

The Blues

The blues is a musical genre and form which originated in the United States in the later 1800's. Combined with ragtime, the blues directly influence the creation of jazz and its ongoing importance to the development of jazz can't be stressed enough. Most beginning jazz improvisers learn this form first as it is relatively simple and easy to apply improvisational techniques to.

For our purposes, we will be focusing on the 12-bar blues form, which in its simplest version only utilizes three chords, the I, IV and V chords of the key. The blues can be played in any key but the most common are F and Bb. We will be working on blues in F for this course.

Here is an example of the most basic blues form:

Musical notation for the most basic 12-bar blues form in F major, 4/4 time. The notation consists of three staves, each with four measures. The first staff starts with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The chords and their Roman numerals are: G7 (I) in the first measure, followed by three measures with a slash (/). The second staff starts at measure 5 with C7 (IV) in the first measure, followed by three measures with a slash (/). The third staff starts at measure 9 with D7 (V) in the first measure, C7 (IV) in the second measure, G7 (I) in the third measure, and a slash (/) in the fourth measure.

Over the years, jazz musicians have altered the structure a bit by adding chords to create more movement and voice leading possibilities.

Here is an example of a standard jazz blues:

Musical notation for a standard jazz blues form in F major, 4/4 time. The notation consists of three staves, each with four measures. The first staff starts at measure 13 with G7 (I) in the first measure, C7 (IV) in the second measure, G7 (I) in the third measure, and a slash (/) in the fourth measure. The second staff starts at measure 17 with C7 (IV) in the first measure, a slash (/) in the second measure, G7 (I) in the third measure, and a slash (/) in the fourth measure. The third staff starts at measure 21 with Am7 (ii) in the first measure, D7 (V) in the second measure, G7 (I) in the third measure, and E7 (VI) in the fourth measure. The fourth staff starts at measure 25 with Am7 (ii) in the first measure, D7 (V) in the second measure, G7 (I) in the third measure, and E7 (VI) in the fourth measure.

*some people play iii or A minor instead of I here

In 1951, Charlie Parker wrote Blues for Alice which became known as "Bird Blues". There are many more chords and it's much more complicated than the original blues. Notice the form still centers around the I and IV chords in measure 1 and 5. Also, the last 4 measures are identical to the typical jazz blues.

Here is an example of a Bird Blues:

25

Gmaj7 F#m7(b5) B7 Em7 A7 Dm7 G7

29

C7 Cm7 F7 Bm7 E7 Bbm7 Eb7

33

Am7 D7 G7 E7 Am7 D7