



## *Searchin' for the Blues*

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**Lesson Time Frame:** Approximately five 10–15 minute sessions. Movement from lesson to lesson must be contingent upon student progress. Some of the days described in the lesson may need to be repeated, depending on the the teacher's perception of student progress.

**Description:** This lesson leads students into blues improvisation based upon two blues progressions and a blues scale. Students begin with rhythmic improvisations based on I, IV, and V chords with a flatted third then progress to melodic improvisations using a given blues scale.

**Essential Question:** How can an improvisation sound like the blues?

**SBI Number:**  
**Assessed:**

I.3.1 Improvise in a given rhythmic and melodic style.

**Addressed:**

I.2.1 Demonstrate proper tone production.

I.6.1 Demonstrate perceptual skills in discerning musical styles of aural examples.

**Objectives:**

Students will improvise rhythmically within a twelve measure I, IV, and V blues pattern in common time.

Students will improvise melodically within a blues scale for one or more four measure units in common time.

## **Assessment:**

### **Summative**

#### **• Description**

The students will demonstrate their improvisational skills by playing corresponding chord tones within the given twelve bar blues progression.

The students will demonstrate their improvisational skills utilizing the pitches of a given blues scale for four or eight measures.

#### **• Task Prompt**

"Blues Language" handout.

([www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/gis/bluelang.doc](http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/gis/bluelang.doc)) "Blues Language" quiz.

([www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/gis/bluelangq.doc](http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/gis/bluelangq.doc))

Improvisation Rubric

Improvisational Reference Sheet

Audio files

([www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/al/audiofiles.html](http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/al/audiofiles.html).)

\* Performance Standard:

Scoring distinguished on rubric.

**\* Rubric:**

See the Improvisation Rubric in the Resources.

<http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/gis/bluesrubric.html>

**\* Student Exemplars:**

Video of students can be seen at

<http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/cog/examples.mov>

**Formative**

Teacher will aurally monitor for correct notes for each chord.  
Students perform individually for class.

**Materials/Resources:**

\* Blues Recordings/Teacher Model, including audio files available online

(<http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/al/audiofiles.html>)

\* Improvisational Reference Sheet

\* Pencils

\* Instruments

**Learning Activity:**

**Day One:**

**STEP ONE:** Present aural example. Discuss. Ask students, "What is improvisation?" Discuss. Model a brief improvisation for the students. Give students a chance to briefly improvise individually.

**STEP TWO:** Ask students "What can you tell me about the blues?" Discuss. Improvise in twelve bar blues style with sequenced (or other prepared) accompaniment for students. "You are going to learn to do that."

**STEP THREE:** Review D, G, and A major chords. Teach lowered third concept. Each chord is to be played with a lowered third. Rehearse playing chords as they are called out. Students should improvise their own rhythms and change notes, arpeggiate, etc. according to their individual comfort levels. Encourage them to use notes in

various locations: high, low, more than one string for same letter name, etc. Reinforce listening/perceptual skills by playing blues style accompaniments as students play. At this point, the blues structure is not necessarily followed. Stay on each chord until students demonstrate proficiency. Increase rate of harmonic change as appropriate. All students may play simultaneously, since everyone is playing the same chord at the same time. Offer opportunities for individuals to play solo.

## **Day Two:**

**STEP ONE:** Review previous lesson. Introduce blues progression:

D | D | D | D | G | G | D | D | A | A | D | D ||

[The chord progression can be heard at  
<http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/al/blues2.html>.

Students may write this for themselves, or teacher may provide a progression chart handout. The chart can be found at:  
<http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/al/chorprog.html>

**STEP TWO:** Teacher models improvisation with blues progression. Play a blues recording. Play one time just to listen and enjoy. Play it again, having students call out the chords as they change. (It doesn't matter whether the recording is actually in D. Explain that they will be naming the chords as if it were in D.)

**STEP THREE:** Students improvise using chord tones only, watching progression chart. Note: Always provide accompaniment as students play. As students demonstrate adequate comfort level, introduce stylistic elements, such as portamento, glissando, shake, tremolo, anything that is within their skill level. Encourage them to play "all over" the instrument, rather than remaining in first position with a more limited number of actual pitches. Encourage experimentation. (Students can use audio files to accompany their experiments.)

### **Day Three:**

**STEP ONE:** Review the previous lesson. Introduce, teach and practice using passing tones while maintaining emphasis on chord tones.

**STEP TWO:** Introduce blues scale: D F G G# A C D. (To hear the blues scale on D, click [here](#).) Again, students may write this for themselves or be supplied with a handout. Model for the students. Play a recording in which use of the blues scale is evident. It will probably be appropriate to explain that the performer(s) are using blues scales starting from more than one pitch, but the students will only use one starting pitch for the time being.

**STEP THREE:** Students practice playing notes using stylistic rhythms as well as other stylistic devices (modeled by the teacher) on each note. Allow students to practice these notes in any way they choose. Be sure they utilize various locations on the instrument for each pitch name. Again, always provide accompaniment as students play. This increases the likelihood of stylistically appropriate playing. As students develop confidence, encourage solo improvisation. Refer students to sources for blues listening, such as radio stations, festivals, concerts, stores where recordings may be purchased, etc. (Students may use these audio files for listening and or "practicing" improvisation.)

### **Day Four:**

**STEP ONE:** Introduce blues progression #2:

D | D | D | D | G | G | D | D | A | G | D | D ||

[The chord progression can be heard at <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/al/blues2c.html> ]

Rehearse this progression. Then practice signaling "1" or "2" with your fingers so that the students may change from one progression to the other.

## **Day Five:**

**STEP ONE:** Teach some possible ways of ending the musical piece. Use teacher modeling and recordings for reference.

**STEP TWO:** As proficiency (not necessarily "perfection") becomes apparent, have students improvise entire musical pieces. For example:

All students perform progression #1 twice, improvising collectively, using chord tones (and, possibly, passing tones).

Each student improvises four or eight measures (or more, depending on the inclination of the student) using the blues scale.

Signal change to progression #2. Play once or twice. Conclude composition/performance.

**STEP THREE:** Continue to practice, explore, listen. Encourage students to develop some favorite "licks" they might wish to incorporate into their performances at any chosen time.

**STEP FOUR:** Add keys (tonal centers), progression patterns, scales, terminology, etc. as skills continue to develop. Enjoy.

## **Author Reflection:**

This lesson is probably most applicable during the middle or end of the year.

Multilevel teaching is possible. Some students may add skills and devices while others continue to develop the basics. This is actually an open-ended lesson. and as such may serve as a springboard for further development into blues/jazz performance.

It is beneficial to play recorded examples often. A vast selection of blues recordings are available from many merchants. The teacher should listen to the recordings ahead of time to check for classroom appropriate lyrics. Recordings featuring the harmonica are especially helpful, since many of the stylistic devices are easily adaptable to string playing.

## **Content Knowledge:**

The teacher must be familiar with and capable of demonstrating stylistically correct basic blues performance. The teacher should be familiar with blues structure. If the teacher does not have a background of blues and improvisational playing, a suggested starting point is *Nothin' But Blues* (Book and CD) by Jamey Aebersold.

Students must have basic playing ability and be comfortable moving about on the instrument, preferably on all four strings.

Students must be familiar with and understand the D, G, and A triads.

## **Strategy Description:**

Peer modeling. This can be done as a Kagan strategy (Think, pair, share) – students think of an improvisation and share it with their shoulder and/or face partners. The teacher can strategically place stronger with weaker students.

Teacher modeling

Professional exemplars through recordings and guest performers

## **Adaptation**

\* As stated in the "Author Reflection" students move at their own pace, providing for multi-level teaching. Therefore this lesson has its own adaptations for the special needs child.

\* In addition to pairing weaker with stronger students, the teacher may want to pair special needs students with other students in the class.

## **Student Enrichment**

\* Have students write a short paper answering these three questions:

1. How has this activity improved your skills as a musician? (or on your instrument)

2. If you were going to show someone else to do what you learned, how would you do it?
3. What did you like most/least about this activity?

Encourage the students to elaborate if any of the lesson had any special interest or meaning in their lives at home. (With older students, this could be the basis for a five paragraph theme paper.)

\* If a local group is available and willing, have them come in and play for the students one day making sure to give them a little bit of time to answer questions students may have. Make sure students are aware that questions are to be mostly music related. If a group is not available, then bring in a video of a group performing. A list of questions for students to answer may help them stay focused. Also, with either scenario, make sure you know what music is going to be played and that it is appropriate for the students.

\* Other suggestions for extension and adaptation are given by Brett Smith in a similar lesson plan which can be accessed by clicking here. With these extensions the following social studies SBIs will be addressed:

**Grade 5**  
**Standard 4**

Sociology Anthropology: Analyze the influence of cultural factors (e.g., customs, traditions, language, media, arts, architecture) in developing pluralistic societies and how these factors contribute to both conflict and interdependence among groups, societies, and nations.

**Benchmarks:**

5.4.1 Explain ways in which language, stories, folk tales, music, media, and artistic creation serve as components of a culture.

**Indicators:**

5.4.1.1 Compare folktales from different cultures for similarities and differences.

5.4.1.2 Examine character writings from different cultures and explain how the language depicts the culture.

5.4.1.3 Create any artistic product representing a particular culture and explain how it represents the culture.

## **Teacher Resources:**

\* Aebersold, J. (2003). Jamey Aebersold Jazz, Inc. – Anyone Can Improvise! – Homepage. Retrieved July 10, 2003, from <http://www.aebersold.com>.

\* Aebersold, J.; Haerle, D.; Reid, R.; and Hyman, M. (2000). Nothin' but blues: jazz and rock: play-a-long book & recording set. New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, Inc.

This is a book/CD set published for all instruments. The CD is in a play along format. Solos heard on the CD have been transcribed. Performance level is easy to medium.

\* Alonzo, L. (2003). Blues Progressions. Retrieved July 12, 2003, from <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/al/blues2.html>, <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/al/blues2a.html>, <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/al/blues2c.html>, and <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003al/blues2d.html>.

These are html versions of the progressions realized by Alonzo using Finale and converted to MIDI format so that the progression can be heard as well as seen.

\* Alonzo, L. (2003) Blues Progressions. Retrieved July 12, 2003, from <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/al/chorprog.doc>.

The Microsoft Word, printable version of the progression chart handout for this lesson plan. There are two charts on each page, one page is in letter format and one is in staff format. Use whichever you choose.

\* Alonzo, L.; Ardrey, M.; Cogbill, M.; Gish, A.; and Transue, P. (2003). Searchin' for the Blues. Retrieved July 5, 2003, from <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/gis/strings1.doc>.

The Microsoft Word, printable version of this lesson plan.

\* Alonzo, L.; Ardrey, M.; Cogbill, M.; Gish, A.; and Transue, P. (2003). Improvisation Rubrics. Retrieved July 5, 2003, from <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/gis/improvrubric.doc>.

The Microsoft Word, printable version of the rubric for this lesson plan.

\* Band [sic], B. (2001). A touch of the blues. [Transcribed by Net3Media.com]. At FreeAudioClips.com. [MIDI file]. Retrieved July 30, 2003, from <http://freeaudioclips.com>.

\* Cogbill, M. (2003). Blues Language. (2003). Retrieved June 18, 2003, from <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/cog/blulang1.doc>.

This is a study sheet about the components of the blues. It is in Microsoft Word format. This can also be viewed with audio at <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/gis/blueslanguage.html>.

\* Cogbill, M. Student Examples. (2003). Retrieved June 18, 2003, from <http://www.kckps.org/iarc/2003/itsmusic/cog/examples.mov>.

This is a video of students improvising 12-bar blues patterns after they have been instructed using this lesson.

\* Delmore Brothers. (2001). Blues stay away from me. [Transcribed by Net3Media.com]. At FreeAudioClips.com. [MIDI file]. Retrieved July 30, 2003, from <http://freeaudioclips.com>.

\* Howlin' Wolf. (2001). Little red rooster. [Transcribed by Net3Media.com]. At FreeAudioClips.com. [MIDI file]. Retrieved July 30, 2003, from <http://freeaudioclips.com>.

\* New York State Education Department [Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment]. Commencement – General Education. Retrieved July 23, 2003, from <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/arts/pub/muscommence.pdf>.

This appears to be a list of state standards and benchmarks for music. Of particular interest to this lesson is page 5, which refers specifically to the blues. However, the entire 34-page document is of interest to all urban music educators.

\* Smith, Brett. PBS – Jazz, a film by Ken Burns: Classroom: Blues Improvisation. Retrieved July 5, 2003, from <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/classroom/bluesimprov.htm>.

This is another lesson plan concerned with blues improvisation. Some very good suggestions on adaptations and extension of this plan can be accessed by clicking here.