

SOME BLUES BASICS (Part 1)

Playing through blues progressions is something that most, if not all, guitarists enjoy at some point or another. This idiomatic succession of chords is not only common in the blues style, but finds its way into other musical genres, including pop/rock, Rn'B, and jazz, among others.

Commonly, the blues progression is structured as a 12-bar pattern that repeats. The chord that starts the progression is understood as the "tonic" of the progression; this means, if you're starting on an F-rooted chord, you're playing a "blues in [the key of] F." Example 1 shows the chord progression for a basic 12-bar blues in F. (Note how it is quite common in this style to play all of the chords as dominant-7th chord types, i.e. 1–3–5–b7).

Example 1: A basic 12-bar blues progression in the key of F

The image shows a 12-bar blues progression in the key of F. The first staff contains the first four bars: F7, Bb7, F7, and a slash. The second staff contains the remaining eight bars: Bb7, slash, C7, Bb7, F7, and C7. The notation is in 4/4 time and uses a treble clef.

[Audio Example]

This progression can be embellished in a variety of ways by adding more chords and chord-types. However, an important contributor to the characteristic sound of the blues progression is the change to the IV chord in bar 5—in this case, Bb7. (This is the IV chord because its root lies four diatonic scale steps above the tonic, F; hence, I–II–III–IV = F, G, A, Bb.)

Apart from the widespread use of this progression, and its variants, another reason why guitarists might enjoy playing through it is because it can be relatively easy to improvise over. Specifically, it's possible to solo over the entire progression shown in Example 1 with a single scale; namely, the F Pentatonic (or Blues) Scale. Example 2 shows one way to play this scale.

Example 2: One way to play the F Blues Scale (F, Ab, Bb, Bb, C, Eb)

The image shows the F Blues Scale in a treble clef. The scale is written as a sequence of notes: F, Ab, Bb, Bb, C, Eb. Below the staff, there are three lines representing the T, A, and B strings of a guitar. The T string has no fret numbers. The A string has fret numbers 8, 9, 10, 9, 8. The B string has fret numbers 11, 8, 11, 8, 11, 8. The fret numbers are placed below the corresponding notes on the staff.

[Audio Example]

Of course, just because it's possible to use only this scale when soloing over the blues progression, this doesn't mean that your note choices within the scale don't matter. Though simply running up and down the F Blues Scale may not sound terrible, it would be preferable to have a certain amount of coherence and direction to your solo. This is where "target notes" come in...

In this lesson, target notes will be those scale notes that you want to aim for at particular moments during your solo. Hitting specific target notes at specific times will help to give your solo some coherence by bringing out the sound of the chords that you're playing over at any given moment.

[Note: a convincing solo is one in which you can hear the underlying changes even if you're playing without accompaniment. This means that, when you're practicing, you shouldn't just practice running scales at various speeds, or individual licks. Instead, you should imagine that you're actually playing over changes, and strive to hear those changes in your head.]

To begin, the target notes will be the roots of the chords used in the progression: F, B \flat , and C. The fact that a single F Blues Scale contains all three of these roots is one reason why this scale is so effective. Example 3 reproduces the scale shown in the previous example, but highlights the aforementioned target notes.

Example 3: The F Blues Scale, with "target notes" highlighted

F B \flat C F B \flat C F C B \flat F C B \flat F C F

T
A
B
8 11 8 9 10 8 10 9 11 12 13 11 13 11 13 12 11 9 10 8 10 9 8 11 8 11 8 11 8

The general idea when using target notes is that you should aim for the target note that corresponds to the underlying chord, and do so specifically at the chord's point of entry. This means that, over the F7 chord, you should aim for target-note F; over B \flat 7, you should aim for target-note B \flat ; over C7, you should aim for target-note C. One additional detail that I would like to add, however, is that you do not have to hit these targets every time the corresponding chord passes by. Instead, you should try to hit the target note *only when the underlying chord begins*. For example, you do not have to hit target-note F at the beginning of both measures 3 and 4. Hitting target-note F at the beginning

of measure 3 alone will provide enough direction to your solo by sufficiently signaling the change to the corresponding F7. Example 4 plays through a 12-bar blues in F, and hits the target notes at the appropriate times.

Example 4: Hitting target notes at the entry-point of each chord

[Audio Example]

The next step will be to embellish your solo by playing notes other than the target notes. What is important, though, is that you continue to hit the targets shown in the previous example even while embellishing.

A simple way to embellish your solo is to use "passing" and "neighbor" notes. Passing notes are notes that connect two notes that are separated by a small leap. For instance, if you transition from target-note F to target-note B \flat through a connecting A \flat , the A \flat can be considered a passing note (since, in the F Blues Scale, the notes go: F–A \flat –B \flat , etc). Neighbor notes result when you play a note that is adjacent to the one you were just playing, and then immediately return. So, if you play the line F–E \flat –F over an F7 chord, the E \flat could be considered a neighbor note since it is neighboring the note F.

While working on embellishments, it's interesting to note how every target note shown in Example 3 is separated by only one scale note. This means that every note in the scale that *is not a target note* can function as an embellishment to one of the target notes. Example 5 embellishes Example 4 using passing and neighbor notes (in the example, TN = Target Note; P = Passing Note; N = Neighbor Note). This example is also provided without accompaniment. You will notice how, in the unaccompanied version, it is still possible to "hear" the underlying blues progression as a result of the appropriately placed target notes.

Adding these basic, but effective embellishments, when used in conjunction with well-timed target notes, will immediately begin to turn your solo into something coherent, convincing, and tasteful.

Example 5: Hitting target notes at the entry-point of each chord

F7	B \flat 7	F7	∕	B \flat 7	∕
TN P	TN P	TN N	TN P	TN N	TN P
TAB	TAB	TAB	TAB	TAB	TAB
10° 9	11° 9	10° 8	10° 9	11° 12	11° 9

F7	∕	C7	B \flat 7	F7	C7
TN N	TN P	TN P	TN P	TN	TN
TAB	TAB	TAB	TAB	TAB	TAB
10° 8	10 10 8	10 10 9	8 8 11	8	10

[Audio Example]

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