merit a lifetime of study, but even a cursory exploration yields deep riches. Why not give it a shot? You've nothing to lose, but your blues. . .

Dr. David Wallace makes sure that no dancer graduates from Juilliard without improvising E-flat blues solos on the piano. As a Senior Teaching Artist for the New York Philharmonic, he has taught hundreds of fifth graders plastic recorder blues improvisation as a means of understanding the orchestral masterworks of Gershwin and Ellington.