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Is there such a thing as the 'blue note'?

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Among the most frequently repeated formulae in the description of the traditions most often called Afro-American music, in particular the styles of jazz, blues, soul and rock, is the concept of the 'blue note'. It may also seem that this is a most widely accepted idea. The 'blue note' is usually thought of as a kind of basic element in those styles, as constituting the 'ethnic' or 'African' aspect of those musics as opposed to the 'Western' contributions of harmony.

My main attempt here is to step into the somewhat muddy waters of musicological and sociological/anthropoligical/cultural studies discourses of 'the blue' and ask what the 'blue idea' really is about. In rethinking the concept of the 'blue note', I find it necessary to differentiate between two concerns that often seem to be somewhat unconsciously or muddily mixed together:

(1) the idea of the 'blue note' as referring to pitch, thinking of the note as an 'item', commonly thought of as the slight altering of the minor third and the flattened seventh; and

(2) the general concept of 'blue feeling' linked to the idea of playing 'blue notes': in short, the performance of music with a 'blue feel'.

From my analysis of performances, interviews and recordings, the conclusion will be that most musicological analyses of these styles are still based on an oversimplified idea of harmony: the applied Western major/minor theory concept with the addition of 'blue elements'. My argument is that the harmonic foundation of blues, rock, and some jazz styles, in emic terms and performance practice, in fact represents both a totally different conception of harmony to that of the Western functional (tonal) harmony and also represents a different comprehension of dissonance/consonance in music.

The idea of the 'blue note' as pitch

Is there such a thing as the 'blue note?' This question is raised for a number of reasons. First of all I think that the concept of the 'blue note' is partly misunderstood and misused. As such it represents a simplified explanatory version of the style of blues music. Later on, I will suggest an alternative way of thinking about 'the blue' elements in terms of 'blue harmony' and 'bluesness'. The latter term is adopted from Steven G. Smith (1992) who traces the relationship between blues and 'bluesness' as an aesthetic category: as embodied feeling of 'blues' or 'pain'. It should also be noted that my concept of 'blue harmony' diverges from common notions of

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'blues harmony', thought of as 'patterns of harmony' or harmonic progressions; and also from commonplace notions of 'blue notes' and 'blues scales'. My concept of 'blue harmony' aims at a description of a particular stylised blend of harmony inherent in blues performance – but also partly transformed to other styles – such as jazz and rock.

The purpose of this essay is not to give a final definition of 'the blue' in music, but rather to raise a few questions which seem crucial to our understanding of theoretical concepts of harmony applied and reworked in blues performance. As known, blues is also commonly understood as 'form'. Having played and intensely listened to blues music myself for more than twenty years, my experience has always been that 'form' is internalised by blues musicians in such a way that perception of formal structure (as understood in musicological theory) is not at all what is at issue in performance. Discussing the topic of 'blue notes' with numerous – well-known as well as lesser-known – blues musicians and scholars,[1] has further supported my view that the concept of 'blue notes' is derived from Western musicology and that the 'blue note' may not even exist as an element of emic theory: its origin was surely invented to describe the structure of 'Negro' music as opposed to that of European music:

> The blues structure, like ragtime, was an admixture of African influence (the call-and-response pattern) and European harmonically derived functional form. But unlike ragtime, the blues were improvised and as such were more successful in preserving the original and melodic patterns of African music . . . Harmony has already been mentioned as the basis of blues structure in its later stages of development. (Schuller 1986 [1968], p. 38)

The description of 'blues structure' here given by Schuller seems representative of how jazz and blues historians have imagined how blues music came into being, and the fact that 'harmony' is portrayed as the 'basis of blues structure'. Blues is primarily thought of as a mixture of 'simple structural forms' of harmony derived from European music with the addition of the 'Negro's' 'hollering' and 'crying' of 'blue notes'. As described by Stearns, blues harmony is thus thought to be simple:

> The harmony employed in the blues is another matter. It is pretty clearly derived from European music although coloured by the blue tonality of the cry. At its simplest, the harmony of the blues consists of the three basic chords in our musical language . . . These chords are technically known as the 'tonic', the 'subdominant', and the 'dominant' . . . (Stearns 1957, p. 102)

The view that music is foremost an expression of 'structure' – and in particular that of 'harmonic structure' – has been the ruling ideology of Western musicology (including ethnomusicology) almost up to the present day. As such, the discipline of musicology has in particular been ruled by the ideas of 'complexity' versus 'simplicity'; the 'developed' versus the 'primitive'; 'art' versus 'folk' and 'pop'; 'high' versus 'low', and so forth.[2] Even though many scholars have come to assume that 'blues form' often includes a wide range of variation from the basic I–IV–V, twelve-bar form, the performance of blues is still commonly thought of as exegetic of 'simple form' with the addition of 'blue notes' and sad lyrics. Thus the following definition of blues is given by Frank Tirro:

> 'Blues' refers to a style of music, a type of performance, a musical form, and a state of mind. Structurally, the chief characteristic of the musical form is a repeated harmonic pattern of twelve-measures' duration in 4/4-time. (Tirro 1993, p. 51)

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In defining the 'blue note' (by quoting ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl), Tirro – like most jazz/blues writers and scholars – leans on the ever-repeated definition of the past where 'blue notes' came to be classified as the pitch-altering of thirds and sevenths:

> A frequently mentioned characteristic of U.S. Negro songs is the so-called 'blue note', the flatted or slightly lowered third and seventh degrees in a major scale. The origin of this phenomenon is not known, but it probably cannot be traced to Africa. Here is a musical trait which may, possibly, have come into folk music from practices of American Negro popular and jazz musicians. (Tirro 1993, p. 54)[3]

I think Nettl is wrong in suggesting that the concept of the 'blue note' has derived from the musicians performing this music. Rather it has originated from the scholars describing the music. In addition, in blues performance every note may be bent or altered, but in different ways depending on style and how such notes appear in the harmonic texture. One of the most frequently heard 'blue notes' as regards pitch discrepancy in post-war electric guitar playing may be that of the bent fourth: this is commonly bent to include different pitches between the fourth and the fifth (and higher pitches as well). The second (which does not even appear in what scholars have named the blues scale) also seems to be a very common 'blue note' feature of most blues guitarists' repertoires: moving between the second and the minor third in innumerable ways. In fact every note of the twelve-tone chromatic scale may appear in a blues tune, possibly also as 'blue notes',[4] because microtonality, attack, and timbre variation are such essential parts of blues expression. The aesthetics behind this practice – being crucial to the 'meaning' of blues performance – is that of 'putting things to the notes' as described by B.B. King in his book, *Blues Guitar Method*:

> To me it's more like the human voice. It's like a person singing. It seems to say more and you can feel it. It makes the sound sort of stimulating . . . I think in terms of not just playing a note but making sure that every note I play means something. You need to take time with these notes. If you just play notes and not put anything into it, you'll never have a distinctive style. You need to put yourself into what you are doing. It will set you apart from the person just playing the guitar. In other words, make music. (King 1973, p. 15)

The aesthetics of blues phrasing involves an idea of 'personifying' each and every note. The master of blues performance may make his personal mark on each note – with a bend or a vibrato – in such a way that the skilled/socialised listener only needs to hear one single note in order to recognise and feel the presence of the sound of a B.B. King as being distinct from Albert King, Albert Collins, Buddy Guy, or players like Peter Green, Eric Clapton or Jimi Hendrix. This contrasts with the idea of 'musemes' as the smallest item of 'music' – sometimes defined as a minimum of three notes, sometimes more 'flexibly'. (For a summary of the relevant theories of Philip Tagg and others, see Middleton (1990), p. 189.)

Among the very few ever to have questioned the widespread mis-assumption of what makes up the pitches of 'blue notes' is Jeff Todd Titon in his study of 'early downhome blues' (a term borrowed from the vernacular). From analysing a number of downhome blues performances, Titon comes to the conclusion that in fact all the pitches of the Western twelve-tone scale may be used in one single blues melody in this early performance style of the blues (Titon 1994, p. 154). Hence, Titon abandons the notion of 'blue notes' in favour of his own 'pitch complexes'. Related to the keynote of C he defines groups of pitches as 'E complex' (the series between E♭ and E), 'G Complex' (the series between G♭ and G), and 'B♭ complex' (the series

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between B♭ and B), which he finds to be the most frequently found microtones in this style of blues, alongside movements including the notes A, F and D, while C (tonic) and G (the fifth) still seem to be the most important notes. Titon goes on to show that this particular practice does not seem to be a play of chance but occurs within a rather consistent system of melodic contour, lines and stanzas:

> . . . the most important argument that these quarter-tones form distinct pitches in a down-home blues mode is that singers enter and move within the complexes in a manner reasonably consistent from phrase to phrase, line to line, and stanza to stanza throughout a given song. (Titon 1994, p. 159)

Returning to Stearns (1957), data arguing for an alternative concept of 'blue notes' seem to have been present also at that time; however, the emic utterances were rather used as a means of documenting the stubbornness and lack of theoretical understanding of the blues performer, for instance, the harmony employed by John Lee Hooker is viewed as lacking in development. As Stearns writes:

> There were blues singers on recordings in 1955, however, who still did not employ European harmony. It is generally possible to date a blues style by the complexity of the harmony. Guitarist John Lee Hooker, whose recordings are made for Negro trade exclusively, employs a drone which sounds very much like the skirl of a bagpipe and he says his grandfather played that way. His rhythms, however, are very complicated. With Big Bill Broonzy it's a matter of pride not to employ European harmony, although he doesn't think of it in those terms:
> . . . for me to really sing the old blues that I learned in Mississippi I have to go back to my sound and not the right chords as the musicians have told me to make. They just don't work with the real blues . . . the blues didn't come out of no book and them real chords did . . . the real blues is played and sung the way you feel and no man or woman feels the same way every day . . . (Stearns 1957, pp. 102–3)

In considering later examples of blues performance, in particular that of post-war electric blues with representatives like B.B. King, Albert King, Freddie King, John Lee Hooker, Hubert Sumlin, Albert Collins, Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, Johnny Winter, Stevie Ray Vaughan; players like Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Peter Green, Steve Cropper, Robert Cray, rockers like Eddie Van Halen or Jimmy Page, and even jazz players like John Scofield, Mike Stern and John McLaughlin, my argument is that what is at stake in blues is not simply a major/minor Western concept of diatonic practice with the addition of 'blue notes', but rather a completely different concept or reworking of functional harmony[5] as regards the comprehension of dissonance/consonance. The simplified conceptualisation of what 'blue notes' are about partly stems from the intense musicological insistence on separation of elements of musical 'structure' derived from Western music theory: the insistence on the separation of 'harmony' from 'sound' (timbre), 'melody' and 'rhythm', as the starting point of all analysis.

Music as process: 'blue notes' as participatory discrepancies

Rather than thinking of music as the structure of 'objects', I think it is wise to view music as a mode of performance: as a process involving musicians and participants. Following Charles Keil, 'the power of music lies in its participatory discrepancies': a concept Keil uses to describe the intentional 'out-of-tuneness' and 'out-of-syncness' of music performance: the 'process' of 'vital drive', 'groove' or 'beat' and the 'texture' of 'timbre', 'sound', 'tone qualities', etc. (Keil and Feld 1994, p. 96)

A similar point of departure is taken by Robert Walser's argument that music

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Table. Layers of 'sound'/'harmonic texture'.

Layers	Instruments	Texture
(4) Lead:	Vocal/lead guitar/sax	Melody, improvisation, lines
(3) Background:	Guitar/piano/organ/horns/backing vocals, etc.	Riff, chords
(2) Reference:	Bass guitar	Harmonic foundation, arpeggios, lines, root (tonic) references, riff
(1) Pattern:	Drums	Sound, attack, space

should be revived as a verb rather than a noun in order to challenge the common practice of analysing and understanding music in terms of objects. In doing so he takes as a starting point Christopher Small's notion of 'musicking' (see Small 1987 and 1998): 'Musicking embraces composition, performance, listening, dancing – all of the social practices of which musical scores and recordings are merely one-dimensional traces.' (Walser 1993, p. xiii)

'Blue notes' may obviously be seen as 'participatory discrepancies' following Keil's definition which tries to capture the fundamental feature of participation, interaction and sociality of music performance. Seeing 'grooving' as fundamentally social, my assumption will be that 'harmony' must be viewed as part of what Keil defines as 'texture': 'sound', 'tone qualities' and so forth. What blues performances of 'Chicago style' (Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, etc.), 'Texas style' (Clarence Gatemouth Brown, Stevie Ray Vaughan, etc.), 'New Orleans style' (Earl King, Snooks Eaglin, etc.) and 'British style' (the Bluesbreakers, 1960s Fleetwood Mac, etc.) all have in common is that their music is the outcome of an interaction of individual players creating the 'sound' or 'texture' of the blues in interplay. Each musician of a band participates in creating the 'whole' – the music – by grooving and creating sounds in real time. There may be expressed or unexpressed stylised rules governing this process; however, to be accepted as a musician (to be able to play the blues), some stylised regularities must be followed as a basis of performance.

In performance, interplay (collaboration/communication) is based on the idea that each player finds or defines his 'space' in relation to the others. At the bottom there will be a keeper of the groove: usually the bass player and the drummer in interaction. At the next layer there will be some rhythmic 'lift-up-over-sounding' discrepancies: rhythm guitar or keyboards. On top, there will be vocals and lead guitar soloing. Together, all those layers make the 'groove', while simultaneously creating the 'texture'.

As regards 'texture', the opening up of 'sound' and 'space' is created by breaks and continuity in the rhythm pattern set by the drummer. The harmonic reference/foundation/root is initiated by the bass player, while chords and harmonic riffs are played on guitar/keyboard. On top of this the texture is filled with melodies and lines of lead vocals, lead guitar or possibly other instruments, like piano, sax, harmonica, etc. entering this role (see the Table, layer 4).

The Table sets out a very simplified model of how 'harmonic texture' is set into play in the process of a blues band performance. 'Groove' as process occurs at all layers, as does improvisation. What is of main concern here, however, is how the concept of 'blue notes' fits within the process of the 'harmonic texture': what I am going to term 'blue harmony'. This interaction between the different layers,

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between different individuals, may also be the essence of the performance as regards 'sound' and 'harmony', as well as the core of the musical interaction between the members of a band. A man who came to influence the 'sound' of 1960s and 1970s soul, blues and rock performance to a great extent is guitarist and producer Steve Cropper, who recorded and produced artists like Albert King, Otis Redding, Wilson Picket, Eddie Floyd, Booker T & the MGs, etc., until he re-entered the stage as a 'Blues Brother' in the 1980s. Cropper, in an interview I conducted, especially speaks of 'sound' as the identification of different layers, and of different 'roles' of the individuals in a band: the ambition 'to fill in the holes' of the whole texture:

> I like to play licks that are of a rhythmic nature. That creates a feel; and a groove. And I like to play in the holes, when the singer is not singing. I like to play stuff that compliments the melody; and really get involved in what the singer is trying to do. And I think that's where I am most valuable as a guitar player. (Weisethaunet, interview with Steve Cropper, 8 June 1990)

The concept of 'sound' is definitively even more complex than that of 'harmony', and in the way it is commonly used amongst musicians it incorporates almost every aspect of the musical performance. In what follows, my main argument is that neither 'harmony' nor 'sound' are elements as easily separable as is often thought. From my analysis of a vast number of blues tunes and from the experience of playing blues music, however, some simple conclusions might nevertheless be drawn as far as 'harmony' is concerned.

If we stick with the Table above, it might be observed that at layer (1) a pattern or framework of 'groove' is laid down by the drummer. As regards texture, this pattern will create a temporal reference which will be varied, broken down or changed at certain points, creating both high and low end sounds and the essential 'opening up' and 'closing' of space in the texture. At layer (2) the bass player will usually stay close to the roots of the actual chords or create patterns that will fit with the basic structure employed according to each song. Usually this implies a major tonality. (Minor blues forms occur but are rather to be seen as a variant that differs from the main formula.) If the 'simplest' twelve-bar form is followed, the bass will indicate the chords I–I–I–I–IV–IV–I–I–V–IV–I–V. The bass player will usually hold on to this harmonic foundation, and at its very simplest create walking lines (or ostinato) of notes 1–3–5–6: the arpeggio of the major chord with the possible addition of the sixth. At layer (3), however, rhythm guitar or piano may impose major chords, but more commonly they will in blues rather employ sevenths (1–3–5–♭7), ninths (1–3–5–♭7–9), thirteens or diminished chords, etc. In the style of contemporary (1990s) blues commonly heard in Texas (such as on the scene in Austin, among players like Jimmie Vaughan, Jesse Taylor, John McVey, Ian Moore, Alan Haynes and Chris Duarte), one of the most common rhythm chords used at this layer seems to be the 3–♭7–9–5 (a voicing of a ninth chord, with root omitted) or ♭7–3–6–1 (a voicing of a 13th chord with the root on top and fifth omitted). On top of this, however, the most 'naturally'/'emic sounding'/'diatonic scale'[6] on the I chord is neither the major scale (as should be indicated by the bass line) or the mixolydian scale (as should be indicated by the chords at layer (3)), but rather the notes of the dorian scale: 1–2–♭3–4–5–6–♭7–8.

My argument here is that the dorian scale (which also may be seen as what is named the 'blues scale' with, however, the addition of the significant notes 2 and

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6) sounds 'less dissonant' to blues performers and listeners when applied against the foundation of a major-oriented bass line – in a texture usually featuring variations of seventh chords – than the major scale. Blues players will also employ the major third in their solos and phrases; however, if this is overdone, it will take the feeling away from that of the blues and make the music sound more 'jazzy' or 'country-like'. From the perspective of the blues performer and listener, the major third against the major chord may thus sound more 'dissonant' than the application of the minor third over the major chord![7] Seeing the idea of the 'blue note' in such a context, it seems clear that the texture of 'blue harmony' involves a specific comprehension of harmony that becomes neglected if 'harmony' and 'melody', or chords and solos, are analysed entirely separately from each other. In what follows, I will illustrate by examples how such an application of 'blue harmony' seems a common characteristic of the style of blues performance.

'Blue harmony' – a different concept

The concept governing Western functional harmony (at least in theory and up to a certain point in history) is the diatonic principle: in short, the C-major scale works with C-major, a-minor, G7, e-minor, d-minor chords, and so forth. However, C-minor scales are not considered to go along with C-major chords: this will usually be thought of and experienced as 'dissonance'. In the texture of 'blue harmony', however, this does not sound 'dissonant' at all to blues people. That is why I think the concept of 'blue harmony' may be a good one, as it is experienced as a kind of mode of texture which is known from the blues, but which is not limited to this genre/style.[8] It is also likely to enter into rock as well as jazz, soul, reggae and other African–American influenced popular musics. As Walser points out:

> Heavy metal, like all forms of rock and soul, owes its biggest debt to African–American blues. The harmonic progressions, vocal lines, and guitar improvisations of metal all rely heavily on the pentatonic scales derived from blues music. (Walser 1993, p. 57)[9]

Before this argument is taken any further, I will give a few examples of how my idea of 'blue harmony' has derived from analysis of the harmonic texture of blues performances. The word 'texture' seems to be a good one since 'blue notes' never appear as isolated 'items'. Often the performer will play two or three notes simultaneously – also in solo guitar playing – and the effect of 'blue harmony' seems to be created by the way those are voiced; put together; imposed, in accordance with the rest of the texture. As such blues is to be experienced as tonal music; there is in blues always a tonal centre; it is a play within a tonal framework. Blues is hardly ever 'a-tonal', as may be the case with Western non-functional musics.

Example 1 shows one of the most commonly heard 'blue' constellations of notes. It seems to occur in most blues guitar players' repertoires: as in the beginning of Eric Clapton's version of 'Ramblin' on My Mind' (from the LP, John Mayall, *Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton*, Decca, 1966). When played 'right', this example may almost sound like the whistle of a train, one of the core metaphors of blues mythology. It is a very common lick, and Clapton probably 'got it' from Robert Johnson's playing. Note, however, that the notation here is a reduction of the musical textural complexity, i.e. the notation is a representation of what is played but, on paper, definitively a reduction of the way it 'sounds'. As such, these examples are bound to a particular performance technique but also to the intrinsic qualities of the guitar

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as an instrument (a pianist would have to approach the examples very differently). For the sake of simplicity, the examples are transcribed in the key of C.

Imposed over a C major (I) chord, the 'lick' in Example 1 consists of notes ♭3 + 5, which is like imposing the minor chord over the major. Functionally, the ♭3 could also be explained as the ♯9, but that does not change the effect. When the chord changes to IV (subdominant) (F), the same 'lick' may still be played, but its function has changed: to ♭7 + 9.



♭3+5

Example 1.

Another 'lick' which is commonly applied on the I chord is shown in Example 2. This 'lick' consists of notes 6(13) + ♭3. When applied against the IV chord (subdominant) rather than on I (tonic) – which is also very usual – it changes its function to 3 + ♭7



6(13)+♭3

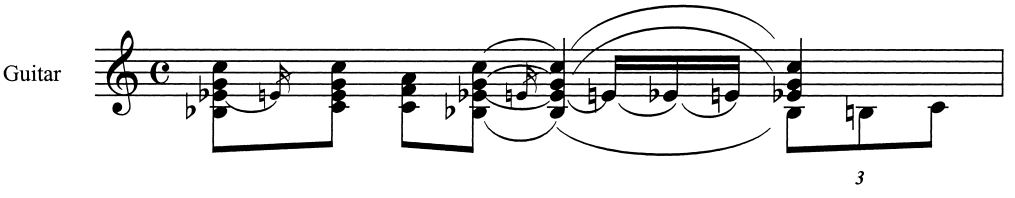
Example 2.

Example 3 is a very common 'lick' heard in Stevie Ray Vaughan's playing which includes an interchange (constant shift/'hammer on/off') between the minor third and the fourth. This is usually also played over the background of a major or seventh chord (initiating a style of guitar playing which is also a typical feature of the music of John Lee Hooker).



Example 3.

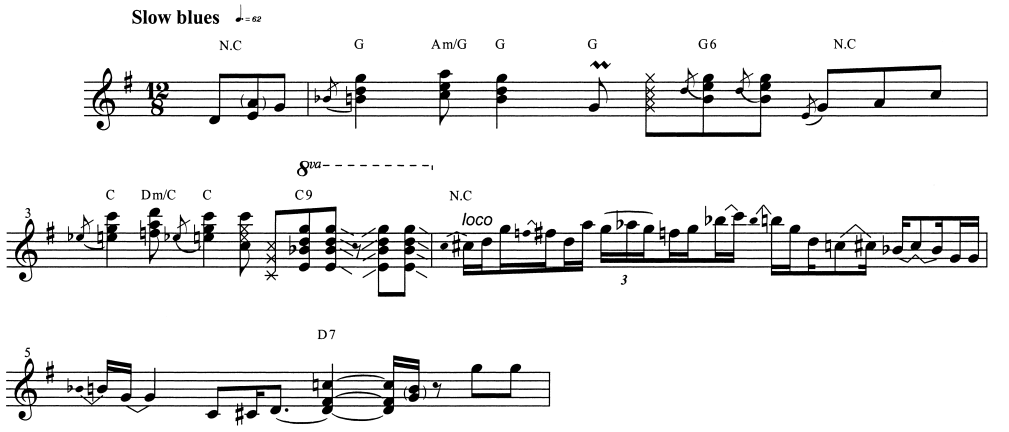
One of the most used 'riffs' in blues rhythm guitar playing is shown in Example 4, and involves a constant shift – or a kind of a trill – between ♭3 and 3, and it is used by everyone from B.B. King to Stevie Ray Vaughan, Robert Cray, Clapton, etc.



Example 4.

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In general, blues phrasing is based on a very subtle play of tonality, where rhythmic attack, microtonality and bending of strings creating an interplay between major and minor – but also other – intervals is of the essence. Among the performances where the kind of trill between ♭3 and 3 shown in Example 4 may be heard, is Stevie Ray Vaughan's recording of the blues 'Texas Flood' (written by Larry Davis and Joseph W. Scott), from the album, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble, *Texas Flood* (Epic/CBS, 1983), cf. the G chord in the very beginning. The transcription which follows (adapted from Vaughan 1995, p. 20, transcribed by Jesse Gress) is in G major; however, the tune is played in G♭. The reason why it is notated in G is that Stevie Ray Vaughan, like Hendrix, usually tuned his guitar down half a step, from E tuning to E♭ tuning, in order to obtain a 'fatter' sound by allowing the use of heavier gauge strings without reducing the ability to perform large bends. After the introduction, displaying in particular 6th and 9th chords, the second line of notation here, from the third complete bar, shows some very typical Stevie Ray Vaughan bends: the 4 is bent higher than ♭5 almost to 5, then the line goes: 5 – 1′ – ♭7 bent almost to 1′ – 5 – 2′ – 1′ – ♭2′ (♭9) – 1′ – ♭7 – 1′ – ♭3′ bend to 4′ – ♭3′ bent to 3′ – 1′ – 5 – 4 bent to ♭5 – then ♭3 is bent to 4 (a well-marked bend also frequently heard in the playing of Buddy Guy) – 1 – 1 – and ♭3 slightly bent against 3, before the line ends on 1, then 4 – ♭5 – 5: leading into the dominant seventh. (I have used the sign ′ just to indicate moves to an octave above.)



Example 5. 'Texas Flood' (Davis, Larry/Scott, Joseph W.) © 1958 Duchess Music Corp./Universal/ MCA Music Ltd. Used by permission.

Example 6, extract from 'The Same Way' by Peter Green (from the LP, John Mayall, *A Hard Road*, Decca, 1967, my transcription) shows a segment of one of British guitarist Peter Green's typical blues lines. The tune is clearly based in A-major tonality, with 'shuffle'-comping rhythm guitar typical of a blues/rock style. Introducing the solo is an E (dominant) chord; however, a second and third guitar play a simple riff which includes the notes c, b, a (♭3, 2, 1), also indicating a minor tonality. (While one guitar plays this melodic line, another guitar, however distorted, strums the full chords C, B(m) and A, underneath this line.) The overall tonality, however, is A major. In his solo, Peter Green begins by playing a significant 1, ♭7, ♭3 line. In bar 3, he makes a bend from the second to ♭3 and back. In bar 4, he makes a very significant bend from the fourth (D) to a note slightly higher than the ♭5 (E♭). Then notice how he fuses major and minor tonality in the outgoing triplet

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line (bar 5). First there is a slight indication of a minor third in front of the major third: then the line goes 3′–5′–4′–♭3′–1′–5–4–3. Green is typically enough using both major and minor thirds in the same line, and ending up on the major third an octave below.



Example 6. 'The Same Way' by Peter Green © 1967 Getaway Music Ltd. Transcribed by H. Weisethaunet. Used by permission.

As already pointed out, the texture in which lines and riffs occur consists of several layers that will give an overall picture of 'blue harmony' which is quite complex, and much more complex than presented here. Neither does the notation feature pitch discrepancies (which are essential to the feel of the overall texture), give any indication of sound/timbre, or point out how the notes appear rhythmically in accordance with what is happening in other layers. My main point, however, is not that of 'complexity', but the simple fact that the notion and definition of 'blue notes' most commonly applied to blues performance is a misnomer.

In conclusion, performances invoking 'blue harmony' seem to be based on a constant interplay between pitches, between major and minor thirds; between flattened fifths, fourths and fifths; thirds and flattened sevenths; bent seconds; sixths, etc. etc., where a wide range of microtones are created. Blues phrases rarely seem to be made out of 'one scale', rather they will be based on interplay, bends, slurs, slides, etc. between notes and against the layers of bass lines, guitar riffs and contrasting chords, a practice which has not yet been adequately described from the point of view of music theory. However, some few relatively good transcriptions, supporting the claims here, do exist.[10]

I think it is evident that this stylised[11] practice of 'blue discrepant harmony' has also found its way into other styles of music, in particular jazz and rock.[12] One of the jazz players who seems to have incorporated influences from 'blue harmony' into his music to a large extent is guitarist John Scofield:

I am totally in debt to the blues. I think blues is really powerful music, the good blues . . . I think I was one of the first to seriously try to incorporate that element, the phrasing of blues and rock, with be-bop chords and changes. For me it's really hard to separate between jazz

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or fusion, rhythm & blues, blues, or rock music. In a way, I think all those elements are in my music . . . (Weisethaunet, interview with John Scofield, 1989)[13]

This practice may be heard in almost every phrase of Scofield's music. He seems to be very aware of how 'blue harmony' – how each and every single note/bend – fits with the horizontal/vertical structures of chord progressions essential to jazz. Essential to 'harmonic texture' is that in modern jazz (as in blues) there will often be a play of ambiguous tonality, like in Scofield's tune 'Blue Matter' (from the CD, John Scofield, *Blue Matter*, Gramavision, 1987) which centres around D, Fm, B♭, and then Bm. Blues performance may be completely stripped of what is commonly thought of as blues 'form'/'structure', but it may still be the blues, as evident in the textures of the music of the late Miles Davis, in which Scofield also played an essential role.

Another guitarist who brought discrepant blues phrases and 'blue harmony' concepts into jazz is John McLaughlin. In my earlier work (Weisethaunet 1989B), I tried to measure some of those discrepancies as pitch variations and found that one may clearly speak of a 'microtonal' practice.[14] In interviewing McLaughlin, he made it clear that in his view the application of what may be called 'blue harmony' or 'blue notes' – the fundamental practice of bending notes in blues guitar and vocal performances – is not simply a question of 'natural feeling' as African–American blues players' discourses may often seem to stress:

Nothing is 'natural'. The first time you pick up a guitar it sounds like crap . . . (demonstrates). Bending of strings and application of microtones is learned from listening, and training. That is not a question of 'natural' feeling. It is learned from practice; from the music; from the culture in which you are born. I worked a lot with Indian musicians. Still in my improvising my main influences are from jazz and rock. In the beginning I was very influenced by Big Bill Broonzy . . . (Weisethaunet 1989A)

McLaughlin also stresses that 'bending' of strings to certain intervals is nothing that happens by 'chance'. It is practised and performed,[15] i.e. it is culturally patterned as style. The influence from the stylised phrasing of blues performances of the past is also emphasised in my dialogue with another white guitar player who seems to have incorporated that element into his playing style, guitarist Robben Ford. Ford in particular stresses the aural side of blues music; that it cannot actually be notated, but must be learned from listening to others:

Music is an audio experience, right? You listen to music . . . I think it is very important that you learn a lot about music just by listening . . . I learned a lot about phrasing from all the great blues guitar players, blues singers, very important you know; when I play, I very much feel like it's the same thing as singing. I learned a lot from Jimmy Whiterspoon, Billie Holliday, and B.B. King you know; as a singer as well as a guitar player. The blues really is the sort of thing . . . it's definitively the thread that runs through music for me, it's the main ingredient, it's the thing that bind everything together, you know. (Weisethaunet, interview with Robben Ford, 11 July 1990)

A question that may be raised is whether the practice that I have described as 'blue harmony' should be called 'modal'. Van Der Merwe in his important work tracing African origins in early blues forms, argues that the blues must be seen as a modal form: 'African modality was reduced to the powerful simplicity of the blues mode' (Van Der Merwe 1992, p. 145). The problem still is, however, that the 'blues mode' can hardly be reduced to the notion of a 'blues scale' or the 'modal application' of certain scales, since the texture of 'blue harmony' rarely stays in one scale or 'modality' for very long. Even each phrase or line will commonly be mixing several 'modes' or 'scales' together in the overall texture of harmony, and 'scales'

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are rarely imposed simply at a 'horizontal' level unrelated to the underlying progressions of chords. In defining the 'modality' of blues, Van Der Merwe, however, falls back on the notion of the 'blue note':

> What is the essence of the blues? All blues tunes have two things in common: one is syncopation, and the other is a mode, which in fact is not merely a mode, but a particular kind of modality . . . The first and most fundamental thing to explain is the mode. The blues mode is actually a modal frame: that is, a framework of melodically sensitive notes interspersed with less important notes. Among the notes constituting the framework are the famous blue notes, and my explanation of the blues mode must begin by defining them. Like the blues in general the blue notes can mean many things. One quality they all have in common, however, is that they are flatter than one would expect, classically speaking. But this flatness may take several forms. On the one hand, it may be a microtonal affair of a quarter-tone or so. Here one may speak of *neutral* intervals, neither major nor minor. On the other hand, the flattening may be a full semitone – as it must be, of course, on keyboard instruments. It may involve a glide, either upward or downward. Again, this may be a microtonal, almost imperceptible affair, or it may be a slur between notes a semitone apart, so that there is actually not one blue note but two. A blue note may even be marked by a microtonal shake of a kind common in Oriental music. (Van Der Merwe 1992, pp. 118–19)

Van Der Merwe finds that the most important degrees treated as 'blue notes' are the third, seventh, fifth and sixth. I think, from analysing performances and recordings, that any note of the twelve-tone chromatic scale may be 'treated' in such a way, but that the main question is how they appear within the complete harmonic texture. Seeing 'blue notes' as 'neutral intervals' is off the track, since in performance they seem rather to be the opposite. The main problem is that Van Der Merwe is trying to apply the Western musicological notions of consonance/dissonance to give an explanation of what is going on in blues performance:

> The reason why these notes change their pitch in this apparently haphazard way is that their function within the mode is also changing. It is a matter of a kind of instability rather analogous to harmonic dissonance. So close is the parallel that it is not misleading to use the term 'melodic dissonance'. Just as a discord resolves on a concord, so a melodically dissonant note resolves on a melodically consonant note. And just as a seventh or ninth is the mark of discord, so the various forms of flattening that make a blue note are the mark of melodic dissonance. (Van Der Merwe 1992, p. 120)

This is the point where Van Der Merwe's notion of the 'blue note' and blues as a 'mode' becomes mistaken. For a blues performer the starting off and ending with a seventh, ninth or diminished chord is not necessarily a question of 'dissonance'. This will more likely be experienced as the 'good sounding' chord/sounds (cf. also the quoted utterances of Big Bill Broonzy), since this is how the harmonic and melodic tension of the blues is 'resolved', or rather not 'resolved' – but 'played with' – as similar to the 'tension' apparent in the music of Stravinsky or Debussy. However, this should be a question of 'tension' as emic experience, rather than assuming that music 'naturally' lends itself to end on major chords. I think the other main point is that 'melodic dissonance' and 'harmonic dissonance' should not, *contra* Van Der Merwe, be seen as 'independent' of each other:

> It should be emphasized that melodic dissonance is completely independent of harmonic dissonance. Melodic dissonances may occur against the background of pure triads, or in a single melodic line with no accompanying harmony at all; while conversely melodic consonance may go with a dissonant harmony. (Van Der Merwe 1992, p. 120)

From a performance perspective it is the 'tension' between the different layers (as described in the Table) which creates the overall texture of 'blue harmony'. In

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my view, one should not think of 'harmony' as something which is just played as 'accompaniment' to a melodic line (an idea obviously borrowed from the experience of Western 'song' notation).[16]

It is possible that blues performances as argued by Van Der Merwe may be called 'blue mode' or 'modal'; however, the definition of modality must then be an extremely broad one as the blues performer will commonly fuse a number of 'modal scales' inside each phrase. The most comprehensive work on 'modal theory' as applied to jazz (and rock/blues) is still that of George Russell's *Lydian Chromatic Concept*, in that it presents a theory and a modal map for musicians thinking in terms of mode and improvisation. The question of creating 'harmonic texture' in blues, as in jazz and rock, is a question of which notes are played against which lines, riffs and chords; this comprises the overall texture of 'blue harmony'. The practice of blues performance shows that the harmonic texture of the blues infuses both 'vertical' and 'horizontal' approaches to harmony: a concept essential to understanding how functional harmony applies to improvised music, and which is well explained by Russell in his dialogue with Martin Williams (Russell 1959, pp. xx–xxiii, reprint from Jazz Review). Improvising musicians will most commonly relate to both 'vertical' changes of chords and 'horizontal' lines of 'melodic'/'modal'/diatonic/non-diatonic character. Blues performance is deeply embedded in an experience of a tonal centre, which implies that 'vertical' phrases will operate in dialogue with more 'horizontal' ('blues-modal') phrases.

A few examples of how this may theoretically work in actual performance can be given. In the soloing/improvising of a blues the choice could be any of the notes from the chromatic scale. However, when playing a major scale, which theoretically works well with the I chord, the major third imposed on the IV chord gives the major 7th, which may not be particularly 'well sounding' according to 'style'. An easier way to go in a completely 'horizontal' blues approach is to hold on to the ♭3 (E♭), which will change its function to the ♭7 as the chord changes to IV (F). Furthermore, as an overall effect, playing the major 3rd rather than the ♭3 on the I chord may be experienced 'horizontally' as creating more 'tension', as this note is usually to be avoided on the IV chord. The dorian scale (1–2–♭3–4–5–6–♭7) or blues pentatonic scale (1–♭3–4–5–♭7) will go well horizontally on I, IV and V; however, the ♭7 of those scales gives the minor third of the dominant (V chord), where the major third to many players might sound more 'natural'. As regards the modal application of minor scales in blues over the background of major chords, a 6 is more commonly heard than a ♭6, i.e. dorian rather than aeolian, a fact that may be explained because the sixth of the dorian (with its tonic on I) contains the major third of the subdominant (IV). In a 'horizontal' approach, this implies that a B♭-major scale may be used to improvise over a blues in C major (a practice Russell might call 'pan-tonal'), giving a (C) dorian I chord tonality, a (F) mixolydian IV chord tonality and a (G) aeolian V chord tonality. Mixolydian over the IV chord may be perceived of as very 'bluesy', but aeolian over the V chord may, as already mentioned, not. Most blues performers have learned how to master harmonic changes in such a way that they also may be playing on the edge of the actual chords: going inside/outside tonality as a part of making the music 'come alive' and 'sound good', similar to what Russell (1959) terms 'ingoing'/'outgoing' tonality in jazz.

Performance instruction books (the production of which has become an industry in itself) often set up scales to be imposed on certain chords, which may surely be a way of learning 'harmony' for beginners. Blues performance, however, is not

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a question of imposing scales, but rather a practice in which a complex stylised idiom of phrasing and bending is essential to texture: to discrepancies as process. I asked Robben Ford, who himself has released a few instruction books of the kind mentioned, if he thought of the blues as 'modal form'. His answer was, however:

> With the blues I never thought about it as a mode. I just listened to it, and I would find it on the guitar. (Weisethaunet, interview with Robben Ford, 11 July 1990)

Furthermore, in the mind of the blues performer there is no such thing as a twelve- or six-bar harmonic pattern: forms and patterns are internalised in such a way that he or she will never have to count measures (as beginners may have to do). As also noted by Van Der Merwe, 'the term ''twelve-bar blues'' is, as usual, a misnomer' (Van Der Merwe 1992, p. 129). Also, harmony (chords) – what musicologists like to think of as fundamental structure – will be improvised: chords may be substituted (as in jazz), and the twelve-bar, six-bar, fourteen-bar formula, or whatever, may suddenly be changed or broken down on the impulse of the guitar player, the vocalist or the improvised break of a drummer. As expressed by the late Stevie Ray Vaughan:

> The blues doesn't have to be three chords, or two or one. It doesn't have to be a lot of passing changes. It can be any of those combinations, or notes. (Govenar 1988, p. 232)

The question then is whether it is time for musicology to start measuring the pitch discrepancies of blues performance to 'crack the code', to find out what blues is 'all about'. Recent articles by Keil, Prögler, Alén and others (1995) take on the task of measuring PDs (as they have come to be called). The main problem with such approaches may be the danger of confusing music with mathematical representation. For what is there to measure? In the participatory processes of performance, time and tonality are felt rather than measured. Hence, musicology may never be able to measure experiences of 'blue harmony' and 'bluesness' because what is measured is not necessarily what is experienced or felt as significant. Accounts of cultural discourse thus seem more relevant than the reified structuring of applied mathematics or computer formalism. Having heard Buddy Guy perform at the club Antone's in Austin, Texas, and at other venues – with everyone screaming back, interacting, yelling, and 'having the blues' in a positive sense (i.e. I am stressing the point of process/event as the ultimate aspect of music) – the question is: How can the measuring of pitch ever take any account of blues experience? The main question still is: What aspects of the musical material are conceived of as significant to listeners and performers?

'Everyday I have the blues' – 'blue harmony' as a discourse of identity

> There is only one B.B. There's a lot of imitations, lot of people pick up the guitar and follow this man – but you can tell when the main person, the main man, hit it. You know it's B.B.
>
> John Lee Hooker (Obrecht 1995, p. 34)

My conclusion is: there is no such thing as the blue note, the 'item' of musicology. There is no such thing as the 'blue note' as a strange or 'out of tune' third or seventh (apart from in the theories and ideologies of a few musicologists). Rather than thinking of 'blue notes' as pitches being out of tune, 'blue harmony' creates a space for the play of identity in music performance. There is – as expressed by John Lee Hooker – only one B.B. King: you can tell when the main man 'hit it', or in B.B.'s own words 'you need to put yourself into what you are doing' (King 1973,

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p. 15). That is the core aesthetics of the play of notes, bends, slides and phrases, in the texture of blues performance.

Following Keil, 'style' represents struggles (of 'peoples', ethnic segments of the working class, etc.) to keep control of their social identities in music. As such, the notion of the 'blue note' may have been one of many stereotypes created by the 'white' to make and sell 'black culture', i.e. 'the blues' as the commodity of the suffering black (Keil and Feld 1994, pp. 197–217). As Keil and Feld correctly point out, the 'sharing' of income and control of music as industrialised commodities have never been on 'equal terms' as regards class, ethnicity and race. Still, rather than seeing white players doing and recording blues as a 'rip-off', I think the fact that blues style and discourse have remained for such a long period is because blues has come to be an effective means of artistic expression of individuality and identity[17] in music performance, a stylisation that cannot simply be put aside as 'nostalgia', 'authenticity' or 'roots' megalomania (although all those elements may be part of the experience). Music is also a question of good and bad performance – not only of social or moral intentions. As Keil maintains, recreation through ritual has sustained these styles, and I think to the point that blues performance for black as well as (or mostly?) for white people has become an effective means of mediating experience. Part of this experience is what Steven G. Smith has termed 'bluesness'.

> I postulate that bluesness is an effectively important way of apprehending a musical process and the human world; a way of steering through musical composition and through worldly affairs; and further – considering the passion of the blues – a specially pointed way of realising the mind–body relation, one that tellingly discloses how music as such is concerned with this relation. (Smith 1992, p. 41)

While blues lyrics most often emphasise the fact of 'being blue' or 'having the blues', the participation in blues performance may be seen as something more' . . . ''having the blues'' is easily if inadequately equated with being sad or down, *doing* blues must involve something far more' (*loc. cit*.). At this point it may be that the notion of 'blue notes' has come to metaphorise something more than pitch discrepancies, namely the general feeling of 'bluesness', not in particular linked to that of 'blue notes' but to that of 'playing the blues' or 'having the blues'. The latter seems to have been one of the core metaphors of blues experience, as a marker of style, just as much as any formal or structural features. It is also a part of black counterdiscourse in America as described by Keil (1991).

> Got the blues, can't be satisfied
> Got the blues, can't be satisfied
> Keep the blues, I'll catch that train and ride . . .
>
> From 'Mississippi' John Hurt's 'Got the Blues', December 1928 (Okeh 8727). (Titon 1994, pp. 76–9)

Houston A. Baker Jr (1984) and Henry Louis Gates Jr (1988) place blues as the metaphorical centre of African–American experience and, therefore, literature, taking on Afro-American discourse as a 'signifying' practice embedded in vernacular theory, or in Gates' own words:

> Afro-American culture is a complex, reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix . . . The matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in a productive transit. Afro-American blues constitute such a vibrant network. (Baker 1984, p. 3)

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The emic concept of 'blue notes' is not that of pitches out of tune, but that of 'having the blues': the emotional one, and Steven G. Smith (1992) goes on to argue that 'blues' might be one of the central aesthetic categories of humanity, like the 'grotesque' and the 'romantic'. Still, there is a danger in simplifying the whole issue by seeing the 'blues' metaphor basically as an expression of 'pain', or as a coherent mythic creation and 'parody' of black everyday life experiences. As correctly noted by Keil:

> Bob Blaumer got the title wrong in his essay 'Black Culture Myth or Reality?': it should be 'Myth as Reality'. Black people have been making it on myth, faith, hope, soul, spirit, and the intangibles for as long as I have been witnessing. (Keil 1991, p. 238)

I think Smith gets close in describing 'bluesness' as 'a conception upon individuality, the most intense statement of ''Here I am'' implicit in all musical utterance . . .' (*Ibid* p. 44), but I think he makes a big mistake in taking as a point of departure the notion of blues as a kind of 'anti-music': 'the exceptional trick it pulls off is precisely to turn anti-music fully into music' (*Ibid*. p. 43) and in repeating stereotypes like that 'the harmonic simplicity of blues can be regarded as immediate release from musical tensions . . . '(*loc. cit*.), even if his conclusion fortunately comes to be a different one.

I think blues is foremost a means of voiced artistic expression. As such it is the expression of individuality, sociality, sharedness and loneliness, anger and grief, pain and happiness, of being, and even of being as nothingness, in vocal as well as in instrumental performance. The essential point is that blues is music.[18] It is 'groove' and 'texture' rather than reified forms of structure. As a field of dialogue and struggle, its 'meanings' are diverse rather than singular or coherent.[19] Yet, the materiality of 'blue harmony' is fundamental to the experience of blues music and 'blue' elements of related styles, among them jazz and rock. What I have termed 'blue harmony' – rather than 'blue notes' – may, as illustrated, be a more complex phenomenon than is often thought. It may be easy to play the blues, but it is still not *that easy* to play the blues. As a stylised expression of individuality, the performances occurring within the framework of 'blue harmony' are not that easy to transcribe, describe or copy. If it were that easy to play the blues, more musicians would play just as well as B.B. King, Elmore James, Howlin Wolf, Buddy Guy, Jimi Hendrix or Eric Clapton. However, according to emic conceptualisation, that is not the case: there will always be only one B.B., one Muddy, and one John Lee.

Endnotes

1. I would in particular like to thank Charles Keil for his helpful comments in the process of writing this essay, as well as the many blues musicians that I came to know and play with during my stays in Austin, Texas, in 1993 and 1995.
2. Swedish musicologist Lars Lilliestam (1995) makes a good summary of the fundamental problem of the prevailing ideology of 'complexity' within musicology. Moreover, as Walser (1992) argues, the point is not that of claiming blues, pop or rock to be 'high art' – as opposed to 'low' – but that even 'classical music' is a relatively recent cultural construct (see also Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983).
3. Tirro cites Nettl (1973, p. 185) as reference for this quote. It is, in fact, slightly rewritten from Nettl (1973, p. 231).
4. Apart from the major seventh – which seldom occurs on the I chord apart from in more 'jazzier' styles of the blues, due to its leading tone function. Thus the major seventh is seldom 'bent'. The 'bent' note will be the minor seventh.
5. I use this term as commonly understood as a translation from the German *Funktionslehre*. However, it also embraces traditional Western harmonic analysis, where major and minor tonalities can be viewed as very distinct.
6. I am using the notion 'diatonic' to stress the

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fact that emic/'native' performance theory may not necessarily regard the major scale as 'diatonic' in the sense that it is heard as the scale being 'closest' to the major chord.

7. The practice here described commonly also involves playing a rather straight minor over the major chord: a phenomenon that hardly can be explained by the notion of the 'blue note' thought of as a 'flat' third.
8. I see harmony as an essential part of what Keil terms 'texture'. As such, 'blue harmony' comprises the harmonic part of 'texture' (or sound in emic terms) viewed both vertically and horizontally (i.e. a particular relationship between chords, melodic lines, riffs, etc., occurring at the different layers of performance described in the Table). Possibly this might also be called 'blue mode' or 'blue harmonic texture'; however, the essential point here is that 'blue harmony' diverges from common concepts of modality as well as from harmonic progressions.
9. However, picturing blues performance purely as a 'pentatonic' practice I think is unfortunate as it may simplify what is going on a little too much.
10. A good example of transcriptions illustrating these points are Dave Whitehill's transcriptions of Hendrix's material, in particular his transcriptions of several recorded versions of the blues 'Red House' (Whitehill 1990), which Hendrix himself expressed as of the 'down home' type, at least as regards inspiration. Analysis of the personal bending styles and typical tonal/harmonic approaches of players like Albert King, Johnny Winter, T-Bone Walker and Stevie Ray Vaughan, is also demonstrated by Chipkin (1993). Furthermore, there are quite good transcriptions of Robert Johnson's music by Ainslie and Whitehill (1992) indicating how a 'blue harmony' concept also seems inherent in solo performances.
11. For further discussions on the significance of 'style', see Keil and Feld 1994.
12. In jazz guitar playing there was a stylistic change particularly around 1969–70 – mainly influenced from blues and rock – where players like George Benson, John McLaughlin, John Abercrombie, Bill Connors, Terje Rypdal and others developed playing styles that were impregnated with blues phrasing and 'blue harmony' textures to an extent which was not heard in the styles of jazz players like Charlie Christian, Barney Kessel, Tal Farlow, Joe Pass, etc.
13. I met with Scofield several times between 1984 and 1990. In all of the interviews he particularly spoke of being influenced by the blues in his improvisations and 'harmonic thinking' (more detailed discussion in Weisethaunet 1990).
14. Finding also notes going from higher to lower pitches, i.e. the string may be bent before it is played, and then lowered after it is picked, cf. the vast number of bends to be heard in his soloing on 'Every Tear from Every Eye' (from *Electric Guitarist*, CBS, 1979).
15. This is also the conclusion of Titon as regards the harmony of 'down home blues' performance: 'The simplification and ambiguities are deliberate and controlled, not accidental and unsuccessful attempts to achieve the standard progression.' (Titon 1994, p. 150)
16. That is also why Allan Moore's analysis categorising a vast number of rock/pop songs into different 'classes' falls short of actually describing what harmonically may be going on with this music (Moore 1992). The same problem occurs in Berendt's definition of jazz, which takes as a starting point a reified separation of harmony from melody, sound, etc.: 'Jazz, on the other hand, though among the most revolutionary developments in the arts in our century, is relatively traditional in respect to harmony and melody. Its newness is based on rhythm and sound. Almost the only novel and singular thing in jazz in the harmonic domain are the blue notes.' (Berendt 1982, p. 143)
17. The concept of 'individuality' and 'identity' advocated here must be seen as constituted by the social, i.e. in accordance with (and not in contradiction to) Keil's concept of 'style' as a process of struggle. In figuring music as a 'process', I follow Bakhtin's theory of 'dialogue', seeing every utterance as fundamentally social: 'Where Saussure sees passive assimilation, Bakhtin sees a process of struggle and contradiction. And whereas Saussure dichotomizes the individual and the social, Bakhtin assumes that the individual is constituted by the social, that consciousness is a matter of dialogue and juxtaposition with a social Other.' (Stewart 1986, p. 43)
18. As Lawrence Levine (1977, p. 221) writes: 'The blues was the most highly personalised, indeed the first almost completely personalised music that Afro-Americans developed.'
19. I think it is particularly problematic to view the contemporary field of blues experiences as a coherent system or 'culture', even though it is definitively a musical 'style'.

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