

Clive Allsopp In Search of the Blues



... the worksong was the foundation of the Blues, not the spiritual! ...

Since its introduction, the new national curriculum has put music departments under increasing pressure to teach improvisation. As a vehicle and an aid to make this form of creative music more accessible to students in the classroom who do not play an instrument in the traditional sense, (for example fingered Casio chord and one finger melody), the 'Blues' has been adopted as the standard educational aid. This has brought about numerous publications with references to Blues; tunes called the Blues; and examples of 12-bar blues for improvisation in beginner method books; all this I could applaud if only the facts being given to the students were correct!

Unfortunately, the world of education, its publishers and to a large extent some of its most revered teachers, are misrepresenting the Blues by giving incorrect information through a lack of understanding about this very complex form of music. Some take the attitude 'well its only that jazz thing' and because of this half-hearted approach they only tell a portion of the story. In the paragraphs that follow I will tell the story as I believe it should be told to young music students.

The social element of this genre of music is of fundamental importance to the understanding and enjoyment of the Blues. At the time the Blues was developing, music in Western Europe was in its 'Romantic' phase. There was a move towards large orchestras and large concert halls where the audience came to see a performance. Blues and jazz musicians preferred to work in front of a *participating* and *dancing* audience in an intimate setting. This social element of a Jazz or Blues performance was derived from the

African heritage of the music. However, the African element does not make it African music because the principles of harmony and formal structure are derived from Europe. White musicians played this music from the beginning and made important contributions; therefore it would be wrong to classify them as imitators. However, the principal makers of this music were black and the root of the music for black musicians was indeed Africa.

In African society there are ritual songs which are sung at birth, death and puberty; songs to inspire courage in hunters and to mourn those killed in battle or to celebrate victory, work songs tailored to a given task. In fact, a song for everything. Ernest Borneman an ethnomusicologist said of Africans, 'Language and music are not strictly divided'. An example of this is the Yoruba word 'olo' which means 'husband' if the first syllable is pitched lower; if the second syllable is lower it means 'canoe' and 'spear' if both syllables are low. Therefore, we can see the pitch of the syllables gives the meaning of the word. From this it can be argued that music has a very important function in African society.

The African-based notion of chords, scales and keys has differences to European notation, the most obvious difference being that African music avoids the use of semitones. European music demands a standard timbre from its performers; for example, there is but one trumpet sound and to deviate from the standard means the performer would not be given the opportunity to perform. In African music each player is encouraged to develop their own sound just as their voice is individual so is their instrumental sound.

In European music, each note has a fixed pitch but this is not true in Jazz and Blues. The pitch of notes is flexible to quite a large extent. In fact some types of notes are deliberately played 'out of tune' by European standards. In a European melody the groundbeat is implicit but this is not the case in Jazz and Blues. The beat must be established by a separate rhythm section because the beat is deliberately avoided in the melody.

The common musical practice of the *work-song* was the foundation of the Blues, not the *spiritual* as popular belief has it. A slow ground beat with short call-and-answer phrases was the form of work-songs which spread into the social culture of black folk music. The men that sang these songs lived in turpentine camps along the railroad lines where there was very little to do in their leisure time. To sing songs was a free and natural form of entertainment which had a double function. On the one hand the participating nature of this activity gave an identity, a feeling of belonging to a social group, which extended into the audience. On the other hand, it gave these men the opportunity to share their grievances about their conditions with people who were sympathetic and understanding because they were in the same unfortunate position.



Billie Holiday ... would start on a blue third, slide down to a blue seventh and resolve on to a perfect fifth.

The way in which parts of the song varied greatly, switching from singing to shouting, talking, and the use of falsetto singing, were devices used in work-songs, which all spilled over into their entertainment.

In its infancy the Blues did not have a set number of bars and would be based around one tonic centre (this type of Blues became known as 'Country Blues'). The form of the modern Blues is in a strict format both in metre and cadence. Twelve bars is divided into three four-bar phrases, the first and second phrases state and echo a sentiment and the last phrase makes a closing statement. This format works to the same degree of satisfaction in both vocal and instrumental music. In the example below the call phrase is in

bold type, the answer in standard type and the closing statement italicised.

Down to the Red House,

That's where my baby stays.

Down to the Red House,

That's where my baby stays.

Ain't seen my lov'in baby for ninety nine and one half days.

The harmonic structure in this form is of paramount importance. As the chords used are neither major nor minor but in a Blues mode, in my example I will use the root names.

Tonic / / /]Tonic / / /]Tonic / / /]Tonic / / /]

Subdominant]Subdominant]Tonic / / /]Tonic / / /]

Dominant /]Dominant /]Tonic / / /]Tonic / / /]

However, the central feature of the Blues is in fact the melody. A Blues melody should be taken from the scales employed in black folk music. The most important aspect of this African practice is the off-pitch notes called 'blue' notes. The confusion and misinformation about blue notes is something that has been misunderstood by even some great jazz musicians and lately by people preparing and administering the National Curriculum for music in our schools. It has been thought that blue notes were the ordinary minor third and minor seventh (in the key of F, — A flat and E flat). The whole so called funk movement led by black musicians in the 1950's and W. C. Handy himself thought they were just minor intervals in a major setting. Blue notes are not available to instruments of a fixed pitch like the piano or organ because a blue note falls somewhere between the cracks in the keyboard. To play blue notes on a band instrument the musician must bend the pitch by using the embouchure. A blue note does have its own place in the diatonic scale, as a third and seventh, but not major or minor. It is derived from a scale discovered by A. M. Jones which he called the 'equi-heptatonic' scale. Like our diatonic scale it has seven tones, the difference is that instead of using whole tones and semitones, the tones are evenly spread. This avoids the use of semitones which in effect is what the blue notes do. Winthrop Sargent in *Jazz : Hot and Hybrid* says that blue notes are not exactly fixed pitches but tend to wander downwards and upwards. He comments that the blue seventh is a firmer tone than the blue third.

There has been some debate amongst jazz writers about the existence of a blue fifth. The blue fifth *does* exist; it replaces the perfect fifth when the fifth is a passing note. It must be made clear that when the fifth is the last tone of a phrase it is always played as a perfect fifth. The Blue fifth must also not be confused with the flat fifth employed by the Be-bop movement.

Two singers who used blue notes to great effect were Bessie Smith and Billie



Jack Teagarden - a white trombonist absorbed the blues living next to a black Evangelical Church.

Holiday, a characteristic of the latter's singing being that she would start on a blue third, slide down to a blue seventh and resolve on to the perfect fifth. This scheme, with the climax at the beginning of the phrase and not at the end, is contrary to European musical form. Many musicians however were playing blue notes, this of course excludes any keyboard players because the instrument is not capable of playing blue notes. Louis Armstrong frequently used blue notes in his playing and singing. The white trombonist Jack Teagarden also used blue notes. Teagarden grew up living next to a black Evangelical Church and said he spent many hours listening to the gospel singing in the church. This trained him to have a natural ear for blue notes.

Lately the true blue note has disappeared and musicians use minor notes as a substitute. If minor tones are what the musician is hearing and he recreates the minor sound through his instrument, this seems in order to me. Unfortunately a lot of players are playing minor tones and calling them blue tones. Clearly, because of this lack of understanding about blue notes we are in danger of losing true blue notes altogether.

Here are some examples of scales that are being passed off as a blues scale in music education.

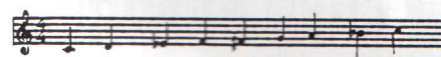
This scale is a minor pentatonic:



This example is a minor pentatonic with an added flat 5th, rather badly spelt because the flat 5th is represented as a sharp 4th. A scale with Be-bop flavourings:



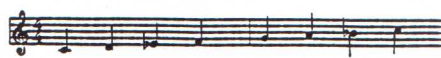
A wrongly spelt altered mixolydian scale:



A correctly spelt altered mixolydian scale as favoured by Be-bop musicians. By adding a major third to this scale you have Graham Collier's version of a Blues scale in his book *Jazz*. Collier's scale is in fact called a Lydian chromatic whole-tone scale.



The last example is a Dorian minor given to a colleague in Solihull as a blues scale in a tutorial at music college:



All of these examples are used and do work very effectively when playing a Blues. What I find unacceptable is that students are led to believe that these scales are Blues scales when in fact they are not. By all means explore the Blues with these scales but please use their correct names.

The major form of the Blues, 'The 12 bar blues' is a major building block for both jazz and rock musicians. This form, as with the black blues sung 100 years ago, has strict rules concerning the structure of the chords. Because a piece of music is twelve bars long it cannot automatically be called a 12-bar blues. I have come across tunes in basic instrumental methods that pretend to be '12 bar blues', or so their editors would have the uneducated believe. Firstly it has to be understood that Blues harmony in 1994 can be in major or minor. However, in its authentic form and because of the blue notes, it has a root structure that European musicians can relate to but the harmonies over the roots are most definitely in a blues mode. The root structure has been changed by various musicians to the point that it might seem a different animal from the original 12 bar blues. The work of Bill Evans and Eric Dolphy took Blues root structure as far away from home as was possible; the only part of their form that leaves us to realise that they were playing the Blues was the cadences in bars 4 to 5 and 10 to 11. Without these cadences the form cannot be called a Blues (bars 4 to 5 tonic to subdominant and bars 10 to 11 dominant to tonic). Any piece of music that does not have these cadences should not be called a 12 bar blues. Unfortunately young instrumentalists are being given music to play that does not have this structure but believe they are playing a 12 bar blues. This practice is not doing justice to a serious form of culture and is educating people to believe something that is not true.

The format for a basic Blues in F would look like this:

F7 // / F7 // / F7 // / F7 // /
 Bb7 // / Bb7 // / F7 // / F7 // /
 C7 // / C7 // / F7 // / F7 // /

This is the format of a more advanced blues used by modern jazz musicians. Bars 9 and 10 to 11 and 12 have become a 2,-5,-1 perfect cadence.

F7 // / Bb7 // / F7 // / F7 // /
 Bb7 // / Bb7 // / F7 // / F7 // /
 Gm7 // / C7 // / F7 // / F7 // /

The more advanced Blues form used by Eric Dolphy is my next example. Note that the cadences in bars 4 to 5 are the same as the basic form and the perfect cadence is intact in the last four bars.

Bb7 / B7 / F7 / A7 / D7 / G7 / C7 / F7 /
 Bb7 // / Bb7 // / F7 // / F7 // /
 Gm7 // / C7 // / F7 // / F7 // /

These are good examples of a 12 bar blues. I recently came across a 12 bar sequence that was being represented as a 12 bar blues in the method book *Team Brass*. As you can see from the example, the cadences which are the make-up of a 12 bar blues are not in evidence here. In fact this sequence is as far from being a 12 bar blues as is Beethoven's 5th! This I suggest is misrepresentation of the form and as it is, in a beginner tutor book, potentially very damaging to the training of young musicians. However, further examples of 12 bar blues in *Team Brass* do indeed have the cadences in the correct places.

Simply Blue (Twelve bar blues) page 45, *Team Brass* by Richard Duckett:

Dm7 // / Dm7 // / Dm7 // / Dm7 // /
 Dm7 // / Gm7 // / Gm7 // / Dm7 // /
 Dm7 // / A7 // / Gm7 // / F7 // /

The first Blues records were not made until 1920 when the form was fully developed and there is no use of the term 'blues' in any 19th century writings on black music or a description of a music that resembles the form. Therefore, the full story of the Blues may never be told. Blues was in fact developing aurally at the same time as the symphonic poem and the nocturne. Would we misrepresent the work of Smetana and Chopin in the same way as the Blues is being misrepresented. I think not. If we are going to have the Blues in the National Curriculum, let us give the next generation of musicians the true story. However, in the words of Louis Armstrong 'If you gotta ask, you'll never know'. Or was it 'You'll never know, if you gotta ask'?



Clive Allsopp had his first taste of music in the field of jazz in 1967 when he played Ragtime for Trombone with the Eccleshill School Band. Shortly after, he took part in a massed band concert for the regional finalists of the Yorkshire Brass Band Movement. Playing In The Mood as a selected audience pleaser. It was the reaction of the audience to this that inspired Clive to further investigate jazz. Later while at Huddersfield Polytechnic, he was tutored by an American singer (Miriam Mosonyi) who encouraged his interest in the Blues. Following this experience Clive sang with various blues bands in the Bradford area. At this time he formed his own Dixieland Band called 'Red Satin'. Although the style of music Clive now plays is in the modern jazz idiom he has continued to run his own bands. Such groups have appeared at jazz clubs throughout the Midlands, at The Birmingham Jazz Festival and alongside him setting up the running clinics for Midland Arts, Teacher Training Days, The Coventry Centre For The Performing Arts and Clifton College, Bristol. In 1980 Clive organised and ran the very first weekly workshop on jazz improvisation in the Midlands area. Some young players of that time who passed through the Sunday Jazz Workshop are now at the top of the profession; for example, Mark Nightingale and the Aqualias Brothers.

Throughout his wide career Clive has performed with a number of prominent Big Bands including: 'The String of Pearls Orchestra', 'The New Millionaires', 'The Eric Delaney Band and Chico Arnez' 'Impact of Brass' to name but a few. He continues to support his interest in jazz through his role as musical director for the Stourbridge Youth Swing Band and as a regular performing artist himself.

Bibliography:

Lydian-Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organisation for Improvisation by George Russell.
Jazz, The Modern Resurgence by Stuart Nicholson.
The Making of Jazz by James Lincoln Collier.
Black Music of Two Worlds by J. S. Roberts.
The Talking Drums of the Yoruba Journal of African Music Society, Vol. 1.
Jazz by Graham Collier.
Louis Armstrong by Hugues Panassie.
JAZZ : Hot and Hybrid by Winthrop Sargent.
Team Brass by Richard Duckett.

Discography:

The Louis Armstrong Story, Vol. 1. Col. CL 851.
Negro Blues and Hollers, AAFS L10 (Sin-Killer Griffin).
Lady Day, Col. CL637.
King Oliver's Jazz Band, EMI PMC7032.
Bill Evans, Verve VE 2-2509.