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BY DAVID PEARL & TODD LOWRY

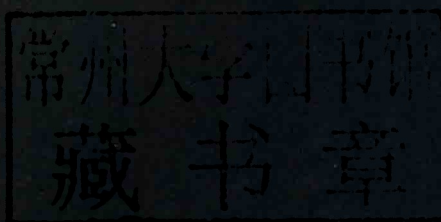
 HAL • LEONARD®

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CORPORATION
7777 W. BLUEMOUND RD., P.O. BOX 13819 MILWAUKEE, WI 53213

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In Australia Contact:
Hal Leonard Australia Pty. Ltd.
4 Lentara Court
Cheltenham, Victoria, 3192 Australia
Email: ausadmin@halleonard.com.au

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In Australia Contact:
Hal Leonard Australia Pty. Ltd.
4 Lentara Court
Cheltenham, Victoria, 3192 Australia
Email: ausadmin@halleonard.com.au

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LESSON #1:

GRACE-NOTE SLIDES OR BENDS

Sliding or bending notes is a concept central to playing the blues. In vocal styling as well as string and wind instruments playing, sliding from one note to another is a standard expressive technique of any blues master. Referred to as both **sliding** and **bending**, this technique involves approaching a note from a pitch either below or above the main note, and sliding or bending up or down to the main note. Piano players are limited in their ability to replicate this because we can't really slide between notes the way a singer or guitarist can, and we can't bend a note flat or sharp the way a horn player can. But we can imitate this technique by playing one or more grace notes leading up or down to a note, and can then create a wide range of sliding and bending options that have come to define blues piano.

Riffs

Let's start with a simple slide up to a note. The example below shows an easy melodic riff, first with no slide and then with a slide.

RIFF 1



TRACK 1
0:00

♩ = 72 (♩ = ♪³)

There is no one correct way to play these grace notes: Stylistic interpretation allows for a variety of ways to play. You can play the grace note a bit earlier than the main note, as close to the main note as possible, or even at the same time as the main note. You can release the grace note before playing the main note or release it after playing the main note. Play around with these different methods, and use your ear to choose which style you like. The goal is to develop a flexibility that allows for spontaneous expression.

Here is another melodic riff, then a repetition of the riff with the slide-down technique added. Again, play around with how you articulate these grace notes and their main notes. More expressive possibilities will come out of accenting one or the other of these notes, or tweaking the dynamics of the notes in other ways.

RIFF 2



TRACK 1
0:24

♩ = 72 (♩ = ♪³)

Now let's see what other possibilities there are when we add more grace notes. With each added grace note, we lengthen the slide, or make a bigger bend.

Riff 3 puts extra upward slides into the riff from Riff 1.

RIFF 3



$\text{♩} = 72$ ($\text{♩} = \overset{\text{3}}{\text{♩}}$)

And Riff 4 shows downward slides filled in with chromatic grace notes.

RIFF 4



$\text{♩} = 72$ ($\text{♩} = \overset{\text{3}}{\text{♩}}$)

Of course, slides and bends shouldn't be used to the point of excess, but adding these slides up and down will give a bluesy dimension to your playing in many ways.

LESSON #2:

GOOD "GOOD" FINGERING

When you're playing blues riffs in the right hand and boogie patterns in the left, you need your fingers to work for you, helping you get the right articulation, the right accent, or the best movement to a new hand position. Good fingering is the key to getting around the keyboard and playing expressively. But good fingering is more than what you may have learned when you were practicing your scales with Mrs. Knucklebuster down the street. It's applying different techniques to what you want to play, how you want to play it, and the individual characteristics of your hand.

Alternate Fingering

This lesson works with a traditional approach to fingering: **alternate fingering**. Alternate fingering means using adjacent fingers for adjacent notes, or alternating between two adjacent fingers for a pattern of notes, in scales or other pattern of notes, while avoiding using the thumb on black keys.

Example 1 shows several alternate fingering combinations for the right hand. Notice how fingers 1, 2, and 3 alternate in different combinations, from 2-3-1 to 3-2-1 to 2-3-1-3-2. Because they are the most flexible and agile of the fingers, they are the best to use in navigating these ascending, descending, and crossover moves.

EXAMPLE 1



TRACK 2
0:00

$\text{♩} = 86$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}^{\text{3}}$)

Example 2 shows a bluesy bass figure for the left hand, using good alternate fingering, also in both ascending and descending movement. Notice which fingers fall on the beats (1, 2, 3, and 4), as opposed to the upbeats (the "ands"), so you can give these beats more weight while you keep the upbeats lighter. This requires careful planning, keeping an eye out for where the fingers will land on the keyboard.

EXAMPLE 2



TRACK 2
0:10

$\text{♩} = 86$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}^{\text{3}}$)

Smooth Riffs

Planning your fingering can help you play fast and **smooth blues** riffs up and down the keyboard. In the next example, check out how alternate fingering can facilitate the alternating white and black keys in this bluesy run up and down the keyboard, using the longer fingers (2 and 3) on the black keys and the thumb on the white keys. You should sense a comfortable position for your hand, compact and rounded with fingers slightly curved, easy as it moves up to the right and then down to the left.

EXAMPLE 3



$\text{♩} = 86$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}^{\text{3}}$)

1 3 1 3 1 4 5 1 3 1 3

Left-hand boogie patterns are notoriously tricky. The next boogie-style passage for the left hand shows similar alternate finger planning can help you smooth out a tricky passage.

EXAMPLE 4



$\text{♩} = 86$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}^{\text{3}}$)

5 1 4 3 2 1 2 3 2 1 2 3 4 3 1

You can use alternate fingering for passages that call for smooth articulation, in either *legato* phrasing or groups of notes you want to sound even in terms of dynamics. Alternate fingering also is the way to go when planning fast passage work up and down the keyboard.

LESSON #3:

GOOD "BAD" FINGERING

Playing the blues really demands a maximum amount of expression. Why would you be playing the blues if you didn't feel blue? One of the ways of expressing yourself through a musical instrument is through **articulation** – the precise way you play a note as defined by its individual dynamic, attack, and release. Put a string of notes together in a phrase and you can easily see the possibilities in terms of articulation in each and every phrase you play.

Non-Alternating Fingering

This unconventional-sounding label fits an unconventional technique: playing two or more notes that are next to each other on the keyboard with the same finger, rather than with alternate fingers. One of the reasons you would choose this approach is because of the sound you get from this deliberate articulation. You can't play two neighboring notes with the same finger and get a true *legato* (smoothly connected) articulation, but you can get a range of detached articulation, from slightly separated to short, *staccato* phrasing.

This first example is a riff in F for the right hand, showing non-alternate fingering applied in a couple of different ways. Chromatic 3rds gain a *staccato* touch from the successive 4-2 fingering, and the three-note chromatic line at the end of the measure gains a heavier, detached articulation from using your thumb on all three notes.

RIFF 1



TRACK 3
0:00

$\text{♩} = 90$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩}$)

In the next riff, notice how the non-alternate fingering causes the notes on beat 2 to sound a bit more accented, helping the smoother phrasing to the next note and adding considerable variety to the character of the riff. Notice also how the successive use of the thumb at the end of the riff can still allow for contrasting articulation and dynamics..

RIFF 2



TRACK 3
0:10

$\text{♩} = 90$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩}$)

The next riff shows a left-hand boogie pattern in G that benefits from the thumb-to-thumb fingering shown, and contrasts with the smoother articulation of the three preceding notes.

RIFF 3



TRACK 3
0:19

$\text{♩} = 76$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩}$)

This walk-up pattern in the left hand, also in G, shows how good use of non-alternate (5 to 5) fingering affects the articulation and keeps your hand in position to manage the wide interval skips.

RIFF 4

TRACK 3

0:32

$\text{♩} = 76$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩}$)

Breaking the Rules: Thumbs on Black Keys

A traditional approach to piano technique will have you avoid using your thumb on the black keys when possible. And when navigating a quick or tricky passage that you want to sound smooth, it's best to avoid the extra movement and twisty wrist that can result from having your shortest finger on a black key and your longer fingers going for an adjacent white key in a flow of notes. But when you're playing the blues, you'll want to break the rule to give the rhythm and articulation the right emphasis.

See how having your thumb on the E_b allows you to make these accents stronger, especially because moving off the E_b to the E forces you to return back to the E_b with a dropping motion as the riff repeats and the accents go against the beat.

RIFF 5

TRACK 3

0:43

$\text{♩} = 104$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩}$)

And the same with the following left-hand pattern: Using your thumb on the black key allows you to match all the accented notes, beats 2, 3, and 4, in the riff.

RIFF 6

TRACK 3

0:52

$\text{♩} = 90$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩}$)

The next riff shows a similar pattern using a thumb slide from a black key up to a white key, but here the context gives extra emphasis on the notes played by the thumb, strengthening the beat.

RIFF 4



$\text{♩} = 82$ ($\text{♩} = \overset{\text{3}}{\text{♩}}$)

5 2 1 1 1 1 5 2 1 1 1 1

16th-Note and Grace-Note Slides

The next riff uses a quick sliding technique, as the black-key grace note is played as close as possible to the main note. Don't be afraid to drop your thumb from just above the D \sharp onto the black key, starting the sliding motion as you keep dropping into the E \flat from the D \sharp .

RIFF 5



$\text{♩} = 102$ ($\text{♩} = \overset{\text{3}}{\text{♩}}$)

This straight-eighth note riff for the left hand, in F, includes articulation to drive the rhythm in an especially percussive style. This time, the left hand does the quick drop necessary to slide from the E \flat s down to the Ds, the A \flat s down to the Gs.

RIFF 6



$\text{♩} = 116$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}$)

LESSON #5:

SLIDING THE PINKY

In this lesson, you'll expand your sliding technique, adding the **pinky slide** to the thumb slide you learned in the previous lesson.

Right-Hand Slides

Start out with a riff in G that makes use of the slide up to B from a B \flat a half-step below. Remember to keep the tip of your pinky on the edge of the black key rather than the middle. This way you're in a better position to slide off and into the middle of the B key.

RIFF 1



$\text{♩} = 92$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}^{\text{3}}$)

The next one, a killer riff, relies on careful articulation for a downward slide. Group the slurred notes together and separate the groups so the distinct articulations are audible.

RIFF 2



$\text{♩} = 76$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}^{\text{3}}$)

Left-Hand Slides

Now for some left-hand pinky slides. First try a slide up in this boogie-style pattern in F. The fingering on this is a bit tricky, but practice will prove worth the effort so the pattern becomes comfortable enough to expand into a full 12-bar blues pattern.

RIFF 3



$\text{♩} = 96$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}^{\text{3}}$)

A real workout for the pinky, the next riff imitates a blues guitar pattern that alternates a single-note bass line with upper chord notes in between.

RIFF 4

TRACK 5
0:30

$\text{♩} = 80$ (♩ = $\overset{\frown}{\text{3}}$)

Quick Slides

Grace-note slides are more difficult, and require nuanced movement in the pinky. This right-hand riff in C features a slide down from E \flat to D.

RIFF 5

TRACK 5
0:42

$\text{♩} = 78$ (♩ = $\overset{\frown}{\text{3}}$)

Successive combinations of quick slides, both up and down, can be found in progressions like this I-VI-II-V in the key of C. They could be used in a blues turnaround.

RIFF 6

TRACK 5
0:53

$\text{♩} = 86$ (♩ = $\overset{\frown}{\text{3}}$)