

Foundations Unit: G Jam Blues

Summary

- **Introduction** - Originally “C-Jam Blues” by Duke Ellington and Barney Bigard recorded in 1942 is also known as “Duke’s Place.” This version is #transposed to accommodate a combined beginning string, woodwind, brass ensemble. The tune will serve as vehicle to explore jazz’s signature features including blues, improvisation, and swing.
- **Audience:** Grades 4-8 for beginning music ensembles. Activities are designed to accommodate beginning players but can be flexible to challenge intermediate players exploring musical skills such as improvisational playing, groove, and song form.
- **Unit Objectives** - Students will be able to:
 - Understand the cultural context and significance of the blues song form and learn a well-known jazz blues standard.
 - Learn how to build and play a basic 12 -bar blues harmony
 - Learn simple strategies for improvisational playing over the blues
 - Understand how to feel and play a groove and swing

Terms to know

#riff
#root notes
#downbeat
#rest
#swing
#groove
#12-bar blues
#backbeat
#articulation
#call and response
#comping
#transpose
#solo
#fills

Credits and Context

- **Composers, year first recorded:** *Duke Ellington, Barney Bigard, 1942*
- **Talking points:**

What’s in a title: “CJamBlues”?

“C” refers to the musical key signature that a song centers around. Key signatures create a tonal agreement among musicians establishing a palette of notes that a group of musicians should work within any given tune. Keys serve as guidelines for both harmonic chord changes and melodies though jazz musicians may also deviate from these from time to time to explore different expressions and sounds.

“Jams” (or jam sessions) Jazz jams are gathering among musicians. In the early years of jazz jams were typically held in intimate venues like clubs, apartments, or studios, where musicians take turns leading and supporting one another, exploring different tempos, harmonies. The unpredictable nature of jazz jams fosters creativity, encouraging musicians to create on-the-spot musical dialogues. The interplay between instruments, the improvisational solos, and the tight communication among the performers make jazz jam sessions a celebration of the art form’s spontaneity and collaborative spirit. Jams continue today as part of the jazz tradition to share and learn tunes amongst musicians. Typical jazz jams involve a rhythm section of bass, drums, piano or chordal instrument (guitar) plus an assortment of melodic instruments. Players call out

tunes and the format usually starts and ends with a tune's primary melody. Between those melodies, improvised solos are passed around all instruments and most communication is done non-verbally.

"The Blues" – The blues can refer to any number of musical elements, song forms and genres. Most commonly in a jazz setting the blues is a 12-bar song form that has predictable pattern of harmonies based on an agreed upon key. Jazz musicians can take this song form and jam around any number of composed melodies then use the form to improvise solos. The origin of the blues come from African American musical traditions of work songs and spirituals. These expressive songs often speak of hardship, heartache, and struggle. Blues melodies created in the jazz tradition have evolved using the blues as upbeat dance melodies transforming soulful and sorrowful into joy and celebration.

- **Lyrics**

*Baby, take me down to Duke's Place
Wildest box in town is Duke's Place
Love that piano sound in Duke's Place*

- **Links to recordings and related media**



"G Jam Blues Play Along" video - JazzED Messengers

[Duke Ellington](#) (Blues in Orbit)

[Duke Ellington with Ella Fitzgerald](#) (Blueella: Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Blues

Louis Armstrong (Satchmo At Symphony Hall)

[JazzED Spotify Playlist](#)

[Ben Webster Sextet](#) (Soho Nights) – *this version is in the key of Ab*

Clark Terry (C Jam Blues)

[Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra](#) (Live in Swing City-Swingin' With Duke)

- **Think, Pair and Share prompts**

- Talk about a time you heard live music at a party or small gathering. How did music change the mood of the room?
- Compare and contrast: Listen to this slow blues ([Stormy Monday by T Bone Walker](#)) and C Jam Blues. These songs are based on the same blues song form. What feelings do the artists express in each blues song?
- Talk about a time when hearing a song changed your attitude?
- Is there a time when singing or playing your instrument brought out a certain feeling in you?

- **Form and Feel**

- A basic 12-bar blues song form

1	1	1	1
4	4	1	1
5	4	1	1

- Teach a #swing groove by first internalizing rhythm pattern with body percussion (See Activity: Build-a-Groove below). Each layer of pattern represents a part of the drum kit
 - Stomp** as a Kick drum would to help establish a downbeat (Beat 1= “Dog”)
 - Clap or snap** on the #backbeat (beats 2 and 4) on “Walk” where a snare drum would “crack”
 - Add swing pattern by **chanting** the pattern notated below “Dog. Walk the dog” as played on a hi-hat or ride cymbal.

Dog. Walk the Dog. Walk the Dog. Walk the Dog. Walk the

Extended Activities

Activity: Blues Roots

Objectives: *Students will develop an understanding of a basic structure of the 12-bar blues form. They will be able to hear and play the underlying chord changes that accompany G Jam Blues and other blues melodies. The blues roots can also be used as a tool to introduce improvisational playing or soloing.*

Arts standards: Creating, Performing,

Musical focus: Harmony, Song Form,

Materials and setup: [G Blues backing track](#)

Steps:

1. Draw out a 3x4 grid as shown above to help students visualize a 12-bar form showing the 3 lines of 4 measures/bars
2. Add chord numbers to indicate placement of chord changes or appropriate chord symbols to show chord changes.

4. Determine a rhythmic pattern for each measure (or 2 measure patterns).

Skill Level	
Beginning	<p>Start with playing roots as whole notes to practice sustaining longer, even tones.</p> <p>Try short quarter notes to develop articulation and help keeping time.</p> <p>Solicit rhythmic ideas from ensemble for short, playable patterns that can be overlaid on top of the blues form. Use prompts such as playing your name, favorite foods, color, etc. to generate rhythmic patterns.</p>
Middle	<p>Add neighbor tones (half or whole steps above or below each chord root) to start developing improvisational strategies.</p> <p>Play root and 5th scale degrees</p> <p>Predetermine a simple melodic pattern to play over each chord root.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 -2 - 3 (G A B) - 1-2-1-1 (G A G G)
Upper	<p>Utilize arpeggios (chord tones root 3rds & 5ths) to hear how chord tones harmonize against each root note played. Combine with more complicated rhythmic patterns to introduce the idea of motivic playing.</p>

Activity: Build a Groove- Swing and beyond

Objectives: *Students will be able to understand how #grooves function as a rhythmic pattern within a song. They will learn how groove patterns derive from cultural dances and traditions (rumba, cha-cha, reggae, etc.). Students will be able to construct a jazz swing groove as well as create their own groove pattern.*

Arts standards: Creating, connecting, responding

Musical focus: rhythm, groove

Materials and setup: Have student begin as a non-instrument (voice and body) exercise. Can also start on simple classroom instruments that demonstrate contrasting sonic range. As rhythmic concept is better understood, instruments can be included.

Steps:

1. Students should understand idea of 4/4 time or a 4-beat measure
2. Use body and voice to create a rhythmic groove. Each pattern simulates a drum/cymbal of a drum kit.
3. #Downbeat – **Stomp** on 1 (and 3)
4. #Backbeat – **Clap** on 2 and 4
5. #Swing groove- **Chant** “Dog. Walk the dog...” or **beatbox** or **vocalize** the hi-hat sound “Tsss. Tst tst-Tsss”.

Students can create their own 1-2 measure rhythmic pattern to play along with the root notes of a blues form. Use another lyrical phrase to create a groove pattern (i.e. "Dog. Walk the dog"). Offer the following prompts to generate groove ideas from the class:

Fun Prompt: students suggest ice cream flavors and rhythmically loop the flavor names to create a groove pattern.

Ex. "Mint chocolate chip. Mint chocolate chip. Mint chocolate chip. Mint chocolate chip..."

Continue to keep the downbeat stomp and backbeat clap going underneath groove rhythm and identify which syllables land on the downbeat. These patterns can be used with other activities in this unit including (Red Light Blues, Blues Roots)

Heritage prompt: Students can research rhythmic patterns derived from their personal heritage or heritage of interest. Clave patterns which derived from the African diaspora and through the era of slavery, have found their way to western hemisphere most notably in Brazilian, Cuban and Latin music genres. These clave patterns are typically connected to a dance tradition or can serve to place a rhythm with a place or people. Claves can be found in many grooves within the jazz tradition.

Questions to engage students about grooves:

- What groove pattern might your community/culture be known for?
- Identify a song that is connected to your culture. Can you make out a clear groove?
- What other patterns (musical, visual or other) might define your culture?

Activity: Tell me, What's Your Favorite...?

Objectives: Students will be able to play fills using the G Jam Blues melody and creative prompts. Fills can serve as a simple introduction toward building improvised solos using a call and response/question answer form.

Arts standards: Creating, responding, performing

Musical focus: melody, rhythm, improvising

Materials and setup: [G Blues backing track](#)

Steps:

1. Start without instruments to help students understand the parameters and placement of responses. Sing G-Jam Blues melody using the phrase: "Tell me, what's your favorite...?" Solicit ideas from students about a question prompt. Use a relevant prompt that fits the melody of the tune.
2. Point out the space of rests between the phrases and
3. Demonstrate how to respond vocally within the space to the prompt using created response.

Tell me - - what's your fav-'rite ice cream? Coo-kies and cream

- After a round with vocal call and responses, students can play the G Jam Blues melody and insert their instrumental response as a fill between phrases.

Skill Level	
Beginning	Simply respond rhythmically over a single note
Middle	Start adding tones above or below the original note within the key. Explore the idea of musically answering a question with a downward inflection (i.e. Ending with descending notes)
Upper	Explore this fill as an using tone, texture, dynamics to provide more musical detail to the response.

Activity: Red Light Blues

Objectives: Students will become familiar with the timing and harmonic changes of the 12-bar blues form

Arts standards: responding, connecting

Musical focus: rhythm, form

Materials and setup: [G Blues backing track](#); C Jam Blues recordings (see media links above)

Steps:

- Set up as a challenge for students to keep track of their place in the song.
- Play media, or have student play the Blues Roots activity. Multiple choruses/rounds of the blues form are played as a “jam”. At any random point in the song, stop the media or cut-off instruments clearly.
- Ask students where in the blues form did the song stopped.
- Start by conducting downbeats clearly, increase difficulty by only marking downbeat of each 4-bar line; then even more challenging marking only the top of the form.
- Can be played a la musical chairs where any wrong answers are removed from the challenge until the following round.