An introduction to the 12-Bar Blues

Name of pupil:
The Blues is the name given to a style of music created by African Americans at the end of the 19th century.

African slaves brought their music traditions with them when they were transported to work in North American colonies. Their music grew out of despair of slavery.

Early types of African American music included spirituals (religious songs using vocal harmonies) and work songs. Work songs were sung rhythmically in time with the work being done. They used call and response in which phrases from a lead singer were repeated by other singers.

African Music combined with the folk music of white European settlers to produce new styles of music.

Blues music was originally performed by one singer accompanied by a guitar or banjo. Piano, drum and harmonica are also typical blues instruments.

During the 20th century, the blues became a huge influence on the development of pop music.
2. Origins of the blues: Worksheet

1. Where did Blues Music originate from (tick one)

Native Indians  ☑  European settlers  ☑
African Slaves  ☑  Pop singers  ☑

2. Name two types of song that influenced early African American music:

-----------------------------------------------------------------
-----------------------------------------------------------------

3. Practise some **call and response** with your teacher.

4. Which of the following are typical instruments used in blues music (circle them)?

- Piano
- Harp
- Harmonica
- Recorder
- Banjo
- Guitar
- Drum Set
1. Choose three words to describe the music.

2. Listen again and choose a selection of listening cards to describe the music. Write down the words you chose:

3. Write down any instruments that you can hear.

4. How would you describe the lyrics (words) of the music?
5. Draw a picture in the frame below to show what the music means to you.
2c. Listening: Lyrics

The words below can be used to describe the lyrics of blues music.

- Full of emotion
- Longing for a better life
- Dwelling on loneliness
- Raw
- Use of slang
- Used to express feelings
- Passed on from musician to musician by oral tradition
- Sad
- Slow
- Melancholic

6. Did the listening cards you choose reflect the mood / lyrics of blues music?

😊 ☑️ 😞 😥
3. Features of the Blues

**Features**
The most common form of the blues is called the **12-bar blues** because it has 12 bars, or measures, of music to work with.

This uses **three four-bar phrases**.

Most blues songs have **four beats in a bar**.

**Chords**
The most common chord structure uses just three primary chords:

- Chord I (Tonic)
- Chord IV (Subdominant)
- Chord V (Dominant)

**Pattern**
The most commonly used pattern for the 12-bar blues looks like this:

```
I  I  I  I  I
IV IV I  I  I
V  IV I  V/I
```
Let’s look at the three primary chords in C major.

1. Colour in the keys for an **C major chord** and play the chord. This is Chord I (tonic).

2. Colour in the keys for an **F major chord** and play the chord. This is Chord IV (Subdominant).

3. Colour in the keys for a **G major chord** and play the chord. This is Chord V (Dominant).

4. Play the three primary chords on the keyboard.
Below is the most commonly used chord pattern for the 12 bar blues:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chord Pattern for 12 bar blues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bar 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Fill in the chord patterns using the primary chords in C major (C, F, G)?

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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bar 9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
You can play left hand accompaniments for blues music in different ways. Below are a few examples to practice as your teacher improvises the right hand.

**A. Bass notes only**

Play the first note of the chord only.

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{4/4} & \text{o} & \text{o} & \text{o} \\
\text{5} & \text{o} & \text{o} & \text{o} \\
\text{6} & \text{o} & \text{o} & \text{o} \\
\end{array}
\]
B. Triads

Play the first, third and fifth note of the chord.

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{4th}\, \text{note} & \text{6th}\, \text{note} & \text{5th}\, \text{note} & \text{3rd}\, \text{note} \\
8 & 8 & 8 & 8
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{5th}\, \text{note} & \text{6th}\, \text{note} & \text{5th}\, \text{note} & \text{3rd}\, \text{note} \\
8 & 8 & 8 & 8
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{6th}\, \text{note} & \text{6th}\, \text{note} & \text{5th}\, \text{note} & \text{3rd}\, \text{note} \\
8 & 8 & 8 & 8
\end{array}
\]

C. Open 5\textsuperscript{th} > 6th

Play the first and fifth note of the chord and then move to the first and sixth note of the chord.

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{4th}\, \text{note} & \text{6th}\, \text{note} & \text{5th}\, \text{note} & \text{3rd}\, \text{note} \\
\text{8} & \text{8} & \text{8} & \text{8}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{5th}\, \text{note} & \text{6th}\, \text{note} & \text{5th}\, \text{note} & \text{3rd}\, \text{note} \\
\text{8} & \text{8} & \text{8} & \text{8}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{6th}\, \text{note} & \text{6th}\, \text{note} & \text{5th}\, \text{note} & \text{3rd}\, \text{note} \\
\text{8} & \text{8} & \text{8} & \text{8}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{7th}\, \text{note} & \text{6th}\, \text{note} & \text{5th}\, \text{note} & \text{3rd}\, \text{note} \\
\text{8} & \text{8} & \text{8} & \text{8}
\end{array}
\]
4c. Primary Chords: Accompaniments

Extension: Can you work out the primary chords in the key of G major and complete the charts below. Practice the different types of accompaniment using these new chords.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chord I</th>
<th>Chord IV</th>
<th>Chord V</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G major</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Chord Pattern for 12 bar blues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bar 1</th>
<th>Bar 2</th>
<th>Bar 3</th>
<th>Bar 4</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bar 5</th>
<th>Bar 6</th>
<th>Bar 7</th>
<th>Bar 8</th>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bar 9</th>
<th>Bar 10</th>
<th>Bar 11</th>
<th>Bar 12</th>
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</table>

How confident do you feel identifying primary chords and playing different accompaniments for blues music?

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The blues scale is different to other scales that you may already know.

Some notes, known as “blues” notes, are flattened by a semitone.

These give the music a special “blues” sound.

Below is a blues scale starting on C.

1. Fill in the boxes with the letter names of the notes. Join them to the right note on the keyboard below.
2. Play these notes on the keyboard using your thumb for the white notes and finger 3 for the black notes.

Extension: Can you work out the notes of the blues scale starting on G. Write them below:
6. Blues Improvisation

**Improvising** is when you make something up as you go along.

1. Identify the notes of the blues scale on your keyboard (*you may want to put sticky tabs on the keys to help*).

2. Improvise a blues tune with your right-hand using the notes of the blues scale starting on C. Your teacher will play the left-hand accompaniment.

3. Play the left-hand accompaniment whilst your teacher improvises the right-hand blues tune
   a. Bass note only
   b. Triads
   c. Open 5\(^{th}\) > 6\(^{th}\)

Extension: Pick a rhythm card and play a left-hand accompaniment using the chosen rhythm.

How confident did you feel improvising?

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## 7. Rhythms Cards

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<tr>
<th>Rhythm Cards</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>🌐 🌐 🌐 🌐</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhythm Cards</th>
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## 8. Listening cards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Quick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scary</td>
<td>Lively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonely</td>
<td>Melancholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm</td>
<td>2 beats in a bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 beats in a bar</td>
<td>3 beats in a bar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Robert Johnson – Cross Road Blues (1936)

Lyrics for Cross Road Blues

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above, "Have mercy, now, save poor Bob if you please"

Ooh, standin' at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride
Ooh-ee, I tried to flag a ride
Didn't nobody seem to know me, babe, everybody pass me by

Standin' at the crossroad, baby, risin' sun goin' down
Standin' at the crossroad, baby, eee-eee, risin' sun goin' down
I believe to my soul, now, poor Bob is sinkin' down

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
That I got the crossroad blues this mornin', Lord, babe, I'm sinkin' down

And I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west
I went to the crossroad, baby, I looked East and West
Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman, ooh well, babe, in my distress
Repertoire suggestions for teachers

Early Elementary
Twelve Bar Blues and Monkey Blues, Piano Safari Repertoire Book 1 by Katherine Fisher and Julie Knerr

Elementary
Superduck, Higgledy Piggledy Jazz for Piano by Elena Cobb

Early Intermediate
Dusty Blue, Paint Box by June Armstrong
Bonfire Boogie, Easy Jazzin’ about the year by Pam Wedgewood
Don’t Wanna’ Leave You Blues, Jazz, Rags & Blues by Martha Mier

For more information on How to Play The Blues, why not take check out the videos and resources in the February 2018 Curiosity Box “From Blues to Beyonce”.