

MU 1310 (Feurzeig): The Blues Scale

The **blues scale** comprises the notes used to form common blues licks and melodies. It consists of a minor pentatonic scale plus a chromatic pitch that fills in the whole step between the 4th and 5th scale degrees.

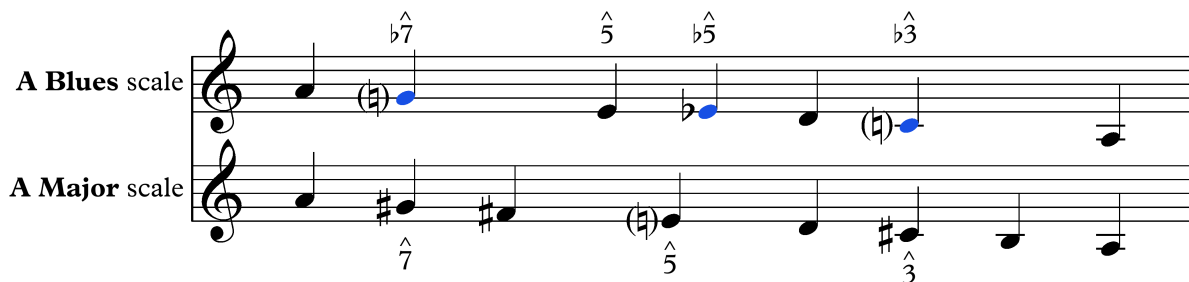


This added note is typically spelled as a raised $\hat{4}$ when it ascends to $\hat{5}$, and as a lowered $\hat{5}$ when it descends to $\hat{4}$.

Comparing the blues scale to the parallel **major** scale, we see scale degrees $\hat{3}$, $\hat{5}$, and $\hat{7}$ are flatted (there is a normal, i.e. perfect, scale degree $\hat{5}$ as well). These are often called “blue notes”. But any note can become a blue note if it is played with expressively altered intonation.

Remember: In the context of scale relationships, *flatted* means *chromatically lowered*, generally in comparison to the parallel major scale. A *flatted* note does not necessarily indicate a note with a *flat* in staff notation. In the key of A, for example, G $\flat$ and C $\flat$ could be referred to as

- the *minor* $\hat{7}$ and $\hat{3}$, because they are found in the natural minor scale
- the *flat* $\hat{7}$ or $\hat{3}$, because they are the lower of the two standard possibilities (# in A major vs. $\flat$ in A minor)
- or (confusingly!) the *natural* $\hat{7}$ or $\hat{3}$, because they are in fact natural (white) notes.



A stylistic mistake many musicians make when first improvising in the blues scale is to overuse the $\#4/b5$ degree. You can sound good using only the five notes of the minor pentatonic scale, and a lot of blues and bluesy styles get by with little or no use of $\#4/b5$.

The blues scale should not be taken too literally. Blues licks often include other pitches as well. Furthermore, blues-style melody includes bent pitches and microtones that are not playable on the piano, nor easily represented in standard notation. Nonetheless, practicing the blues scale and patterns using the notes it contains is a great way to start sounding “bluesy”.