

Will The Real Blues Scale Step Forward!

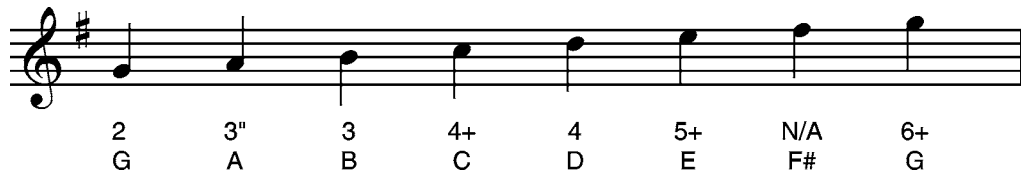
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The blues scale is a great study tool for harmonica players wishing to learn the most common notes used in blues soloing. Many different scales have been presented through time as “The” blues scale. All of them have some validity, so it’s worth spending some time to look at them all in-depth.

Let’s start by looking at the major scale. Since most musicians commonly relate scales to the familiar major scale, it will help to start here. Demonstrated below is the G major scale.

Ex. 1

G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	G
Root	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	Octave



The “Blue Note”

Playing bluesy is all about tension and release. Tension is built from playing a note not within the chord. This note is dissonant relative to the chord and evokes a feeling of unrest in the listener’s ears. The resolving of the note to a chord tone is the resolution of tension. It’s this tension, release, tension, release that gives a blues solo its bluesyness. These tension notes within the blues scale are known as “blue notes.”

The Blues Scale is Universal

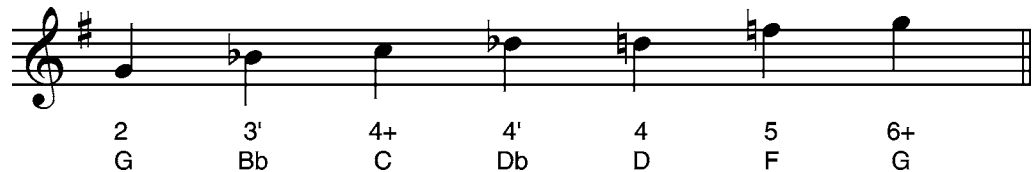
An important point about the blues scale is its universalness. If you are in the key of G, then you will use the G blues scale for the entire song. Though there are other chords in the song (IV and V), there are enough notes in common between the root blues scale (G) and the IV and V chords to work. Phrasing also takes a large role in how it works. If you wish to understand this further you can reference any of my Exploring Series books (Exploring 1st Position, Exploring 2nd Position or Exploring 3rd Position). For now, let’s agree that all we need to focus on is one blues scale, of which can be used over the IV and V chords in a song.

The Blues Scale

Let's start with the original blues scale, then we can discuss why others are not or are alterations of the blues scale as we go. The G blues scale is demonstrated below.

Ex. 2

G	Bb	C	Db	D	F	G
Root	Flat-3 rd	4 th	Flat-5 th	5 th	Flat-7 th	Octave



2 G 3' Bb 4+ C 4' Db 4 D 5 F 6+ G

Let's relate the blues scale to the major scale. The root is the same. The 2nd is omitted. The 3rd is lowered by half step. The 4th is the same. The flatted 5th is added. The 5th is the same. The 6th is omitted. The seventh is lowered by half step. Pretty much every note of the blues scale is dissonant except the root and 5th. You can assume that notes within the blues scale will eventually resolve to the 5th or root.


The Quartertone 3rd

When speaking of 2nd position (our most common position) the third of the scale is found on 3 draw. Almost always the three draw will be lowered for the flat-3rd of the blues scale, but not exactly to the half step. The three draw is lowered to a quartertone below the major third (or a quartertone above the flat-3rd, depending how you look at it). This sounds the bluesiest. The third lowered down exactly at a half step can be used, though in most cases it sounds too low—too minor. The common way to play the third is lowered a quartertone. To present a lighter sound in your solo (more major) play the 3rd (3 draw) unbent. To present a bluesy sound in your solo play the 3rd lowered a quartertone. To play in minor, use the 3rd lowered a half step. These are good general guidelines.

The Minor Pentatonic Scale

Ex. 3

G	Bb	C	D	F	G
Root	Flat-3 rd	4 th	5 th	Flat-7 th	Octave



2 G 3' Bb 4+ C 4 D 5 F 6+ G

The minor pentatonic scale is very close to the blues scale and is commonly mistaken for the blues scale. The flat third and flat seventh are from the blues scale, though there is one note missing, the flat-5th. Though very close, it's not a blues scale without the flat-5th.

Blues Scale #2

Ex. 4

G	Bb	B	C	Db	D	E	F	G
Root	Flat-3 rd	3 rd	4 th	Flat-5 th	5 th	6 th	Flat-7 th	Octave

Though not the “original” blues scale, an interesting mixture of notes. In this case the blues scale has the major 3rd and major 6th addition. Being from the major scale, these two notes lighten up the blues scale. The idea of the original blues scale is to have a scale, if played exclusively, will sound very bluesy. The original blues scale lacks any notes that exclusively imply major (major 3rd, 6th and 7th); it uses only neutral notes (root and 5th) and notes that build tension for bluesy effect (flat-3rd, 4th, flat-5th, and flat-7th). Blues Scale #2 incorporates two notes from the major scale that are commonly used in blues soloing, which makes this scale a more complete picture of blues soloing.

For harmonica players, the major third (3 draw unbent) is hardly ever played unless you want a really light feel. The major sixth (2+, 5+ and 8+) is used all of the time and really does belong in a scale if the scale’s purpose is to show which notes are commonly used in soloing.

Blues Scale #3

Ex. 5

G	A	Bb	B	C	Db	D	E	F	F#	G
Root	2 nd	Flat-3 rd	3 rd	4 th	Flat-5 th	5 th	6 th	Flat-7 th	7 th	Octave

Blues Scale #3 adds to the previous scale the 2nd and major 7th. The 2nd is used often in passing and for chord-tone soloing over the other chord changes. The major seventh is also used the same way, though I would say to include the major 7th in the scale is stretching it a bit.

Barrett Blues Scale

For the purpose of this article, let’s make a new scale that is very specific to what the harmonica player uses. This is detailed below.

Ex. 6

G	A	Bb	C	Db	D	E	F	G
Root	2 nd	Qtn-3 rd	4 th	Flat-5 th	5 th	6 th	Flat-7 th	Octave

2	3''	3'	4+	4'	4	5+	5	6+
G	A	Bb	C	Db	D	E	F	G

The root (2/3+, 6+ and 9+) is played a lot by harmonica players, both for chording and to resolve phrases. The 2nd (3'', 6 and 10) is commonly used between the 3 draw quartertone and root, and as the 5th of the V chord. The quartertone 3rd (3 draw bent a quartertone) is one of our most important blue notes and is played a lot. The 4th (1+, 4+, 7+, and 10+) is used as passing and as the root of the IV chord or flat-7th of the V chord. The Flat-5th (1' and 4') is great for building tension. The 5th (1, 4 and 8), though a neutral note (not major, bluesy or minor), it's used a tremendous amount, and commonly over-used in the case of 4 draw. The 6th (2+, 5+ and 8+) is a lighter sounding note borrowed from the major scale that helps to keep our solos from being too dark. Though not in the original blues scale, many solos would be empty without this note. The flat-7th (2'', 5 and 9) is an integral part of the blues and is played a tremendous amount. The octave completes the scale.

If you were to count the occurrence of notes in a solo, it's pretty safe to say this is what you will almost always see. There are of course the occasional passing tones and odd note usages that employ other notes, but you're pretty safe with this scale.

Because our harmonica does not have all of these notes available to us in its three octave range, it needs to be understood that substitutions and omissions are needed. Detailed below is the above scale with the necessary changes to make it adapt to the three octaves. A couple quick notes of things that might bring some confusion. The Ab (6') is added as a substitution from the D blues scale. The 7 draw B is used because the quartertone Bb is not available on the 7 draw. The 10 draw A is omitted because of its scarcity in soloing.

Ex. 7

1+	1'	1	2+	2''	2	3''	3'	4+	4'	4	5+	5	6+	6'	6	7	7+	8	8+	9	9+	10''+	10+
C	Db	D	E	F	G	A	Bb	C	Db	D	E	F	G	Ab	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Bb	C

The example below is the scale I usually show students to traverse the entire range of the instrument playing with more of a traditional blues scale sound.

Ex. 8

1+ 1' 1 2'' 2 3' 4+ 4' 4 5 6+ 6' 6 7+ 8 9 9+

C Db D F G Bb C Db D F G Ab A C D F G

Application

This is all very heady for a style of music that is almost entirely an oral tradition. Blues is traditionally developed by listening to the masters, copying the masters, and trying to use what the masters used in our solos to speak the language of the blues. The blues scale is not meant to reinvent blues. Blues came first; the blues scale came after to help students maneuver on their instrument using the most common notes played in blues. If you learn the blues scale from the bottom of the harmonica (1+) to the top (10+), you ARE playing the most common notes use for blues soloing. If you can play the scale with decent speed and articulation, learning a new lick can be as simple as rearranging the notes in rhythm to match what you're copying from an artist or what you're hearing in your head.

Notation Key

3+ = 3 Blow

3 = 3 Draw

3' = 3 Draw Half Step Bend

3'' = 3 Draw Whole Step Bend

3''' = 3 Draw Minor Third (three half steps) Bend

I = One Chord

IV = Four Chord

V = Five Chord

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