

Friday Easy Jam with Joe Cribbin

Handout No.3- 03-04-2020 12 bar Blues in E

In this handout we will look at how to play a 12 Bar blues progression and how to write and structure lyrics for this song form. This handout is useful for instrumentalists, singers, lyricists and even drummers.

Some History

The 12 bar blues form is very common song form and can be heard in lots of popular musical genres including, Rock, Pop, Reggae, Folk and of course Blues. The song form was first popularised by American songwriter W.C Handy in 1912 when he published the song Memphis Blues. The song proved immensely popular across America and started the blues craze leading to Blues becoming a key marketing term.

According to Handy blues had become "a common medium through which any such individual might express his personal feelings in a sort of a musical soliloquy". Handy describes the 12-bar form "with its three-chord basic structure (tonic-subdominant-dominant seventh)" as one widely used "by Negro roustabouts, honky-tonk piano players, wanderers and others of their underprivileged but undaunted clan from Missouri to the Gulf [of Mexico]".

Listening

You can hear examples of the 12 bar blues form in the following songs:

Tooti Fruti – Little Richard

Rock and Roll – Led Zeppelin

Jonny B Goode – Chuck Berry

I still haven't found what I'm looking for - U2

Ball and Biscuit- The White Stripes

Give me one reason – Tracy Chapman

Hound Dog – Big Mama Thornton

Structure of 12 bar progression

Let's look at the structure of the 12 bar blues progression and how to play it. In its basic form the 12 bar blues progression uses just 3 chords. This makes it easy to learn and useful for other players to jam along with. Please note there are many variations on the 12 bar progression some with more chords and extra bars but for the purposes of this exercise we will only use 3 chords from the Key of E. if you want to skip the theory go straight to the chord chart.

In the key of E we will use the following chords I, IV and V or Tonic, Sub dominant and Dominant, below is a diagram showing the chords in the Key of E.

Degree	I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii
Chord	E major	F# minor	G# minor	A major	B major	C# minor	D# dim

We are going to use the I IV and V chords so that would give us E major, A major and B Major.

To give the chords more of a blues feel we are going to use 7th Chords. A **seventh chord** is created by adding a flattened 7th to the existing Triad for the chord. For E major we have the triad E G# and B. The 7th note of the scale of E is D# which we flatten to D giving us E G# B D or E7

The notes for each chord we will play are as follows

- E7 = EG#BD
- A7 = AC#EG
- B7 = B D# F# A

Task

Using the instrument of your choice play through the chord progression below. You can use whole notes to begin with so you can feel where the chords change and once you are familiar with the structure add some more rhythmical elements perhaps using triplets to give the progression more swing.

E7

A7

B7

The image shows three guitar fretboard diagrams for E7, A7, and B7 chords. E7: Fret 1, index on B (2nd string), middle on D (4th string), ring on G# (5th string). A7: Fret 1, index on A (2nd string), middle on E (4th string), ring on G# (5th string). B7: Fret 0, index on B (2nd string), middle on D# (4th string), ring on F# (5th string).

12 bar in E

1	2	3	4
:E7 / / / E7 / / / E7 / / / E7 / / /			
At 3 am in the morning I can't close my eyes			
5	6	7	8
A7 / / / A7 / / / E7 / / / E7 / / /			
At 3 am in the morning I can't close my eyes			
9	10	11	12
B7 / / / A7 / / / E7 / / / B7 / / / :			
I lie awake at night too tired to cry			

I have numbered each bar at the top to help with your transitions. Notice how the first 4 bars the home chord or Tonic is played. On Bar 5 we change to the A7 (Sub dominant or IV) chord for 2 bars, this gives a lift moving the chord progression along. On bar 7 we change back to the home chord or Tonic, in this case E7 for just 2 bars.

At bar 9 we have what we call the 'turnaround' which pushes back home, the B7 chord creates a lot of tension and wants to resolve to the home chord until we hit bar 11 and we are back at the tonic or home E7. To mark the end of the 12 bar there is often a push to the B7 for one bar on bar 12. This allows us to mark out the beginning of a new section of the 12 bar progression which can then repeat with solos or singing.

Writing lyrics for the 12 bar structure

When writing lyrics for the 12 bar blues it is important to be aware of the song form, the most common form for 12 bar blues is the AAB song format. This AAB structure can be used in both the lyrics and the melody. The basic structure of a typical 12 Bar Blues contains three four-bar lines or sections. This has its roots in religious music using call and response..

Notice how in the example above the first line is repeated and finally there is a pay off when we reach the turnaround at bar 9. You can think of this a bit like a set up for a joke with the B section being your punchline. You can raise a question in the AA section and respond to it in the B section. The refrain in the B section may be followed by a few bars of melody to lead us neatly back to bar one and the A section again.

Here is another example below from Jimmy Reed 'Bright lights big City' using the AAB song structure.

- A** Bright light, big city, gone to my baby's head
A Whoa, bright light, an'big city, gone to my baby's head
B I tried to tell the woman, but she don't believe a word I said

Task - Try to write your own blues lyric using the AAB lyric structure using a set up and punchline style refrain.

Extension Task:

- Try to write 12 blues chord progressions in other Keys such as A G and D
- Write your own blues song in a minor key how does it compare?
- Try and sing along with your favourite blues song. For a list of artists please see the list below.
- Write additional verse for the song 'Too tired to cry' used in the exercise above.

Remember not all blues uses this format but it's a good place to start, see if you can find other blues style progressions.

Blues Artists List

This is not a complete list by any means. Some of the artists crossover into Jazz, rock, punk etc.

John Lee Hooker
Ali Farqa Toure
Eric Clapton
Peter Green (early Fleetwood Mac)
Sister Rosetta Tharpe
Jimi Hendrix
Robert Cray
Grant Green
Robert Johnson
Blind Lemon Jefferson
Ma Rainey
Bessie Smith
Bonnie Rait
Etta James
Ana Popovic
Muddy Waters
Howlin Wolf
BB King
Lead Belly
Elmore James
Taj Mahal
Freddie King
Stevie Ray Vaughan
Christone Kingfish
Nina Simone
Fatback Deluxe
Matt Anderson
Danny Bryant
Tinariwen
Sue foley
Mississippi John Hurt
The White Stripes
Ty Falco
Jon spencer Blues Explosion
Left Lane Crusier
Jonny Cash
Billy Childish
The Jim Jones Revue.
Junior Kimbrough