

The Twelve Bar Blues Progression

Midge Marsden, blues icon and fellow educator, gave me the idea for this article while we were flying to Auckland together a while ago. For the duration of the flight we discussed the subject of why every musician needs to have a good working knowledge of the 12 bar blues song form, yet many beginning/intermediate guitarists we come in contact with are not well versed in it. When someone of Midge's status voices concern, one ought to take note. Please be aware though – this lesson is about the theoretical form of the blues structure, not the style of blues music, which is different.

One reason why the understanding of this form is so important is that any modern guitar player will likely run into its use 20% of their time (depending, of course, on what music you play). One of the first things musicians like to play to get things started when jamming is a blues-form tune, it helps players warm up and get in the groove with others. Another reason why it is important to know is because the blues form contains the three primary chords which you are hearing about 95% of the time in any modern song.

Now you understand why learning this song form is important, it is a matter of learning to play it, memorise it, and being able to hear it. One of the quickest ways to physically memorise this progression is to play it with bar chords because all the chords are close to each other and form a little visual playing pattern. If you don't know bar chords yet, don't worry, Example 1 is easy enough to remember using open chords.

Example 1 contains two chord progressions for the 12 bar blues – the ones above the staff and another below. The chord progression above contains the most basic 12 bar blues form. Quite often the blues is coloured with dominant 7th chords like in the progression below the staff. Also, there are variations in this progression – the change to D in bar two is called the 'quick change', the 'D' in bar 10 is a common variation, and the last two bars are called a 'turnaround'. Keep your ears open for those variations. When practising you can use any strum pattern you wish.

Ex 1.

The image displays two musical staves for guitar. The first staff shows a 12-bar blues progression with open chords: A (bars 1-2), D (bars 3-4), A (bars 5-6), D (bars 7-8), A (bars 9-10), and D (bars 11-12). The second staff shows a similar progression but with dominant 7th chords: A7 (bars 1-2), E7 (bars 3-4), A7 (bars 5-6), D7 (bars 7-8), A7 (bars 9-10), and E7 (bars 11-12). The staves are empty of notes, focusing solely on the chord changes.

Example 2 is a blues progression you hear in jump and jazz tunes. It is a little more complicated than the previous two, but worth learning once you know the others. It is relatively easy to memorise in that it uses chords I and IV for the first 6 bars, then begins a four bar I, VI, II, V progression, followed by a similar two bar version of it. Notice it is not in a common guitar key, but you will need to get

used to working in non-guitar keys if you want to play with jazz musicians. Playing this with a swing style strum will sound best.

Ex 2.

13 B^b7 Eb⁷ B^b7 Eb⁷

19 B^b7 Gmi⁷ Cmi⁷ F⁷ B^b7 Gmi⁷ Cmi⁷ F⁷

Once you can play either progression in the key written you need to begin to learn it in all the 12 keys. If you are only playing in your favourite guitar keys you are limiting your abilities.

Here are some popular songs that use a 12 bar blues format for Example 1 – Johnny B Goode, Rock Around the Clock, Guitar Boogie and of course there are millions of others. Two songs that use a twelve bar blues format for Example 2 are Tenor Madness by Sonny Rollins and Billie’s Bounce by Charlie Parker. Once you know the sound and the progressions well, you should be able to figure out a few songs yourself. Have fun.

Kevin.

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