

# THE BLUES SCALE

It hardly seems necessary to cover the blues scale as everyone is bombarded by it so much. So many of pop songs and funky jazz tunes are derived from this scale that it is impossible to ignore.

I have a pet theory that the blues scale is a variation of the major and minor pentatonic scales. In many areas of the world, including African countries, the indigenous music is based on two pentatonic scales.



Somehow in the transition from Africa to America, the bass note of the major pentatonic scale was changed from the Eb to the note preceding it, the C. The descending form of these scales, particularly the second one, has now become recognisable as the blues scale.



In ascending passages, the fifth (G, in this case) is often used, whereas the flattened fifth (Gb, here) tends to be used in descending passages. Hence the inclusion of both scales. The first of these scales is called the minor pentatonic scale.

As the scale is associated so much with song, the blues notes (the 3rd, 7th and 5th) are not fixed pitch notes but can vary according to vocal inflections. This slithering and sliding around on these notes give them their unique flavour. If you write a blues instrumental piece, say for a saxophone section to play, you will have to add a lot of these inflections to the notes with slide-ups, fall-offs and trill marks liberally placed around the notes.

These vocal inflections can mean that what starts as a minor 3rd, 5th or more rarely a 7th can end up as a major 3rd, 5th or 7th in ascending passages.

I'm sure all of this is very familiar to everyone (except classic-music singers who want to prove, usually disastrously, that they can also sing other types of music.)

Bearing in mind, that we can think of a blues scale as being a major pentatonic a minor third above the root of the chord (Eb is a minor third above C) we can use this fact to find the blues scale for any key. It is then just a case of flattening the fifth. This can be quite useful, since guitarists like sharp keys, brass players like flat keys and vocalists don't mind any key as long as it's difficult for the accompanists to play in.

A major pentatonic can be described thus: 69, while the same scale with a minor third would be m69 (see above). Combining them into one symbol, this would become (m)69, as in C(m)69.

Therefore, when you want to play a blues lick in an unfamiliar key, work out the note a minor third up and play around on these pentatonics, remembering that the bass note of the chord also becomes the first note of the scale. You will probably be able to remember this without any difficulty, but if you want to write it down, here it is in scored-changes form. Let's say, we want the blues scale of F#:

A(m)69  
F#7.

Last point: You can also get away with playing the major 6<sup>9</sup> and minor 6<sup>9</sup> in the same key to get a funky sound. Eg. C6<sup>9</sup> or Cm6<sup>9</sup> against a C or C7 chord.

Bands like the Yellow Jackets and Kenny G's music is full of this sort of thing.

Just one last thing: Don't overdo it or you can get trapped in a cul-de-sac of cliches.

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