



Blue Notes Or Not

BY JOHN DUARTE

WHETHER a note is considered to be “blue” depends on how it’s used—a distinction that’s often overlooked. Let’s consider a few cases.

Ex. 1’s $E\flat$ clashes with the C chord’s $E\sharp$ and is repeated to drive the point home. Ex. 2 includes a $B\flat$, which enhances the bluesy effect. Play Ex. 2 with the $E\flat$ changed to $E\sharp$, and notice that the $B\flat$ retains the blues flavor; however, if you keep the $E\flat$ and use $B\sharp$, the phrase sounds far from right.

Ex. 3’s $G\flat$ is clearly a $\flat 5$, a blue note that rubs against the C chord’s G. The $\flat 5$ is a trademark of bebop, whose version of the

12-bar blues is quite different from purer forms. Bebop was a rebellious music and the weakening of the perfect fifth, that pillar of the harmonic establishment, issued a challenge. In bebop you can think of the $\flat 5$ as displacing the $\sharp 5$, not confronting it in hand-to-hand battle like a conventional blue note.

When a simple non-harmonic note chromatically pushes up to a chord tone, it takes on an ornamental role, not that of a collision-causing blue note. Analyze the phrases in Ex. 4, where I’ve written $D\sharp$, $F\sharp$, $G\sharp$, and $A\sharp$, not their enharmonic equivalents that use flats.

Ex. 5 expands Ex. 2 into a riff for a simple I-IV-I-I7 sequence—the first four measures of a 12-bar blues. Although $B\flat$ is used in measures 1 and 3, the ear doesn’t expect the supporting chord to be C7. But when measure 4 arrives, the $B\flat$ slots into place and for the moment isn’t a blue note. $E\flat$ is a blue note in relationship to the C chord, but suggests $F7$ in measure 2.



Author/educator John Duarte is one of the world’s foremost composers for classical guitar, and his works have been performed by Andres Segovia, John Williams, Alexandre Lagoya, and many others.

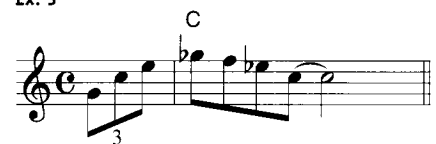
Ex. 1



Ex. 2



Ex. 3



Ex. 4



Ex. 5

