Woodshed > MASTER CLASS BY CHARLIE APICELLA

## 2 Views of the Blues in B<sub>b</sub>

**BLUES PHRASING IS A CORNERSTONE OF JAZZ VOCABULARY**, and mastering blues changes is a lifelong pursuit for contemporary musicians. This music is one of America's most vital contributions to world culture and has permeated music from almost every corner of the globe.

Playing a blues offers an opportunity to express your voice, remain true to your feelings, and to reach out and connect with the listener. Playing a convincing blues for a jazz musician means acknowledging tradition and adding something from your own bag. It is a vehicle to combine your emotions and intellect, and studying even a single chorus of a blues solo by your favorite instrumentalist can open new insights to the craft of improvisation.

The following examples offer a comparison of two like-minded guitarists, Kenny Burrell and Grant Green. Both solos share the same changes, are in the key of  $B_{\rm p}$ , are two choruses in length, and were recorded during the classic hard-bop era (during the late 1950s and early '60s) on Blue Note Records.

The tempos differ in that the Burrell tune is approximately 125 b.p.m. and Green's is approximately 155 b.p.m. The slower tempo highlights Burrell's confidence in his clarity of ideas, use of space and blues vocabulary, while Green's choice of a medium tempo offers him the opportunity to weave his characteristic agile and complex bebop lines.

Also note these excerpts are drawn from Burrell's entire two-chorus solo, while Green's is a two-chorus solo that immediately precedes the out-head-he begins the tune by stating the head and then takes a four-chorus solo. Taking a second, shorter solo before stating the out-head was a common practice for Green throughout his career as a leader and is a testament to the energy and intensity he generated as an ensemble player. He was a great comper out of the Freddie Green tradition, often favoring repetition and two-note voicings that would lock a rhythm section into a ferocious groove. With that helping to drive his bandmates along, it is no wonder he would jump back in the ring to take a few more swings. As a result, his discography is loaded with great mini-solos like this one, which bookend the other soloists.

Burrell's examples are presented first, as his recording career predated Grant's by several years. Grant often cited Burrell as a top influence on guitar, and I was personally told by none other than B.B. King that Burrell was one of his favorites as well. King pointed out to me Burrell's top-notch blues playing, feel, economy and intellect.

Example 1 lays out the common element that links these two solos: blues changes in the key of  $B_{p}$ .

Example 2a shows the the root-position minor

pentatonic shape, which forms a convenient and recognizable "box" on the fretboard. This is one of the first scales every guitarist learns.

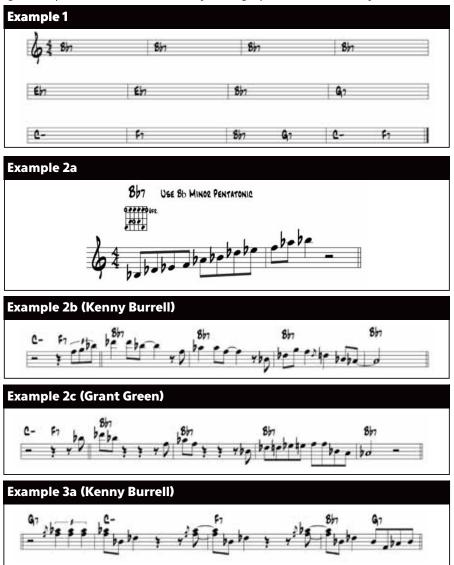
Examples 2b and 2c show both guitarists playing bars 1–3 (preceded by a pickup) firmly planted in this box. Bars 1–2 of each solo contain almost identical themes, and the interesting contrast comes on their resolutions in bar 3. Burrell's idea (2b) starts more rhythmically complex in bars 1–2 and resolves more simply in comparison to Green's (2c), which introduces more chromaticism in bar 3. Note how each ends on the flat-seventh scale degree of  $A_{|v|}$ , creating a springboard for a subsequent statement to begin in bar 4.

In Examples 3a and 3b, notice how Burrell uses double-stops on bars 9–11 (pickups start on bar 8). Example 3a is an extremely useful lick, again closely related to that familiar minor pen-



tatonic box. You can hear some version of this lick in solos by Green, Pat Martino, George Benson and others. It's a great way for a guitarist to build drama through repetition, which is a trademark of organists like "Babyface" Willette, Jimmie Smith and Jack McDuff.

In Example 3b, Burrell cleverly works his way down the Bb minor pentatonic scale in double stops and then resolves it with a simple  $B_p-D_p-E_b$  theme, milking the three notes with varying rhythms. These double-stops must have been



akin to what Leonardo Da Vinci had in mind when he wrote, "Simplicity is the ultimate form of sophistication."

The approach shown in Examples 4a and 4b is one of the most recognizable aspects of Green's sound. Here we see him establishing and developing a C minor dorian idea and getting the most out of the ii–V progression at this point in a blues form (4a: bars 8–11; 4b: bars 8–12). Both licks start with Green's characteristic triplet pickup on beat 4.

Examples 5a and 5b show how Burrell and Green, respectively, build complexity over the I chord leading up to the IV chord (bars 1–5 of the blues).

Burrell begins his chorus (5a) simply enough by developing a three-note theme of  $B_{b}-A_{b}-F$  in the manner we see in the previous examples. He then blasts off a string of triplets that highlight an E-natural, the flat-five blue note of the  $B_{b}$ minor tonality. His line is rhythmically crisp and demonstrates precision in moving up and down the guitar neck starting low, moving to a higher octave and returning.

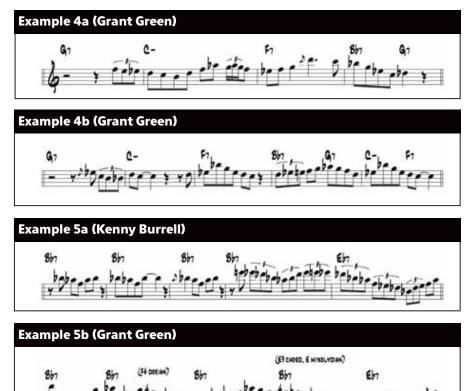
Green pulls out all the stops here (5b) and plays an incredibly articulate, long, virtuosic line loaded with chord substitutions over the static  $B_p7$ chord. Bar 2 starts in F dorian and then moves up to F# dorian starting on the D on the and of beat 2. This creates maximum tension, which is released when the line returns to F dorian for bar 3. Bar 4 is a similar half-step-above approach, cleverly outlining a E9 chord with a descending E mixolydian phrase that abruptly changes direction and retraces its steps in E<sub>b</sub> mixolydian ascending over the E<sub>b</sub>9, which is the IV chord.

In the greater context of the entire choruses from which these two examples are drawn, it is important to note how the ideas these masters might play in bars 6–12 balance the chorus with simplicity and a tasteful use of space.

Each example here is easily digestible for practice in 12 keys and over several octaves. In striving to master the blues, remember to do a lot of transcribing—go to the source. As Willie Dixon, one of our most influential composers, said, "The blues are the true facts of life expressed in words and song, inspiration, feeling and understanding." I take it to mean, "The music speaks for itself." DB

New York City-based guitarist Charlie Apicella is the leader of the organ group Iron City. His third CD, *Big Boss*, is his first on Zoho Music and his debut as producer. His teaching credits include The New York Jazz Workshop and the summer programs of Jazz House Kids in Montclair, N.J., and The Noel Pointer Foundation in Brooklyn, N.Y. Apicella is an Eastman Guitars Featured Artist and a ZT Amplifiers Official Artist. Visit him online at charlieapicella.com or email him at contactironcity@comcast.net.







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