

CHAPTER 2

Blues Basics

In Chapter 1, we traced the development of the blues from an historical and cultural perspective. We discussed the “importing” of the African slaves back in the 17th century and how the inception of the blues took place in the cotton fields of the deep South. We described the evolution of the blues over the years, and how it was continuously influenced by the various societies to which it migrated throughout the land.

In this chapter, we’ll get into the music itself: what is meant when one refers to “a blues” and how it evolved musically. Keep in mind the scenario during the earliest days of the formation of the blues. The slaves were hard at work, the conditions were miserable, and the situation was hopeless. Fully aware they would never return to their homeland, they cried out in woe and despair, and sang about getting into heaven, the only thing they had to look forward to.

In the meantime, as they worked and they sang, the slaves developed a rhythm reminiscent of the rhythms of their African home, leading to new forms of expression and new means of communicating with one another. From this expression came the field holler, a sort of musical shout, rising and falling in pitch. The field holler, in turn, was answered by a shout from elsewhere in the field, inciting a call-and-response, a musical dialogue. The common belief is that this expression developed into the work song and the work songs evolved into the blues—songs of disheartenment, struggle, and hopelessness.

THE BLUES SCALE

Musical analysis of the blues brings to light several observations. One feature pertains to the notes themselves. A typical blues line contains “blue notes,” or flatted notes—generally the 3rd, the 5th, and 7th degrees of a major scale. The result of these alterations is the blues scale, the essence of the blues sound. Try playing this scale on your bass:

Blues Scale

C7

3 6 3 4 5 3 5 3 5 4 3 6

Now play these patterns based on the blues scale. Notice that these exercises are made up of the same six notes arranged in different configurations. For fun, see how many variations you can come up with. Get a music notebook and create your own blues “library of licks.” You’ll enjoy playing these patterns, and you’ll build strength in your hands and develop some good chops. And you’ll be playing the blues! Try them in some other keys (try them in all keys!). With diligent practice, there is no limit to the number of configurations you can come up with.

Blues Scale Exercise No. 1

C7

5 3 5 4 3 6 3 6 3 4 3 6 3 6 3 4 5 3 5