

# The Blues

## Step 1: The basic 12-bar sequence

The Blues is more than just a major diversion; it runs in the face of logic and yet has infiltrated rock, gospel, soul... and, of course, jazz. Although the blues influence is stronger in some jazz players than others, it cannot be considered as a separate entity. If a potential student contacts me requesting to learn just jazz *or* blues I have to insist that jazz and blues come in the same package or not at all.

**The form** (structure) breaks all the rules. Most song forms last 32 bars and subdivide into groups of 8. However, a blues sequence usually runs to 12 bars.

(There are other lengths, such as the 8-bar blues but here we will be focusing on 12.)

**The chord structure** also abides by its own rules. In most western music, **V** leads to **I**. The 5<sup>th</sup> note and chord of the diatonic scale is known as the **dominant** and its function is to pull towards the **I**, known as the **tonic**. If you see a G<sup>7</sup>, the likelihood is that this dominant 7 chord will resolve up a perfect 4<sup>th</sup> to a C major or minor chord. In the blues, dominant 7 chords just lead to more dominant 7<sup>s</sup>. I wonder what Bach would have made of this odd beast.

Here, below, is a basic 12-bar blues sequence in F.

**Fig 27**

Fig 27 shows a 12-bar blues progression in F major. The first staff (bars 1-4) has F7 chords. The second staff (bars 5-8) has Bb7, Bb7, F7, and F7 chords. The third staff (bars 9-12) has C7, Bb7, F7, and F7 chords.

In a basic 12 bar blues, only 3 chords are used: **I**, **IV** and **V**. They are all dominant 7<sup>s</sup>.

**Table 1**

Bars 1 - 4	Bars 5 & 6	Bars 7 & 8
I	IV	I
Bar 9	Bar 10	Bars 11 & 12
V	IV	I

### Simple left-hand options

There are many alternatives, but for now we'll work with just three options. Options 1 and 2 (fig 28 and fig 29) work best for solo piano while option 3 (fig 30) is appropriate when working with a bass player or to a backing track.

In option 1, the bass line simply plays 1, 3, 5, and 6 of each chord in quarter notes. The right hand holds three-note chords. Note that B<sup>b7</sup> and C<sup>7</sup> are inversions.

Fig 28

The musical score for Fig 28 is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is one flat (Bb), and the time signature is 4/4. The first system (measures 1-4) has four measures, each with an F7 chord in the treble and a bass line of eighth notes. The second system (measures 5-8) has four measures: measures 5 and 6 have Bb7 chords, and measures 7 and 8 have F7 chords. The third system (measures 9-12) has four measures: measure 9 has a C7 chord, measure 10 has a Bb7 chord, and measures 11 and 12 have F7 chords. The bass line in all systems follows a consistent eighth-note pattern: quarter, quarter, eighth, eighth, quarter, quarter, eighth, eighth.

In option 2, a boogie feel is created with two-note chords that alternate between 1 + 5 and 1 + 6 of each chord.

Fig 29

Straight 8s

The musical score is titled "Straight 8s" and is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of three systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The bass line is a steady eighth-note pattern: B-flat, D, F, B-flat. The right hand plays chords on the first and third beats of each measure, with rests on the second and fourth. The first system (measures 1-4) has chords F7, F7, F7, and F7. The second system (measures 5-8) has chords Bb7, Bb7, F7, and F7. The third system (measures 9-12) has chords C7, Bb7, F7, and F7. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

1 F7 F7 F7 F7

5 Bb7 Bb7 F7 F7

9 C7 Bb7 F7 F7

**Option 3: shells.** Shells are 2-note chords played with the left hand. They consist of either 1 + 7 or 1 + 3 of each dominant 7 chord. Ensure that you don't play these shells too low. Shells are mainly used when you are either playing with a bass player or to a backing track. The idea is to leave space for the bass.

(Note that in the following example, bar 2 is a  $IV^7$  chord. This is a common variation.)

Fig 30

1 swing 8s

5

9

Detailed description of Fig 30: The figure shows a piano accompaniment for a swing piece in 4/4 time, key of Bb major. It consists of three systems of four measures each. The first system (measures 1-4) starts with a first ending bracket. The second system (measures 5-8) continues the melodic line. The third system (measures 9-12) ends with a repeat sign. The treble clef contains a melodic line with eighth notes and triplets. The bass clef contains a simple harmonic accompaniment with whole notes and some half notes. Chord symbols are placed above the treble staff: F7, Bb7, F7, F7 in the first system; Bb7, Bb7, F7, F7 in the second system; and C7, Bb7, F7, F7 in the third system. A '3' with a bracket indicates a triplet in the treble staff of every measure.

## The blues scale

In the example above (fig 30) I have written out an improvisation based on the blues scale. This scale is simple to use as it fits over all three chords. The F blues scale does not need to switch to the B<sup>b</sup> blues scale when the chord changes to B<sup>b7</sup>. This approach is known as horizontal improvisation. I have intentionally used the same four-bar phrase three times to show that one scale fits all.

**Horizontal improvisation:** chords change, scale doesn't.

**Vertical improvisation:** chords change, scale changes.

The blues scale consists of six notes: 1, <sup>b</sup>3, 4, <sup>b</sup>5, 5, <sup>b</sup>7. Note that it doesn't contain the major 3<sup>rd</sup>. Here is the F blues scale.

**Fig 31**



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This is an extract from chapter 7 of my eBook Learn Jazz Piano book 1.