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**Article 26:
Singing the Blues ...
Again**

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Singing the Blues ... Again

by Bob Taylor – ©2006 Visual Jazz Publications

Over the years, I've noticed a very interesting phenomenon with many young jazz vocalists and scat singers ...

They are addicted to the blues.

Not that there's anything wrong with the blues – it's one of the core elements of jazz improvisation, and I love improvising on blues tunes. Still, over-dependence on the blues (actually, on the limiting aspects of the blues) seems to be an epidemic in today's jazz education culture. Countless method books are published with a near-endless supply of blues licks and patterns – with the appeal of “instant music” for the learner. Sadly, many improvisers never seem to make it past those blues licks and into the rest of the creative improvisation world.

The Dilemma

So how does a young improviser get trapped by the blues?

- The blues and blues scales are fairly easy to learn, so that's where most improvisers start.
- Once you're into the blues, it gets so comfortable that it's hard to leave (kind of like getting out of that soft recliner chair).
- Blues scales are traditionally learned from octave to octave, leading to a lot of “root-dependence” (which misses color possibilities).
- Although you can play one blues scale over a whole blues, there are disadvantages to doing this that beginning improvisers are seldom aware of. For example, the 1 in C7 (C) is the 4th in G7 (avoid); the #4 in C7 (F#) is the b2 in F7 (avoid); the b7 in C7 (Bb) is the 4th in F7 (avoid).

The bottom line - you can get “addicted to,” or trapped by, the blues.

If this problem is pervasive for young instrumentalists, it’s even more of a problem for singers. So first, let’s take a look at how we can free singers from the blues trap – and then we’ll reconnect with the blues to come full circle.

A Starting Point

Rather than starting beginning improvisation students on the blues, I prefer to have them begin with a bossa nova style in a single key, such as Concert Bb. Why? Because it gets students used to looking for color tones and color rhythms in an easy surrounding. That desire for color will later come in handy in the blues, as well as other chord progressions.

The bossa nova also removes the “swing” factor at first. That may seem like a disadvantage, but often times students who are new to swing actually learn bad habits (accenting downbeats, stiff articulations) when they have to concentrate on improvising at the same time. Swing techniques deserve their own special attention.

Finding the Footholds

The easiest “entry points” for the blues are first the 1 (root), then the 5th, then the third. When you listen to most young singers (or instrumentalists for that matter), that’s where the vast majority of their phrases begin –

... on the 1, the 5, or the 3.

As I’ve noted in other articles, those tones also tend to be the most boring, adding to the boredom factor in many solos.

So where do we find the footholds for going beyond the blues? They’re the color tones –

... the 2, 6, and 7 (and sometimes 3 and 4).

Now it’s fairly easy for instrumentalists to play color tones, once they know which ones they are – they just press a key or valve, move a slide, etc. But for singers it’s more of a challenge. It takes practice to find – and hear and sing – the 2 immediately in any given key. Likewise with the other color tones; they don’t come automatically. But when they are sung confidently and in tune, they open up a new horizon.

And don’t forget the rhythmic footholds – the traditional ones (beat 1 and beat 3) are overused by singers, while the more colorful spots (beat 2, beat 4, and all the offbeats) should be used much more often.

Keeping the Footholds

When singers find one of the footholds (melodic or rhythmic), the next step is to grab it with confidence. This seems obvious, but the voice is a slippery instrument without good vision and good ears. Many times color tones are hit but not held in pitch in a solo; and many times rhythmic color spots are hit, but the rhythm that follows tends to falter.

One big reason for shaky color tones – the “**Tidal Pull.**” The octave and the 5th (resting tones) seem to exert a lot of gravity on nearby color tones. For example, the octave psychologically “pulls” the seventh and second towards it, and the 5th pulls the 6th towards it, resulting sometimes in color tones with poor pitches. Be aware of the “tidal pull.”

The solution? Plenty of drilling and practice makes the difference. Here are a few suggestions to help you or the vocalists you teach keep a strong grasp on the “non-blues” footholds:

1. Find, sing, and grab melodic color spots.
2. Develop “color interval” skills. Color intervals are those that contain two color notes, such as skipping from the 2 to the 6, or the 3 to the 7.
3. Develop rhythmic flexibility. Be able to sing consecutive offbeat quarters, consecutive dotted quarters, offbeat half-notes, quarter-note triplets, etc.

Benefits

Sharpening these skills will help vocalists sing better solos in a variety of tunes – modal, rhythm changes, standard tunes, etc. – without making everything sound like it was borrowed from the blues. That’s a definite improvement from where many vocalists are now, in terms of improvisation style.

And speaking of the blues ...

Back to the Blues (Expanded)

One of the best ways to spice up the blues is to add color – and to do that, you can use the *expanded blues scale*. To expand a blues scale, you add these tones to it:

- 6th
- 2nd
- Natural 3rd

These notes add a new dimension of color to the blues. Notice that you can use the b3 and natural 3 become a nice pivot point between a minor feel and a major (dominant) feel in your solos. And ...

Tri-Tones in the Expanded Blues Scale

Besides the addition of color tones, the expanded blues scale also offers two more tri-tone (augmented fourth) intervals, which can be very cool-sounding. Besides the 1 to #4 of the regular blues scale, you also get (sounds kind of like an infomercial ...)

- b3 to 6
- 3 to b7

So in a C Blues, the b3 to 6 would be Eb to A; the 3 to 7 would be E to Bb. These “side-by-side” tri-tones offer some fun switching possibilities in solos. (Note that in minor blues, the natural isn’t used, so neither is the 3 to b7.)

Now let’s take a look at how these tri-tones are used in the three blues chords of a C blues (C7, F7 and G7):

- 1 to #4 becomes C to F# in C7, or F to B in F7, or G to C# in G7. Note that few players think to use B natural or C# in a C7 blues, but in those two spots (B on the F7, C# on the G7) it works fine.
- b3 to 6 becomes Eb to A in C7, Ab to D in F7, or Bb to E in G7. The Ab is seldom thought of in a C blues.
- 3 to b7 becomes E to Bb in C7, or A to Eb in F7, or B to F in G7. Note that the A and Eb work for either C7 or F7.

There are some great tri-tone possibilities here – practice them in all keys and learn how to connect to them smoothly.

Conclusion

Get yourself free from the Blues Trap. Then come back and visit the blues from a fresh perspective, and see how your horizons – well – expand.