

MandoUniversity News

Exploring The Neck: Up Three For Blues

Picture this. You are in the middle of a jam session that has been gaining steam for 45 minutes or so. Someone kicks off a tune that you don't know but it has long stretches of single chords. It's not one of those tunes like Blackberry Blossom with a chord change coming at you on each down beat. By about the third pass through the tune you have figured out the chord progression (its in G) and have a vague idea of the melody. Or at least you have picked up on a little "hook" that everyone is playing at one point of the tune. The tune is getting hot and your solo is next.

You tear into your solo with a flurry of G doublestop "doodly-doot" and there are stretches of the tune that stay on that G chord for 8 bars. You find yourself repeating the same old stuff over and over and by the time your solo is over you are thinking "that wasn't so hot" and you are trying to think of something better to try if it comes around a second time.

Let's stop and examine an idea. First, do you know the difference between the blues scale and the major scale? Don't worry if your don't--you can fix that! It has been my experience that when you hear other players doing things you would classify as "hot licks" they are almost invariably using notes of the blues scale. Notes of the blues scale are not appropriate for every kind of song. Some songs are wrecked by them. As you learn to bring out the blues notes in your playing you will soon discover when they fit in and when they do not. This is mostly discovered through trial and lots of errors. Jam sessions are the kind of place where it is OK to experiment and if you fail you learn. Hopefully.

I am not going to go into a great degree of detail in this article about the formation of scales and will suggest that if you do not have the book "Mandolin Master Class" that you read the discussions in there that cover this topic. This article (and this newsletter in general) is written for people who have bought the books and my purpose is to amplify and expand on ideas that were hit upon in the books. So, that said, I might be going a little "deep" here but read on anyway and I am sure you will get something out of this.

One way to add a little musical hot sauce to an otherwise bland solo is to spice it up with notes from the blues scale. Here is a comparison of the G Major Scale and the G Blues Scale:

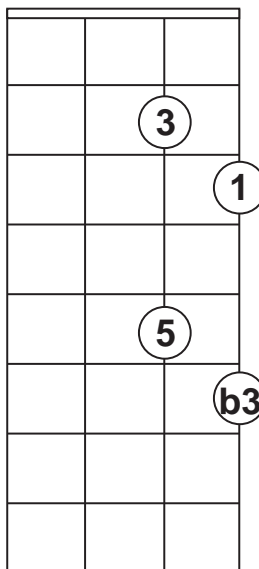
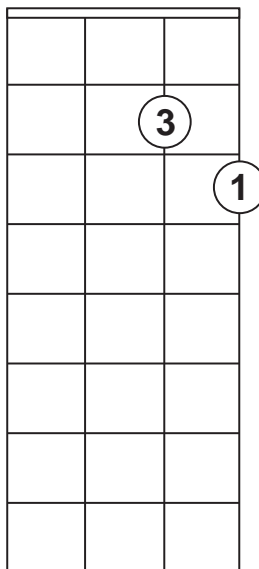
G Major

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1
G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	G

G Blues Scale

1	b3	4	#4	5	b7	1
G	Bb	C	C#	D	F	G

It should be obvious that the two scales are quite different. Now, let's say that during that long G chord section of the tune you were trying to think of what to play and that you decided to play a double stop on the 1st and 2nd strings consisting of an B note and a G note. Like this:



OK, so here you are flailing away on this G doublestop on the left. The 3 is a B note which is the third note of the G Major Scale. The 1 is, of course the high G at the top of the G major scale. Both notes are present in the G chord, the G major scale, and the G pentatonic Scale. No wonder these are such obvious and safe note choices!

Now, let me suggest an idea that might scare you at first. Just take that mild mannered lick and move it up 3 frets. Don't sit there and dwell on it too long. Just do it. Then go back to where you were. How did it sound to you? You just employed a trick I came up with a while ago that instantly changes major notes to notes of the blues scale. How did this work?

If you add three frets to the B note you get a D note. This D note is the 5 note and is found in both the major and blues scale. If you add 3 frets to the G note you get a Bb which is the b3 which is also found in the blues scale. So, in this little example we see that at least these two notes of the G major chord become G blues notes by simply moving them up 3 frets.

Usually our mental starting point for creating doublestops is to play two notes from the chord. In this case we played the 3 and the high 1. Our major chord derived doublestop could be a 1-3, 1-5, or 3-5 combination. What happens if we add 3 frets to each of these doublestop combinations?

Here are the notes from the G chord:

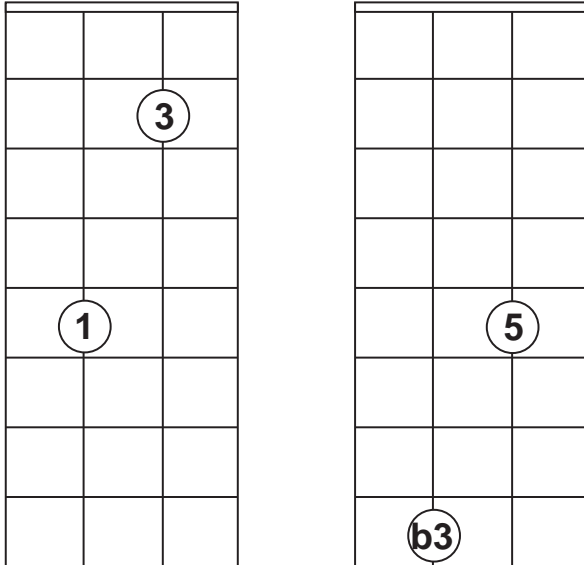
1	3	5
G	B	D

If we add three frets to each note we get:

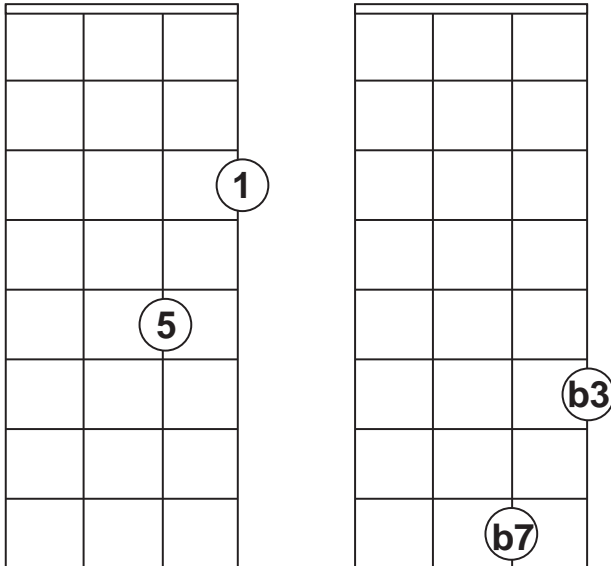
1+3 frets	3+3 frets	5+3 frets =
Bb	D	F

What a coincidence!! Look at the chart on the left column for the notes of the G blues scale. Every one of the notes we created by sliding up 3 frets is a blues scale note!

Let's draw some conclusions from this interesting fact. **If we are playing notes of the major chord (the 1, 3 or 5) and we simply raise the notes up 3 frets we are now playing notes from the blues scale.** File that away in your mind. You can use that. Let's compare a couple of these double stop positions to confirm this. Here is another common G chord double stop we often play, along with it's "up three" bluesy doublestop:



In the 1st example we see the same two notes, 1 and 3, becoming b3 and 5--2 blues scale notes.



In this example we see the 1-5 combination transforming into the b3 and b7. Both notes are from the blue scale and it doesn't get more bluesy than that, boys and girls!

Let me take a moment and predict how some of you are reacting to this. One group (the group who as yet doesn't understand the basics of scale construction and music theory, etc.) will play the licks, try them while some befuddled guitar player pounds out a G chord for testing, and will take a way a valuable idea. Simply "Up Three!!" And that may be enough to create some hot new solo ideas that really speak to people.

The second group (who understands all the b3, #4 crap and has a technical understanding of constructing a blue scale.) will likely try out the idea and, with the other knowledge they have, find other ways to use the idea.

I stand firmly in the middle on this issue. Knowledge is power. Ignorance is power. One can find new things by blindly poking around in the unknown. Do both. Learn everything you can and you will find that you can better express yourself on the mandolin. On the other hand, the person who gets the "Up Three" concept only at its most basic level is actually more likely to ask "Well, if that works, what about Up Four or Up Five?" Some combination of the two approaches is ideal! Understanding every little detail of ideas like this can be empowering and at the same time limiting. There is a tendency that as we accumulate knowledge we begin to think we know something and stop seeking new ideas. One thing I am sure of. The more I know the more I don't know.

OK, enough of the philosophical for now. Let take the same idea and try applying it to the pentatonic scale. How will that work out?

(Shameless plug #258: If you want to learn about pentatonic scales and a lot of other mando things try my books, Mandolin Master Class and Mandolin Training Camp, found at www.mandouniversity.com.)

Here is the G pentatonic Scale:

1	2	3	5	6
G	A	B	D	E

In the book, Mandolin Master Class, I spend a lot of ink discussing the many ways one can use pentatonic scales. But I didn't mention this miraculous transformation.

If you add three frets to each of the Pentatonic Scale notes then all 5 notes become notes of the Blues Scale. Let me, since I am feeling generous, add 3 frets to each note shown above and let's just see if this is true.

G plus 3 frets = Bb. Yep, that is in the G blues scale. How about A? A + 3 frets = C. Is C in the G blues scale? Heck yeah!! Hit me with another one!

The B note + 3 frets = D. We already did that one didn't we? But, again it is from the blues scale. How about the D note? D + 3 frets = F natural. Also from the blues scale. And finally the E note. E + 3 frets = (well I'll be damned!) a G note!!

So let's draw a 2nd conclusion from this little experiment: **If you are playing notes of the Pentatonic Scale and you move them up 3 frets, you will be playing notes of the same Blues Scale.**

And finally let's recap what we have figured out so far; and I am sure there are many other things we can learn if we keep poking around in a similar manner. **Any note from the major chord or the pentatonic scale, when raised 3 frets, gives you a note from the corresponding blues scale.**

Now, back to that hot solo you are in the middle of. Don't know what to do? Sounding kinda bland and boring? Slide up three frets and see what happens.

*This issue is dedicated to the memory of
Larry Rice*