Blue Notes Or Not

BY JOHN DUARTE

Whether a note is considered to be "blue" depends on how it's used—a distinction that's often overlooked. Let's consider a few cases.

Ex. 1's Eb clashes with the C chord's E♭ and is repeated to drive the point home. Ex. 2 includes a B♭, which enhances the blues effect. Play Ex. 2 with the E♭ changed to E♭, and notice that the B♭ retains the blues flavor; however, if you keep the E♭ and use B♭, the phrase sounds far from right.

Ex. 3's G♭ is clearly a b3, a blue note that rubs against the C chord's G. The b3 is a trademark of bebop, whose version of the 12-bar blues is quite different from purer forms. Bebop was a rebellious music and the weakening of the perfect fifth, that pillar of the harmonic establishment, issued a challenge. In bebop you can think of the b3 as displacing the 5, not confronting it in hand-to-hand battle like a conventional blue note.

When a simple non-harmonic note chromatically pushes up to a chord tone, it takes on an ornamental role, not that of a collision-causing blue note. Analyze the phrases in Ex. 4, where I've written D♭, F♭, G♭, and A♭ not their enharmonic equivalents that use flats.

Ex. 5 expands Ex. 2 into a riff for a simple I-IV-I-7 sequence—the first four measures of a 12-bar blues. Although B♭ is used in measures 1 and 3, the ear doesn't expect the supporting chord to be C7. But when measure 4 arrives, the B♭ slots into place and for the moment isn't a blue note. B♭ is a blue note in relationship to the C chord, but suggests F7 in measure 2.

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