CHAPTER 4

THE BLUES

Major meets Minor

You may have heard the saying “The Blues Had a Baby and They Called It Rock n’ Roll.” There is much truth to that old phrase. The blues has influenced many forms of American popular music, including gospel, jazz, country, and rock styles, which have now morphed into the myriad of genres present in today’s digital landscape.

Blues music may be considered basic and unadorned in some circles, but understanding blues in terms of standard music theory can be a difficult task. Our Western European tonal system is based on two pillars — major and minor. Blues basically exists between the cracks of major and minor, so traditional music theory is sometimes inadequate. This should not be surprising, for blues does not come solely from the European tradition. If you go back far enough, blues is actually a **blending of the European and African traditions**, representing a combination of British folk ballads with African-American worksongs and spirituals.

Essential Concepts / Skills
covered in chapter 4

- Blues scales, dom 7th chord, blue notes, vocal melisma
- Blues origins, cover songs
- Common chord progressions, especially the 12-bar blues form and its variations, as heard in pop song examples
- Signature riffs, boogie bass patterns, turnaround riffs
- Songwriting devices for creating focal points
- Ear training - I7, IV7, V7, chords

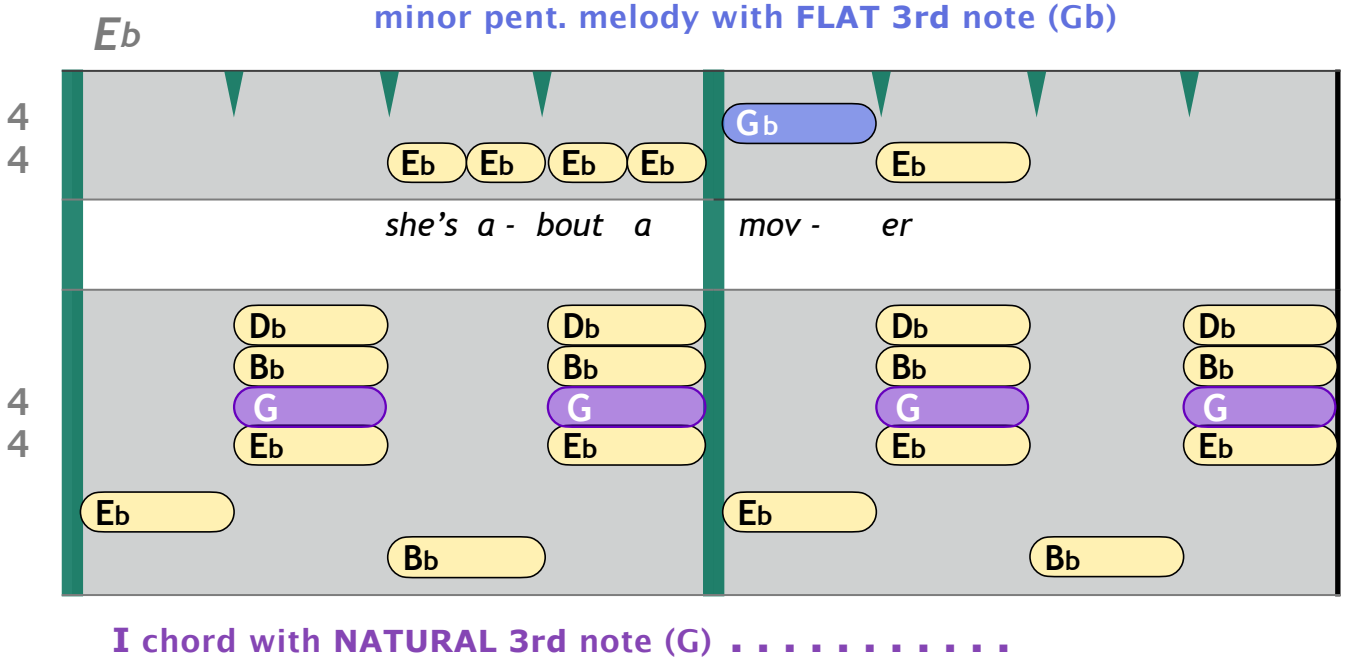
In terms of traditional music theory, there is no “official” 7-note blues scale, and no set of diatonic chords generated from the scale as with the major and minor keys. Instead, blues features a tonal mixture, most commonly using minor pentatonic melody notes over major triads I, IV, and V. This clash of minor over major, specifically the **flat 3rd scale degree in the melody** against the **natural 3rd note in the I chord**, is what give blues its unique harmonic sound.

Here’s an example of the blues sound in a pop/rock hit from 1965, illustrating the clash between melody and chords. The notes of the I chord are Eb, G, and Bb (scale degrees 1, 3, 5), and there is also a Db (b7) note, that gives additional blues flavor (more on the b7 later). START LISTENING AT **0:52.**

“She’s About a Mover” — Sir Douglas Quintet — 1965 **Eb blues** 1

For AUDIO, see the “Song Examples” playlist in the right sidebar, and click on track 1 song title. To navigate within the audio track, slide the progress bar forward to the desired starting point.

0:52 CHORUS



Origins of the Blues

As mentioned, although blues does not fit neatly into the Western European tonal system, it does borrow several basic elements from that tradition. The overall song form is taken from British folk songs and hymns, including the use of metered rhythm, with 12 or 16-bar verses, and 3 or 4-line lyric phrases. The I, IV, V chord accompaniment is also derived from Western harmony, not African music. In fact, for much of traditional African music, there is no harmony at all.

In terms of rhythm, the blues probably shows more African than European influence. In African tradition, rhythm is paramount, with some African pieces having neither harmony or melody — just drum ensembles playing very complex, non-metered polyrhythms. Western tradition has few, if any true polyrhythms, but the importance of syncopation (off-beat accents) in American blues, jazz, and eventually rock is often considered an echo of distant African beats.

Cultural differences also contribute to the contrast between blues and European music. For several centuries, European culture has been transmitted through the written word, while African culture is based on an oral tradition. This is reflected in the importance of the written score in European music, versus improvisation in African music. Trying to notate blues melodies can be quite frustrating, thanks to the use of unique pitches known as "**blue notes,**" which don't conform to standard European notation.

BLUE NOTES

Going back to the days of slavery and spirituals, African-American singers would modify the melodies to European hymns and folksongs, reflecting the different scales and sounds they carried from their African homeland. (Traditional African music is sometimes based on dividing the octave into 7 equal parts, unlike the 12 pitches we use in Western European tradition.) The most common notes to be altered were the 3rd, 5th, and b7 degrees, by sliding into each note from a half step below. Sometimes the slide would be as large as a whole step to the 3rd or 5th, creating a wide area of pitch ambiguity between the 2 and 3 and the 4 and 5.

At the turn of the 20th century, these blue notes were especially prominent in African-American **field hollers and worksongs**, two types of music that contributed substantially to the development of early blues. Here is an example of a field holler, recorded by researchers in rural Alabama in 1950. The numerous **pitch bends** and **slides** are mainly between the 2nd and 3rd degrees.

Children's Call" — Annie Grace Horn Dodson — 1950 | **A blues** | 2

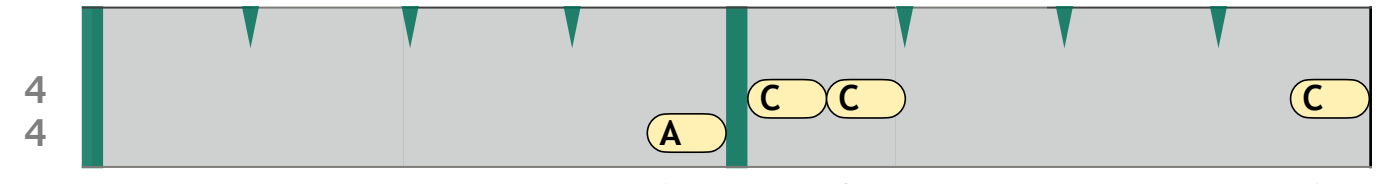
Over the years, blue notes gradually became an indelible part of virtually all American folk and pop — from blues and jazz, to R&B, gospel, and rock. These pitches are even prevalent in styles not usually associated with blues, such as country, bluegrass, and even Broadway show tunes.

A modern example of blue note singing can be heard on Eric Clapton's 1994 album Blues from the Cradle. Listen to how Clapton sings the word "ground" on the blues classic "I'm Tore Down," letting the pitch drift upward from the **flat 3rd** (Eb note in the key of C) towards the **natural 3rd** (E note).

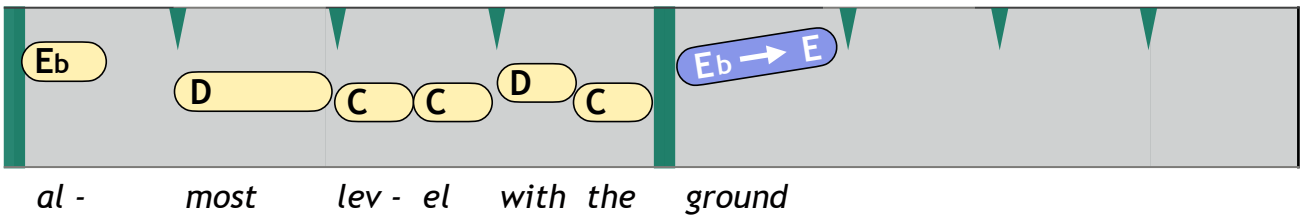
"I'm Tore Down" — Eric Clapton — 1994 (orig. Freddie King) | **C blues** | 3

0:08 VERSE

swing



BLUE NOTE



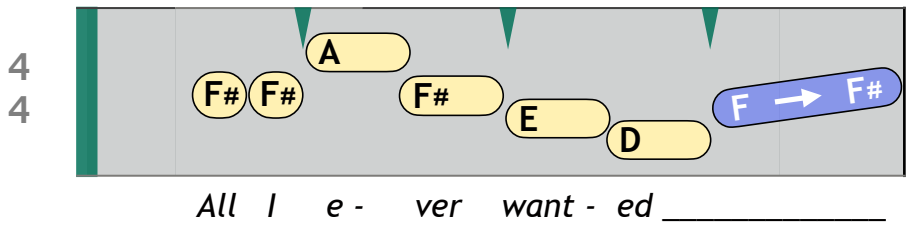
The note on “ground” is somewhere between E flat and E natural. It seems to rise up, so it is written in our alternative graphic notation as slanting upwards from left to right, as shown above. In traditional staff notation, there would be a slur mark written between the two notes of Eb and E. Either way, it is obviously difficult to capture blue notes in written notation.

Let’s check out another example of blue notes, this time from Bonnie Raitt. Listen to how she sings the word “ wanted.” START LISTENING AT **0:22**

“Come to Me” — Bonnie Raitt — 1991 | **D blues** | 4

0:22 VERSE

BLUE NOTE



Again we have problems trying to capture the singing in notation because the blue note on “wanted” falls somewhere between the pitches of F natural and F sharp. Many pop & rock songs contain blue notes, so we must remember that these melodies are best learned by ear rather than printed score.

Since blue notes originated with the voice, they are also quite difficult to imitate on a fixed-pitch instrument like a piano — you have to either trill between 2 notes or simply crush them together. This is why pop & rock vocal melodies can sound too formal or “stilted” when played on a piano alone. The guitar, however, is ideally suited for blues, thanks to the magic of string bending. In fact, it has always been the highest compliment to say that a blues guitarist can really make his instrument “talk” (think of B.B. King and his beloved guitar “Lucille”).

In our last example for this section, we’ll listen to blue notes on guitar, but with a twist. The pitches are bent by sliding a metal bar across the top of the strings — better known as “**slide guitar**.” This technique is also a part of the blues tradition, and the style was carried

into the rock era by blues rock bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd, Z Z Top, and The Allman Brothers. In "Statesboro Blues" listen to how Duane Allman makes his guitar "talk," answering the short vocal phrases of brother Gregg, STARTING AT **0:39**. This **vocal call / instrumental response** is a hallmark of the blues style.

"Statesboro Blues" — Allman Brothers Band — 1971 (orig. Blind Willie McTell)	**D blues**	5

— **0:46** (verse) **Call & response** "dialogue" between vocal & slide guitar

— **1:32** (guitar solo) Exaggerated **BLUE NOTES** especially at **1:39**

VOCAL MELISMA

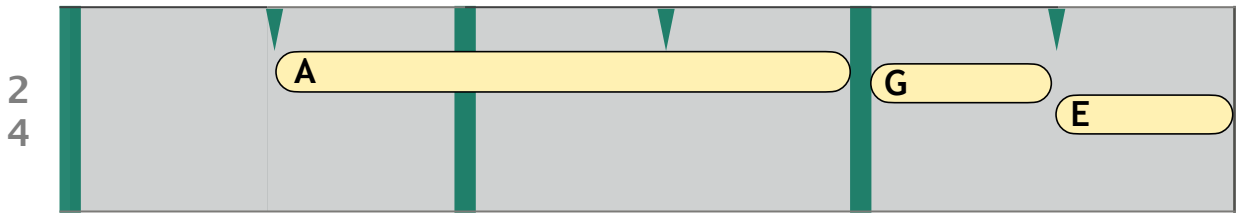
Another reason blues-based melodies don't translate well to standard notation is the extensive use of improvisation and embellishment, especially by gospel and R&B style singers. These singers often add several extra notes per syllable — a style called "**melisma**." This style goes as far back as Gregorian chant in the European Middle Ages. However, the modern R&B style of melisma comes from the African-American blues tradition, containing numerous blue notes. Here is another field holler, this time sung with extensive melisma. The recording was made in 1947 among the inmates of Parchman Farm, the notorious Mississippi State prison. Listen for words like "well," "morning," and "time" that are sung with up to a dozen notes per word.

"Levee Camp Holler" — Bama — 1950	**A blues**	6

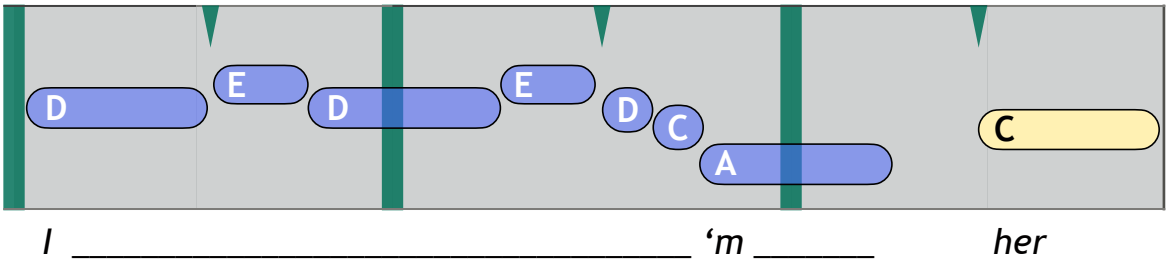
The roots of melisma in American pop music can be traced from Ray Charles to Little Richard, Mariah Carey, and Alicia Keys to name only a few. Here's an example of gospel-style melisma from Mr. Charles (START LISTENING AT **2:22**)

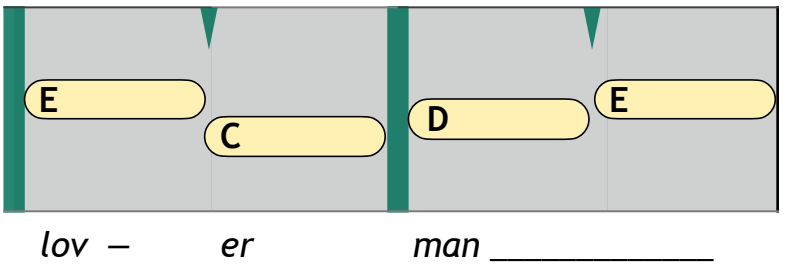
"I Got A Woman" — Ray Charles — 1955	**A blues**	7

2:22 LAST VERSE



MELISMA . . . . . .



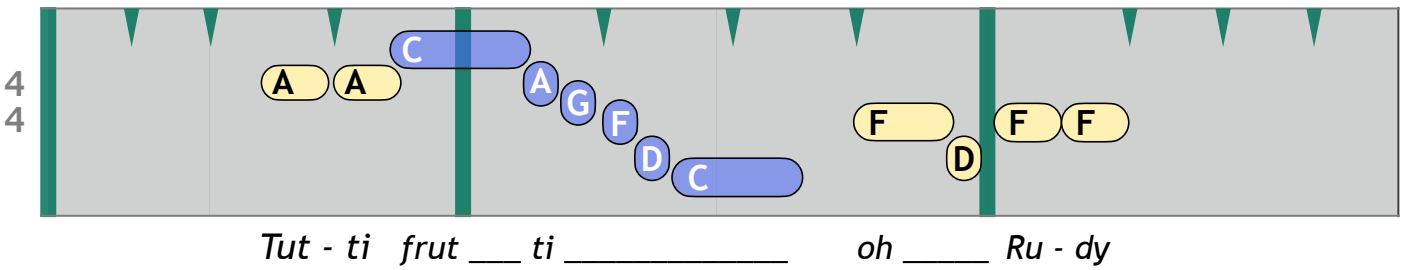


Listen at **0:10** to another pioneer of gospel melisma in early rock - Little Richard.

"Tutti Frutti" — Little Richard — 1956 | **F blues** | 8

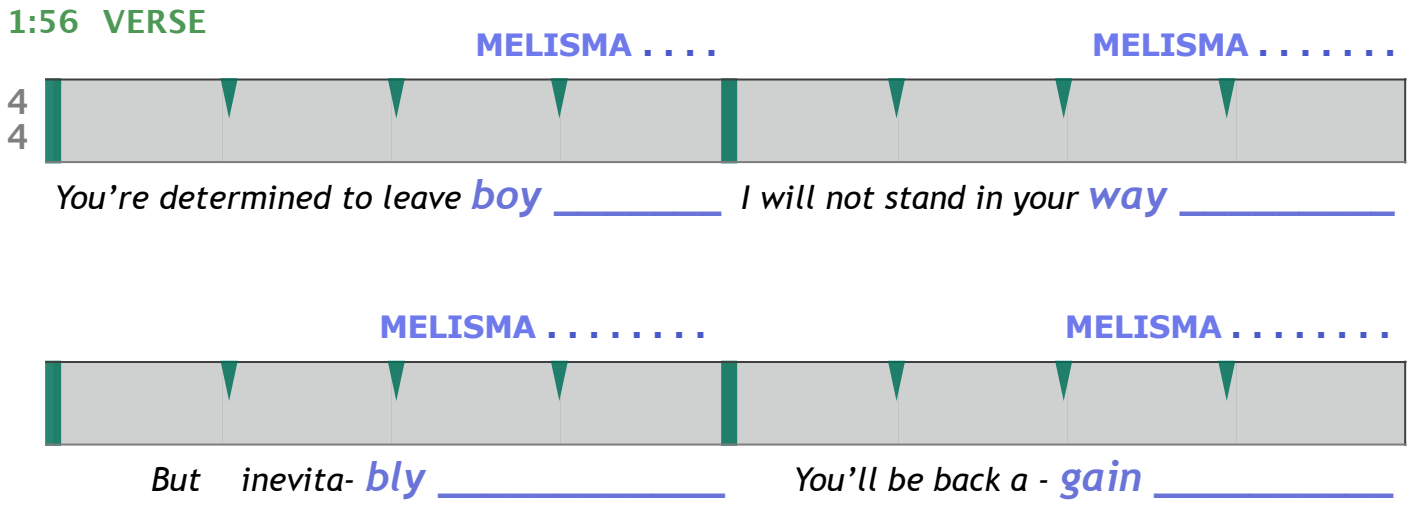
0:10 VERSE

MELISMA . . . . . .



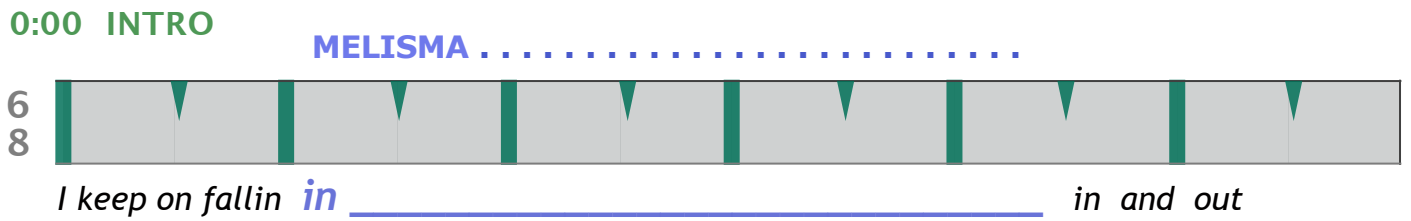
Here's a more recent example from Mariah Carey, carrying the melismatic gospel tradition forward into modern R&B. Listen for the quick flurry of notes on the words "boy," "way," "inevitably," " and "again" at the **1:56** time mark.

"Always Be My Baby" — Mariah Carey — 1996 | **E major** | 9



Alicia Keys represents a new generation of R&B singers heavily influenced by the gospel vocal style. This example is taken from her 2001 hit "Fallin."

"Fallin'" — Alicia Keys — 2001 | **E minor** | 10



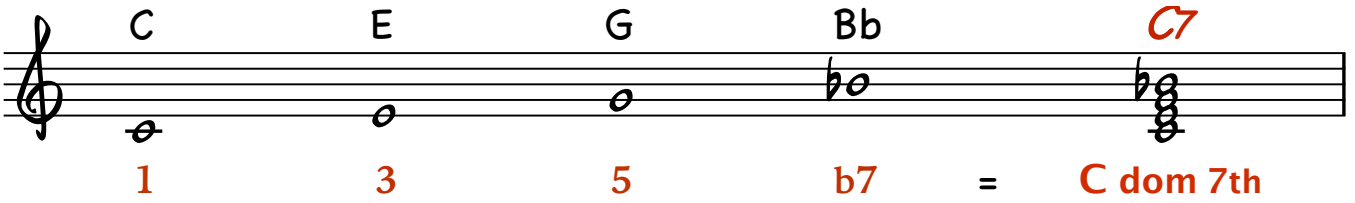
DOMINANT 7th CHORDS

It was mentioned earlier that the basic accompaniment in blues harmony consists of the I, IV, and V major triads. However, in the blues style these will often be 4-note chords instead of triads, adding the b7 note to create what are called **dominant 7ths**. (The word

"dominant" is usually omitted from the chord symbol.) This addition of the b7 was briefly mentioned earlier when listening to the song "She's About a Mover." Some blues may have all triads, some all 7ths, and some a mixture of the two. The formula for the C7 chord is shown below.

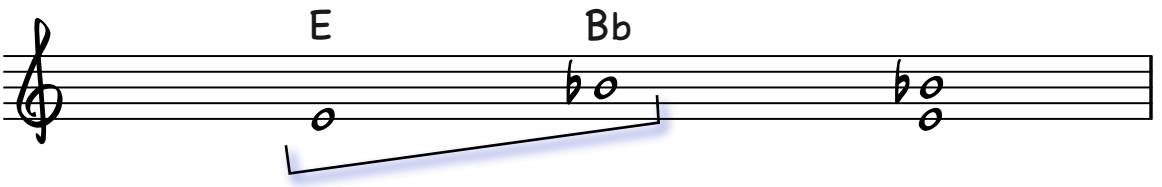
ex. 1

For AUDIO, see "Theory Examples" on top-right sidebar, and click on ex. 1



Two notes inside the structure of the C7 chord, E and Bb, form a special interval known as a **tritone**. The distance from E to Bb could be considered a diminished 5th, with E as the 1 and Bb as the b5. Remembering from Chapter Two that A# is another way to spell the Bb note, it could be called an augmented 4th, with E as the 1 and A# as a #4. Either way, the simplest way to describe a tritone is the 3 and b7 notes of a dom7 chord.

ex. 2 TRITONE INTERVAL



This distinctive interval has an arresting sound — so arresting that it is included in the blaring notes of a traditional train whistle. In the European Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical periods it was considered to be a dissonance best avoided. However, it is embraced as a signature of the blues sound. The tritone gives the dom 7th chord its unique, "edgy" sound, and the interval is often isolated and prominently featured in blues accompaniments and solos.

WRITTEN EXERCISE

Practice spelling some common dominant 7th chords by completing **Exercise 4.1** (see "Textbook Contents"/ "Volume 1"/ "Written Exercises").

BLUES COVERS

In addition to borrowing individual elements like blue notes, melisma, and dom 7th chords, many pop & rock artists have hit the charts by covering (re-recording) entire songs from the blues repertoire. You may have noticed previously on the green title bars that both "I'm Tore Down," and "Statesboro Blues" were cover songs, done originally by Freddie King and Blind Willie McTell respectively.

Sometimes the cover version is intentionally similar to the original, as the modern performer simply wants to pay respectful tribute to the bluesman's work. "I'm Tore Down" clearly falls in this category, as Eric Clapton's cover faithfully reproduced Freddie King's lyrics, melody, rhythmic feel, and even several of Freddie's guitar licks. For another blues cover that is very similar to the original, listen to Stevie Ray Vaughan's recording of the Buddy Guy tune "Leave My Girl Alone." Both versions are listed below.

"Leave My Girl Alone" — Buddy Guy — 1965 **Bb blues** 11

"Leave My Girl Alone" — Stevie Ray Vaughan — 1989 **A blues** 12

The legendary Muddy Waters was a favorite source of blues material during the 60s and 70s blues revival, influencing young British rockers like The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and Eric Clapton (both solo and with The Yardbirds and Cream), as well as American artists like The Allman Brothers and Stevie Ray Vaughan. The Stones covered several of Muddy's tunes over the years, including his "I Can't Be Satisfied" in 1964.

For this song, the band actually got to record in Chicago at the famous Chess studios (Muddy's hometown and record label). They were especially excited to meet Waters, having been fans of American blues for many years, and not surprisingly their version closely follows the original. However, the band would be the first to admit they couldn't quite capture the subtle nuances of Muddy's slide guitar licks, or the depth of the bluesman's vocal expression and blue note embellishments.

"I Can't Be Satisfied" — Muddy Waters — 1948	**G blues**	13

"I Can't Be Satisfied" — Rolling Stones — 1964	**G blues**	14

Additional BLUES COVERS that are SIMILAR TO ORIGINAL

Boom Boom	**John Lee Hooker**	**1962**	**F blues**
	Animals	**1964**	**E blues**
Little Red Rooster	**Howlin' Wolf**	**1961**	**A blues**
	Rolling Stones	**1965**	**G blues**
Going Down	**Freddie King**	**1970**	**D blues**
	Jeff Beck	**1972**	**G blues**
Close to You	**Muddy Waters**	**1958**	**B blues**
	Stevie Ray Vaughan	**1991**	**Ab blues**
Rollin' & Tumblin'	**Willie Newbern**	**1929**	**Ab blues**
	Eric Clapton	**1992**	**G blues**
Walkin' Blues	**Robert Johnson**	**1936**	**B blues**
	Eric Clapton	**1992**	**G blues**

In other recordings the cover is done radically different, as on the earlier slide guitar example “Statesboro Blues.” On that song the Allman Brothers transformed Willie McTell’s gentler, acoustic original (recorded in 1929) into a driving, southern-rock shuffle, complete with two drummers and lengthy electric solos. In the early 1970s the Allmans modified several other blues originals, including Muddy Waters’ “Hoochie Coochie Man,” and Sonny Boy Williamson’s “One Way Out.”

Here’s an example of a Muddy Waters tune covered by the English band Foghat in 1972. First listen to the original. The laid-back swing tempo is deceiving, only serving to heighten the intensity of Muddy’s trademark vocal delivery, as the opening syllables of each phrase seem to jump right out of the speakers.

“I Just Want to Make Love to You” - Muddy Waters - 1954 **D blues** 15

— 0:11 (verse) **Laid-back, swing rhythm**

In the cover version, Foghat brings its own intensity, giving the song a faster, driving beat with straight 8ths instead of the original swing feel. Foghat also replaces Muddy’s more delicate guitar riff with a chugging bass line that soon takes over the piece, morphing into the recording’s signature riff on distorted guitar.

“I Just Want to Make Love to You” — Foghat — 1972 **A blues** 16

— 0:00 (intro) Chugging bass line with **faster, driving beat** and **no swing**

— 0:40 Signature riff enters with **heavier, distorted guitar** sound

Elvis Presley was no stranger to blues covers, having recorded several blues songs in his early years including this next example originally done by Junior Parker. Once again the cover version speeds up the tempo. Presley’s train flies down the track at 90 miles an hour, transforming Parker’s lumbering, lazy delivery into a lighter, up-tempo blend of blues and

country — some would say the very pinnacle of early Memphis rockabilly. Also contributing to this difference is the instrumentation. Parker's record features a deliberate, heavy sax sound imitating a train horn, whereas the cover version omits the sax and features a percolating slap-back echo on the guitar strums.

"Mystery Train" — Junior Parker — 1953	**E blues**	17

— **0:18** (verse 1) **Laid-back, bluesy vocal** delivery with **lumbering tempo**

— **0:45** (verse 2) **Heavy sax** sound imitates train horn

"Mystery Train" — Elvis Presley — 1955	**E blues**	18

— **0:09** (verse 1) **Energetic, up-tempo** rockabilly style
Lighter, bubbling guitar sound with **slap-back echo**

Iconic British rock band Led Zeppelin specialized in covers, recording well over a dozen blues songs in the 1970s, including their first chart hit "Whole Lotta Love," which was based on Muddy Waters 1962 song "You Need Love." On most of their covers, Led Zeppelin chose to substantially re-work the originals, often transforming a relatively simple pre-war blues song with acoustic guitar into a full-blown production of arena rock.

This transformation is perfectly illustrated on Led Zeppelin's 1971 recording of "When the Levee Breaks." The song was originally recorded in 1929 by Memphis Minnie and Joe McCoy. Listen first to the original, noting the **fast tempo and delicate, jangling guitars** playing major I, IV, V chords, which create an upbeat mood. This is curiously at odds with the minor pentatonic blue notes in the melody, and the dark subject matter of the lyrics.

"When the Levee Breaks" — Memphis Minnie & Joe McCoy — 1929	**Bb blues**	19

Led Zeppelin's cover version - drenched in heavy reverb with low, rumbling bass, massive drum beats, and high, menacing harmonica notes - created a foreboding atmosphere few rock fans will forget. As Robert Plant sang "If it keeps on rainin' the levee's going to break," it is not hard to imagine the black storm clouds rolling in. Group guitarist Jimmy Page has stated in interviews that their version is almost unrecognizable from the original, for he wanted to make the song sound as ominous as possible. Most would agree that the group succeeded. Notice that unlike the previously heard covers, this recording is decidedly slower than the original.

"When the Levee Breaks" — Led Zeppelin — 1971 | **F blues** | 20

— **0:00** The recording opens with a **heavy, propulsive drum beat**.

— **0:07** A **high, shimmering harmonica** enters with an **arresting tone**, playing notes that sound like a train horn.

Underneath, the bass and guitar play a **low, rumbling riff**, based on the **dark**- **sounding b3 to 1 notes**. This adds a menacing touch to the song. The mood is ominous.

There is no chord "progression," just **one single chord** acting as a **hypnotic drone** over the first minute of the song

— **1:08** The chords briefly change and a **swirling guitar** slides between each chord, adding to the **trance-like** feeling.

— **1:24** (verse) - Vocals enter as the song settles back to the single droning chord.

This musical transformation from original to cover version is due mainly to differences in something called **timbre** - ie. tone quality. Timbre can be described in terms of "bright" vs. "dull" or "smooth" vs. "rough," but it should not be confused with pitch, which describes "high" vs. "low." For example, the middle C note on a piano is a specific pitch. Yet that same exact pitch (same octave) could be played on a clarinet, flute, or trombone. It is the unique tone or timbre that would allow us to identify each instrument.

A WORD ABOUT TIMBRE

While traditional musical analysis often focuses on the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, or form, the element of timbre is sometimes overlooked. Timbre is crucial to the overall presentation of a song. In symphonic music, the composer gives careful consideration to which combination of instruments will play a specific part.

Although rock bands typically have fewer instruments than an orchestra, timbral creativity in pop music is just as important (if not more so) than in classical music. With the advent of electronic effects and the synthesizer in the late 60s, musicians can now create completely new timbres that go beyond the sound of traditional instruments. Rock guitarists have been known to spend hours and hours experimenting with the array of effects pedals at their feet, trying to find just the right sound for a song. In the studio, more time is often spent on mixdown and production than actually writing melodies and chord progressions. In fact, advances in audio technology have basically transformed the modern recording studio into another instrument and the sound engineer into another performing musician.

When we listen to many pop & rock songs of the last 60 years, it is clear that the creative interest is not always in the melody or harmony of these songs. Many classic hits have a **weak "melodic ID"** - ie, a narrow, blues-based melody that pivots around the same two or three notes for the entire song. If only the melody line is played on a single piano, it would be hard for most listeners to distinguish the difference between Led Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker," Elvis's "Jailhouse Rock," Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama," Tim McGraw's "Down on the Farm," or Def Leppard's "Let's Get Rocked."

In terms of chord progressions, there are also many well-known songs that have a **weak "harmonic ID,"** based on only one chord throughout the entire song. These include diverse hits like Kool & The Gang's "Jungle Boogie," David Bowie's "Fame," George Thorogood's "Who Do You Love," Harry Nilsson's "Coconut," and the recent hit "Bang Bang" from Jessie J, et.al. - not to mention all the one-chord minor key songs listed previously in Chapter Two. In many of these songs, as well as the cover songs discussed above, the interest lies mainly in the rhythm and especially in the timbre.

Let's listen to another Led Zeppelin blues cover titled "Bring It on Home." This time the band chose to have it both ways, combining a section that closely copies the original with a middle section that dramatically changes the style. First, the original by bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson II:

"Bring It on Home" — Sonny Boy Williamson II — 1963 **Eb blues** 21

The cover version starts with what seems to be a direct copy or even a parody of Sonny Boy's original. Singer Robert Plant tries to imitate Williamson's vocal style, right down to the drawn-out, moaning syllables, the rapid vibrato, and other inflections. The mood is quiet and understated, with a medium-tempo shuffle beat. Then at **1:43**, the song suddenly explodes into a fast-paced, hard-rock style, with a funky 16th-note pulse in the rhythm. This second section is like a different song, with a different form, chords, melody, and lyrics - only the title phrase remains.

"Bring It on Home" — Led Zeppelin — 1969 **E blues** 22

No artist in pop & rock history has recorded more blues covers than British rock guitarist Eric Clapton. At last count, he has recorded over 100 songs from the blues tradition in his long and illustrious career. He may be known to some fans for his well-crafted pop hits of the 1970s and 80s, and to others as the original rock guitar hero, influencing an entire generation of electric lead guitarists. But those who know him best recognize that his musical foundation is in the blues.

Clapton got his start in the 1960s with seminal blues-rock bands like John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, The Yardbirds, and Cream, and 30 years later he released an entire collection of blues covers on his best-selling 1994 album "From The Cradle." There are several Eric Clapton blues covers scattered throughout this book - some faithfully copying the original like "Walkin' Blues" and "Rollin & Tumblin," and others changing the original in dramatic ways like "Crossroads" and "Motherless Children."

The next song features one of his dramatic transformations. Listen first to the original version of "Mean Old Frisco," recorded by Little Brother Montgomery in 1931 as "Frisco High-Ball Blues:"

"Frisco High-Ball Blues" – Little Brother Montgomery – 1931 **G blues** 23

— 0:07 (verse) **Energetic, up-tempo** boogie woogie accompaniment on **solo acoustic piano** with **swing rhythm**

Now listen to Eric Clapton's 1977 cover recording. The song is totally transfomed from a clean, energetic piano boogie woogie into a slow-burn rock song with heavy drum backbeat, and dirty electric slide. Also note the occasional repeated guitar riff (not on the original) that answers some of the vocal phrases.

"Mean Old Frisco" – Eric Clapton – 1977	**G blues**	24

— 0:01 (intro) **Slow tempo** with straight rock backbeat on drums (**no swing**)
Lazy slide guitar licks with a **thick, distorted** sound playing an instrumental version of the melody

— 0:35 (verse) Slide guitar continues as vocal enters, doubling the melody with the voice (a common trait of early folk blues)

— 0:53 **Added guitar riff** answers the vocal phrase on lines 2 and 3 of the verse

Additional BLUES COVERS that TRANSFORM the ORIGINAL

That's All Right	**Arthur Crudup**	**1946**	**Bb blues**
	Elvis Presley	**1959**	**A blues**
Crossroads	**Robert Johnson**	**1936**	**B blues**
	Cream	**1968**	**A blues**
Whole Lotta Love	**Muddy Waters**	**1962**	**E blues**
	Led Zeppelin	**1969**	**E blues**
Early in the Morning	**Louis Jordan**	**1947**	**G blues**
	Harry Nilsson	**1971**	**C blues**
Hallelujah I Love Her So	**Ray Charles**	**1956**	**Bb blues**
	Humble Pie	**1971**	**D blues**
One Way Out	**Sonny Boy Williamson**	**1961**	**Db blues**
	Allman Brothers	**1972**	**A blues**

Hoochie Coochie Man	**Muddy Waters**	**1954**	**A blues**
	Allman Brothers	**1973**	**A blues**
Wang Dang Doodle	**Howlin' Wolf**	**1960**	**E blues**
	Pointer Sisters	**1973**	**C blues**
Motherless Children	**Blind Willie Johnson**	**1927**	**D blues**
	Eric Clapton	**1974**	**A blues**

NOTE - There are dozens of blues covers throughout this book. When these songs are presented, the original artist's name will be shown alongside the current pop & rock artist.

BLUES SCALES and IMPROVISATION

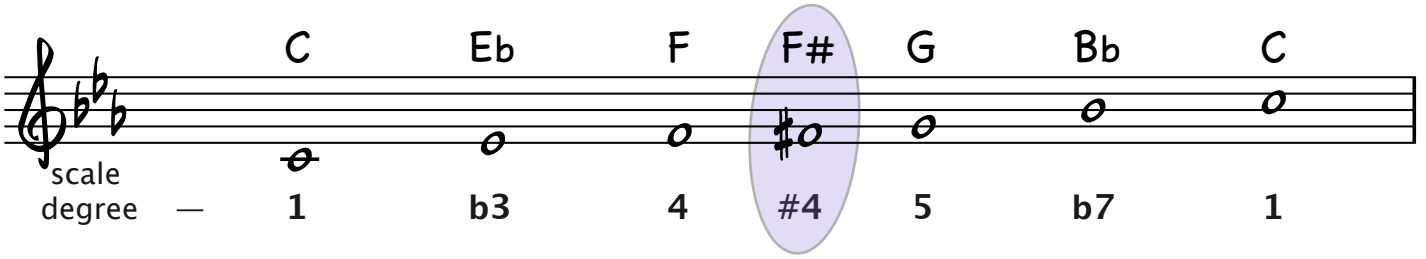
As mentioned in Chapters Two and Three, the numerous song examples and "Additional Listening" lists throughout this book provide lots of raw material for practicing improvisation, since key info is listed for every song. Chapter Two briefly discussed using the major pentatonic scale as a starting point for improvising solos with the major key songs, and Chapter Three suggested using the minor pentatonic on the minor key songs.

However, a detailed explanation of scales and improv is beyond the scope of this book. Players will want to consult the supplemental guitar workbook that accompanies this main text for much more in-depth information. The workbook includes discussions about phrasing and technique, along with suggested riffs and how to play some of the famous "signature riffs" included in the main text. For now, we will include here only a brief discussion of some scale choices for blues improvising.

As mentioned earlier, there is no “official” 7-note blues scale, and no set of diatonic chords generated from the scale as with the major and minor keys. Blues melodies and riffs are often based on some version of the **minor pentatonic** scale, although the basic chords are I, IV, and V borrowed from the major key. This sets up the unique tonal mixture of major and minor. However, blues improv can also be approached from the major side, starting with the **major pentatonic** scale and then adding occasional b3 or b7 notes for a bluesier sound. You can even use both pentatonics in the same song, such as the major over the I and V chords, and minor over the IV. (Jazz players are used to following the chord changes like this, and they often go one step further - playing embellished dominant 7th arpeggios to match each chord).

This can all get very complicated from a theory standpoint, so beginning improvisers usually start with the basic minor pentatonic covered in Chapter Three (1, b3, 4, 5, and b7), played over the entire song. One common variation for blues improv is to add the **#4 note** to the scale, as shown below in the key of C blues .

C MINOR PENTATONIC SCALE with #4 NOTE ex.3



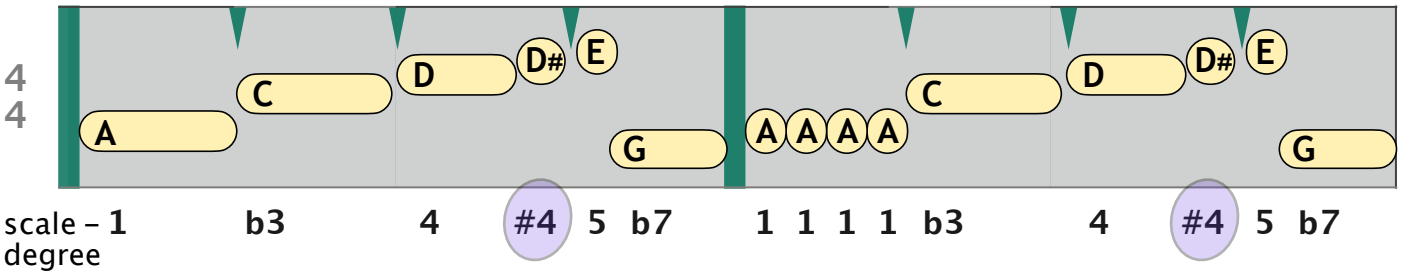
WRITTEN EXERCISE

To practice spelling some common minor pentatonic scales with the added #4 note, try **Exercise 4.2** (see “Textbook Contents”/ “Volume 1”/ “Written Exercises”).

Here’s a famous Led Zeppelin riff that features the #4 note (circled in purple) with the pentatonic:

"Heartbreaker" — Led Zeppelin — 1969 | **A blues** | 25

0:01 INTRO RIFF



(For another example with the #4 note, see the riff on "Mean Old Frisco" later in this chapter).

The #4 note is often heard as part of a wider blue note that can be created by bending the pitch upwards from the 4th to the 5th degree - a very common string bend for blues guitarists. This bend is featured prominently on the beginning of Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode," one of the most famous guitar intros of all time. Berry borrowed this lick from bluesman T. Bone Walker, one of the pioneers of modern lead guitar.

"Johnny B. Goode" — Chuck Berry — 1958 | **Bb blues** | 26

— **0:06** (intro) Guitar solo features the **4th degree bent upwards**, followed by the 5th. This is quickly repeated five times with the IV chord

— **0:09** Same combo of bent 4th to 5th, five more times, but with the I chord.

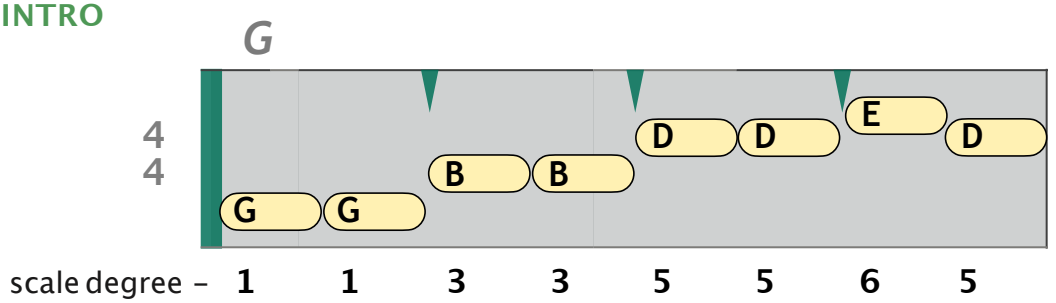
— **0:12** One more bend of the 4th before moving on to other notes in the riff.

As discussed earlier, another option for blues improvisation is to use the major pentatonic of the key (1, 2, 3, 5, and 6). Since the major pentatonic has a natural 3rd and 6th degree (unlike the minor pentatonic), it sounds best with blues songs that have these notes in the melody or bass line.

Here's a classic from Little Richard that has the **natural 3rd and 6th in the bass**. This sets up a bluesy clash with the prominent b3 in the vocal melody on the words "good golly Miss." Shown below is the bass pattern for the I chord.

"Good Golly Miss Molly" — Little Richard — 1958 | G blues | 27

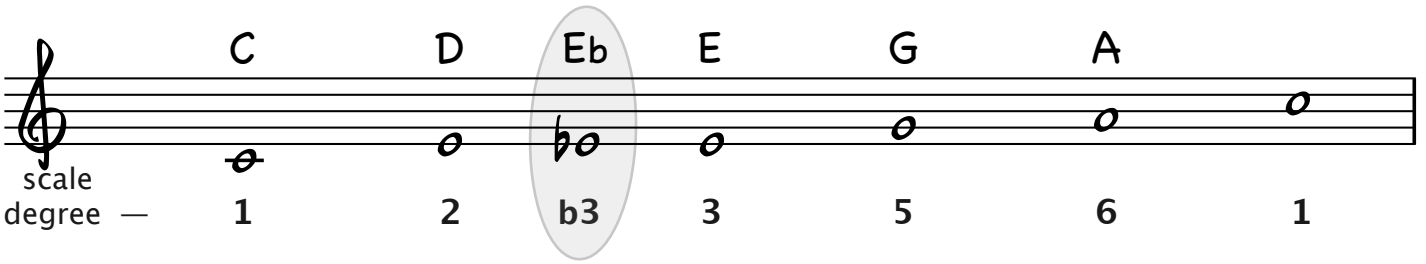
0:01 INTRO



Notice that eventually the pattern shifts to accomodate the changes to the IV and V chords. You will recall that in Chapter Two we discussed the same type of shifting bass pattern with the same scale degrees on "Haunted House" and "Ain't That a Shame." These songs did not have a blues tonality, however, because their melodies did not contain any b3 notes.

When the major pentatonic is used for improv on blues songs, the b3 note is often added to the scale, giving it a bluesier sound. In these cases, the b3 is usually followed immediately by the natural 3.

C MAJOR PENTATONIC SCALE with b3 NOTE ex.4



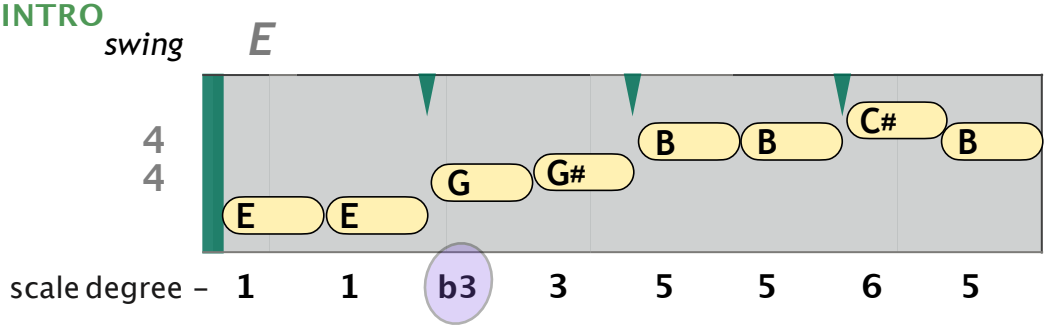
WRITTEN EXERCISE

To practice spelling some common major pentatonic scales with the added b3 note, try **Exercise 4.3** (see "Textbook Contents"/ "Volume 1"/ "Written Exercises").

This 1991 hit by Brooks and Dunn features a similar bass line to “Good Golly Miss Molly,” but the b3 has been added to the mix as an approach to the natural 3.

“Boot Scootin Boogie” — Brooks and Dunn — 1991 | **E blues** | 28

0:01 INTRO



Listen to the **deep, growling sax** on the next song. It offers a perfect example of a lingering **2 to b3 blue note**, added to the major pentatonic.

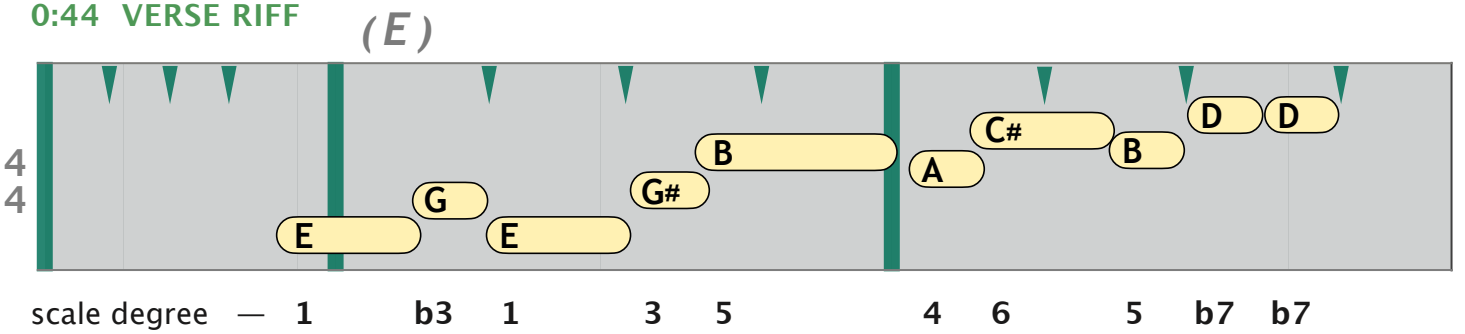
“The Stroll” — The Diamonds — 1958 | **F blues** | 29

In summary, the choice of pentatonic scale for improvising depends on the unique elements of each individual blues song. If the bass or melody features all flatted 3rds, then the minor pentatonic will usually sound best. If the natural 3rd is prominent, then the major pentatonic may sound better. In many blues songs, either choice will work over the entire piece.

Some riffs or solos simply combine the elements of both pentatonics, using any or all of the available notes (1, 2, b3, nat 3, 4, #4, 5, 6, and b7). The signature riff on AC/DC’s 1980 recording “Shake a Leg” is like this, containing most of the scale ingredients discussed so far in one powerhouse rifF. START LISTENING AT **0:44**

"Shake a Leg" — AC / DC — 1980 | **E blues** | 30

0:44 VERSE RIFF



scale degree — 1 b3 1 3 5 4 6 5 b7 b7

Common Chord Progressions

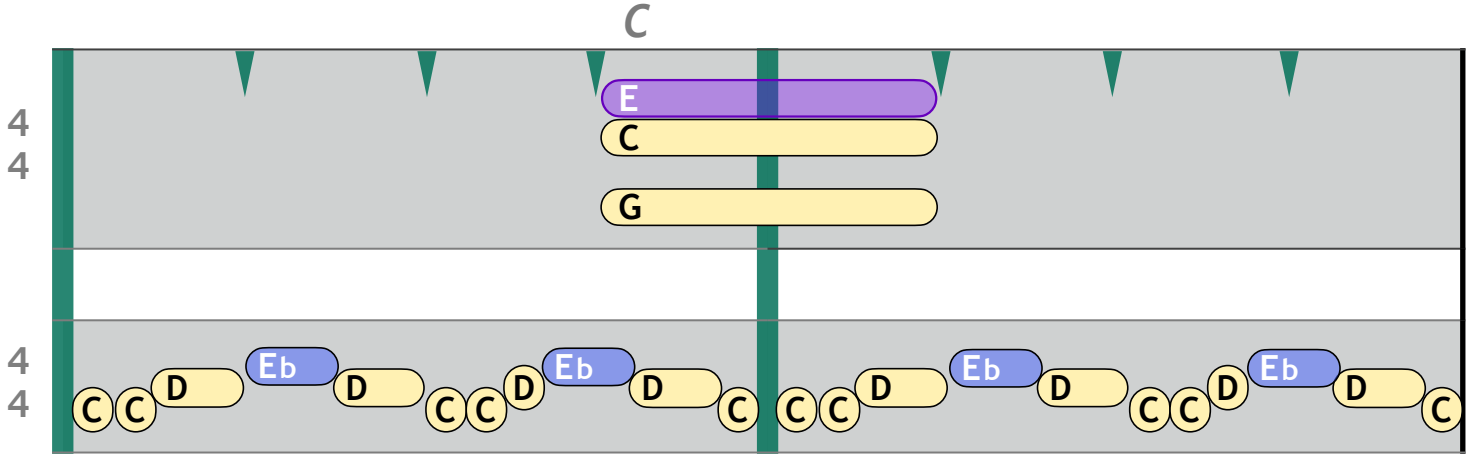
ONE CHORD or RIFF

As with the major and minor keys, there are also one-chord songs in a blues tonality. The 1987 hit "Need You Tonight" has no real chord changes, essentially remaining on the tonic I throughout. A muted guitar riff bubbles underneath most of the song, and an occasional high, ethereal I chord pops up overhead. Of special interest is the clash between the natural 3 in the chord and the b3 in the riff - a perfect example of the major / minor ambiguity of the blues. START LISTENING AT **0:17**

"Need You Tonight" — INXS — 1987 | **C blues** | 31

0:17 VERSE

I chord with NATURAL 3rd note (E)



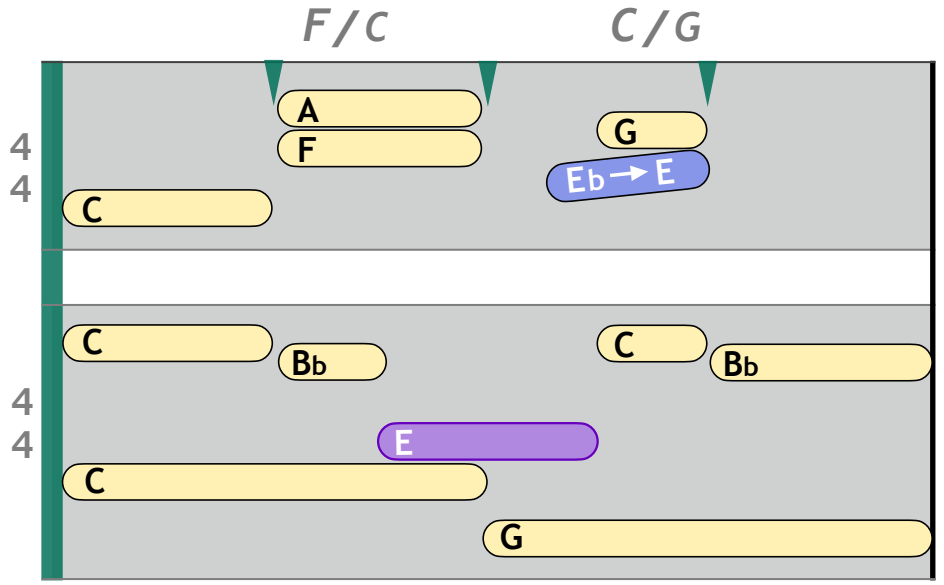
repeated riff with FLAT 3rd notes (Eb) . . . . . .

In the next song, both the b3 and natural 3 are heard in the chords, and the finger-picked guitar riff adds prominent b7 and natural 3 notes. Although there are technically two chords (F with a C bass, and C with G bass), the overall effect is a one-chord song stuck on a C7 chord (the b7 makes it a dom7 sound). START LISTENING AT **1:17**

"Coconut" — Harry Nilsson — 1972	C blues	32

1:17 VERSE

b3 to nat 3 **BLUE NOTE** slur in chords



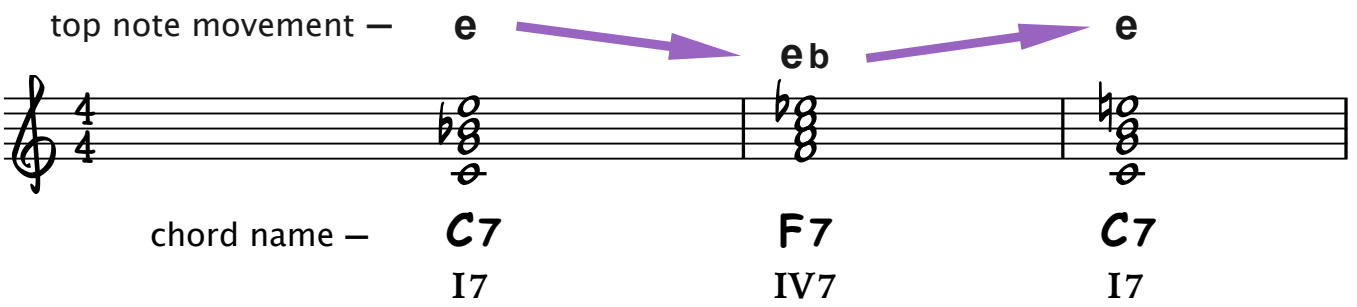
repeated riff with **b7** (Bb) and **NATURAL 3rd** (E)

Additional songs with PREDOMINANTLY ONE CHORD or RIFF (blues)

1959	*Peter Gunn*	Ray Anthony	F blues
1966	*Land of 1,000 Dances*	Wilson Pickett (orig. Chris Kenner)	D blues
1971	*Dolly Dagger*	Jimi Hendrix	Bb blues
1975	*Fame*	David Bowie	F blues
1978	*Who Do You Love*	George Thorogood (orig. Bo Diddley)	F blues
2014	*Bang Bang*	Jessie J., Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj	C blues
2018	*I'm Getting Better*	The Record Company	G blues

TWO CHORD VAMP, I7 – IV7

Several pop & rock songs are based on a simple two-chord vamp alternating the I7 and IV7 chords. In the diagram below, written in the key of C, you will notice that the b7 note of the IV7 chord (placed on the top of the chord) is the b3 of the overall key. Since the natural 3rd is in the I chord (also placed on top for clarity), this means that vamping between I7 and IV7 creates a half-step **alternation between 3 and b3 of the key**, once again underscoring the **major - minor ambiguity** of the blues.



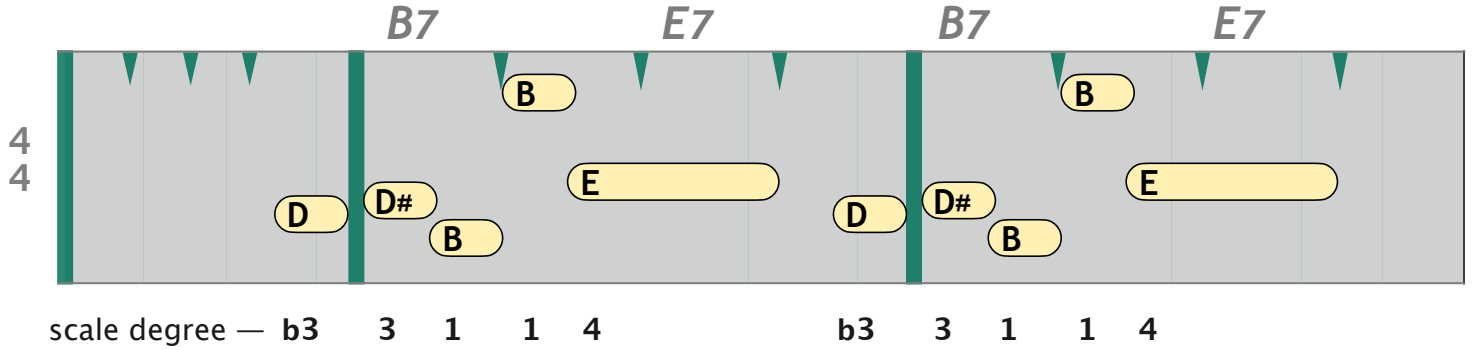
Brenda Lee's 1961 recording "Dum Dum" is a perfect example of a song based on the I7, IV7 vamp. (Well, almost perfect - there is a very brief V chord at the end of each verse.)

"Dum Dum" — Brenda Lee — 1961 | **Db blues** | 33

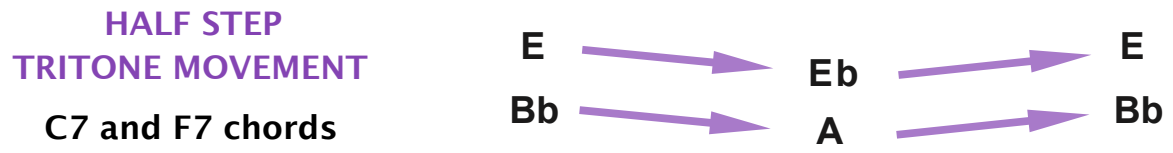
Here's a more recent example of the vamp. The repeated guitar riff once again features the bluesy **b3 - natural 3 ambiguity**.

"Hooch" — Everything — 1998 | **B blues** | 34

0:00 REPEATED RIFF

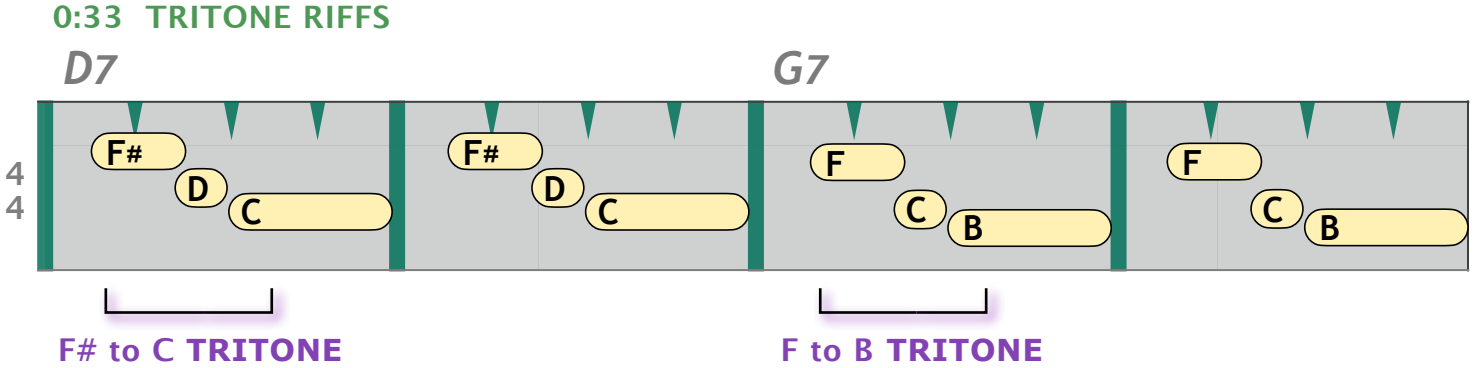


Looking back at the diagram of the I7 - IV7 chord change, a closer look reveals that another pair of notes, Bb and A, also move by half step. If combined with the E and Eb notes, it becomes apparent that these are the tritones of each chord, moving seamlessly back and forth by half step. This gives the I7 - IV7 vamp a distinct and bluesy sound. To get a stronger blues flavor, the guitar or piano sometimes play only the tritone notes, letting the bass guitar add the chord roots.



This close movement between the tritones of the I7 and IV7 can be heard on Animotion's 1985 dance hit "Obsession," where a repeated guitar riff basically outlines the tritone intervals of each chord. START LISTENING AT **0:33**

"Obsession" — Animotion — 1985 | **D blues** | 35



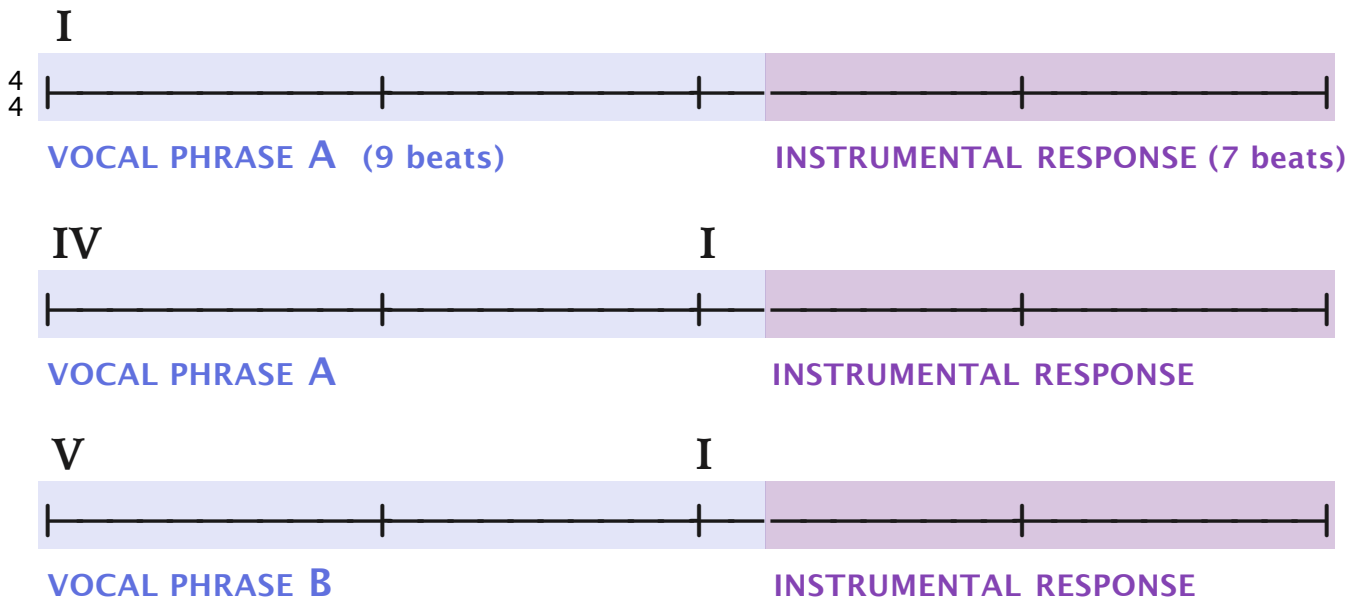
Additional songs with TWO CHORD VAMP I 7 – IV 7 (blues)

1986	*To Be a Lover*	Billy Idol	C blues
1991	*Things That Make You Go Hmm*	C & C Music Factory	Eb blues
2001	*Love You Madly*	Cake	E blues

12-BAR BLUES FORM

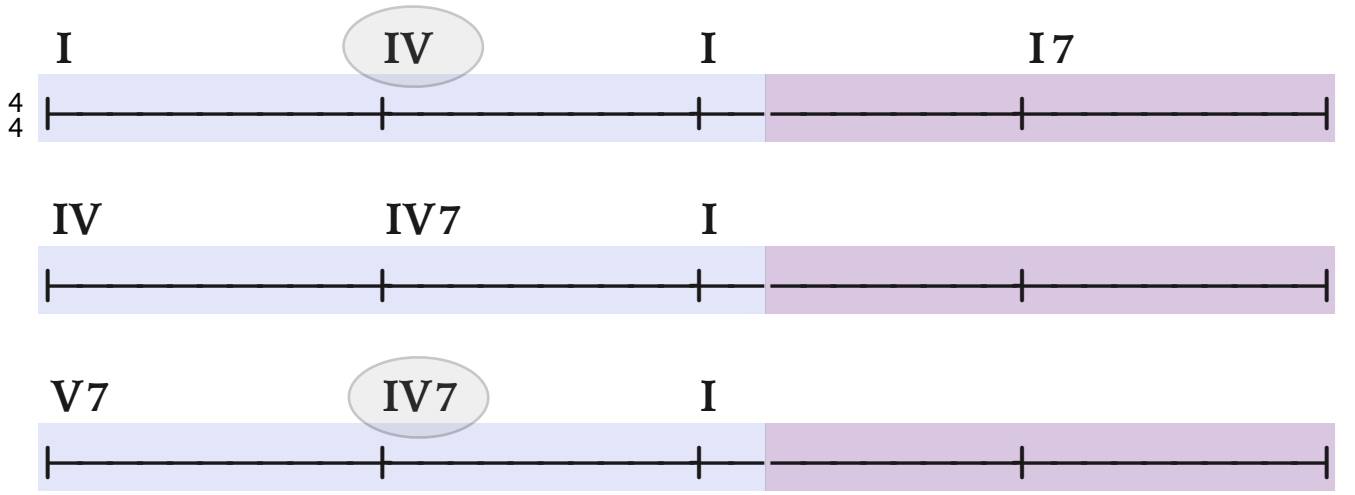
Many pop & rock songs with a blues tonality follow the **traditional blues form**, consisting of a repeated 12 bar verse, divided into 3 lines of equal length. Each 4-bar line has a vocal phrase of 9 beats, often followed by an answering instrumental phrase of 7 beats. The vocal phrases are usually done in an A, A, B sequence, accompanied by I, IV, and V chords as either triads or dominant 7ths. A very basic version of the form is shown below.

BASIC 12-BAR BLUES



Often the chord progression is varied to include occasional dom 7ths and the **IV chord** on bars two and ten (circled below).

12-BAR BLUES chord variation



WRITTEN EXERCISE

Practice writing some 12 bar blues progressions in different keys by completing **Exercise 4.4** (see "Textbook Contents"/ "Volume 1"/ "Written Exercises").

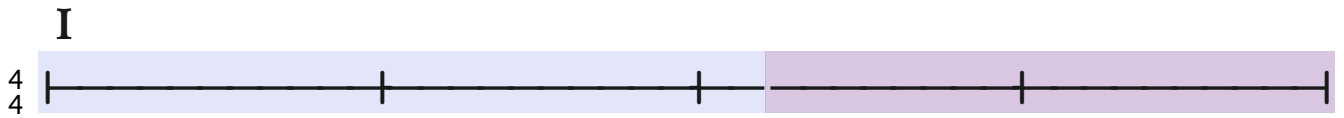
The 12-bar blues form can be a short, ready-made formula for beginning songwriters, yet it has plenty of room for creative improvisation within the fairly narrow structure. Virtually all musicians playing popular music know this form backwards and forwards. This creates a sort of universal language that enables musicians who have never performed with each other to get up on stage, without rehearsal, and "jam" as though they have played together for years.

Stevie Ray Vaughan's 1989 recording "Let Me Love You Baby' is a perfect example of the basic 12-bar form outlined above, with **A, A, B lyric structure**, and clear **call & response phrases** of 9 and 7 beats respectively. The only difference is the addition of the IV chord on bar 10 and the V chord on the last 2 beats of bar 12. START LISTENING AT **0:22**

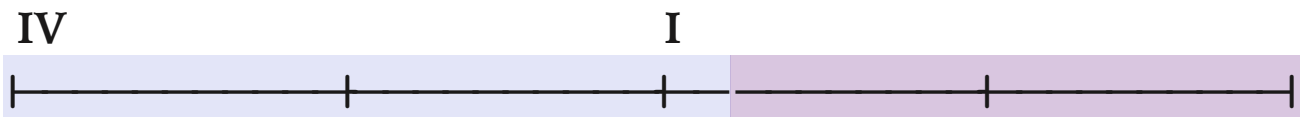
"Let Me Love You Baby" – Stevie Ray Vaughan – 1989
(orig. Buddy Guy)

E blues 36

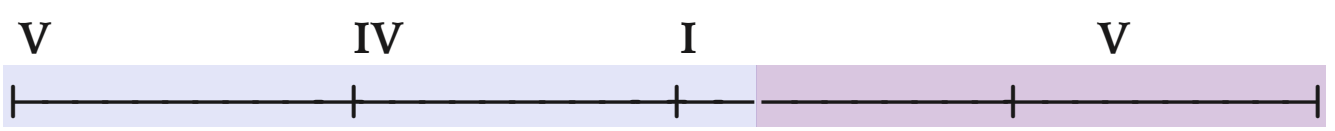
0:22 VERSE



Ooo - wee baby, I declare you sure look fine GUITAR RESPONSE RIFF (7 beats)



Ooo - wee baby, I declare you sure look fine GUITAR RESPONSE RIFF



A girl like you made many-a man change his mind GUITAR RESPONSE RIFF

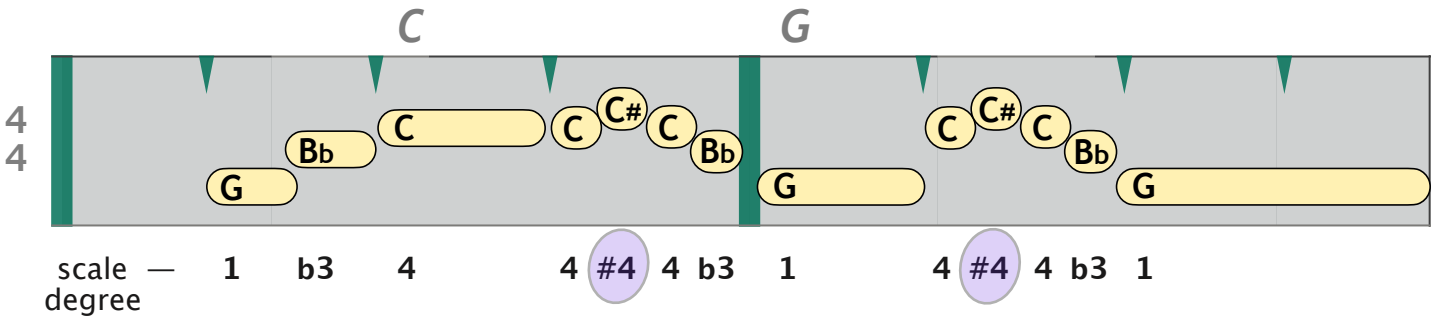
Cream's classic rendition of Robert Johnson's "Crossroads" also features all the elements of the 12-bar form, including the addition of the IV chord on the second measure. Notice that the instrumental response is the same guitar riff each time.

"Crossroads" – Cream (orig. Robert Johnson) – 1968 | **A blues** | 37

Earlier we listened to the blues song "Mean Old Frisco," discussing the transformation from original to cover. Listen again to Eric Clapton's version, noting the variation on the first line, with the instrumental response missing and the vocal phrase extending for the entire line. Lines 2 and 3 retain the traditional call & response, and the overall form still has the A, A, B lyric sequence. Also note that the minor pentatonic response riff (shown below) features the prominent #4 scale degree discussed earlier.

"Mean Old Frisco" – Eric Clapton – 1977
(orig. L. B. Montgomery) | **G blues** | 38

0:53 **RESPONSE RIFF** – minor pentatonic with #4



Many pop & rock songs like Elvis Presley's iconic recording of "Hound Dog" have the traditional 12-bar form without the call & response element. However, "Hound Dog" does retain the A, A, B lyric structure. This time the B phrases are the same for every verse, essentially becoming a refrain (like a chorus) at the end of every 12-bar repeat. Notice that during the I chord, a prominent b3 in the melody clashes with the natural 3rd in the bass line.

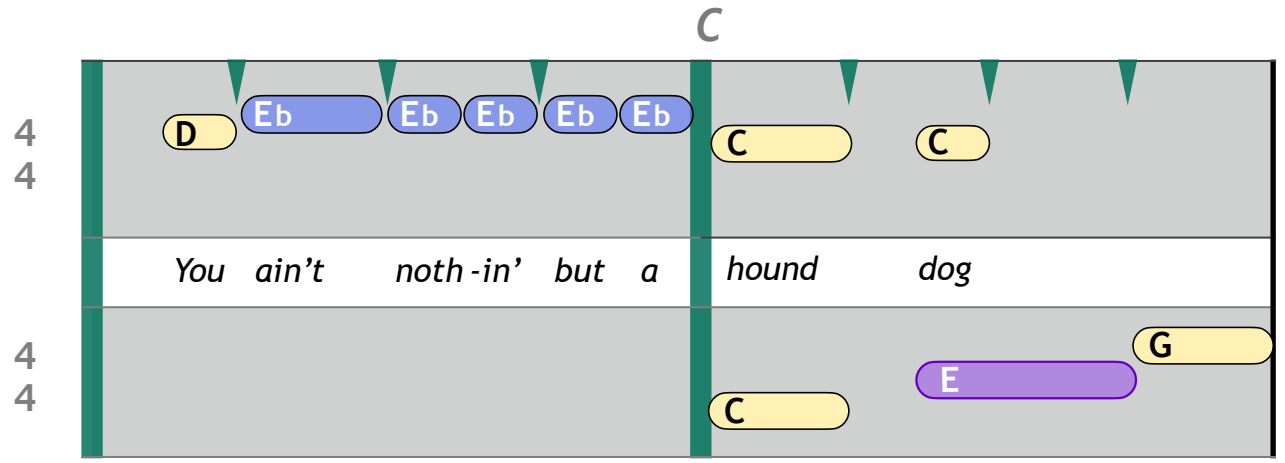
"Hound Dog" — Elvis Presley — 1956
(orig. Big Mama Thornton)

C blues

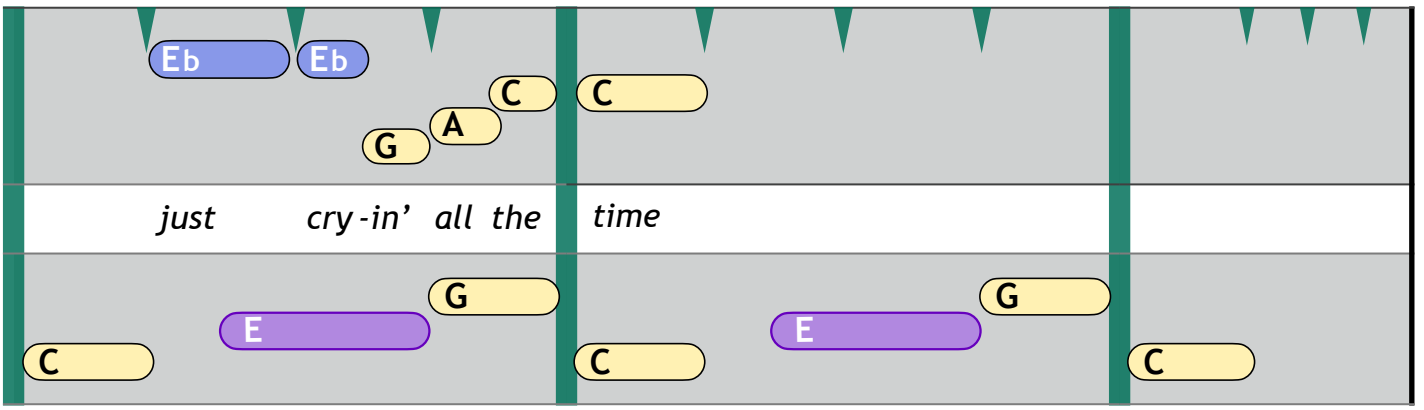
39

0:00 VERSE

melody with **FLAT 3rd** (Eb notes) . . . . .



bass line with **NATURAL 3rd** (E notes)



Additional songs with A, A, B LYRICS in 12-BAR BLUES FORM

1958	*The Stroll*	Diamonds	F blues
1972	*Going Down*	Jeff Beck (orig. Freddie King)	G blues
1978	*Flip, Flop, & Fly*	Blues Brothers (orig. Big Joe Turner)	Bb blues
1989	*Before You Accuse Me*	Eric Clapton (orig. Bo Diddley)	E blues

The A, A, B lyric structure is not quite as clear on Jerry Lee Lewis' classic "Whole Lotta Shakin Goin On," but like "Hound Dog," there is a kind of refrain, since the title phrase repeats at the end of every verse. Once again, the narrow blues melody is dominated by the b3, clashing with the major I chord.

"Whole Lotta Shakin Goin On" - Jerry Lee Lewis - 1957	**C blues**	40

The next 12-bar example features Doors guitarist Robby Krieger bending a prominent blue note from 6 to b7 on almost every measure in the intro. Listen starting at 0:22 when the organ comes in. The blue note is on the upbeat of the third count.

"Back Door Man" — Doors (orig. Howlin Wolf) — 1967	**A blues**	41

— **0:22** (intro) Guitar **BLUE NOTE** on beat 3+ of several measures, bending from 6 to b7

The 1960s featured several instrumental hits with the 12-bar form and blues tonality, including Sam The Sham & The Pharaohs' "Wooly Bully," The Surfaris' "Wipeout," and the next example "Last Night." On this song all chords are dom 7ths.

"Last Night" - Mar-Keys - 1961	**F# blues**	42

In pop & rock music the 12-bar form is sometimes **"doubled" to 24 bars**, with the I, IV, and V chords retaining the same proportions within the form. This translates to 8 bars of I, then 4 bars of IV, I, V, and I. Here's an example from Lynyrd Skynyrd of the doubled form:

"Swamp Music" - Lynyrd Skynryd - 1974	**E blues**	43

Additional songs with 12-BAR BLUES FORM

1957	*Send for Me*	Nat King Cole	F blues
1962	*Peppermint Twist*	Joey Dee & The Starliters	C blues
1965	*She's About a Mover*	Sir Douglas Quintet	Eb blues
1970	*Mississippi Queen*	Mountain	E blues
1971	*Statesboro Blues*	Allman Brothers Band (orig. Blind Willie McTell)	D blues
1980	*Sweet Home Chicago*	Blues Brothers (orig. Kokomo Arnold)	F blues
1983	*She's Sexy and Seventeen*	Stray Cats	E blues
2019	*Don't Threathen Me with a Good Time (start at 0:21)*	Thomas Rhett feat. Little Big Town	Eb blues

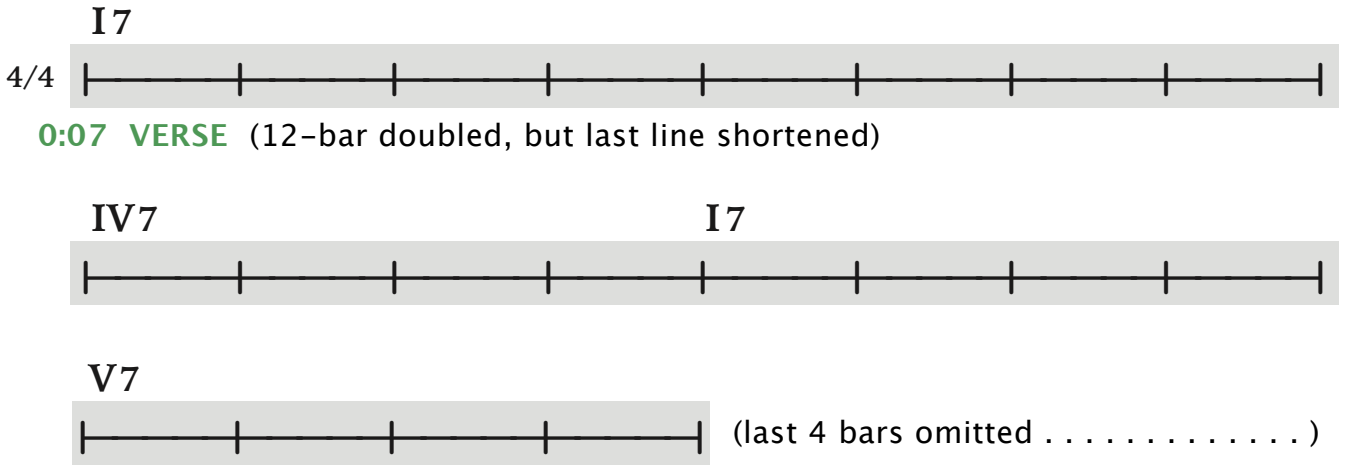
12-BAR VARIATIONS

Many pop & rock songs use modified versions of the standard 12-bar form, either by extending the meter (extra measures / beats) or changing the harmony (adding chords or embellishments). On the 1966 song "Barefootin," the **first line of the 12-bar form is extended to 8 bars**, but lines 2 and 3 remain the same as usual with 4 bars each. As the form is repeated, lines 2 and 3 actually function like a chorus, using the same lyrics each time. Also listen for the **typically narrow blues melody**, with two notes (b3 above and b7 below) pivoting around the tonic note for most of the song.

"Barefootin" — Robert Parker — 1966	Db blues	44

Bruce Springsteen's song "Pink Cadillac" has a doubled 12-bar verse, but the last 4 bars of the I chord are omitted, and the song heads straight to a standard 12-bar chorus. This represents an interesting blending of the traditional 12-bar blues form and the verse - chorus structure of modern pop.

"Pink Cadillac" — Bruce Springsteen — 1984 **E blues** 45

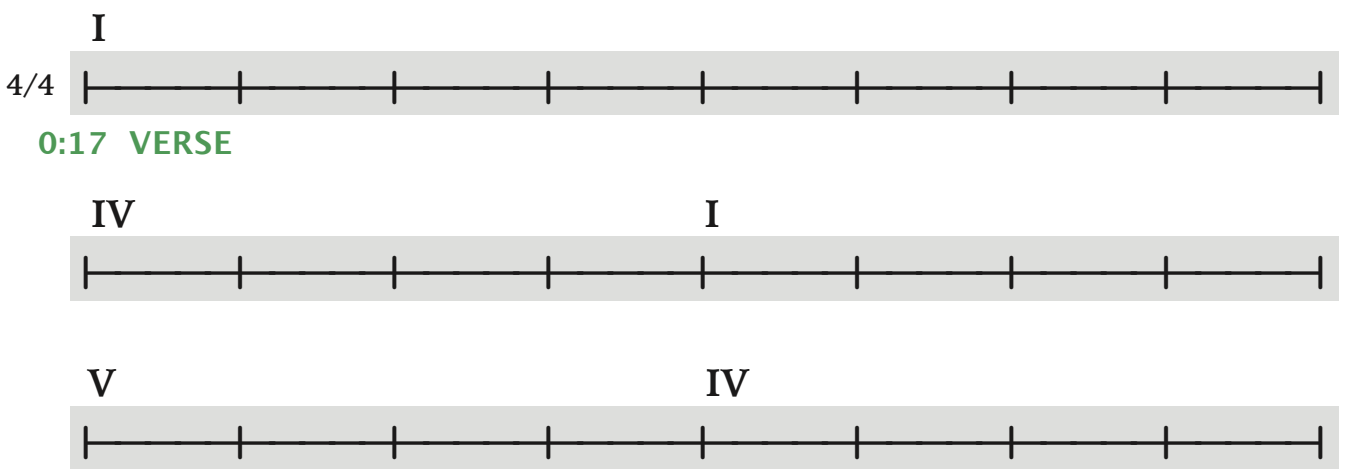


0:07 VERSE (12-bar doubled, but last line shortened)

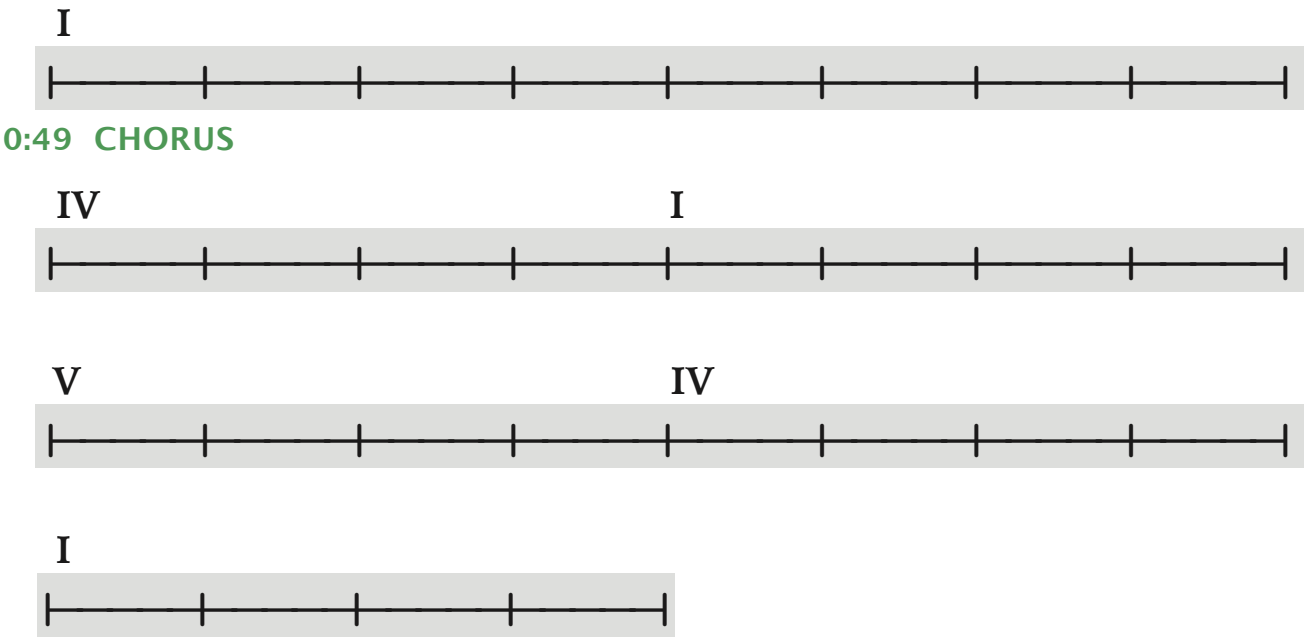
1:15 CHORUS is basic 12-bar form

The next song has a similar doubling of the form, but with variations on both the verse and the chorus.

"Redneck Woman" — Gretchen Wilson — 2004 **F# blues** 46

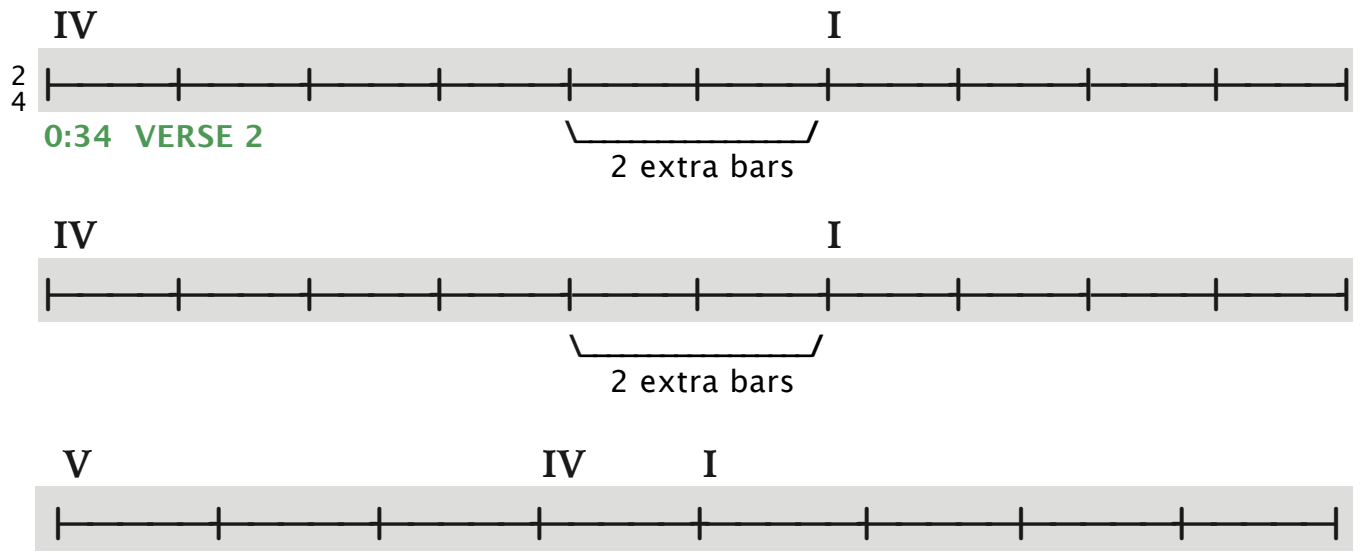


0:17 VERSE



Listen again to Elvis Presley's recording of "Mystery Train," paying close attention to the chord changes, and you will notice that the second chord in lines 1 and 2 is delayed by two bars on most verses. Also note that the verse begins on the IV, not the I chord. START LISTENING AT **0:36** (verse two)

"Mystery Train" - Elvis Presley (orig. Junior Parker) - 1959 **E blues** 47

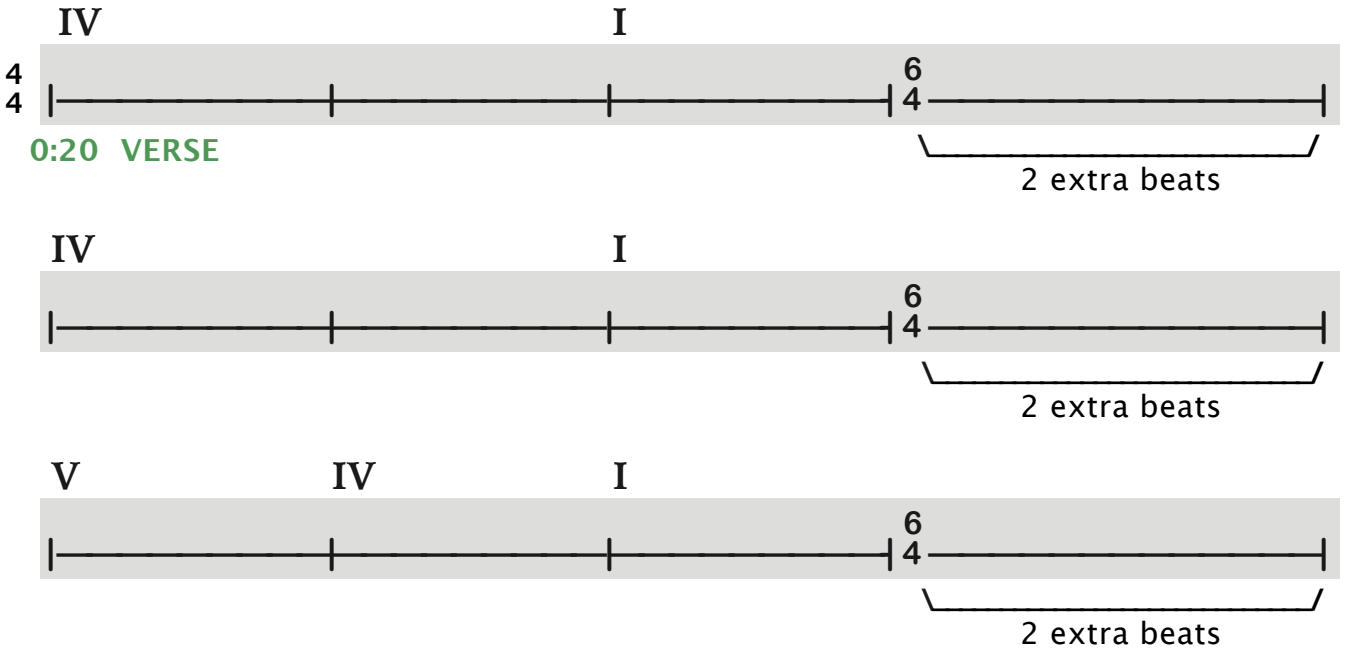


The next example also starts on the IV chord, and has a 2-beat extension on every I chord. START LISTENING AT **0:20**

"Rollin' and Tumblin'" — Eric Clapton — 1992
(orig. Willie Newbern)

G blues

48



Roy Head's "Treat Her Right" retains the usual 12-bar chord changes, but includes a **chromatic run-up** (b7, 7 to 1) to each chord.

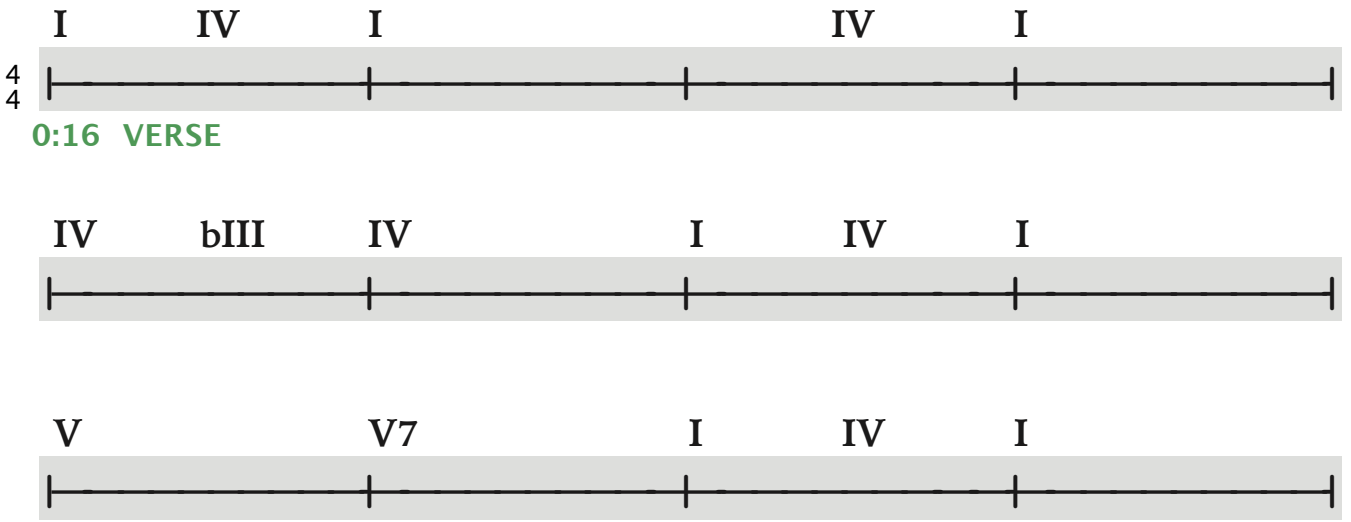
"Treat Her Right" — Roy Head — 1965

G blues

49

On the following 1983 song by The Clash, a brief **bIII chord** is inserted in the first bar of line 2:

"Should I Stay or Should I Go" — The Clash — 1983 | **D blues** | 50



Additional songs with 12-BAR BLUES VARIATIONS

1957	***Searchin'***	Coasters	Db blues
1961	***Ya Ya***	Lee Dorsey	F blues
1963	***Walking the Dog***	Rufus Thomas	E blues
1963	***You Can't Sit Down***	Dovells	F blues
1988	***Roll With It***	Steve Winwood	G blues
1992	***Mercury Blues***	Alan Jackson (orig. K.C. Douglas)	D blues
2018	***Shoe Boot***	Daniel Rateliff & The Night Sweats	G blues
2021	***Not Dead Yet***	Lord Huron	F blues

12-BAR with STOP TIME / REFRAIN

Stop time is a brief pause in the instrumental accompaniment, usually on beats 2, 3, and 4 of a single measure. However, the pause can last for up to 4 bars in some songs. Of course the term is a bit misleading - the background instruments may stop playing, but like any rest in standard notation, the beat keeps going during the silence and the tempo is maintained. Also, the vocal melody or drums may continue while the other instruments pause.

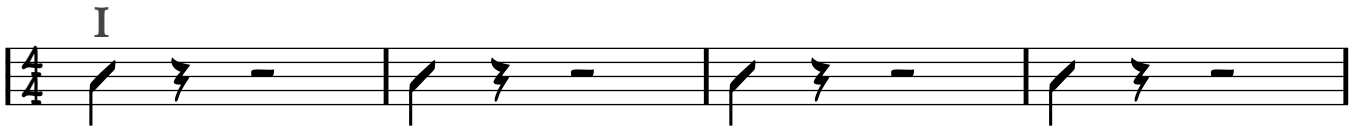
Many blues-based songs with a 12-bar form have stop time at the beginning of the form, with a long stop time sequence of 4 bars, featuring punctuations on the down beat of each bar. This creates a unique tension - almost like a sputtering car that can't quite get started. When the instrumental groove finally kicks in on the 5th measure, it makes the feeling more powerful and satisfying.

As the 12-bar form repeats over and over, the first four bars usually feature a new set of words each time, functioning like a verse. In contrast, the last 8 bars remain the same each time, acting like a chorus or **refrain**. This 12-bar stop-time / refrain form was very common in the early days of rock & roll, as seen in several of the examples below.

We'll start with Bill Haley's "Rock the Joint," a recording that actually pre-dates the rock revolution of 1955 by three years. Listen for the title refrain on lines 2 and 3 of every 12-bar repeat. Also note the rhythmic tension created by the repeated stop time figures. This tension is released at the entrance of the refrain when the steady rhythm resumes.

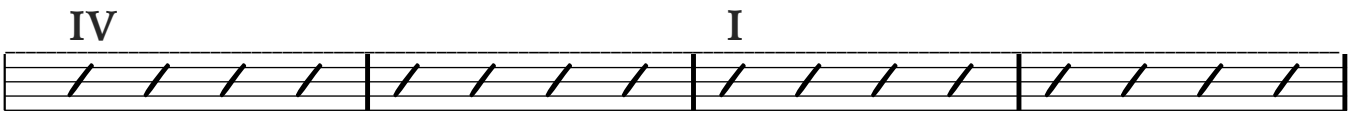
"Rock The Joint" — Bill Haley & The Comets — 1952 **A blues** 51

swing

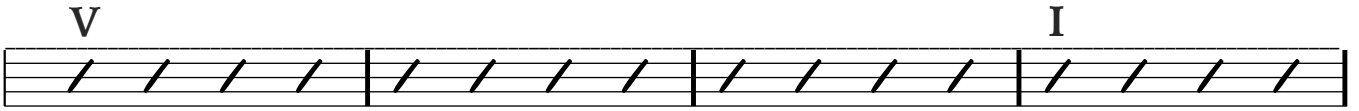


STOP TIME sequence . . . . . **TENSION**

0:17 VERSE 2



0:22 REFRAIN (steady rhythm resumes)



Here's another 12-bar with stop time / title refrain. This time the stop time is more subtle, defined only by the bass notes.

"Too Much Monkey Business" — Chuck Berry — 1956 | **F blues** | 52

— 0:15 (verse) **STOP TIME** on first line defined by **bass notes**

On Little Richard's "Good Golly Miss Molly" (heard earlier), the stop time line is extended 2 extra beats, adding to the tension and further highlighting the title. START LISTENING AT **0:35** (2nd verse)

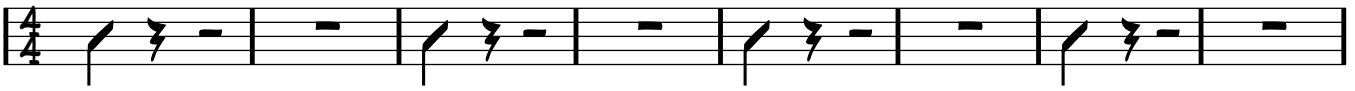
"Good Golly Miss Molly" — Little Richard — 1958 | **G blues** | 53

— 0:35 (verse 2) **STOP TIME** on first line **extended 2 extra beats** (adds to **TENSION**)

The next song adds two variations to the stop time line. First, the line is basically doubled, extending to 8 bars with 8 beats between each punctuation. Second, the rhythm instruments (drums and handclap) continue through the entire first line with a steady rhythmic flow, and the stop time is only defined by the punctuating guitar notes.

"Rockin' Robin" — Bobby Day — 1958 | **G blues** | 54

I (guitar punctuations) **TENSION**



STOP TIME sequence . . . . . with **DRUM FILL**

0:10 VERSE

Eric Clapton's cover of "I'm Tore Down" (heard earlier in the discussion of blue notes) progresses from no stop time on verse one, to 4-bar stop time on verse two, to 8-bar stop time on verses three and four. Also notice the frequent call & response between voice and guitar.

"I'm Tore Down" — Eric Clapton — 1994
(orig. Freddie King) | **C blues** | 55

NON 12-BAR SONGS in a BLUES TONALITY

Many pop & rock songs do not have a 12-bar form, but still have a strong blues tonality, thanks to other elements like prominent blue notes, occasional clashes between the melodic b3 and harmonic natural 3, or use of dominant 7th chords. Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll" clearly has the first two elements:

"Old Time Rock and Roll" — Bob Seger — 1978 | **F# blues** | 56

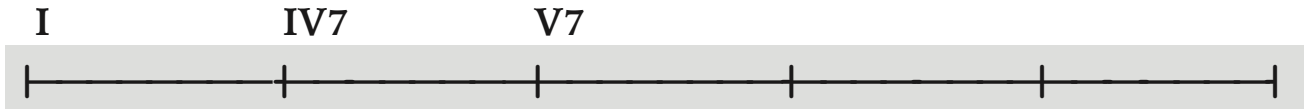
— 0:06 (verse) Prominent **b3 note** in melody clashes with **natural 3rd** in accompanying I chord. (Words "just take those old" all sung on b3)

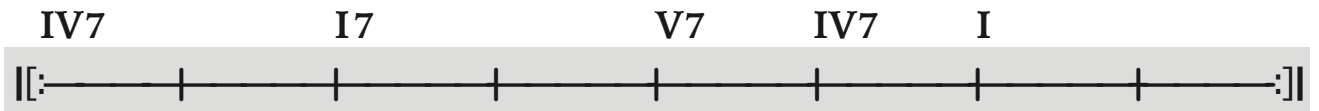
— 0:23 Word "disco" is clearly a b3 rising **BLUE NOTE**

This Bonnie Raitt song might not have the exact 12-bar form, but there is no mistaking its bluesy flavor. Like "Come to Me" heard earlier, Bonnie's soulful singing includes numerous **blue note slides and embellishments**.

"Road's My Middle Name" — Bonnie Raitt — 1989 | **E blues** | 57

0:10 VERSE

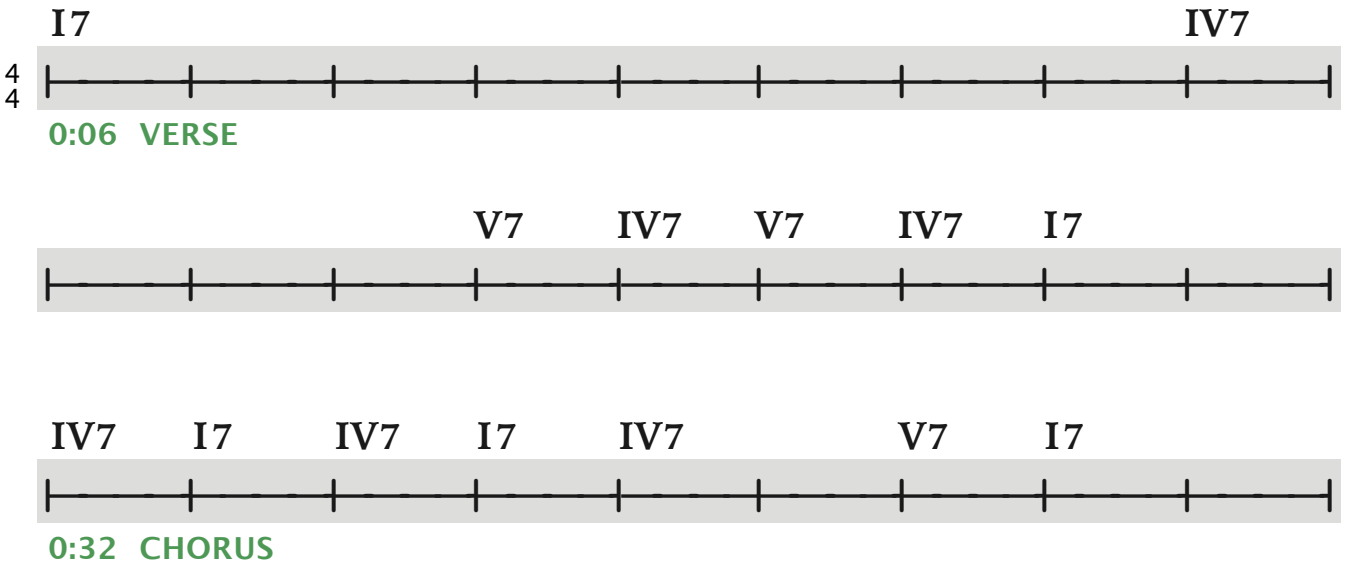




0:48 CHORUS

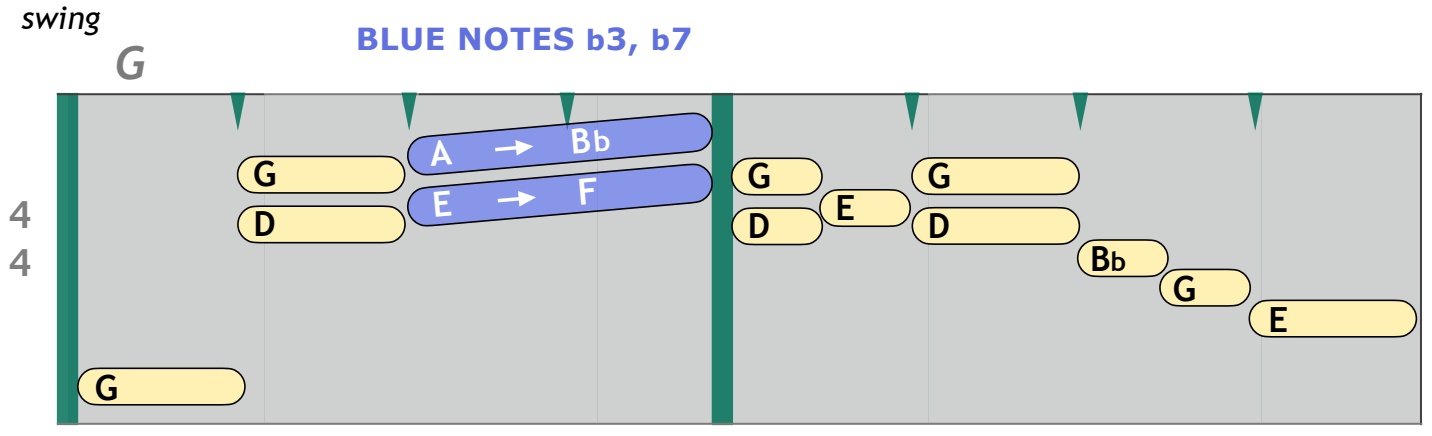
The chord changes on the following Jim Croce classic “You Don’t Mess Around with Jim” bear no resemblence to the standard 12-bar form, but they are all **dominant 7ths**, giving the song a decided blues flavor:

“You Don’t Mess Around with Jim” — Jim Croce — 1972 **E blues** 58



The next song features a signature guitar riff with string bending on two blue notes - the b3 and the b7. The riff, shown below, remains the same for the I and IV chords, but changes slightly for the V.

“The Fool” — Sanford Clark — 1956 **G blues** 59



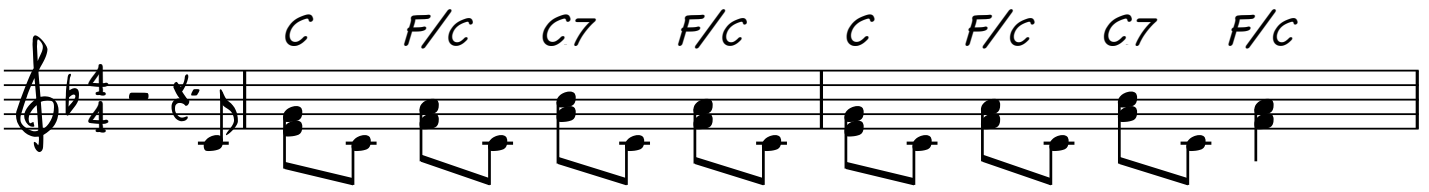
Additional NON-12 BAR SONGS in a BLUES TONALITY

1965	*Midnight Special*	Johnny Rivers	G blues
1974	*You Need a Man*	Loggins & Messina	A blues
1978	*I Ain't Got You*	Aerosmith	G blues
1983	*Rock This Town*	Stray Cats	D blues
1989	*Rattlesnake Shake*	Motley Crue	G blues
1994	*It Doesn't Get Any Countrier Than This*	Tim McGraw	A blues
2011	*Walk in the Country*	Scotty McCreery	F blues

CIRCULAR BLUES PROGRESSION

Previously in Chapter Two we heard several songs with a circular major progression. There is also a circular blues progression - usually a one bar pattern that repeats as shown below.

CIRCULAR BLUES RIFF in C ex. 5

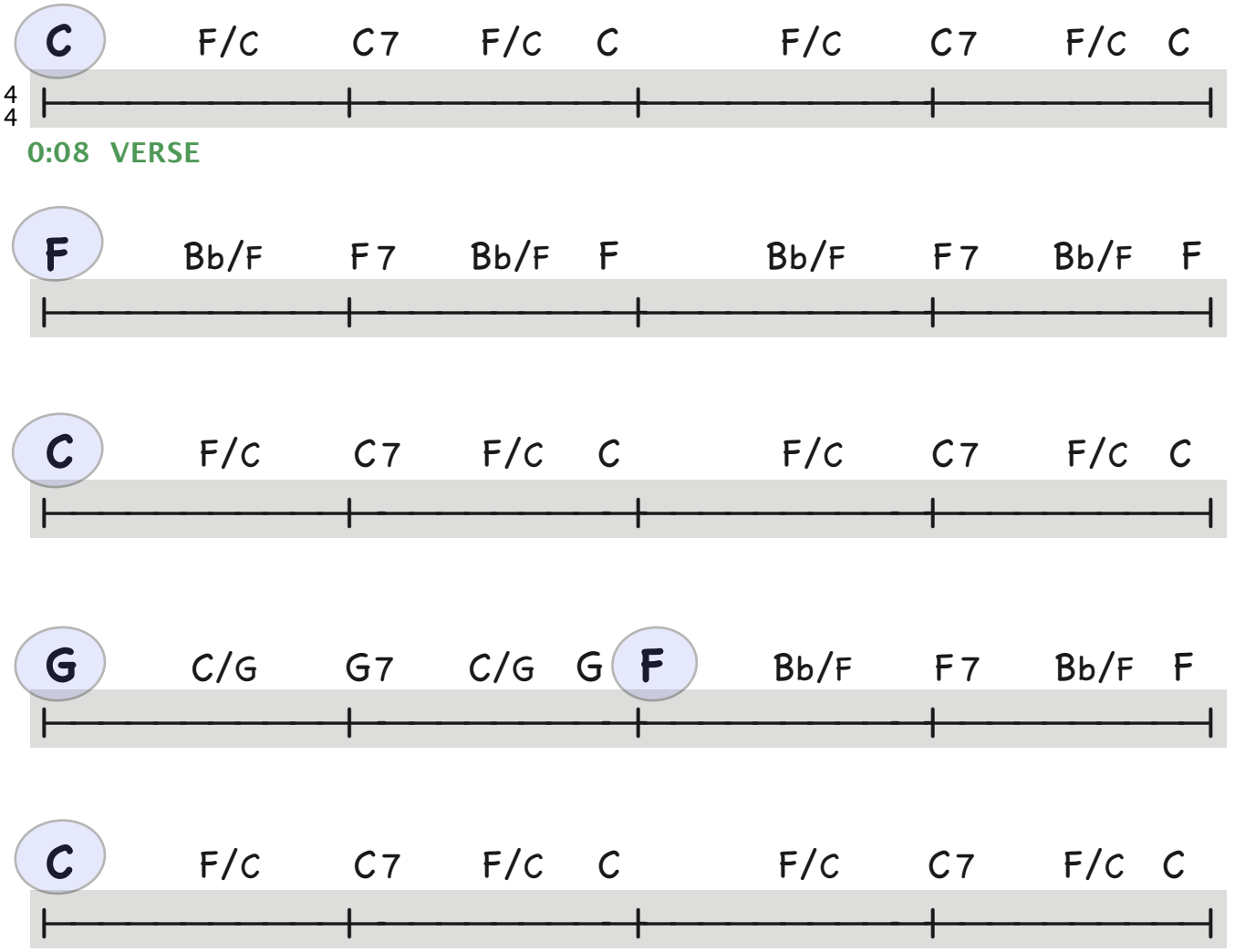


Like many riffs and bass patterns in pop & rock, this sequence can transpose up or down to follow the chord changes. For the standard 12-bar blues form in C, this would mean shifting the sequence to the IV chord (F, Bb/F, F7, Bb/F) and eventually to the V (G, C/G, G7, C/G). Harry Nilsson's "Early in the Morning" features a **two-bar variation** of this circular riff, moving through the I, IV, V changes in a modified 12-bar form:

"Early in the Morning" — Harry Nilsson — 1971
(orig. Louis Jordan)

C blues

60



The 1965 hit "Boy From New York City" is also a 12-bar song with shifting circular riffs, but this time the riff is omitted on the V and IV chords at the end of the form.

"Boy from New York City" — Ad Libs — 1965

F# blues

61

On the next classic hit from 1963, the circular blues riff is modified into a three chord progression I - IV - Vm - IV that lasts for the entire song.

"Louie Louie" — Kingsmen — 1963	A blues	62

Additional songs with CIRCULAR BLUES PROGRESSION

1963	***Sally Go Round the Roses***	Jaynetts	D blues
1970	***My Generation***	Who	G, A, Bb, C blues
1972	***Long Cool Woman***	Hollies	E blues
1973	***Living for the City***	Stevie Wonder	F# blues
1985	***Freeway of Love***	Aretha Franklin	G blues
2014	***Shake*** (chorus)	MercyMe	F blues

EAR TRAINING EXERCISES

For additional practice hearing the I, IV, V and I7, IV7, V7 in a blues tonality, try **Exercises 4.1e – 4.5e** (see "Textbook Contents"/ "Volume 1"/ "Ear Training Exercises").

Boogie Bass Patterns

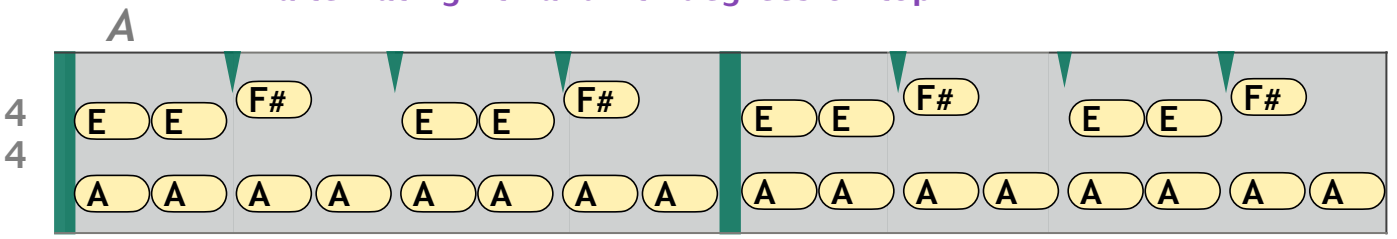
BASS ALTERNATING 5, 6

Many rock songs are anchored by a particular kind of harmonic riff called a **boogie bass.** The most common version features the 5th and 6th degrees of the chord at hand, alternating over the root, as shown in the example below from the 12-bar hit "Keep Your Hands to Yourself." The rhythm is almost always a steady stream of 8th notes with the short pattern repeating every 2 beats. This pattern shifts to match the chord changes, like the previous bass patterns in Chapter Two ("Ain't That a Shame," "Haunted House," "Can't Turn You Loose"), or Harry Nilsson's "Early in the Morning."

"Keep Your Hands to Yourself" - Georgia Satellites - 1987 **A blues** 63

0:00 VERSE

alternating 5th and 6th degrees on top . . . . . .



root drone on bottom . . . . . .

This repeated bass pattern is usually heard today on electric guitar, but it originally came from the boogie woogie piano players of the 1910s and 20s. Bluesmen like Jimmy Yancey, "Pinetop" Smith, and Meade "Lux" Lewis pioneered the new boogie woogie sound, playing everywhere they could — from the city saloons of Chicago and St.Louis, to the backwoods lumber camps of the deep south.

Here's an example of classic piano boogie woogie, recorded in 1939 by Pete Johnson. Listen to how the alternating 5, 6 bass pattern shifts up or down to follow each chord change of the standard 12 bar form.

"Climbin' and Screamin" — Pete Johnson — 1939 **C blues** 64

Boogie bass patterns like this eventually made the transition from piano to guitar, thanks to blues guitarists like Robert Johnson, who reportedly was an avid listener of piano blues. Legend has it that Johnson would drop the needle on his old Victrola and "record copy" the piano licks he heard. (This was the beginning of a long tradition among guitarists. Later guitar gods like Stevie Ray Vaughan would copy from Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton, who in turn copied from the recordings of bluesmen like Johnson.)

"Sweet Home Chicago" — Robert Johnson — 1936	**F# blues**	65

Robert Johnson was probably the first musician to record a song with this boogie bass on guitar, and his 1936 recording sounds remarkably modern. In fact, when listening to Johnson's guitar, it doesn't take much imagination to hear the beginnings of rock & roll.

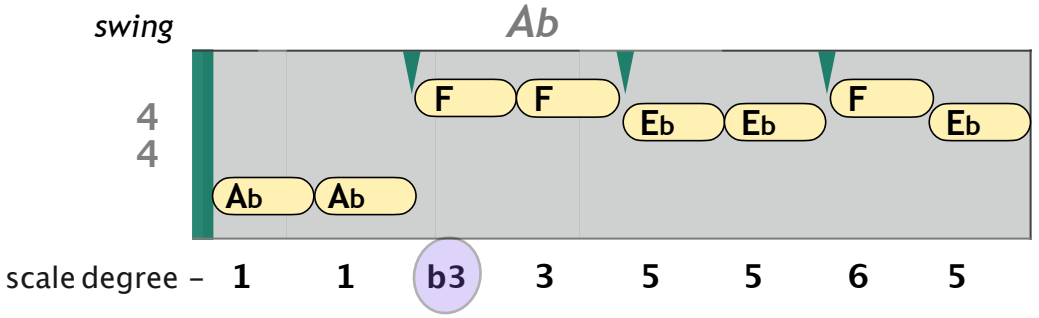
By the time rock & roll finally did emerge in the 1950s, the boogie guitar pattern was so common that it became a defining element of the new style. Chuck Berry was especially fond of the boogie bass and used it to anchor many of his early hits, like this classic from 1958 :

"Sweet Little Sixteen" — Chuck Berry — 1958	**Db blues**	66

Elvis Presley's 1957 recording "Too Much" features a single note version of the 5, 6 bass (shown below). Once again the pattern shifts to match the standard 12 bar chord changes.

"Too Much" — Elvis Presley — 1957	**Ab blues**	67

0:08 VERSE



Additional songs with BOOGIE BASS 5, 6

1957	*School Day*	Chuck Berry	G blues
1958	*Johnny B. Goode*	Chuck Berry	Bb blues
1960	*Stuck on You*	Elvis Presley	G blues
1960	*The Twist*	Chubby Checker (orig. Hank Ballard)	E blues
1970	*Key to the Highway*	Eric Clapton (orig. Segar / Broonzy)	A blues
1991	*Close to You*	Stevie Ray Vaughan	Ab blues
1992	*Achy Breaky Heart*	Billy Ray Cyrus	A blues
2021	*Not Dead Yet*	Lord Huron	F blues

BASS 1, 3, 5, 6

One common variation of the boogie bass adds the **3rd degree**, as heard on Elvis' song "All Shook Up." The pattern should be easy to hear — the notes walk right up 1 - 3 - 5 - 6 and shift to match the I, IV, V chord changes. We previously heard this pattern on Little Richard's "Good Golly Miss Molly."

"All Shook Up" — Elvis Presley — 1957	Bb blues	68

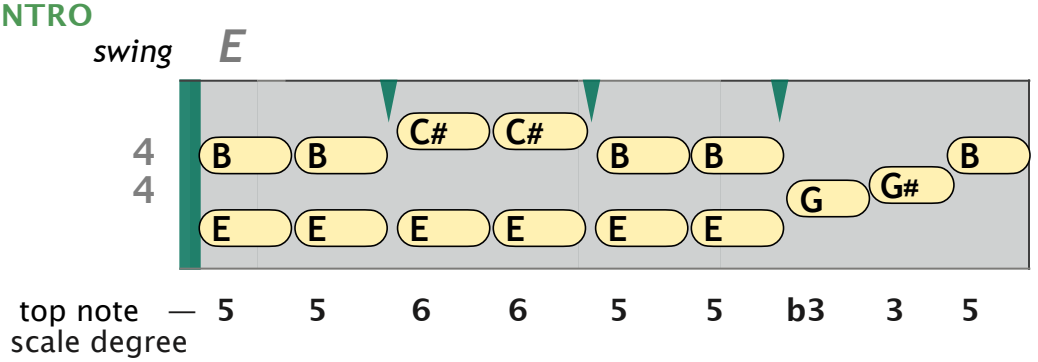
Take another listen to the understated guitar on the intro of Led Zeppelin's "Bring It on Home." You will notice another common variation of the boogie bass, as Jimmy Page adds the b3 in front of the natural 3 at the end of the pattern 9 (shown below). This variation was also heard previously on "Boot Scootin' Boogie."

"Bring It on Home" — Led Zeppelin — 1971
(orig. S. B. Williamson)

E blues

69

0:00 INTRO



Additional songs with BOOGIE BASS 1, 3, 5, 6

1957	*Jailhouse Rock*	Elvis Presley	Eb blues
1958	*Good Golly Miss Molly*	Little Richard	G blues
1964	*Slow Down*	Beatles (orig. Larry Williams)	C blues
1975	*South's Gonna Do It Again*	Charlie Daniels Band	A blues
1983	*Crosscut Saw*	Eric Clapton (orig. Hollins / A. King)	A blues
1991	*Boot Scootin' Boogie*	Brooks & Dunn	E blues

BASS 1, 3, 5, 6, b7

If the bass on "All Shook Up" could walk right up the ladder with a 1 - 3 - 5 - 6 sequence, why not take one more step and go to the bluesy b7 note? That's exactly what the bassist in the Brian Setzer Orchestra does on the 1998 recording "Jump, Jive, and Wail." Just for good measure, he retraces his steps, returning 6 - 5 - 3 - 1. Try and ignore the honking sax riff, and turn up the bass, focusing on the classic walking boogie pattern. (The

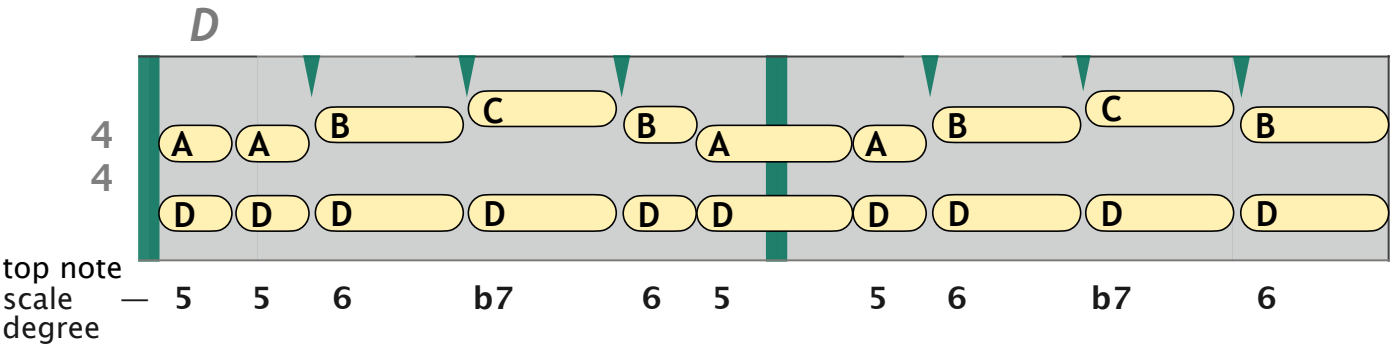
term “walking” comes from the deliberate pace created by the steady stream of quarter notes, holding down a solid 4/4 groove.) If this sequence sounds familiar, it’s probably because the top notes of the circular blues progression heard earlier outline the same **5, 6, b7, 6 pattern**.

“Jump, Jive, and Wail” — Brian Setzer Orchestra — 1998 (orig. Louis Prima)	**Bb blues**	70

The guitar line on the next song is basically an extension of the boogie 5, 6 alternation heard earlier.

“Roll Over Beethoven” — The Beatles — 1964 (orig. Chuck Berry)	**D blues**	71

0:17 VERSE



Additional songs with BOOGIE BASS 1, 3, 5, 6, b7

1958	***Hard Headed Woman***	**Elvis Presley**	**C blues**
1978	***Ice Cream Man***	**Van Halen (orig. John Brim)**	**Eb blues**
1985	***Neutron Dance***	**Pointer Sisters**	**E blues**

Signature Riffs

MELODIC FUNCTION RIFFS

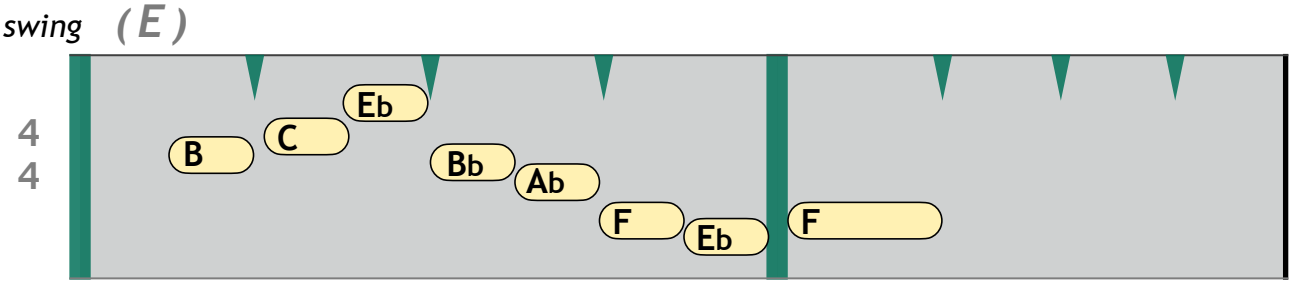
The Animal's 1964 hit "Boom Boom" features another example of a repeated riff based on the minor pentatonic with the added #4 note (riff shown below). It is also a good example of a blues cover that is almost identical to the original. In terms of the form,"Boom Boom" has an interesting variation on the 12-bar blues form. It features the traditional call & response, but the phrases are much shorter than usual — basically alternating 4-beat vocal phrases with 4-beat instrumental response riffs over the entire form.

"Boom Boom" — The Animals — 1964
(orig. John Lee Hooker)

F blues 72

0:18 VERSE — VOCAL CALL "Boom, boom, boom, boom"

— INSTRUMENTAL RESPONSE RIFF



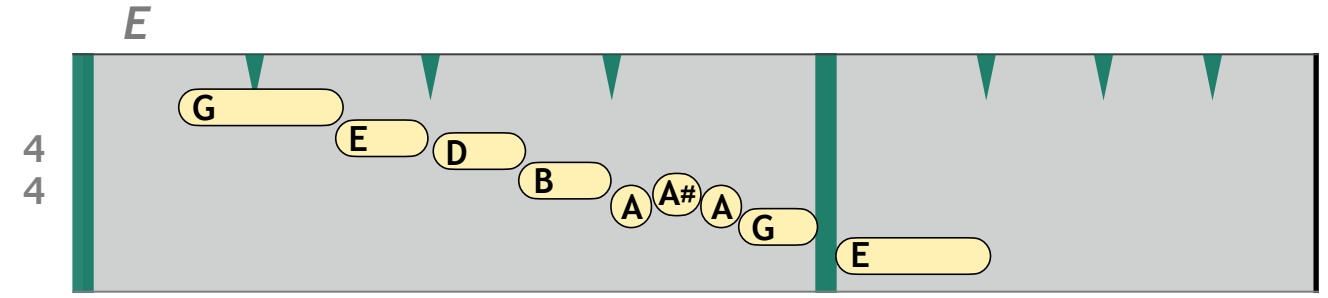
scale degree – #4 5 b7 4 b3 1 b7 1

Elvis Presley's "Little Sister" also has short call & response phrases, but only on the chorus. The guitar response riff is written below:

"Little Sister" — Elvis Presley — 1961

E blues 73

0:08 CHORUS RIFF



scale degree – b3 1 b7 5 4 #4 4 b3 1

Additional songs with MELODIC FUNCTION RIFFS (blues)

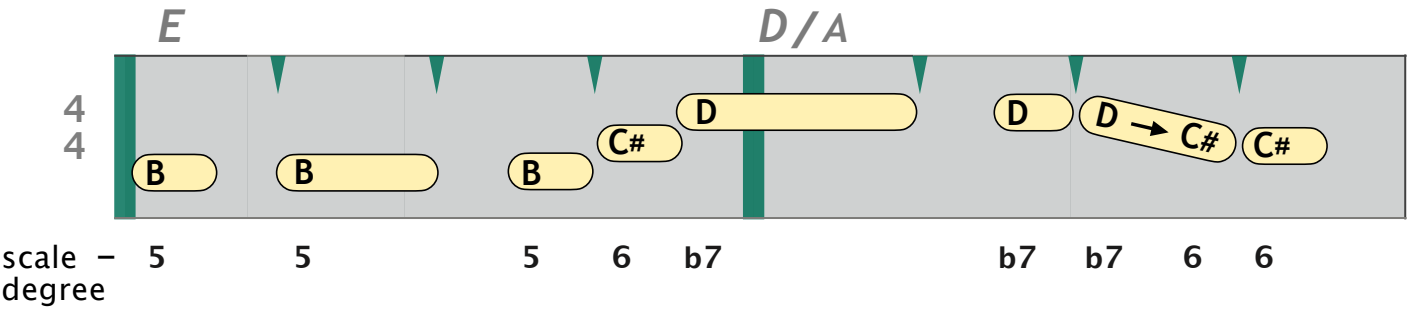
1959	*Peter Gunn*	Ray Anthony	F blues
1959	*What'd I Say*	Ray Charles	E blues
1972	*Black Dog*	Led Zeppelin	A blues
1972	*Hot Rod Lincoln*	Commander Cody	E blues
1980	*Shake a Leg*	AC / DC	E blues
2011	*Keep On*	Eric Church	F blues

HARMONIC FUNCTION RIFFS

One of the most famous rock riffs of all time turns out to be the blues in disguise. Listen closely to the iconic fuzz-tone riff of the Stones' "Satisfaction" and you'll recognize the traditional boogie 5, 6, b7 pattern. The riff is used without vocals in the intro, then disappears during the verse, but it returns to anchor the chorus, accompanying the vocals throughout the section.

"Satisfaction" — Rolling Stones — 1965 | E blues | 74

0:00 INTRO and CHORUS RIFF

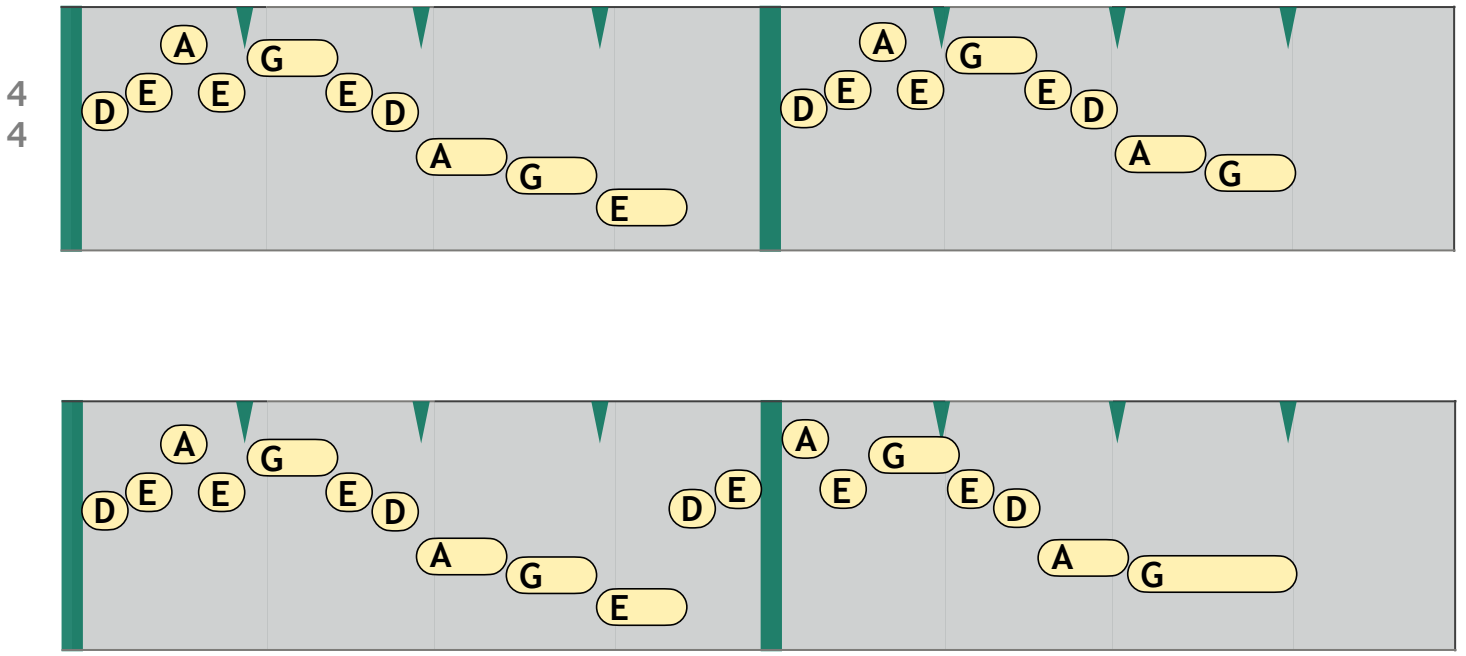


Here's another example of the signature riff introducing the song, then leaving during the verse, only to return in the chorus to highlight the title phrase. The guitar riff (shown below) is all **minor pentatonic**, with very brief upward string bends on most of the b3 notes (G naturals).

"Life in the Fast Lane" — The Eagles — 1977	E blues	75

0:00 INTRO and CHORUS RIFF

(E)



Additional songs with HARMONIC FUNCTION RIFFS (blues)

1969	*How Many More Times*	Led Zeppelin	E blues
1970	*Funk #49*	James Gang	A blues
1972	*One Way Out*	Allman Brothers (org. S.B. Williamson)	A blues
2000	*Short Skirt, Long Jacket*	Cake	D blues
2019	*Eagle Birds*	Black Keys	E blues

TURNAROUND RIFFS

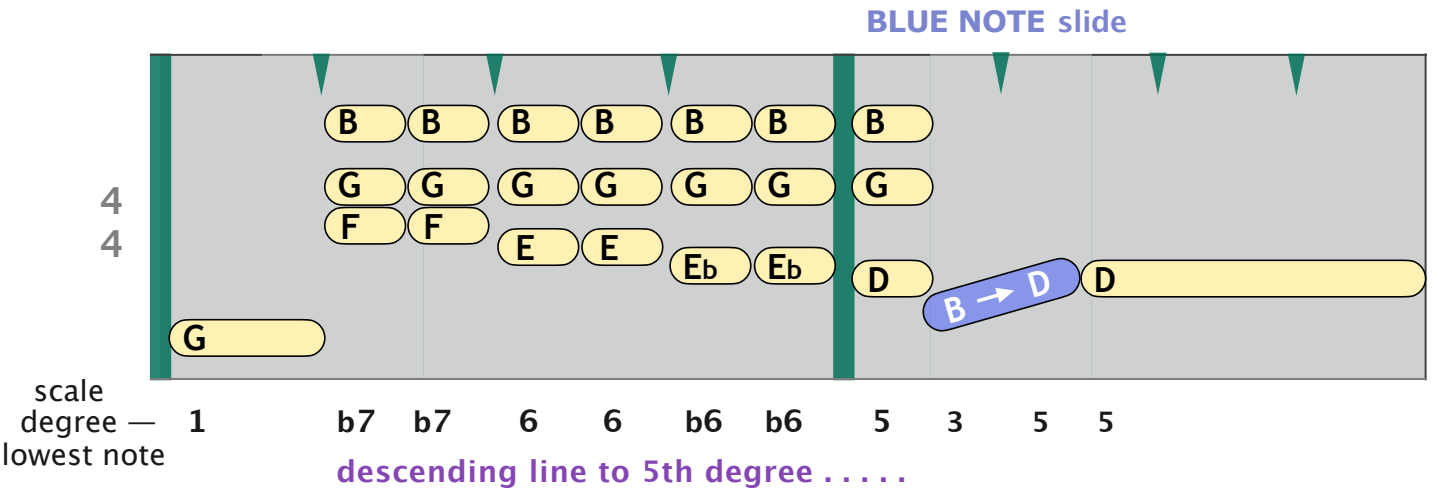
Some blues songs embellish the last 2 bars of the 12-bar form with a special riff called a **"turnaround,"** which describes perfectly the function of the riff. Here's a classic descending turnaround riff heard on Eric Clapton's cover of "Walkin' Blues" (originally recorded by Robert Johnson in 1936). The riff starts on beat 2 in the 11th measure of the 12-bar form (**0:30** on the recording). Notice the **descending b7 - 6 - b6 notes**, which land on the 5th degree. These are a common ingredient in many turnarounds. In this case there is only the single D note to suggest the V, but on other blues songs the full V chord is also present.

"Walkin' Blues" — Eric Clapton — 1992
(orig. Robert Johnson)

G blues

76

0:30 TURNAROUND RIFF – bars 11 and 12



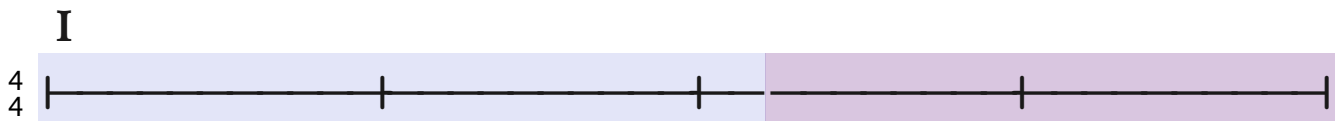
Z Z Top use basically the same riff on their cover of another Robert Johnson classic "Dust My Broom." Listen for the riff at **0:56.** Also listen for the clear vocal call / instrumental response structure and A, A, B lyric sequence of the traditional 12-bar form, starting at **0:30**.

"Dust My Broom" — Z Z Top — 1979
(orig. Robert Johnson)

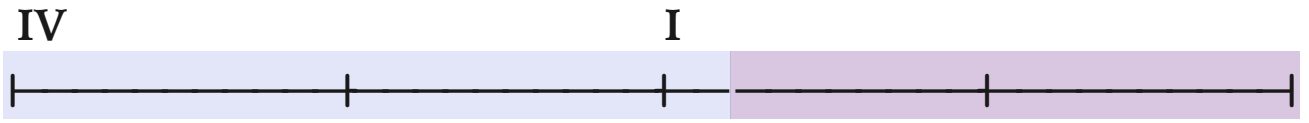
D blues

77

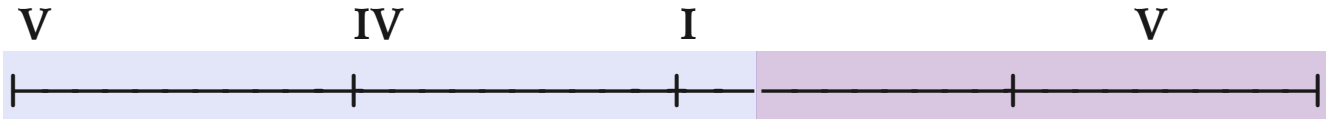
0:30 VERSE



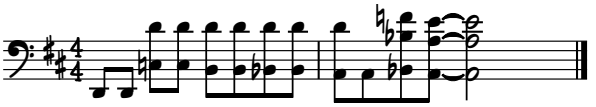
Gonna get up in the mornin I believe I'll dust my broom **GUITAR RESPONSE RIFF (7 beats)**



Gonna get up in the mornin I believe I'll dust my broom **GUITAR RESPONSE RIFF** *Well my*



best gal I'll be leavin so my friend get outta my room **0:56 TURNAROUND RIFF**



descending line to 5 . . . .

Here's a country song with some blues influence, using the 12-bar form and featuring another descending 1, b7, 6, b6, 5 turnaround. This time the turnaround is only in the bass guitar, so listen closely (riff is at **0:51**).

"Give It Up or Let Me Go" — Dixie Chicks — 1999

A blues

78

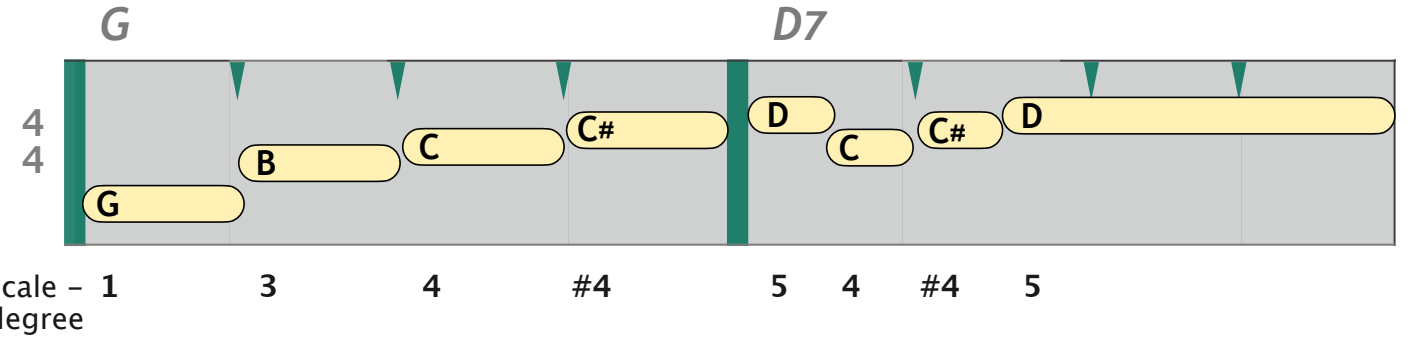
0:51 TURNAROUND RIFF – descending 1, b7, 6, b6 to 5 from the **bass guitar**

Some blues turnarounds contain an **ascending** approach to the 5th, as heard on the Stones' blues cover "I Can't Be Satisfied." This ascending turnaround riff is basically an extension of the rising guitar riffs featured throughout the song. These riffs generally rise chromatically from the 3rd to the 5th degree (3 - 4 - #4 - 5), shifting with every chord change of the 12 bar. (The turnaround riff is at **0:24**).

"I Can't Be Satisfied" — Rolling Stones — 1965
(orig. Muddy Waters)

G blues 79

0:24 TURNAROUND RIFF – bars 11 and 12

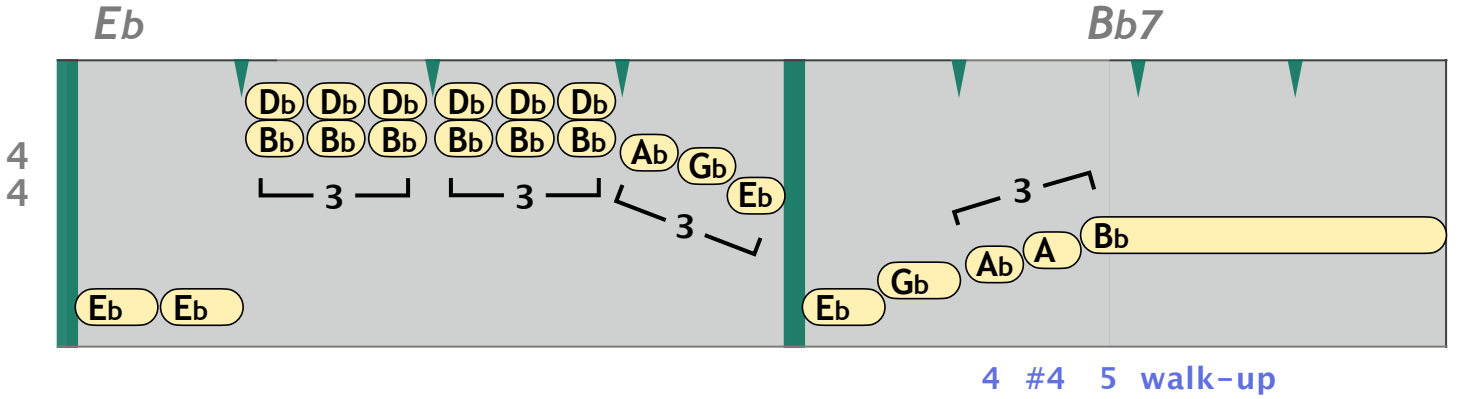


The next example features a common variation of the previous turnaround, adding triplet figures in bar 11, and retaining the 4 - #4 - 5 walk-up with a triplet in bar 12. LISTEN AT **1:13** for the turnaround.

"Pride and Joy" — Stevie Ray Vaughan — 1983

Eb blues 80

1:13 TURNAROUND RIFF – bars 11 and 12



Eric Clapton's recording "Before You Accuse Me" is a fitting close to this discussion of the blues style, featuring many of the elements that define the blues form. As a review, cover up the list below and test your ears. How many elements can you name?

"Before You Accuse Me" — Eric Clapton — 1989
(orig. Bo Diddley)

E blues

81

— 0:07 (verse) — **12 bar form**
— **A, A, B lyric sequence**
— **Vocal call & instrumental response**
— **Boogie bass on guitar**
— **Turnaround riff with 4 – #4 – 5 walk up**

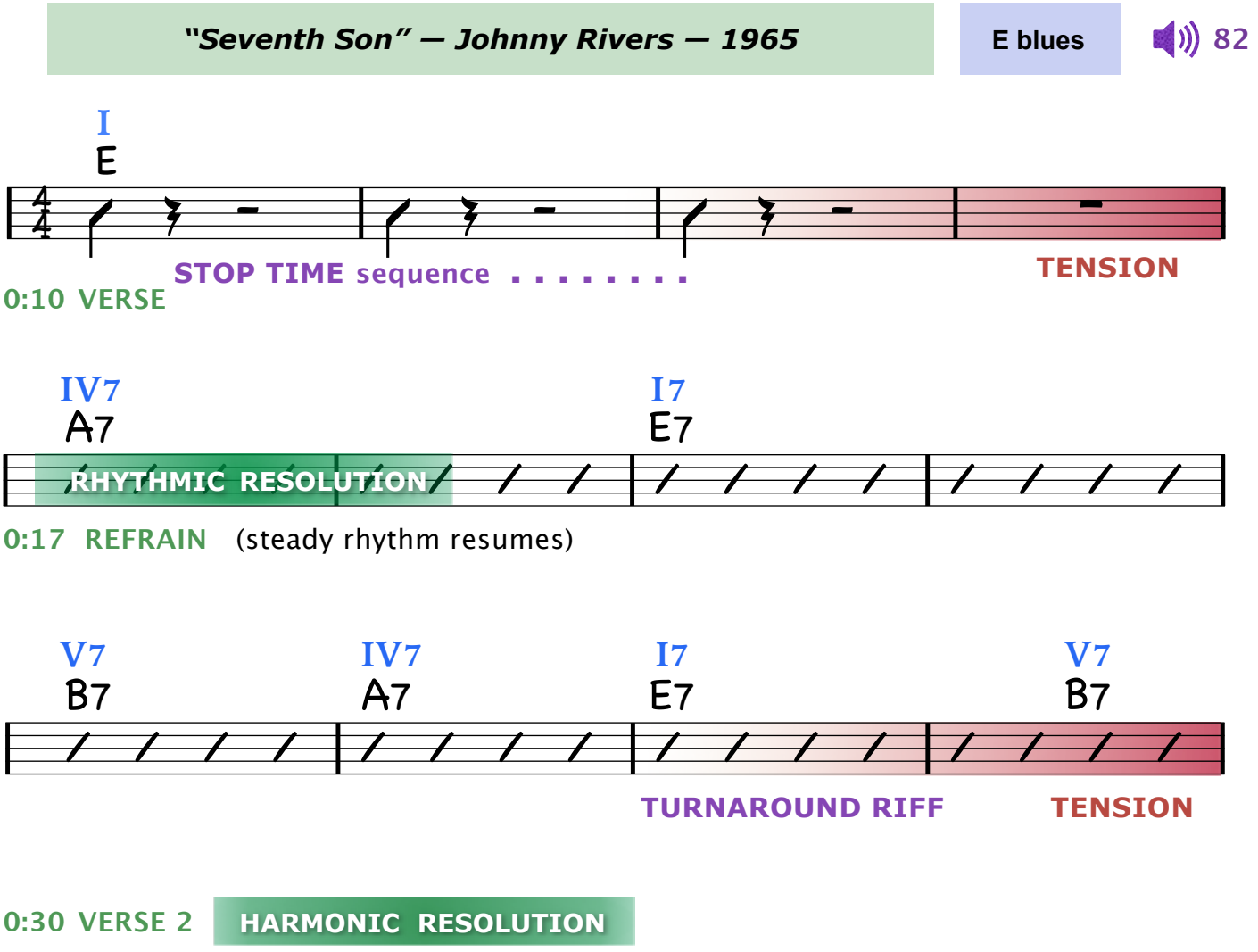
Songwriting Focal Points

In this chapter's songwriting section, we will look at two musical elements that have already been introduced earlier in the chapter — **stop time** and the **turnaround riff** — and discuss a little further how they are used to create focal points in the blues song "Seventh Son." This song was written by noted bluesman Willie Dixon, and first recorded in 1955 by Willie Mabon. We will listen to the version made popular on the Top-40 charts in 1965 by artist Johnny Rivers. Let's look first at how stop time is used in this song to create a focal point.

Stop Time

As we heard earlier on several songs, the 12-bar blues form is sometimes split into a 4-bar verse and an 8-bar refrain, with stop time featured during the verse. In terms of songwriting, stop time can be a very effective way to create a focal point because the abrupt break in the song's instrumental flow obviously attracts attention and highlights the entrance of the refrain.

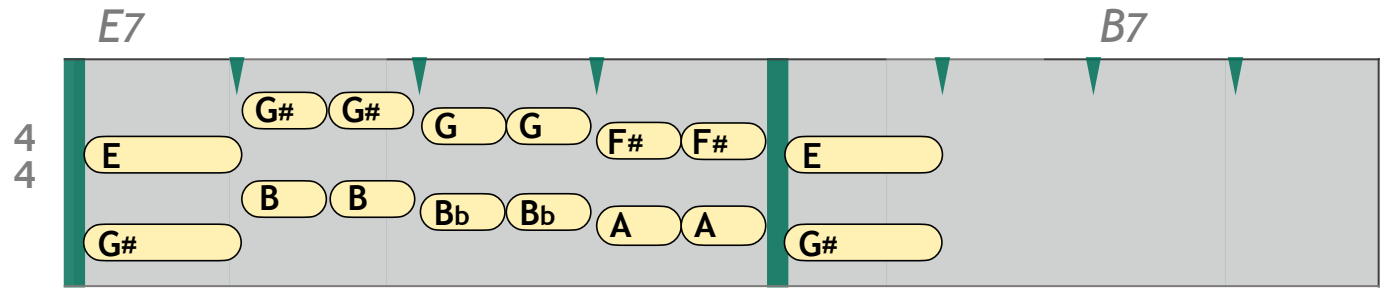
Johnny Rivers' "Seventh Son" provides a good example of a strong focal point generated by the 12-bar stop-time / refrain form. The first 3 bars feature a stop time sequence with an instrumental hit on beat one of each measure, creating some rhythmic tension. However, the last bar of the verse (bar 4) does not have the expected hit on the down beat, which only increases the tension heading into the refrain. Later in the song on verses 2, 3, & 4 (not shown), the stop time section is doubled to 8 bars.



12-bar Blues Turnaround

You will notice that there is a second area of tension at the end of the refrain (bars 11 and 12) where the dominant V chord is added. Many blues songs include the V like this on the last measure of the repeating 12-bar form, which creates the familiar V to I focal point

when the form starts over and resolves on the I chord. Adding to the strength of this hook is the descending turnaround riff (shown below). This turnaround is very similar to the riffs heard earlier on “Walkin’ Blues” and “Dust My Broom,” with descending scale notes b7, 6, b6, and 5.



0:27 DESCENDING TURNAROUND RIFF – bars 11 and 12

With the completion of Chapter Four, we have introduced the three main pillars of pop and rock harmony — major, minor, and blues. This lays the foundation for virtually all the chapters that follow in this book. More will be said about blues tonality in Chapter Eleven when we further our discussion on blues-influenced songs.