

The Blues Progression

One of the most popular forms of the blues is the 12-bar blues progression. The term *progression* refers to a series of chords. *Twelve-bar* means the progression is 12 measures long. The three chords used in the basic 12-bar progression are the I, IV, and V chords. The I chord (sometimes called the *tonic*) has the same letter name as the key in which you are playing. For example, the I chord in the key of E is E. The IV chord (subdominant) has the letter name which is four steps up the major scale from the I chord. The IV chord in the key of E is A. The V chord (dominant) has the same letter name as the fifth step up the major scale from the I chord. The V chord in the key of E is B. The following chart shows the I, IV, and V chords in the different keys. The more common keys are shown first.

Key
↓

I (Tonic)	IV (Subdominant)	V (Dominant)
E	A	B
A	D	E
D	G	A
G	C	D
C	F	G
F	B \flat	C
B \flat	E \flat	F
E \flat	A \flat	B \flat
A \flat	D \flat	E \flat
D \flat	G \flat	A \flat
B	E	F \sharp
F \sharp	B	C \sharp
G \flat	C \flat	D \flat

The formula for building the basic 12-bar blues progression is: four measures of the I chord, two measures of the IV chord, two measures of the I chord, one measure of the V chord, one measure of the IV chord, and two measures of the I chord. It's very common to replace the last measure of the I chord with a V chord if the progression is going to be repeated. This last measure is sometimes called the *turnaround*. The advantage of knowing the Roman numeral formula is that, by plugging in the correct I, IV, and V chords, you can play the blues in any key.

The following exercise is the basic 12-bar blues progression. Notice that the number of measures that each chord is played fits the blues formula. The chords in parentheses are the chords which would be used to play the blues in the key of E. Seventh chords (7) are commonly used on every chord in the blues because of their dissonant quality.

Play the following progression strumming down four times in each measure. While it may seem overly simple, strumming down four times in a measure was, and is, a fairly popular technique. Accent beats two and four.

Accent marks. Play the strums which have these marks above them louder.

The next progression is a very common variation of the 12-bar blues. The IV chord has been added in the second measure. Remember the V chord in the last measure is optional. This chord can be played if the progression is going to be repeated. If you're not repeating the progression, play the I chord in the last measure. Practice strumming this exercise. In each measure of the progression, play the strum pattern which is written in the first measure. This strum pattern works well when playing songs in 4/4.

Count: 1 2 & 3 & 4 &

Strum the next progression which is a blues in the key of A. In each measure, use the strum pattern which is written in the first measure. This is another strum pattern which works to accompany songs in 4/4.

③

Count: 1 2 & 3 & 4 &

I (A7) IV (D7) I (A7) IV (D7)

I (A7) V (E7) IV (D7) I (A7) V (E7)

The following *strum patterns* can be used to accompany songs in 4/4. Each pattern takes one measure to complete. Once you decide on which pattern you would like to use for a particular song, play the same pattern in each measure of the song.

Pattern 1

Count: 1 2 3 4

Pattern 2

Count: 1 2 & 3 4

Pattern 3

Count: 1 2 3 & 4 &

Pattern 4

Count: 1 2 & 3 & 4 &

Pattern 5

Count: 1 2 & 3 & 4 &

Pattern 6

Count: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

Play the chords to the following song which is a blues in the key of E. In each measure, use the strum pattern which is written above the first measure. You should also practice the song again using some of the other strum patterns for 4/4. The trick is singing the melody which is written while playing the strum pattern. You have to practice the strum pattern enough so that you don't have to think about it while you're singing.

Baby Don't Love Me

④

E7 A7

I love my baby, _____ but my baby don't love _____ me.

E7 A7

I love my baby, _____

but my baby don't love me. Feelin' down and lonely.

Wish these blues would set me free.

The next exercise is a blues in 6/8 time. The strum pattern which is written in the first measure is a common strum for 6/8. Use this pattern to play each measure of the progression.

⑤

Count: 1 2 & 3 4 5 6

The following exercise is the blues in 12/8 time in the key of E. In each measure, play the strum pattern which is written in the first measure. This is a common strum for 12/8. Notice the accents on beats 1, 4, 7, and 10. Because of the accents, 12/8 should actually feel like four beats in a measure.

⑥

Count: 1 2 & 3 4 5 6 7 8 & 9 10 11 12