

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: F7 (I) in the first measure, followed by a slash (no chord) in the second, third, and fourth measures. The second staff starts with a measure number '5' and contains: Bb7 (IV) in the first measure, a slash in the second, F7 (I) in the third, and a slash in the fourth. The third staff starts with a measure number '9' and contains: C7 (V) in the first measure, Bb7 (IV) in the second, F7 (I) in the third, and a slash in the fourth. Each measure contains a single eighth note on the middle line of the staff.

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 with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The chords and their Roman numerals are: F7 (I) in the first measure, Bb7 (IV) in the second, F7 (I) in the third, and a slash in the fourth. The second staff starts with a measure number '13' and contains: Bb7 (IV) in the first measure, a slash in the second, F7 (I) in the third, and a slash in the fourth. The third staff starts with a measure number '17' and contains: Gmi7 (ii) in the first measure, C7 (V) in the second, F7 (I) and D7 (VI) in the third, and Gmi7 (ii) and C7 (V) in the fourth. Each measure contains a single eighth note on the middle line of the staff.

*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 F maj7 Em7(b5) A7 Dm7 G7 Cm7 F7

29 Bb7 Bbm7 Eb7 Am7 D7 Abm7 Db7

33 Gm7 C7 F7 D7 Gm7 C7