

The Essential

Mike Bloomfield

Pickup Phrases

by Don Mock



Welcome to this lesson series on the legendary Michael Bloomfield. No guitarist cast a larger shadow of influence on my playing career than Bloomfield.

Mike was a gifted and creative Blues player who had a special magic when he played. He was the first player in the '60's to incorporate melodies and sounds that were above and beyond the rock and Blues styles of the day. I can remember literally wearing out my "Butterfield" and "Super Session" albums trying to capture every note and nuance in his solos.

Mike Bloomfield was clearly influenced by the great Bluesmen but he also listened to and was inspired by other forms of music including jazz. And it was those great little jazz touches, Mike brought to his improvised solos, that intrigued me and many others to study deeper into the world of jazz as well as Blues. And although I became known more as a Jazz and Fusion player later in my career, my musical soul still resides in the Blues and Mike Bloomfield. So, thanks for checking out this lesson and hope you gain a bit more insight into this great American guitarist whose life and career were far too short.

This first installment of the Essential Mike Bloomfield demonstrates "pickup" or "setup" phrases Mike often used to begin or lead into his brilliant solos. The examples are rooted in traditional Blues and R&B and similar versions can be heard by many Blues guitar players. But Bloomfield had a special way of making even the simplest of them sound unique. He used these signature melodies as "springboards" to launch into Blues, Rock and Jazz-inspired solos that could at times be unpredictable and always incredibly musical.

The first is the iconic intro to "Albert's Shuffle" from the Super Session album. Mike played this classic Blues riff in various versions as a "set up" to any number of phrases. He'd not only play it on the "I chord" in Blues situations, but also on the IV and V, as he did on the D7 (V) kicking off "Albert's Shuffle."

Example 1 is in C at the 8th fret and begins with a whole-step bend (F to G on the 3rd string matching then the G note on the 2nd string followed by the high C on the 1st. I've added a classic Bloomfield phrase following the "pickup" which demonstrates Mike's characteristic use of the major 6th. He often talked about his love for the "sweeter" side of Blues playing. He grabbed or bent into major 3rds and 6ths when he wanted to create a nice "major-ish" contrast to his "down and dirty" minor pentatonic Blues phrases.

Example 1

Example 2 is another classic pickup that Mike played on the tune “Mary Ann” from the “Live Adventures of Mike Bloomfield and Al Kooper” album. Three simple notes never sounded so good as Mike runs up a major pentatonic (5th, 6th and root) into a nice little phrase with 3rds. The slides are essential to add some grease to the line. It can also be played using hammer-ons in place of the slides. Bar both the 2nd and 3rds strings at the 8th fret and hammer the Eb to E on the 3rd while hitting both strings.

(....and Les Paul players throw your pickup selector to the middle setting for the sweet tone on this one!)

Example 2

Whenever Mike Bloomfield played Example 3 it was as if he was signing his name in a musical fashion. I can't think of a more identifying Bloomfield phrase. Notated in C, it begins with a short chromatic line from G to A on the 2nd string then up to the C and D on the 1st. Following a bend of the D note is a quick hammer-pull-off phrase launching into C and the 1st bar. Because Mike played this phrase in so many variations rhythmically, and even out of time, I noted it two different ways. The first is sort of an easier generic version followed by the way he often played it which uses 16th note-triplet figures.

Example 3a

Example 3b

Example 4 is a variation of Example 1 which Mike also used quite often. Here he adds the b7th (Bb) to create a five-note pickup phrase. Following the pickup, I've added some classic Bloomfield lines for the first four bars of a Blues in C. Unfortunately, it's nearly impossible to notate all the subtle things Bloomfield would do with phrases like these. He'd add various speeds and widths of vibrato, half and whole step bends and wonderful slight "tweaks" to each note giving them some musical attitude and a vocal quality.

Example 4

Our final example is part of one of my favorite Bloomfield solos. It's the first 12-bars of Mike's solo from "Gypsy Goodtime" a great Blues tune on Nick Gravenites 1969 "My Labors" album. Mike's fills and entire solo are great but the first solo chorus, beginning about two minutes into the track, has a couple of classic Bloomfield phrases including two great pickups. The music notation in the transcription is left fairly straight so it's easier to learn. Again, it's just not practical to attempt to notate every little "nuance and tweak" in transcriptions like this one. So hearing the actual recording is a must.

It begins with a pickup line similar to Example 2 ("Mary Ann") that leads into a similar phrase in the first bar with 3rds. In the fourth bar Mike plays another of his classic set-up melodies. No bends, just the minor 3rd to major 3rd, 5th then up to the root where he plays the Bb on the 1st string then again on the 2nd string, 11th fret, to change positions.

Then Mike plays a killer bend phrase on the IV7 (Eb7) reminiscent of Albert King. Typical technique of Bloomfield was the way he played phrases like this one a bit out of time to create a musical punctuation.

In bar six Mike plays another of his classic bend/pull-off lines holding the note into bar seven. Listen to the recording to hear how he slightly bends some of the Db notes up....not quite a 1/2 step. I love bars 9 and 10 and the bend/pull-off line again with different phrasing this time. In bars 11 and 12 you can feel Mike's energy setting up for the the next chorus.

Example 5

"Gypsy Good Time"
Mike Bloomfield's solo first 12 bars

The musical notation for Example 5 consists of two systems of guitar tablature and standard notation. The first system covers bars 1-4, and the second system covers bars 5-12. The key signature is one flat (Bb). The first system starts with a pickup line in bar 1. Chords Bb7 and Eb7 are indicated above the staff. Fingering numbers (1-4) are shown on the strings. A 'whole' note bend is marked in bar 6, and a '1/2' step bend is marked in bar 9. A 'P' (pull-off) is marked in bar 10. The tablature shows fret numbers on the strings: T (Treble), A (A2), and B (Bass).

Haven't heard much Mike Bloomfield before? Here's a few of my highest recommended recordings. Electric Flag "A Long Time Comin," "Super Session," "Live Adventures of Mike Bloomfield and Al Kooper," w/Nick Gravenites "My Labors." These are just a start but represent Bloomfield's playing at it's pinnacle. There's a complete list of all his recordings on the MikeBloomfield.com site.

Thanks again for checking out this lesson and hope you learned some Bloomfield ideas you can use in your playing. Lessons like this can only take you so far. Blues is a language that has to be heard in context to fully understand. I can't emphasize enough the importance of listening to and emulating great players like Mike Bloomfield. And get out and play as much as possible.

-Don Mock



Don Mock is one of America's most respected guitar educators and players. As one of the founding instructors of G.I.T. and Musicians Institute in Hollywood, Don has authored several books, CD's and videos on modern guitar including his acclaimed "The Blues from Rock to Jazz." He also produced and directed nearly 100 instructional videos of some of the world's top players including Robben Ford, Scott Henderson, Joe Pass, Pat Martino, Paul Gilbert, Joe Diorio, Allan Holdsworth and many others.

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