

The Blues

The blues is a fascinating format that is both rigid in one sense and amazingly flexible in another. It can be thought of and studied as an art form unto itself. A blues format is designed around certain chord patterns, sometimes around certain melody patterns, and all within a small number of measures as well. (For the sake of brevity, this discussion will not focus on the history of the form, or the significance of the lyrics, neither of which should be ignored for a truly thorough understanding of the form).

The 12-bar blues form – basic

A typical starting point for studying the blues is the 12-bar format. This is probably the most popular of the blues forms (other types include 8-bar, 16-bar, or something irregular) and has a high degree of structure and predictability (although never dull!).

A typical 12-bar blues set of chords might go like this (each cell represents a bar) with the bars arranged in three groups of four:

Chords

C7	F7	C7	C7
F7	F7	C7	C7
G7	F7	C7	C7 (G7)

Roman Numerals

I	IV	I	I
IV	IV	I	I
V	IV	I	I (V)

A very important thing to notice with the chords is that often in a blues, the default chord is the dominant 7th chord, whether it's the I IV or V. These chords are structured as dominant 7ths, but do not function like them (except the V7 of course).

Also notice that in the right-side chart, the "7" is not added to the roman numerals. This is done as an abbreviation and it is assumed that all chords are (at least) 7th chords.

The 12-bar blues form – standard jazz style

In a jazz setting, the 12-bar blues is commonly used, but with a variation on the chords that incorporate the all-important ii V I progression:

Chords

C7	F7	C7	G-7 C7
F7	F#°7	C7	A7
D-7	G7	C7 A7	D-7 G7

Roman Numerals

I	IV	I	ii/IV V/IV
IV	#IV°	I	VI
ii	V	I VI	ii V

Notice in the 4th, 6th, 8th and 11th bars that chromatic substitution chords are used. There are other substitution possibilities, but this table represents one of the more usual sets of chords.

The 12-bar blues form – bebop style

Bebop, in addition to being (usually) very fast is also very rich in its harmonic possibilities.

Chords

C	B-7b5 E7	A-7 D-7	G-7 C7
F	Fm	E-7	A7
D-7	G7	C7 A7	D-7 G7

Roman Numerals

I	vii° III	vi ii	ii/IV V/IV
IV	iv	iii	vi
ii	V	I VI	ii V

The backbone structures

While the standard, jazz and bebop blues forms differ in the number of chords they use, there is still an important amount of consistency at work (beyond the obvious 12-bars).

In each case, the I, IV and V chords are roughly in the same place: at the beginning of each group of four measures. In a sense, the 12-bar blues is a structure held up by three pillars, the I, IV and V. These pillars are "load bearing" and cannot be moved too much or the whole thing falls down. Regardless of the style of blues, the first and fifth bars usually feature the I and IV respectively. The ninth bar will usually use chords that 1) are the dominant, 2) suggest the dominant, or 3) feature chords that create a strong need to return to the tonic.

Given these important structural points, an alternative 12-bar blues might do something as simple as this and still keep the pillars (structural chords) in place:

Chords

C7	C7	C7	C7
F7	F7	C7	C7
D7	Db7	C7	C7

Roman Numerals

I	I	I	I
IV	IV	I	I
II	bII (sub for V)	I	I

Knowing this about a 12-bar blues structure makes it easy to hear, since the movement from the I to the IV is so standard. But just because this is a standard, rather simple and perhaps predictable form should not belittle its importance. The harmonic and melodic variations on such an established form are seemingly endless, not unlike the number of ways someone can make something as simple as a pizza. Bon appetite!

The Melodic Structure of Blues

There are no limitations on how a melody is composed for a 12-bar blues, but there are some general tendencies. The most typical approach is to use a short line (or call it a riff or motif if you like) usually one or two or four measures long.

- The first eight measures of the form will use the line (with elements of variation) as many times as it will fit
 - The first four measures and the next four measures are usually very similar in their structure
- The last four measures will either continue to use the line, or they will do something new and different to finish things off

A great example of this is the Sonny Rollins' "Tenor Madness". The main riff is only one measure long and occupies the first eight measures. The last four measures offer a twist on the riff that seems to bring things to a satisfying conclusion. The riff is in the boxes.

TENOR MADNESS SONNY ROLLINS

The notation shows a 12-measure blues progression. The first measure is boxed and contains a Bb7 chord. The second measure is boxed and contains an Eb chord. The third measure is boxed and contains a Bb7 chord. The fourth measure is boxed and contains a Bb7 chord. The fifth measure is boxed and contains an Eb7 chord. The sixth measure is boxed and contains a Bb7 chord. The seventh measure is boxed and contains a Dmi7 chord. The eighth measure is boxed and contains a G7 chord. The ninth measure is boxed and contains a Bb7 chord. The tenth measure is boxed and contains a Bb7 chord. The eleventh measure is boxed and contains a Bb7 chord. The twelfth measure is boxed and contains a Bb7 chord.

This riff could also be thought of as a four-measure unit, allowing the first four measures and next four measures to be heard as rather similar in structure, with the last four measures providing mild contrast and balance.

TENOR MADNESS SONNY ROLLINS

The notation shows a 12-measure blues progression, grouped into three four-measure units. The first four measures are labeled '1st group' and contain Bb7, Eb, Bb7, and Bb7 chords. The next four measures are labeled '2nd group' and contain Bb7, Eb7, Bb7, and Dmi7 chords. The last four measures are labeled '3rd group' and contain G7, Bb7, Bb7, and Bb7 chords.

Similar to this is Charlie Parker's "Cool Blues", where the riff is four measures long and used three times (with a very slight modification in measures 5-8). The riff is in the boxes.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Charlie Parker's "Cool Blues". It consists of three staves of music in 4/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). The first staff is in treble clef and contains a four-measure riff boxed in, with chords Bb, Eb7, and Bb written above it. The second staff is in bass clef and contains a four-measure riff boxed in, with chords Bb7, Eb7, Bb, Dmi7, and Dmi7 written above it. The third staff is in bass clef and contains a four-measure riff boxed in, with chords Cmi7, F7, and Bb written above it. The riff in each staff is a sequence of eighth notes: Bb4, Ab4, Gb4, F4, Eb4, D4, C4, Bb3, Ab3, Gb3, F3, Eb3, D3, C3, Bb2.