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12 Bar Blues Worksheet

The 12 bar blues is a fundamental chord progression in the blues genre. It has influence in rock and roll, jazz, country, as well as pop, and variations of this form turn up everywhere in all genres of music. For that reason it is important to know about it and be familiar with it, and it is also a great deal of fun to play over.

As the name suggests, a 12 bar blues has 12 bars, so it is a really good exercise to count through those bars and make sure you can hear the “top”. When you can hear where the form begins again, you will be able to structure your solo accordingly.

Let’s look at a simple, highly effective way of improvising through a blues.

Use a blues scale

Play it straight and in time to the rhythm, going up and down the scale.

1. Play it straight, but not strictly to the time. Be flexible with the rhythm and play the scale up and down without changing the sequence of the notes.
2. Create motif ideas using a portion of the scale. Repeat and develop those ideas.
3. Create a story arc in your solo.

Play the generic blues

I have written out a generic blues melody for you. This is a really good melody to practise transposing into other keys.

Learn the generic blues, then try to learn it by ear and start throwing it around a little in your improvisation.

Follow the chords

Hit the root, then the root and third, then the root, third and fifth, then root, third, fifth and seventh, and finally root, third, fifth, seventh and ninth of each chord as it passes.

1. Experiment with improvising using only the root, third and fifth, or other combinations of chord tones if you like.
2. Experiment with playing the chord tones descending.

Mix the three ideas

Experiment with moving between chord tone ideas, the generic blues and blues scale ideas.

Final thoughts

Learning a blues is going to help you massively, as it is a very common chord structure that appears in many different genres of music. Becoming familiar with this progression will give you a strong foundation for improvisation.

Most importantly, the blues is simply a lot of fun to play.

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