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JAZZ AND BLUES

BY RICHARD LAWTON

Licks, Grooves, and Jams: Using a Blues Improvisation Approach to Teach Recorder

Anyone who has been part of a garage band (the rite of passage for fledgling guitar heroes, not the Apple program) knows that developing one's blues chops consists largely of learning "licks"—short, hooky, melodic fragments that, when strung together, form improvisational solos. Orff instruments—xylophones, hand percussion, and especially recorder—are not usually thought of as "bluesy," but it is possible to give kids a real blues experience by focusing on how learning the blues is similar to customary Orff practices.

Both the blues and Orff focus on musical ideas short enough to be committed to memory. Learning is almost entirely aural and echoing patterns that teach songs such as call and response, often become elements in performance. In both the blues and typical Orff genres, a highly repetitive bass line often accompanies melody.

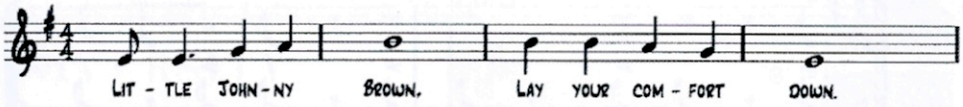
There are some important differences as well. The full blues scale contains a half step between the fourth and fifth scale degree. Typically, pitches are "bent" into less precise intervals. In the blues, solos are often a series of bursts that bear little rhythmic connection to the underlying groove. These components include the sort of imprecision that challenges young musicians, but it is a challenge worth undertaking. There's really nothing like a blues jam for promoting self-expression and communication among bandmates within a party atmosphere.

In my third grade recorder classes, I begin teaching blues improvisation early. Once the students can play B-A-G, I add the E (bypassing the tricky F) giving them four solid pitches to use in improvisation.

The tune "Little Johnny Brown" is a good vehicle to start with, as the first phrase "Little Johnny Brown" presents E, G, A, and B in ascending order and the second phrase "lay your comfort down" presents them in reverse:

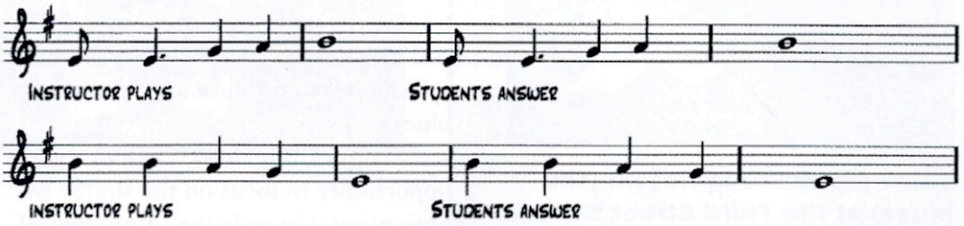
LITTLE JOHNNY BROWN

Trad. African-American

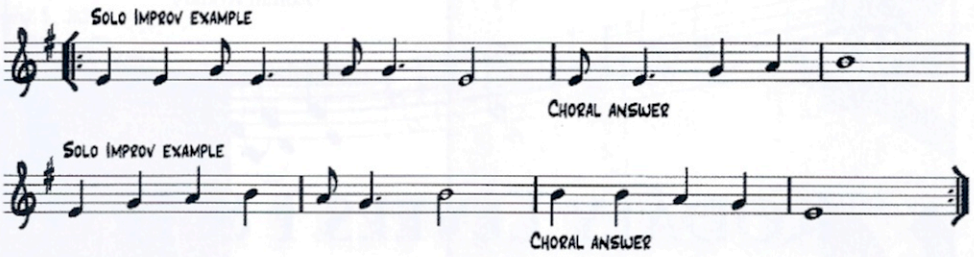


The first phrase also contains a subtle syncopation that can be emphasized to help students identify the shuffle. Shuffle is another important blues component that kids have a hard time getting conceptually, but can develop a feel for when it is modeled for them.

I play (or sing) the first phrase and let them echo me, then repeat the pattern with the second phrase:



Because choral echoing is a familiar element in blues performance, learning the phrases this way immediately generates an authentic blues atmosphere. Once the students are "in the groove," I begin to vary the calls, using the same four-note pallet.

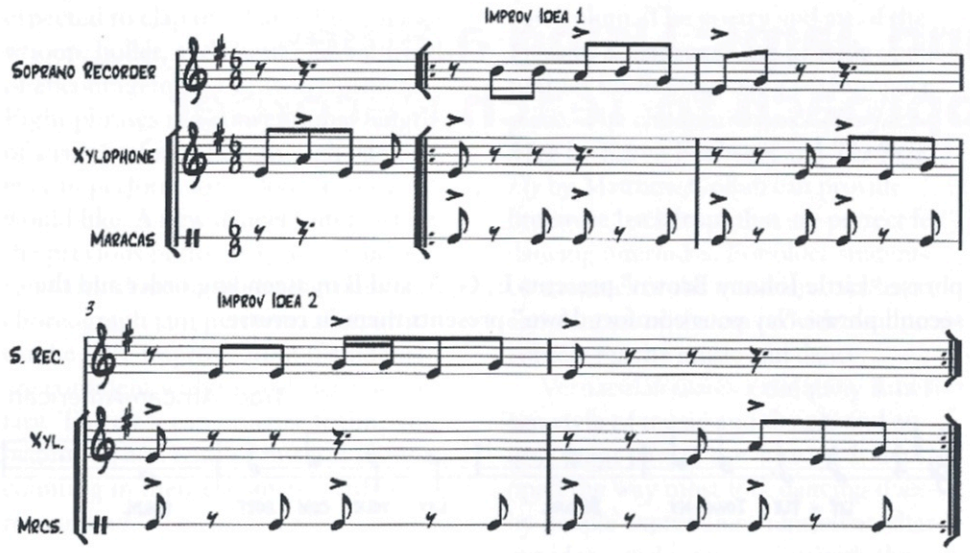


Getting beginning students to take over these two bar solos takes coaxing, but I reassure them that pitch here is not as important as rhythm. Whether it is on guitar or recorder, effective improvs can be done on one note. Given this framework, all can have a satisfying improvisational experience.

Once they have a few licks they feel good about, it's fun to have them try out their ideas over a more challenging groove. I like to use an arrangement based on "Mannish Boy," by Muddy Waters. There's an excellent chance that a few kids will have heard a version of this classic groove (at my school in Laurel Canyon in Los Angeles, California, where many students have parents in the music industry, the ratio is more like 60 percent).

MANNISH BOY

McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters)



Third-grade students jam (the blues) at the Third Street School in Los Angeles.

Blues grooves are invariably la pentatonic-based and easy to play on the barred instruments. I find la pentatonic on E to be the most useful for working with soprano recorder. The blues in E also matches up well with guitar, and when I've taught this lesson in fourth and fifth grade, I add a Bb bar on the xylophones to produce a full hexatonic blues scale.

"Mannish Boy" also provides a great opportunity to focus on the shuffle by presenting it in isolation. A number of classroom instruments can be substituted for the *chuh, ka-chuh ka-chuh* of a ride cymbal and brushes. I like to use one maraca hit against the knee, making sure to pay attention to the accents.

Once the groove is established, students can play their recorder licks on top. I don't spend a lot of time focusing on the change in meter. Instead, I ask them to keep their solos to seven beats or less, just enough to fill in the gaps in the groove and to watch for the accents on the sixth beat (technically the first beat of the next measure.)

In short order, a full-on blues jam is underway. A few daring soloists always amp things up with some "effects," rolling their tongues or trilling. Others will want to know how to finger other "cool sounding" notes like D and Bb. One or two always go completely crazy (it turns out there is a recorder equivalent for air guitar).

At some point, I usually play the Muddy Waters version of "Mannish Boy," (his 1977 recording with Johnny Winter is especially raucous and fun). Like many blues songs the lyrics are a bit risqué, and the instructor should be prepared to explain what a "hoochie coochie man" is. However, the concept of giving "testimony" to one's own identity is something that seems to resonate with kids (and something that can also be adapted into additional blues lessons).

What these simple jams lack in virtuosity, they always more than make up for in enthusiasm. Best of all, the experience usually convinces even my most skeptical students that playing the recorder can be cool. ■

***Richard Lawton** teaches elementary music at the Third Street School and the Wonderland Avenue Gifted Magnet School in Laurel Canyon. He received his master's degree in music at California State University, Los Angeles. He became a music teacher after twenty years of working as a writer in Hollywood because with teaching, he can "make a tangible difference every day."*