

## Blues Lesson 1: Introducing Improv

The focus of this very brief lesson plan is to sketch an outline of what a potential introduction to improv could look like for a string player. I used this plan for one of my students who is quite talented and we were beginning to study improv as an art form in addition to our classical repertoire. Additionally, this plan is really a series of steps which should likely be spread over a number of sessions, unless you are studying improvisation as the sole focus of the lesson.

Begin the lesson by playing some or all of the following clip from *12 Years a Slave*. The purpose of this is to do a few things; give some historical background on the origins of the blues, show the communal nature of improvisation, and to highlight the fact that these untrained musicians are perfectly capable of making music together- and therefore so is your student!!

*Reference: Blues Influences 1 Document*

### **“Roll Jordan Roll” as recorded for the movie 12 Years a Slave**

This recording is a dramatization of what original slave spirituals may have sounded like. An important point to note is the communal participation of untrained musicians. Note how the rhythm is kept and there is a call and response between the group and the “lead” singer. This is fairly similar to how we play back and forth in our lesson when trading licks. The blues is a non-literate art form, meaning that it was not taught using notation in the way that classical music is transferred.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oFcFzJT7Tw>

### I. DO NOT START BY TEACHING THEM THE PENTATONIC SCALE.

At this point, you should start *playing* together, not talking! Another way that I like to think of this is related to the fact that the people portrayed in the above video could not describe the difference in intervallic relationship between a natural minor and a pentatonic scale. So, therefore, I think it shows a degree of respect to the originators of the art form to approach it in a similar way.

Practicing keeping a slow steady beat together with your student. The easiest way is to tap your feet at the same time, at around 75 beats per minute (the tempo of the upcoming tune). We will be playing in the A minor pentatonic scale, but you don't need to say that to your student.

Begin by playing around 3 beats of a melodic idea in the A minor pentatonic scale, leaving 1 beat of rest at the end. Then, have your student repeat the figure you just played. Essentially, this is “trading 1's”, so make sure to keep the beat steady while passing off the melody. Start by using only a few notes (for example, 1 b7 and b3) and then expand the scale until you have around one octave of usable notes with which the student is familiar. The goal

here is to get them comfortable playing in a non-literate style. Be sure to emphasize that things such as the *contour* are more important than hitting all of the correct notes!

## II. You may now teach your student the pentatonic scale

Now that your student has *experienced* the minor pentatonic scale, you may teach them the technical definition of it. Assuming they know the A minor scale (or C major), instruct them that the pentatonic scale is the same thing, just with a few notes removed (there are a few ways to explain this using scale degrees, half steps, etc. Feel out which is the best language for your student.) If your student does not already know a few scales in music theory terminology, I would keep them playing by rote for a while longer. I will not spell out these steps specifically, but ensure that they are skillfully scaffolded and all the other educational terminology we know and love.

## III. Introduce the tune, variate, modulate

### *Reference: Introduction to the blues 1*

Because I live in Nashville, I chose the tune “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” as recorded by the Fisk Jubilee Singers as the first blues tune for my student. This is partially due to the cultural significance, but also because it is a tune many students know by ear. Additionally, the entire tune is essentially diatonic to the pentatonic scale. The condensed series of steps is as follows:

1. “Trade 1’s” or “trade 2’s” (depending on the student's grasp of the scale) with the teacher modeling the melodic fragments first, and then the student repeating the **same** melodic figure. Try to keep your rhythmic figures fairly consistent at first.
2. “Trade 1’s” or “trade 2’s” where the progression of the tune continues through time. I.E. the melody is played as normal, with the teacher and student alternating between playing and helping to keep the rhythm.
3. Return to step 1, but begin to vary the rhythm and pitches, essentially beginning to add improvisatory elements to a melodic figure
4. Return to step 2, but encourage the student to add their own melodic variations.

Notice, all of the above steps are focusing on *melodic* concepts, and we haven’t even mentioned harmony! While there (of course) need to be discussions about harmony forthcoming, I think it is important to begin with concepts of melody and rhythm, just like the original artists of this form of music did!

Once the student is quite comfortable playing and varying the tune in one key, it is a good idea to practice the tune in a variety of keys. This does two things:

1. By changing keys, the student will begin to internalize the specific intervals rather than the specific notes. This is important in establishing the ear-to-finger relationship which is so important in improvisation, and is often underdeveloped in people solely trained in the western classical tradition.
2. Students will begin to internalize finger patterns for pentatonic scales. I am especially sensitive to this as a cellist, because finger patterns are almost **never** taught on the cello! Similar to the previous point, it's very important to strengthen the direct ear-to-finger relationship.

#### IV. Ain't No Sunshine- Bill Withers

As a former West Virginian, I have a special place in my heart for Bill Withers. Furthermore, his tune "Ain't No Sunshine" offers a blues tune in which all of the chords are minor 7th chords. This means that, while there are certain notes which feel better or worse over the *i7 iv7* and *v7* chords, the student can easily stay in the tonic pentatonic key the whole time. Additionally, the vocal melody is primarily pentatonic, but there are also elements of the relative major key as well. This is a good transition to switching scales without needing to delve into total mode-mixture. Finally, the "bridge" section features a really useful hemiola figure which is all over the place in blues music.

The first step is to transcribe the vocal melody, attempting to copy the specific ornaments of his vocal idioms. Utilize this as a stepping stone to improvisation, eventually introducing the concept of harmonic changes.