



Blues Is Not Always Blue

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Not all Blues is dark and aggressive—sometimes we're called upon to play with a lighter feel. This is especially the case when playing country blues, ballad blues and common grooves with a lighter feel, such as the Rhumba. This issue we'll dig into a chapter from my soon-to-be-released book with Mel Bay on Rock Harmonica. Enjoy!

Major Pentatonic Scale

To solo with a light, more major feel, a five note scale called the Major Pentatonic scale is often used. This scale comes from the major scale, with the fourth and seventh scale degrees omitted—giving it a floating quality (this is where the half steps are in the scale—omission of half steps take all of the leading tones away). If the song is in the key of G, then you will use a G major pentatonic scale.

Ex. 3.1 – Major Pentatonic Scale

1	2+	2	3''	3	4	5+	6+	6	7	8	8+	9+	10
D	E	G	A	B	D	E	G	A	B	D	E	G	A
5th	6th	Root	2nd	3rd	5th	6th	Root	2nd	3rd	5th	6th	Root	2nd

Let's now practice this scale in some common rhythms. You'll need a C Harmonica for the following tracks.

Ex. 3.2 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Half Notes

Ex. 3.3 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Quarter Notes

Ex. 3.4 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Swing Eighths

Ex. 3.5 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Triplets

Since you'll play both swing eighths (think shuffle rhythm, like in the examples above) and straight eighths in Rock, we need to practice them both ways. Below are straight eighths and sixteenth notes.

Ex. 3.6 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Eighths

Ex. 3.7 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Sixteenths

Now that you've developed the skill to play this scale in the most common rhythms, it's time to improvise with it. For the following tracks I'll improvise using the limited range notated in our examples below. It's important to get to know each section of the harmonica individually before you try to use its entire range. For each track I'll improvise for a bit and then leave room for you to give it a try.

Do your best to only use the notes of the scale. Let your lick vocabulary drive you, but stay alert so that you can change a note you would normally play outside of the scale to a note that's in the scale. You're basically watching yourself in the third person and saying to yourself, "Watch out, you normally go to a 2" in this run, but you have to change it to 2+." It's this constant assessment that you make as you play that will make this successful. We'll use the rock beat for these examples.

Ex. 3.8 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Holes 1 through 3

Ex. 3.9 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Holes 1 through 4

Ex. 3.10 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Holes 3 through 6

Ex. 3.11 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Holes 6 though 10

Ex. 3.12 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Entire Range

Ex. 3.13 – Play-Along Track Only

Our previous examples played to a backing track that stayed on the I Chord. Though this scale can be used over any chord in the blues progression, there are of course notes that if held can be overly dissonant. Detailed below is the same scale as in Example 3.1 but with the addition of chords below each note. If you see **IV** under a note, that note will sound good when held on that chord. The same for the **V** Chord. Your goal is to hit one note of the chord and hold it for just a bit to tip your hat to the chord change, then go off and improvise without worrying about what notes should match that chord. You can of course adhere closer to the notes of the chord change, but a strong presentation of one of these notes does the trick very well.

Ex. 3.14 – Major Pentatonic Scale w/Chords

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef. The notes of the major pentatonic scale are written from left to right: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5. Below each note is a chord symbol: V, IV, IV, V, V, IV, IV, V, V, IV, IV, V, IV, IV, V.

Ex. 3.15 – Major Pentatonic Scale: Entire Range w/12 Bar Blues Progression

Ex. 3.16 – 12 Bar Blues Play-Along Track

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