

Bright Blues Scale Improv - Bradley Sowash

In a previous post, I discussed the pentatonic scale as a collection of “fallback” notes for improvisation that will sound good in almost any style or chord progression that stays in one key.

Pentatonic Scale Formula:

Scale degrees 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6

You can also think of it as a major scale minus the 4th and 7th notes.

G Major Scale = G A B C D E F# G
G Major Pentatonic Scale = G A B D E G (major scale minus 4 and 7)

Like a painter preparing his or her pallet for a new still life, a great way to bring a bit of jazzy color to this “pitch pallet” is to add the flat 3rd “blue” note. I call the result the “bright blues scale.”

G Bright Blues Scale = G A Bb B D E G (pentatonic plus flat 3rd)

Note that unlike the darker “blues scale” (G Bb C C# D F G) which is often taught to first time improvisors, this one has a brighter character. You can hear the intuitive use of this scale in the often cheerful style of singer Ella Fitzgerald or the happy-go-lucky sound of trumpeter Louis Armstrong.

A basic 12 bar blues progression with a stock boogie bass line provides the perfect context in which to explore this scale. Ask the student to play either of the boogie bass lines suggested below or even simple block triads depending on their ability level. At the same, they will improvise with their right hand using the bright blues scale.

Note: It is not necessary to change scales when the chords change. The bright blue scale works throughout this chord progression.

12 Bar Blues

Suggested left hand bassline:

G7 C7 G7

C7 G7

D7 C7 G7 D7

And here's a more advanced pattern played in the video:

G7 C7 G7 G7

C7 C7 G7 G7

D7 C7 G7 D7

Watch the video as I “trade 4’s” with my adult student using the bright blues scale over this progression. Her left hand plays the bassline written above as I play chords on a nearby piano. (This can easily be reversed for lower level students.) By the way, this student is a traditional piano teacher learning to play and teach improvisation who has been studying with me less than a year. If she can do it, you can do it!

[insert video here]

This kind of call-and-response teaching is fun and you don’t have to be an expert to do it. Just drop the traditional teacher-knows-all model, swallow your pride and enjoy exchanging ideas with your students. You may be thinking, “But what if my student sounds better than me?” That’s a good thing. You’ve opened a creative door that your teachers may have kept closed to you. Some would call that pedagogical evolution. I call it courage.

Until next time, enjoy your creative musical journey!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bradley Sowash". The signature is highly stylized with large, sweeping loops and a prominent flourish at the end.

Bradley Sowash