

# CHAPTER 5

## **Major Blues – 3/7 Voicings**

*“It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing” Duke Ellington*

### **5.1 Listen!**

Listen to the track “**C jam blues** (or **C blues**)” by **Duke Ellington**. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there a lot of different chords in the piece? Do the chords sound simple or complex? What kind of voicings are being used?
- Can you work out what the chords are (roughly)? Listen to the bass line and try and hear which notes are at the beginning of each bar.
- Can you clap along with the rhythm of the tune?
- How many bars long is the sequence?

This piece is in **blues form** but has a very upbeat major feel. This is achieved by the tempo, use of sparse, open chords with not much discord, and using the **major blues scale** in the improvisation.

Note that the pianist doesn’t play much in this recording – he leaves it to the horn section arrangement to state the harmony, with the bassist playing a continuous **walking bass** line. More on playing walking bass lines on piano can be found in “**Improvising Blues Piano**” by **Tim Richards**.

A new type of voicing is introduced in this piece: the **3/7 voicing**. This chord is fundamental to blues and a lot of jazz.

### **5.2 Theory Time!**

#### **The tritone**

The interval between the major third and the flattened 7<sup>th</sup> is called a **tritone**. This is because it is equivalent to three whole tones. For example, in a C7 chord, the interval between the E and Bb is a **tritone**. This interval is the same

even if the two notes are reversed, i.e. it is symmetrical. It is the basis of a **dominant 7<sup>th</sup>** chord, as it sounds as if it wants to resolve to something (either a semitone higher or lower than the top note). Try this with C7 to F (voiced as E, Bb to F, A).

This interval was thought to be so dissonant in Renaissance times that it was actually banned in church music – this is the reason so much church music uses the plagal cadence instead. Try playing a tritone on a church organ sound – you will see why! The tritone interval is also known as a **flattened 5<sup>th</sup>**.

### The 3/7 voicing

Jazz and blues go one step further in embracing this “**devil’s interval**” – by using a voicing that is made up entirely of that interval – the **3/7 voicing**. In C7, as mentioned above, this is E and Bb – try and find this chord also for F7, G7 and D7. Note you can reverse the order of the notes to change the register of the chord. The nice thing is there are only 6 of them!

In a minor chord, the 3/7 can be a **minor 6<sup>th</sup>** (also a tritone) or a **minor 7<sup>th</sup>** (a minor chord with a flattened 7<sup>th</sup> added, as for the dominant 7<sup>th</sup>). In the latter case, the interval is no longer a tritone but a **perfect fifth**.

### The blues using dominant 7ths

Here is a “generic” **blues sequence** written out using 7<sup>th</sup> chords. Note that *all* the chords are 7ths – even the tonic chord. This is what distinguishes **blues harmony** in that it never resolves to the major scale, but is always on a dominant 7<sup>th</sup> yet feels to be “in” that key.

I7	IV7	I7	I7
IV7	IV7	I7	I7
V7	IV7	I7	(V7)

Note that the main body of the sequence only uses plagal cadences, even though it was invented long after Renaissance times! This is probably because most of the blues musicians were freed slaves and had been brought up in a religious environments, so had church chords in their head when harmonising

their music. However, I have put in a basic “**turnaround**” at the end to lead back to the beginning only if you are repeating the sequence – what kind of cadence is this?

We can improvise over this sequence using the **major blues scale** (see last chapter) or the **minor blues scale** (see Chapter 3). When using the former scale, on a IV<sup>7</sup> chord, the minor 3<sup>rd</sup> is used *instead* of the major third as the latter would clash. Thus the major 3<sup>rd</sup> on this chord is called an **avoid note**.

### The blues II-V-I

The last four bars of the blues sequence are often replaced by:

<b>II-7</b>	<b>V7</b>	<b>I7</b>	<b>(V7)</b>
This is the same as a normal II-V-I, but the I chord is a dominant 7 <sup>th</sup> , as it is in a blues. Therefore, we can't improvise on this using just the major scale, but we can improvise over it using the major blues scale, as that scale doesn't contain a 7 <sup>th</sup> .			

## 5.3 Enough theory – let's practice!

- Practice the **3/7 voicing** in all the keys given above. Play it initially in your right hand while playing the root notes in your left, nice and low down on the piano. A common technique for light accompaniment is to use these voicings in the RH while playing a **walking bass** in the left hand. See “*Improvising Blues Piano*” for further study in walking bass.
- Now try playing the root note a **flattened 5<sup>th</sup>** below or above the original one and notice your ears do a flip – the same RH chord works for both root notes. For example, E and Bb also work for Gb7, as E is the 7<sup>th</sup> and Bb is the third! That's why there are only 6 of these voicings.
- Try playing through the blues sequence in C using roots in the LH and 3/7 voicings in the right hand. Notice that between the I and IV chords and the I and V chords, the RH only has to move up or down a semitone. However, to go between the V and IV chords it needs to move down a whole tone.
- A good fingering for playing 3/7 voicings chromatically is to alternate fingers 5 and 2 with 4 and 1, using your little finger like a thumb and “walking” between

the chords. You will have to adjust this when you have two white notes together but it works well for alternating white and black notes.

- Now, try playing the 3/7 voicings through the whole sequence on their own in your left hand. The blues is such a strong and familiar sound that we don't actually need to hear the roots to imagine them in our heads. To test this, do the trick I suggested at the beginning of this section and play roots a tritone away from the original – your ears will do a flip as they did before!!
- Try playing a **minor 7<sup>th</sup>** chord as a 3/7 voicing, with D in the bass. Then try playing G7 and C7 after that – you have played a **blues II-V-I**.

#### 5.4 Let's play through the chords!

The lead sheet of this tune is to be found in Real Book 2. However, they did not put the chord symbols in! Therefore, for your use and that of a jam session you play this at, I reproduce these below (chords are not copyrighted):

C7	F7	C7	C7
F7	F7	C7	C7
D-7	G7	C7	(G7)

- Play through these chords first using roots in your left with 3/7 voicings in your right hand, then 3/7 voicings by themselves in your left hand, until it becomes automatic. Then add the tune in your right hand, playing the chords just at the beginning of every bar.

#### 5.5 Improvisation

- Play some blues licks on the major blues scale that end on or include the E natural, then alter them so they end on Eb instead (for example using D as a grace note leading to Eb).
- Practice playing some of these licks over the sequence and changing them as described above when you get to the IV chords.

- Practice improvising on this blues using the major blues scale with **3/7 voicings** in the left hand. On the I chord, you can use the minor 3<sup>rd</sup> in the RH and it does not clash with the major 3<sup>rd</sup> in the left, but makes a nice, reasonably dissonant and bluesy chord (called a **#9**; see later chapters).
- Note that the structure of this blues melody is “AAA” or 3 times repetition of the same 4-bar phrase. This is the simplest form of blues melody. You can try applying this form, or the “call, call, answer” form of the previous blues, to your solos.

## 5.6 Playing it in a Jam Session!

*Refer to the “Golden Rules” on page 13 of this book.*

- You should do at least 2 choruses each on this, including the bass player and drummer. In the bass solo on a blues, the bassist is usually only accompanied (quietly) by the drummer but as long as you know where you are in the sequence, you can throw in the occasional quiet chord. Use the drum solo as a good exercise in counting bars and make sure you know exactly where to come in!
- Most blues repeat the head twice at the beginning and at the end. Usually this piece does not have an introduction, and just gets a bit quieter on the last time round the head, but use your imagination and come up with some intros and endings if you feel inspired!

***Good luck and enjoy the experience!***

## 5.7 Further study

**Jazz Piano from Scratch** has a good section on 3/7 voicings and a short recording of this piece, as well as a nice arrangement in the Jazz Piano Exam Pieces book for Grade 2. **The Jazz Piano Book** also covers playing 3/7 voicings over a II-V-I.

**Other tunes to try:**

- **Bags Groove** by Milt Jackson (uses the minor blues scale over 3/7 voicings)
- **In The Mood** – Glenn Miller – Has a “bridge” as well as blues sections but this fits with the blues scale & you can use similar voicings.