

Playing the Blues

by Roy Ernst

The best starting point for learning to improvise is playing the blues. Slaves in the New Orleans region sang songs to express their feelings. Probably, when they found songs that they really liked they repeated the pattern of those songs with other songs. A pattern of three lines of lyrics became common, with the first one expressing a feeling, the second line repeating the first with only small changes, and the third line offering a resolution. In the most common pattern, the twelve-bar blues, each line is four measures long. St. Louis Blues by W. C. Handy is a good example:

I hate to see, the evening sun go down,

Yes I hate to see the evening sun go down,

Cause it makes me think that I'm on my last go 'round.

A pattern of chords that fit the lyrics became very common, even standard—the 12-bar blues.

In the key of C major, the first four measures of the 12-bar blues are a C chord (c e g).

The next line, begins with two measures of an F chord, followed by two measures of a C chord.

The third line begins with one measure of G chord, then one measure of F chord and then two measures of C chord. When the piece is repeated, a G chord is often used as the last chord because that gives a feeling of needing to go to the Chord at the beginning. This is how that looks on a staff.

Example xx. Chords for 12-bar blues in C-major in treble and bass clefs.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a 12-bar blues progression in C-major. Each system consists of three staves, each with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The first staff of each system contains four measures of chords, labeled C, C, C, and C. The second staff contains four measures of chords, labeled F, F, C, and C. The third staff contains four measures of chords, labeled G, F, C, and C or G. The notation uses whole notes for each chord, and the progression is indicated by a double bar line and repeat sign at the end of the third staff in each system.

Treble Clef System:

- Measure 1: C
- Measure 2: C
- Measure 3: C
- Measure 4: C
- Measure 5: F
- Measure 6: F
- Measure 7: C
- Measure 8: C
- Measure 9: G
- Measure 10: F
- Measure 11: C
- Measure 12: C or G

Bass Clef System:

- Measure 1: C
- Measure 2: C
- Measure 3: C
- Measure 4: C
- Measure 5: F
- Measure 6: F
- Measure 7: C
- Measure 8: C
- Measure 9: G
- Measure 10: F
- Measure 11: C
- Measure 12: C or G

This is the simple harmony pattern that is the basis of the 12-bar blues.

Some Optional Music Theory

In the example above, the bottom note of each chord is called the root, the next note above it is called the third and the note above that is called the fifth.

If you count up the scale in a C major chord—c d e f g—e is the third note and g is the fifth note. In an F-major chord, f is the root, a is the third and c is the fifth.

Sometimes the third or fifth of the chord is the lowest note. These are called inverted chords, but we don't need to get into that here.

In music theory, Roman numerals are used to designate chords built on certain scale degrees. Capital Roman numerals are used to designate major chords and lower case Roman numerals are used to designate minor chords. Lower case letters are used to designate pitch names.

In the example above, the C-major chord is a I chord because the root of the chord is the first note (tonic) of the C-major scale, the F-major chord is a IV chord because the root is the fourth step of the C-major scale, and the G-major chord is a V chord. This is useful because it helps you think of the harmonic function of chords in different keys. For example, I could say, "Now let's play blues in F-major." You would think "It starts with a I chord for 4 measures, that's an F-major chord and then the next four start with a IV chord of two measures, that's a B-flat major chord and so on." See if you can think through the rest of the 12-bar blues in F major using Roman numerals. Then try doing it in G major.

It's okay if this is more theory than you want right now. It's a lot to take in. You may want to come back to this and think it through several times. The black musicians that created these forms almost certainly did it entirely by ear, but it took many years, maybe even generations, for these patterns to evolve. You can speed that up into hours or days by understanding some music theory.

The Most Important Twelve Bars of Music in the World

Jazz is played in most parts of the world and jazz musicians everywhere know and play the blues. Someone in a group in France could say "Let's play blues in F" and everyone in the group would know what to do—notation not needed. In addition, many songs that are not called blues are actually 12-bar blues—much

of Elvis Presley, such as “Ain’t Nothing But a Hound Dog,” much of Rock and Roll, such as “Rock Around the Clock,” “At the Hop,” “Jump, Jive an Wail,” and the beginning of “In the Mood,” to name just a few well-known examples.

Although the 12-bar blues are by far the most common, there are also 8-bar and 16-bar blues. “Basin Street Blues” is an example of 16-bar blues. “Sittin’ on Top of the World” is 8-bar blues.

I think of the 12-bar blues as the most important twelve bars of music in the world.

Get a feeling for the blues by playing the following example on your instrument.

Roots of blues chords with rhythm pattern in treble and bass clef

Chords for 12-bar blues in C-major

Swing eighth notes

C C C C

F F C C

Chords for 12-bar blues in C-major

Swing eighth notes

C C C C

F F C C

G F C C or G

Now use the notation below to play the same rhythm pattern or a new pattern of your own.

C I C I C I C I

F I F I C I C I

G I F I C I C or G I

G would often be used in the last measure when repeating.

Now play again, using the chord symbols. Periods are used in place of bar lines in this example to avoid confusion between bar lines and Roman Numeral I. This is how jazz musicians would think as they play the blues in different keys.

I . I . i . I .

IV . IV . I . I .

V . IV . I . I or V .

Notice that examples in both treble and bass clefs are not necessary because the chord symbols would be the same in any clef and any key.

Those are the bass notes of 12-bar blues in C. Play and sing that pattern many times, making up your own rhythms (you don't need to use the same rhythm in every bar). Think of it as 3 sections of 4 bars each.

Listen to some of the songs below, such as "Ain't Nothin But a Hound Dog" and try to hear the chord pattern. Hold up 1 finger for a I chord, four fingers for a IV chord, and five fingers for a V chord.

Play with some recordings, playing roots of chords with a rhythm pattern. These are all 12-bar blues. The introduction, if any, is not in the blues pattern—it starts with the song.

The Elvis recording of “Aint Nothin But a Hound Dog” is in C-major.

The Bill Haley recording of “Shake Rattle and Roll” is in C-major

The Bill Haley recording of “Rock around the Clock is in A-major

“At the Hop” with Danny and the Juniors is in A-flat Major.

“Everyday I Have the Blues” by BB King is in B-flat major

“Kind Hearted Woman” by Eric Clapton is in A-major

Playing Blues Melodies

Now that you know the harmonies, you can begin to improvise melodies on them. To start, make sure that you have a loud accompaniment and play anything that sounds good to you. That’s what the original blues players did. Don’t expect your first attempts to be wonderful, but they will gradually get better. You can move ahead faster by trying the following:

Play with swing rhythm—uneven eighth notes.

Play notes that are in the key of the accompaniment.

Include some “blue notes.” These are notes that are not in the chord and are very dissonant. Any note that is not in the chord could be a blue note, but try notes a half-step below the chord note. In C major that would be, b going to c, e-flat going e, and f-sharp going to g.

Try playing a blue note with a short pattern and just grinding away on it to feel the dissonance before you move on.

Your melody can wander all around, and that is okay, but it will be more interesting if you play a rhythm pattern, repeat it and then start a new pattern on

the next chord. Repeat a short pattern two or three times before you go to something else

These are just some ideas to get you started. Listen to people playing the blues and try to imitate some of the “licks” (a melodic pattern) that you hear.

The Blues Scale

The notes of the blues scale sound good with any chord in the blues.

Repeat playing the blues scale until you remember the notes. Then try making frequent use of those notes as you improvise. This is an option—you do not need to think of the blues scale in order to improvise, but it might help you. The blues scale pattern needs to be transposed for each key that you play in. So for any key, the scale pattern is.

Blues scale in C, treble and bass clefs.



Practice alternating between a C-major scale and a blues scale on C to learn the differences.

Modifications

There are sometimes small modifications to the 12-bar blues. Musicians always want to add something new. For example, instead of staying on a I chord for the first four measures, some musicians will substitute a V chord in measure 3. There are also blues in minor keys, which we will not get into here.

Play Along with Recordings

One of the good things about learning the blues is that there are so many good play-a-long recordings that are a joy to use. Check the lesson on using recorded accompaniments. Playing along with a professional trio is a real joy. Don't expect your first tries to be spectacular. If you stay with it, you will begin to get good results and you will love it.

You definitely need to play along with a big sound that is like a real group playing in your room. Use a good speaker, or if that is not possible, use headphones.

Go to halleonard.com. and search "All Blues Play Along." Note that you could use any recording that is in the key of your instrument. For instance, clarinets, tenor saxophones and bass clarinets can use a book for trumpet.

Some instruments have more blues recordings than others. For instance, you will find more for trumpet than for flute. Some items can be downloaded for only \$4.50. While you're on the website, enter your instrument in the search field and play-a-long (clarinet play-a-long). You will find other choices that you will enjoy. Get some of your favorite songs.

If you are a subscriber to MakeMusic you will find a good selection of blues backgrounds, as well as many other pieces with accompaniments. I use MakeMusic and recommend it.

There is a lot on YouTube, but much of it is in keys that will not be good for you and it is mostly for guitar and piano. You could easily get frustrated and confused if this is new to you.

Jazz Lingo (optional)

You might want to have some fun starting to use jazz lingo around your family. Their reaction might be "What happened to grandpa?" So, your horn is your

“axe.” “Where’s my axe?” A performance is a “gig.” A person who plays well has “good chops.” A short solo is a lick. “Nice lick, man.” Good chops can refer to someone being good at almost anything;. “He’s got good tennis chops.” Pay for a gig is “bread.” The word “man” is used frequently. When someone is playing well or just playing well, it’s “Smokin’ man!” “Where’s the gig, man? What’s the bread?” Generally the lingo takes things down to just the most basic function. My favorite is, seeing a beautiful house or any house and saying “Nice pad, man.” After all, if you’re really cool man, a house is just a place to lay down. A musical score is a chart. “Nice chart, man.” All of this is optional, but it can be fun. Not all jazz musicians talk that way.

An Adult Musician

“Never in my wildest dreams did I think at age 68 I’d be playing a trombone, let alone be playing in a band.”