

# *The Essential*

## **Mike Bloomfield**

### *Beyond Blues Phrases*

by **Don Mock**



Beyond Blues Phrases is the topic for this, the third installment of The Essential Mike Bloomfield. No other Blues/Rock guitar player of the 1960's incorporated more interesting melodies in their soloing than Bloomfield. To the casual listener, Mike might sound like just another fine Blues player. But on closer examination, especially on recordings from around 1967 to 1970, Mike often interweaved, what many might consider Jazz or Swing riffs, into his great Blues vocabulary. The question of how and where Mike came up with these unique lines has long been debated. He often said in interviews that he listened to, and admired, the great Jazz players of the time. We can only speculate that his experience growing up in Chicago playing with many fine horn and keyboard players, and hours of listening to records, planted the seeds of improvising above and beyond typical Blues. But Mike also loved the Blues which always remained his musical core. By the late '60's Mike's style emerged as a mixture of classic B.B. King and Albert King inspired phrasing with short and subtle well-placed "beyond Blues" scale runs and even octaves ala Wes Montgomery.

Most people think of "East West" as a milestone recording where Mike explored non-Blues based melodies which sounded like everything from Middle Eastern to Dixieland. But in later recordings, with his band, the Electric Flag and on the Super Session albums, some of these unique melodies found their way into his straight-ahead Blues and Rock soloing. In this lesson we'll learn several examples of these lines which inspired a generation of guitarists, like myself, to explore beyond basic-pentatonic Rock and Blues.

The first two examples are phrases Mike played on the "Live Adventures of Mike Bloomfield and Al Kooper" album. I've always considered this recording to be some of the best playing of his career. And everyone agrees that the incredible open and live sound of his '59 sunburst Les Paul plugged straight into a Fender Twin never sounded better. Many of his solos on the record are high-spirited straight-ahead Blues playing with great feel and expression. On tunes such as "Dear Mr. Fantasy" and "Her Holy Modal Highness" which are extended single-chord jams, Mike displayed more of his beyond Blues melody lines. When I got the album in 1969, I spent months trying to play and understand some of these unique riffs.

One of them, he did quite often, was this very interesting ascending scale/interval phrase. Example 1 is from "Her Holy Modal Highness" which is a 3/4 groove in E minor. The line occurs at about 2:20 into the track (bar 23), after Mike plays a nicely phrased beginning to his solo. The line is essentially a series of repeating 2nd intervals on adjacent strings moving up through the scale with a few chromatics. In this case, except for the passing tones such as F in the second bar, the scale is E Dorian (D major).

## Example 1

**Em<sup>7</sup>**

The musical notation for Example 1 is as follows:

**Measure 23:** Treble clef, 3/4 time, E minor 7 chord. The melody consists of a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) followed by a quarter note (C5) and another triplet of eighth notes (B4, A4, G4). The bass line has fret numbers 7, 10, 7, 10, 7, 10.

**Measure 24:** Treble clef, 3/4 time, E minor 7 chord. The melody consists of a triplet of eighth notes (A4, B4, C5) followed by a quarter note (D5) and another triplet of eighth notes (C5, B4, A4). The bass line has fret numbers 7, 8, 10, 7, 10, 7, 10, 7, 8, 9.

**Measure 25:** Treble clef, 3/4 time, E minor 7 chord. The melody consists of a triplet of eighth notes (B4, C5, D5) followed by a quarter note (E5) and another triplet of eighth notes (D5, C5, B4). The bass line has fret numbers 6, 9, 6, 9, 6, 7, 9, 7, 8.

**Measure 26:** Treble clef, 3/4 time, E minor 7 chord. The melody consists of a quarter note (E5) followed by a quarter rest. The bass line has a fret number 10. The measure ends with "etc.....".

Mike goes on to play several more variations of this line in the “Holy Modal” solo. Sometimes repeating back and forth several times between the 2nd intervals. The entire track offers lots of insight to how Mike would “think” when he played. One of the key things to listen to is his rhythm playing behind the organ and bass solos. Lots of nice E minor 7, 9 and sus voicings. And right at the end, Mike quietly plays a few more variations of Example 1 that are worth noting.

Example 2 is a 12 bar-excerpt from Bloomfield’s solo on “Dear Mr. Fantasy” from the same album. Following Al Kooper singing the primary form of the tune, the band transitions into a “East West” style groove in E minor. But unlike the famous Butterfield exploration, Mike keeps things pretty much in E Dorian (D major) playing classic Blues phrases with great vibrato, bends and more lines similar to Example 1.

The excerpt begins at the 8th bar of Mike’s solo (1:46) with some wonderful Blues phrases demonstrating fine bending control and vibrato. Then at bar 16, he slides into a repetitive phrase using major and minor 3rds, as well and 2nds, ending on a high B. I encourage you to check out the rest of the solo and learn more of the phrases. And if nothing else, listen the logic of Mike’s phrasing.....how each idea seems to set-up the next.



## *Excerpts from Mike Bloomfield's Solo* **“Another Country”**

As I look back over my 45 year career I can still point to specific recordings and solos that were the most influential to my guitar playing. Some were cuts from Hendrix and Clapton and then later on, Jazz players like Montgomery, Benson, Martino and John McLaughlin. But one solo still moves and amazes me like no other. And I could listen to it over and over to this day. It's Mike Bloomfield's solo on “Another Country” from the Electric Flag “Long Time Comin'” album. This simple Latin/Rock groove in A minor is filled with phrase after phrase of some of the finest Blues/Rock/Jazz guitar playing of it's time. And it still hold up today after 40 plus years.

I think a lot of players have overlooked this tune and Mike's superb improvising on it probably because many of the things he played are very smooth and subtle. And he had a knack for making things sound simpler than they really were. Also Mike's Les Paul is mixed fairly low in the recording which is a shame. “Another Country” was also ahead of it's time in other ways besides the guitar playing. With great vocals by Nick Gravenites, it featured psychedelic sound effects married to a powerful R&B groove. Mid-way into the cut a crescendo of sounds and effects give way to a nice Latin Am7-D9 pad for Bloomfield's solo.....for-shadowing recordings to come later from bands such as Santana.

Up next are three excerpts from the solo which further demonstrate Mike's unique blend of Blues and Jazz inspired phrases. Example 3 begins with bar 8 from the beginning of the solo. Each bar is two beats of Am7 and two beats of D9. The phrase in bar 8 is a cool little run up the A Dorian scale. What fascinated me was that, according to my ear, he played it up around the eighth fret changing from the 2nd string, A (4th note) to the 1st string to play a chromatic A# passing tone.

The music notation may not clearly demonstrate the rhythmic phrasing Mike used on lines such as this one. He often played lines either out of time, laid back, accelerated and even rushed. So, listen close to the recording to get a clear feel for the rhythms.

The next few bars Mike plays some nice melodies before bar 12 where he plays one of his classic scale runs finishing on the 1st string with a quick hammer/pull-off riff. He then drops down to the 5th fret area playing a phrase with 2nds and 3rds followed by a simple but effective repetitive single-note tremolo on A. The example ends with Mike playing a nice controlled bend phrase serving as a kind of finishing punctuation to that portion of the solo.

Example 3

Am<sup>7</sup> D<sup>9</sup>

8 9 10

11 12

13 14

15 16

17 18 etc.....

5

The next phrase, which begins on bar 22 of the solo, is one of the most amazing things Mike Bloomfield ever recorded. It stands out for several reasons. One, it's played very high on the fingerboard, above the 17th fret. And on a Les Paul, things get pretty tight up that high. Mike showed superb control and precision executing this bell-like scale run (1st two bars) which sounds more like an xylophone than a guitar. Then he continued in the next two bars descending back down while staying above the 19th fret playing an almost Bop/Blues line, finishing with a chromatic/pentatonic run up to the F#. The entire example is basically in A Dorian (G major) with lots of 1/2 step passing tones. (Although Mike sometimes hints, by playing the b6 on lines like this, that he's thinking the relative minor, A Aeolian-C major.)

Again, hearing this example on the recording is essential to fully understand the rhythmic phrasing and dynamics. As far as his wonderful guitar sound goes, Bloomfield loved the "middle" position on his Les Paul balancing both pickups for that unmistakable chime-like tone.

**Example 4**

Example 4 musical notation showing guitar tablature and standard notation for bars 22-26. The notation includes chord symbols (Am7, D9), fret numbers, and rhythmic markings.

Bar 22: Am7, D9. Fret numbers: 17, 15, 17, 19, 17, 19, 17, 18, 19, 17. Bar 23: Fret numbers: 18, 19, 17, 18, 19, 17, 19, 20, 19, 20, 22, 19, 20, 19, 20. Bar 24: Fret numbers: 19, 20, 20, 19, 21, 19, 21, 20, 19, 21, 19, 21, 20. Bar 25: Fret numbers: 19, 22, 19, 22, 19, 22, 19, 22, 19, 20, 21, 19, 20, 21. Bar 26: Fret numbers: 19, 19, 19, 19.

The final excerpt from the “Another County” solo is near the end of the mellower Latin section. It features another interesting ascending minor phrase that begins at bar 46. Mike starts out around the 5th fret but uses slides to transition to above the 12th playing the A minor scale that includes a few chromatics. The line tops out with his classic hammer/pull-off riff. The phrase ends with a light melody in 3rds setting up the Rock groove as his solo then takes off to another level. The rhythm is a bit tricky so listen close to the recording.

**Example 5**

Example 5 musical notation showing guitar tabs and a treble clef staff. The notation includes fret numbers, accidentals, and a hammer/pull-off (H P) technique. The chords are Am7 and D9. The notation is divided into measures 46, 47, 48, 49, and 50. Measure 46 starts with Am7 and measure 47 with D9. Measure 48 includes a hammer/pull-off (H P) technique. Measure 49 and 50 continue the melody. The notation ends with 'etc.....'.

Thanks for checking out this lesson on Bloomfield’s beyond Blues phrases. Mike certainly never knew how much of an impact his playing would have on generations of aspiring Blues players. And he would probably be blown-away at the number of players who were also inspired to learn Jazz thanks to his unique sounding melodies. It’s a shame he didn’t have a chance to record more instrumental music that explored outside the Blues box. The “what if’s” are many when you think of Mike Bloomfield’s life and career having a different outcome. But it’s understandable, in reading books and articles about him, that the pressures of the music business in the late ‘60’s and ‘70’s, along with his troubled personal life, made the continued pursuit of virtuoso guitar playing unimportant. I, for one however, am very thankful for the incredible things he did play and record. I can’t imagine my own guitar career without the inspiration of Michael Bloomfield.



*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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