



An Introduction to the Blues

By Scott Blanchard

Have you been wanting to break into the blues, but didn't know where to begin? In this edition of the Theory Corner, I'll introduce you to basic blues forms. Blues music originated during the nineteenth century in the southern United States and is derived from African-American work songs and spirituals. Throughout history, there have been many reincarnations of the blues, but today we'll discuss the basics so you can make music in no time. So why is knowing this form a must for any musician in the making? Keep reading and I'll show you everything you need to get started.

A Few Words About Form and Harmony

Before we dive into the blues, I want to introduce you to the idea of form in music. In a nutshell, form is the organizational structure of a piece of music. Think about one of your favorite songs—it has a beginning, a middle and an end. If you listen closely, you may notice more details about the song. Maybe it has an introduction, a verse, chorus, bridge, perhaps a solo or interlude, and maybe even a tag.

This lesson requires a basic understanding of diatonic harmonies represented by Roman numerals, in this case the I, IV and V chords. If you feel you need a little guidance with this concept, check out Jeff Peretz's or Jeff Bihlman's blues lesson "Introducing Two-Note Chords (I–IV–V in A)." Blues music has a basic form, and we're going to pull it apart and put it back together so you know exactly what you're hearing and playing in no time. Let's go!

12-Bar Blues Form

If you associate a certain sound with the blues already, you're probably thinking of the 12-bar form. The 12-bar blues is a 12-bar form in which the I, IV and V chords of a key are ordered in a specific way, leading to an anticipated V–I resolution to start the next chorus (the form begins over again). The order of chords is simple, and throughout most of this form you'll often find yourself repeating chords for more than one measure at a time.

The order of chords in a basic 12-bar blues is as follows (each Roman numeral representing one measure of music): I–I–I–I–IV–IV–I–I–V–IV–I–V. We'll look at this form in the key of C Major, so the I chord will be C, the IV chord will be F and the V chord will be G. You'll notice the slash notation on each beat of the measure. This just means that you play the chord for the given number of slashes, or beats, and there is no predetermined rhythm. What? No predetermined rhythm? This shines light on one of the many great things about the blues; you get to make it your own music every time you play it.

Take a look at the example below to see a 12-bar blues in C Major.

The image shows three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, representing a 12-bar blues progression in C Major. The notes are represented by diagonal slashes. The first staff (measures 1-4) is labeled C(I). The second staff (measures 5-8) is labeled F(IV) and C(I). The third staff (measures 9-12) is labeled G(V), F(IV), C(I), and G(V). The progression ends with a double bar line at the end of the fourth measure of the third staff.

You may have heard the word *turnaround* associated with blues. A turnaround can be defined as a chord or group of chords that take you back to the beginning of a progression. In a 12-bar blues form, the turnaround is the last four measures, as shown below. Think of it this way; the turnaround prepares us to begin the form again. If you need some proof, try playing the 12-bar blues chord progression from the full example above, but stop on the very last chord, the V chord. I think you will find that in order to end a blues in a pleasing way to the ear you'll need a final I chord. Ending on the V chord creates a sense of anticipation in the listener, as V-I is the most definitive sound in all diatonic Western music. Many blues, jazz, rock and acoustic tunes employ this form. Check out "Crossroads" by Robert Johnson, "Rock and Roll" by Led Zeppelin, "Freddie the Freeloader" by Miles Davis and the Beatles' rendition of "Kansas City."

Here's a 12-bar blues with the turnaround labeled.

The image shows three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, identical to the first example. The notes are represented by diagonal slashes. The first staff (measures 1-4) is labeled C(I). The second staff (measures 5-8) is labeled F(IV) and C(I). The third staff (measures 9-12) is labeled G(V), F(IV), C(I), and G(V). A thick black bracket is drawn under the last four measures (measures 9-12) of the third staff, with the word "Turnaround" written in bold black text below the bracket.

12-Bar Blues in C Minor

To make a blues minor, we replace the major chords with minor chords. Let's break down a C Minor blues. We'll use the same root notes as in our major blues, making the i chord Cmin, the iv chord Fmin, and the v chord Gmin. Look at the example below to see what we just did, and play through the form so you can hear the differences from the major blues. Be sure to check out Led Zeppelin's famous minor blues "Since I've Been Loving You."

Cmin(i)

5 Fmin(iv) Cmin(i)

9 Gmin(v) Fmin(iv) Cmin(i) Gmin(v)

8-Bar Blues Form

The 8-bar blues is similar to the 12-bar form, but isn't used as often. Check out "Key to the Highway" by Charles Segar and William Broonzy to hear this form in action. The I, IV and V chords are all we'll need to break the form down, which we'll examine in C Major. This means the I chord is C, the IV chord is F and the V chord is G. Take a look below to see the harmonic progression for a simple 8-bar blues. Be sure to notice that the turnaround comes in measures 7 and 8, twice as fast as in the 12-bar form. For fun, try playing this 8-bar form in C Minor, with the chords Cmin (i), Fmin (iv) and Gmin (v).

C(I) F(IV)

5 C(I) G(V) C(I) F(IV) C(I) G(V)

Turnaround

Variations

Although there are many ways to vary the blues form, a great way to dress up the chords and create a raw bluesy sound is by substituting triads with dominant 7th chords. So in the case of our C Major blues from above, C will change to C7, F to F7 and G to G7. Play the 12-bar form with triads, then play it through with 7th chords and listen to the difference in sound. The use of 7th chords really give the progression a much bluesier sound. Check out the 12-bar blues with dominant 7th chords, shown below. It's as simple as that!

Musical notation for a 12-bar blues progression using dominant 7th chords. The notation is in 4/4 time and consists of three staves of four measures each. The chords are: C7 (I7) in measure 1; F7 (IV7) in measure 2, and C7 (I7) in measure 3; G7 (V7) in measure 4, F7 (IV7) in measure 5, C7 (I7) in measure 6, and G7 (V7) in measure 7.

Another common variation in blues music is called the *quick IV* or *quick change*, which can occur in measure 2 of the 12-bar form. In our C Major blues, the F7, or IV chord will take the place of C7 in the second measure. Check out the example below. This is so common you'll probably recognize the sound right away. The quick IV gives the blues a little spicy momentum as opposed to staying on the I chord for the first four measures, which may detract from the energy of the tune depending on the tempo and melodic material. Check out "For You Blue" by the Beatles to hear the quick IV in action.

Musical notation for a 12-bar blues progression with a quick IV variation. The notation is in 4/4 time and consists of three staves of four measures each. The chords are: C7 (I7) in measure 1, F7 (IV7) in measure 2, and C7 (I7) in measure 3; F7 (IV7) in measure 4, and C7 (I7) in measure 5; G7 (V7) in measure 6, F7 (IV7) in measure 7, C7 (I7) in measure 8, and G7 (V7) in measure 9. A bracket labeled "Quick IV" spans measures 2 and 3.

Conclusion

Besides the formal skeleton, the blues is somewhat unrestrained in a harmonic, melodic and rhythmic sense and is open to countless variations and interpretations. Blues “feel” is also a very widely varied component of the genre. There are many ways to play a blues once you become familiar with the basics. For instance, in terms of melody, there are a number of scales, scale combinations and patterns that can be utilized to express your music. There are also many harmonic substitutions and chord alterations to be explored. Rhythmically, the blues can be very static or very active depending on the mood the performer wants to convey. The options are endless, and discovery is important in music. Be sure to check out the Licks and Tricks section of this newsletter for a first-rate arrangement of an 8-bar form, complete with notation for guitar, keyboard, bass and drums.

If you want to learn even more about these forms, check out our lessons. Guitarists will want to view (you guessed it) blues lessons taught by Alan Bennett, Scott A. Smith, Reggie Chavez, Jeff Bihlman, Dennis McCumber, Matt Smith, Mark Dziuba and Jonathan Barker, beginner and intermediate jazz lessons taught by Tom Dempsey, Amanda Monaco, Jody Fisher and Mark Dziuba and intermediate acoustic lessons taught by Tomas Cataldo and Lou Manzi.

Not a guitar player? No worries; we’ve got plenty more to offer you. Keyboard players will want to check out blues lessons in the Absolute Beginner course taught by Cathy Schane-Lydon, the Pianist’s Toolbox taught by David Pearl and Joe Rose, and Adult Refresher, taught by Leo Marchildon and Andrea Amos.

Bassists will enjoy beginner and intermediate lessons on blues forms taught by Dave Overthrow, Tracy Walton and Sharon Ray.