

After the melody, the rhythm section continues to play the Blues form for several choruses, and then the saxophone comes back in with the melody at the end. That middle section, with the rhythm section playing the Blues form, is your chance to do some improvising. But the big question is, "What notes should I use to improvise with?" The most common answer is "use the Blues Scale" in the key of the tune. In the key of B \flat , it looks like this:



The "Blues Scale" provides the beginning improviser with several things of value. For one, it greatly simplifies the problem of playing on the chord changes. You simply stay on the same scale throughout your solo, and ignore the changes. Moreover, the "Blues Scale" has a familiar, "down-home" sound, so you can capture a "blue" mood almost without effort.

Problems with the "Blues Scale"

There is a major problem with this typical advice, however, which is that aspiring improvisers using this approach almost always sound bad. There are two main reasons for this.

First of all, the "Blues Scale" is missing too many important notes. This makes it a very limited vehicle, unable to carry the variety of phrases and moods that allow you to create contrasts and develop a story-like improvisation. The biggest missing note in this scale is the major 3rd, and also missing are the 2nd and 6th notes of the major scale. So the common six-note "Blues Scale" effectively handcuffs you, paints you into a corner. The effort to simplify ends up oversimplifying.

The second reason that "Blues Scale" solos generally sound bad is that they contain no motion, no harmonic movement. Almost all jazz involves "playing the changes," where your improvisation reflects the harmonic motion of the song. Exclusive use of the "Blues Scale" provides a fundamentally static approach to a fundamentally dynamic art form.

The vast majority of beginning improvisers, however, are not ready to absorb the complex system of chords and scales that evolved jazz musicians use. So the puzzle becomes one of developing an approach that is simple, but not too simple, which retains the advantages of the "Blues Scale" without missing the other good notes, and which gets you playing changes without requiring you to digest the entire system of Western Harmony.