



BASS

David Santos

Really Playing the Blues

In my musical life, I have found styles or genres of music to which I've devoted myself, adopting the mindset required of me to understand them. During such periods, I tend to become so fully immersed in these areas that I listen, play, practice, read and seek out with complete devotional zeal everything I can get my hands on.

One of these styles is the blues. There was a period of my life when the blues occupied the central focal point of my musical existence. I was playing along with blues records, going to blues clubs, reading extensively about the blues, looking for real blues guys to talk to and listen to, playing mostly blues gigs, and taking the stand in every musical discussion that playing the blues is the only way to learn how to "really play." I read about and listened to Robert Johnson, Son House, Mississippi John Hurt, Howlin' Wolf, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Freddie King, Albert King, B.B. King, Willie Dixon, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Buddy Guy, T-Bone Walker, Johnny "Guitar" Watson, Jimmy Reed, Little Milton, Junior Wells, Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, Leadbelly, Albert Collins, Otis Rush, Ray Charles, and too many others to mention here.

I looked for the roots of blues in African music. I analyzed melodies that I found on Library of Congress recordings of field hollers, work songs, spirituals, gospel, blues shouters, blues howlers, call and response, etc. I went on a mission to learn the language, the vocabulary and the history of the blues, as well as the differences between Chicago blues and Texas blues, New Orleans blues and Mississippi Delta blues, country blues and urban blues. I began to understand things about the black experience in America through my research and involvement with the blues.

I have since developed other interests, but that love for the blues is still alive in my heart. This month, I want to pass on some information contained in the "bass language" of American blues. I don't believe, at this point of my life, that you must adhere solely to the clichés and vocabulary of the fathers and mothers of the blues when playing your individual version of the blues. However, it is absolutely imperative that you go back and study the old blues recordings, with the intention of extracting as much truth as possible, in order to understand what the blues is—or at the very least, what you *think* it is. Only after spending many hours listening to and playing along with historical blues recordings should

Fig. 1 G7



Fig. 2 G7



Fig. 3 G7



Fig. 4 G7



Fig. 5 G7



you venture, in my humble opinion, into creating a more unique version of the style.

There are certain bass lines that must be played and experienced in their complete exactness, at least for a time. I recommend that you collect these bass lines as a repertoire, and play them in various keys, at different tempos, in as many environments as possible. Go to blues clubs and sit in with experienced blues musicians. When you play these bass lines, play them with the feeling that you get from listening to blues recordings of the great masters, some of whom are mentioned above. Strive to play with strong time, and groove with the drummer. You will need and want to develop a strong understanding of the triplet in your quest for good blues time. Practice triplets with a metronome, or in time with your foot, or with a recording, so that you feel the subdivisions.

Play these exercises legato, then staccato, and then combine elements from both sides of the spectrum of note duration. These examples are all shuffles, an important part of the blues repertoire. Memorize them in every key at various tempos.

David Santos has played the blues and every other style you can think of with Billy Joel, Tommy James and a slew of others. He is based in Nashville but spends most days on the road.