

Vision Music's

Swing Blues: The Doorway to Jazz

by Mark Stefani



"Swing Blues: The Doorway to Jazz" is one of the most popular wings in Vision Music's One On One: Lessons by Mail program. The course consists of 24 chapters, each containing two to three lesson assignments, one of which is a classic standard in the style arranged for jazz guitar. Each tune has a corresponding backing track at our Jam Central Station page. The purpose of the course is to build both song and core language vocabulary for improvising over jazz changes, while also addressing chord comping and rhythmic concepts, making it the ultimate doorway to jazz. What follows is a chapter-by-chapter overview of the course content and specific goals:

LESSON ONE

The opening segment in the first chapter of the course uses two powerful reference resources, *Improvising Guidelines* and *Jazz Chord Voicings*, to explain the fundamental harmony plus chord comping options as applied to a standard swing blues progression in the key of C. Next up is a jazz guitar arrangement of "C Jam Blues" by Duke Ellington, a riff-based composition played in Wes-style octaves with upper-string chord responses. Last but not least is the introduction to the "Jazz Language" series, with some superb long two-five (II-V) licks covering three harmonic approaches: blues, inside, and outside.

LESSON TWO

In the second chapter of the course we move on to a second riff-based affair in the key of F, "The Sweet Alice Blues" by George Benson. Recorded by GB while with organist Jack McDuff in the early sixties, this tune was transposed from the original key of G to facilitate more of a Joe Pass mainstream interpretation. Either the right-hand fingers or a flatpick can be used for the melody, fingered in the middle of the neck, with jazz short chords (aka "shell voicings") used in response. Also covered is transposing the rhythm role from C to F. In the final segment, "More Jazz Language" demonstrates six terrific short II-V licks and many creative soloing options.

LESSON THREE

This chapter has a distinct Wes Montgomery theme to it, beginning with "Naptown Blues" in the all-important key of Bb. The riff-based head (melody) opens with a double-stop, followed by a blues scale figure, then short chord punches to round it out. "Wes Lives!" is the subtitle for the next lesson assignment, which uses upper-string voicings in a C swing blues scenario that paves the way for dedicated chord soloing and/or more sophisticated comping. The final segment is an introduction to the "Tricks" sub-series. "Turnaround Tricks" builds on a short II-V lick from the previous lesson as a basis to discuss the many lick combinations for soloing on turnarounds.

LESSON FOUR

An edition devoted exclusively to the music of alto sax legend Charlie Parker, the jazz icon who was nicknamed "Bird" by his colleagues. "Billie's Bounce" (key of F) is one of his most famous blues compositions, essentially a saxophone solo translated to jazz guitar. First bebop tune in the course, and essential for any serious student of jazz. "Bird Magic" is the topic for the second half of this chapter, a lesson that illustrates and explores Parker's fascinating technique of moving II minor cliches a flatted third or fifth for getting outside over the V chord, then adapting that concept in a highly visual manner to the guitar fingerboard.

LESSON FIVE

This three-part chapter begins with the classic "Tenor Madness" by saxophonist Sonny Rollins. Featuring a return to the riff-blues format in Bb, this version is arranged with short chords that capture essential melody notes followed by single-line responses. Next is "Double-Stopper" in the key of F, a comping arrangement in the spirit of jazz guitarist Herb Ellis, who anchored the drummerless Oscar Peterson piano trio in the fifties. As the title implies, it features double-stop licks with chord punches throughout. "Two-Five Tricks" comprises the third segment, with several examples and tips on how to get more mileage out of your core jazz language.

LESSON SIX

Pianist Tommy Flanagan's "Freight Trane" is the centerpiece for this edition in the course. The tune was recorded on a Kenny Burrell release in the fifties, also featuring tenor saxophonist John Coltrane, hence the reference in the title. This tune is the first in the key of Ab, and uses the Bird's Blues format with major 7ths for the I and IV chords plus multiple II-Vs, making it the most complicated assignment harmonically to date. "Jazz GB Style: Part One" is the focus for the second half of this chapter, a sub-series of Jazz Language that illustrates some excellent examples of II-V licks, courtesy of guitarist George Benson.

LESSON SEVEN

Another three-part affair, opening with "Freddie the Freeloader" by Miles Davis, quite possibly the most popular swing blues composition in jazz history. Recorded on the famous Kind of Blue release from decades ago, this classic Bb blues is arranged for jazz guitar using three-tone chord voicings to simulate the original horn harmony, followed by short chord punches. Next up is "Bustin' Loose" in the first look at the Solo Sketches sub-series, a model solo in Bb that can be used for expanding concepts as well as a source for fresh licks. Finally, "More Two-Five Tricks" uses a melodic II-V lick from guitarist Tal Farlow over five different families of chords.

LESSON EIGHT

Duke Ellington's "Thing's Ain't What They Used To Be" is the central focus for this chapter. The head for this slower swing blues in Bb is arranged for jazz guitar in thumb-brushed octaves ala Wes, with full four/five-tone Mickey Baker-style chord punches to create a solid call & response effect. "More Bird Magic" comprises the second lesson assignment. Another piece of the Jazz Language series, four great Charlie Parker II-V licks are grouped together, all sharing the fact that they begin in the same thematic manner for the first two beats before moving into unique and powerful variations. Great for understanding the reality of changing direction on the fly.

LESSON NINE

This one opens with a riff-based tune, "Blues In the Closet" by Oscar Pettiford, arranged in the key of Ab with double-stops and chord punches. Building on two earlier lessons, "Like Wes, Like Bird" is another upper-string chord soloing affair against the Freight Trane changes, and perfect as a foundation for dedicated chord soloing or advanced comping. In the final segment, "Trane Techniques" exposes the student to a pair of turnaround formulas using substitutions, then uses them as vehicles to explore a myriad of harmonic possibilities, all based on powerful core language gleaned from John Coltrane's epic Giant Steps solo.

LESSON TEN

Featuring a pair of Bb blues projects with catchy titles, this edition begins with "Opus de Funk" by Horace Silver, one of the most prolific piano composers in jazz history. The head (melody) is bebop-oriented for the first eight bars, much like a great sax solo, before returning to simpler blues roots. "Be Fat Blues" is up next, a jazz guitar rhythm accompaniment arrangement that employs the popular technique of playing a walking bass line with chords at the same time. The harmonic concepts are based on many years of transcribing the work of upright bass legends, then fusing that knowledge with standard jazz guitar chord voicings.

LESSON ELEVEN

An edition based heavily on the music and influence of George Benson. "Rock A Bye" is another riff-based blues recorded by GB early in his career, originally in the key of Db but transposed to C for this lesson. "Man Power" is up next, the second arrangement in the Solo Sketches series and also presented in the key of C, containing several classic moves by Benson and others that can be used to expand improvising concepts while acquiring fresh licks. Finally, "Jazz GB Style: Part Two" is the second collection in this Jazz Language sub-series, with four excellent II-V licks transcribed from Benson jazz solos.

LESSON TWELVE

Midway point in the 24-lesson course, and featuring a strong Wes Montgomery theme. Up front is the classic "Sundown" in the popular guitar key of A, a composition that epitomizes the call & response trademark associated with Wes. The head is blues-based and surrounded by chord punches in a unique progression. "All Thumbs (Up)" is the subject for the rest of this chapter, a blues tribute to Wes in the key of Bb. This tune began as a model solo done in octaves, but due to the chord responses it quickly evolved into more of an original composition in the spirit of Wes. It can be used as a head or to advance the use of octaves in jazz guitar solos.

LESSON THIRTEEN

Jazz piano on guitar dominates two of the three lesson segments in this course edition, starting with "Straight No Chaser" by Thelonius Monk, in the key of F. The jazz guitar arrangement for this bebop blues with a circular melody was inspired by the version done by Miles Davis on the Milestones release many years ago. "Chord 'Nation" is the next assignment, another chord solo ala Wes in the same key. It opens up with a famous Keter Betts bass line translated to the upper-string set. Rounding out this chapter is a special edition in the Jazz Language series. "Jazz Oscar Style" contains some great II-V licks, courtesy of piano legend Oscar Peterson.

LESSON FOURTEEN

Another course chapter with a George Benson slant. "Clockwise" is a fast blues recorded by GB on his famous Cookbook release, and the first composition presented in the key of G. The tune is a two-part affair, riff-based for the first twelve bars followed by the actual head for the next twelve. The latter features some unique diminished with chromatic lines in bars five through eight. "Jazz GB Style: Part Three" is the final segment in this Jazz Language sub-series based on Benson transcriptions, with another group of superb II-V licks plus a dissertation on how GB creatively uses his jazz language to straddle the fence between styles.

LESSON FIFTEEN

A three-part edition that begins with "K.C. Blues" by Charlie Parker. This composition in the key of C is a slower swing number. Like most Bird tunes, the head is really his alto saxophone solo translated to the guitar, a melody rich with major and dominant blues language. Up next in the same key is a second walking bass line accompaniment arrangement. "EZ Walker" gets its name due to the use of three-tone chord voicings, facilitating ease of use, flexibility, and speed. Wrapping this chapter up is "Jazz Bird Style" in the ongoing language series, once again featuring a group of excellent II-V clichés by the alto sax legend.

LESSON SIXTEEN

This edition features the first look at a swing blues in a minor key, with the popular "Mister P.C." by John Coltrane, the legendary tenor saxophonist who composed many blues compositions. This head for this tune in C minor was a perfect candidate for the Wes-style octave approach, due to the numerous opportunities to slide up and down the fingerboard. Because of the unique differences and challenges when improvising over II-Vs in a minor key, "Minor Jazz Language" makes a perfect complement as the second half of this chapter. The concepts and licks gleaned from this segment can be applied to numerous minor jazz situations, blues or otherwise.

LESSON SEVENTEEN

A chapter based in large part around the music of legendary jazz guitarist Hank Garland. The opening segment is devoted to his riff-based "Riot-Chous" composition, recorded on Jazz Winds from A New Direction so many years ago. Also discussed is the harmony used by Hank and Gary Burton for this Bb blues. "The Garland Mystique" is part of the Jazz Language series, comprising the next lesson assignment and documenting several outstanding II-V licks played by Hank on that album. In closing, "Wake-Up Call" is a third arrangement in the Solo Sketches series, in the key of Bb and once again a model solo representing a resource for concepts and new licks.

LESSON EIGHTEEN

This edition features a pair of octave-based lesson assignments, a return to the music of John Coltrane, and the first tune in the key of Eb. "Bessie's Blues" is a three-chord blues at a slower swing pace, and is arranged for jazz guitar in Wes-style octaves. The focus for the second lesson in this chapter is a unique sequel to a previous tune in the course. "If Wes Did Miles" is based on the first chorus of Miles Davis' famous Bb trumpet solo for Freddie the Freeloader. The solo is arranged in thumb-brushed octaves, hence the Wes reference in the title, with jazz chord punches to create a call & response effect.

LESSON NINETEEN

Speaking of Miles, no course in swing blues could be considered complete without the subject for this chapter. "All Blues" is one of the most famous compositions in jazz history and like Freddie the Freeloader, was originally recorded on Kind of Blue. This blues waltz is arranged in the key of G using the plucked-octave approach popularized by George Benson, permitting the addition of a harmony note in between the actual melody. Next up is a related, fingerstyle jazz guitar accompaniment that simulates the original keyboard voicings and rhythm. Last but not least is "Inside Language: Part One" in the Jazz Language series, featuring several melodic II-V licks.

LESSON TWENTY

This chapter is based on a highly-unique blues composition in the key of C, "Unit Seven" by bassist Sam Jones. Most jazz guitar fans know this tune from the Wes Montgomery version that was recorded in the sixties. The structure is two twelve-bar head choruses in swing, followed by an eight-bar bridge featuring II-V sequences in latin rhythm, then a return to a final twelve bar head. "Jazz Chord Tricks: Part One" is the second lesson assignment, offering a number of upper-string voicing examples for the all-important II-V progression in the key of C. Like the previous chord solos, they can be used as a basis for soloing or comping.

LESSON TWENTY-ONE

Another three-part edition that opens with "Au Privave" by Charlie Parker. This well-known bebop blues in the key of F is once again a classic example of a Bird alto sax solo translated to guitar. Includes a discussion of playing bebop heads in the upper register. A first in the same key, "Glass Half Full" is up next and a continuation of the Solo Sketches series, representing a blend of concepts and exposure to fresh licks. In the final lesson segment, "Classic Jazz Riffs" is part of the Jazz Language series, featuring some terrific II-V licks taken exclusively from well-known horn players.

LESSON TWENTY-TWO

This chapter is a return to the jazz-piano-on-guitar theme, with a second famous composition by legendary pianist Thelonius Monk. "Blue Monk" is three-chord, slower swing blues arranged in the key of Bb, and like a previous lesson uses the more pianistic plucked-style octave approach to add the harmony note associated with the head to the guitar arrangement. Chord responses round out this essential blues addition to the course. "Blues to the Tenth Power" is a keyboard-oriented comping assignment, also in the key of Bb. Three-tone chords in tenths are played in a four-beats-to-the bar rhythm, an excellent option for slow swing accompaniment.

LESSON TWENTY-THREE

A three-part chapter featuring yet another Miles Davis composition and two sequels to previous lessons. "Walkin'" is a sultry blues in the key of F. It opens with an eight-bar intro based off the F minor pentatonic scale before moving into the head, arranged in Wes-style octaves. Next up is "Jazz Chord Tricks: Part Two" as a follow-up to the first part, only this time focusing on the I-VI-II-V turnaround formula voiced on the upper-string set. The ideas can be used in countless scenarios, both blues and beyond. In the closing segment, "Inside Language: Part Two" adds some great II-V licks with a melodic, flexible personality, expanding core vocabulary for solos.

LESSON TWENTY-FOUR

It's only fitting that the final edition in the course would center on a Wes Montgomery standard, and one of his most famous compositions. "West Coast Blues" is a jazz waltz in the key of Bb, set against a very distinctive chord progression. A single-note affair this time around. In closing and in a continuation of the Jazz Language series, "Great Guitar Riffs" takes a look at a group of outstanding II-V licks by three jazz guitar icons: Charlie Christian, a huge influence on Wes, the aforementioned Herb Ellis from his days with Oscar Peterson, and Barney Kessel, who's long career as a performer and recording artist is well-documented.

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