

Blues Builders

Blues Jam Basics

Learning about 12 bar progressions

Blues Builders will stick to the “basics” at blues jams to allow everyone the best chance to explore their creativity. So, what are the basics? Won’t that be boring? Well, the basics means we will stick to standard 12 bar progressions (including standard variations) which is NOT boring at all! Using this structure actually allows the greatest opportunity to learn and practice improvisation skills. It also allows those not yet ready to solo the opportunity to work on the roots of the structure and improve their rhythm, timing, and tone quality. Not sure how to improvise? Plan to sign up for one of our workshops and skilled blues players will give you the personal help you need to blow away the crowd!

If you are new to the blues structure, here are some basics to get you started. The first item is to choose what key to play in. The best keys for beginning guitarists are E, G, and A. If you are a vocalist (or singing instrumentalist) you will need to consider your vocal range when choosing a key. For soloing work (and singing) it will be important to know if the key is major or minor as well as any other variations but we will save discussing those more advanced items for later. For now, once the key is chosen, the next step is to determine the root notes of the chords that are used in common blues progressions. The most common notes/chords used within a given key are normally spoken of as the I (1st), IV (4th), and V (5th) intervals of the scale for the key you have chosen. Check out <http://www.musictheory.net/index.html> for more in depth information about how to find these intervals and chords.

The following is a chart of the I-IV-V chords/root notes for keys you might want to try. Remember the “I” chord also represents the key of the song. Guitar and bass players will find these intervals occur in patterns that repeat and they may be “moved” up and down the neck.

If you are a beginner you can simply play the root note or Chord listed in the chart. Bass players can choose a simple quarter note pattern playing the root of the chord (from the chart,) in the 12 bar pattern of the song. Guitar players can strum the chord (also from the chart) following the song pattern. Those with more background in scales and arpeggios can expand on the chord. Unless you hear a strong dissonance, it is suggested to stay in the major key, especially when chording at a basic level.

I	IV	V
A	D	E
G	C	D
E	A	B
C	F	G
D	G	A
B	E	F#

Chord Chart

The pattern we have used for our “Blues in G” sample tracks is shown in the following chart. Each block of the chart represents one measure (four beats.) Our samples use a common blues beat which is the 4/4 time signature.

Measure 1	Measure 2	Measure 3	Measure 4
I	I	I	I
Measure 5	Measure 6	Measure 7	Measure 8
IV	IV	I	I
Measure 9	Measure 10	Measure 11	Measure 12
V	IV	I	V

Hopefully you have found this discussion of progressions and patterns helpful. Please feel free to e-mail any questions you have to: sandy@bluesbuilders.org