

Introduction to The Blues
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The Blues is a distinct form of Americana music which was formed primarily as an African-American art form which eventually blended with other musical influences in the United States following the abolition of slavery.

The musical genre of the blues is a wonderful starting point for students who are just beginning to improvise. First, the harmonic simplicity of the changes means that students can utilize one scale for the entire changes until they advance. Additionally, students are **very** familiar with the sound of the blues. Along with the harmonic minor scale, the blues scale is one of those things which immediately makes students *feel* something exciting. When introducing the blues, many teachers will start with a tune like “Sonny Moon for Two,” however, there are some issues with this approach.

First, modern students are just not as familiar with jazz as we would like to think. Most students have experienced jazz as a kind of “historic” music in movies or video games, but they do not often sit down and listen to an album of bebop until they are taught how to appreciate it. Additionally, Sonny Moon for Two features a heavy swing feel. As it is not the main focus of this document, I will simply say that swing is stylistically complex and technically challenging due to its asymmetrical nature on the bow.

Due to these factors, I personally recommend introducing the blues (and indeed improv as a whole) through a primarily **vocal** medium. In this document I have compiled a brief history of the blues in the United States. While this list is **not in any way** comprehensive, my goal was to give my student a way to start her own spotify playlist in order to listen deeply to the style.

Swing Low Sweet Chariots- Fisk Jubilee Singers (Nashville, TN 1909. Earliest recording of this song).

Fisk University is a Historically Black College in Nashville TN that was formed as a way of educating freed slaves after the Civil War. The college was in danger of closing in 1871, and so one of the school’s musical directors organized a choir tour to raise funds for the college. The Fisk Jubilee Singers eventually became an international success and one of the first times that an American genre of music gained global acclaim.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUvBGZnL9rE>

“Roll Jordan Roll” as recorded for the movie *12 Years a Slave*

This recording is a dramatization of what original slave spirituals may have sounded like. An important point to note is the communal participation of untrained musicians. Note how the

rhythm is kept and there is a call and response between the group and the “lead” singer. This is fairly similar to how we play back and forth in our lesson when trading licks. The blues is a **non-literate** art form, meaning that it was not taught using notation in the way that classical music is transferred.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oFcFzJT7Tw>

African American Influence Found in Classical Repertoire

Antonin Dvorak was a Czech composer who noted the influence of African-American music in the unique culture being formed. In his famous “New World Symphony ” which was composed while living in the U.S. he composed a “wordless song” in the largo section that has gone on to become one of the most popular symphonies ever composed. Although this song is not a direct quote of a spiritual, it embodies many of the same qualities.

Dvorak Symphony No9-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASlch7R1Zvo>

Reminagining by the Silk Road Ensemble (Yo-Yo Ma)-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uymTSOYYC0&t=37s>

Blues as a “guitar-centric” art form

It is important to note the origin of a style of music, because that origin will be affected by the musical idioms which are common on that instrument. After slavery was abolished, African-American music traveled along a variety of pathways in the United States, leading to the formation of a number of musical genres such as Ragtime, Jazz (New Orleans style, Kansas City, Chicago, New York City), and also influencing existing styles such as Appalachian old-time. In the Mississippi Delta region and into Memphis, the guitar was increasingly added as a way for blues singers to accompany themselves in “juke joints” across the South.

This is a modern version of what is reminiscent of the kind of music played in Juke Joints. Notice how the right hand of the guitar is often hitting at the same time as the kick drum, giving the feeling of “backbeat” on 2 & 4. Interestingly, a similar backbeat can be felt in other American styles like Jazz and Fiddle that were all in the process of coming to fruition at this time (turn of the 19th century).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZeIGRlc6ac>

Robert Johnson-

A popular example of the famous “Sold his soul to the devil to learn the guitar” myth that is a common trope in movies etc.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yHnS3IVPME>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8hqGu-leFc>

“Modern” electrified blues

To cut to the chase, these are some of the most important influences you should draw upon in order to play the blues authentically. There are many different forms of “Blues” out there, but in my opinion these are the most emblematic examples.

B.B. King- Sweet Little Angel

Blues legend B.B. King with his famous black Gibson ES-335.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d43jj3F6quo>

Stevie Ray Vaughan- Pride and Joy

Stevie has a very specific style which would be hard to emulate when not on the electric guitar, but he is an important artist to note.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vo23H9J8o8>

Fiddlesticks- Billy Contreras

Billy is a current Nashville violinist who teaches at Belmont (I currently study with him) so I thought I would include this version of a “blues” that sounds quite different from the rest!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jn067t4Oeg>

Robert Johnson- Cross Road Blues (1936)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtDIZdhHRCI>

John Mayer- Crossroads (2015)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zqRVADxYpM>