

Playing and Improvising Acoustic Blues

Doug Young Acoustic Blues Workshop Notes

Our goal is to be able to play a simple, but effective solo blues guitar piece, hopefully with some improvisation. I'm assuming a little bit of basic knowledge and ability on the guitar. You are hopefully comfortable with basic chords. Some experience with fingerpicking is also helpful, but if this is new to you, a simple blues is a good place to start. Take your time, step through the examples, and have fun.

Getting Started

The first and most important element of playing a good solo blues piece is to be able to create a solid bass line. The bass line will provide a basic harmonic structure for the blues, but, more importantly, also provides the rhythm. Practice the first example on the next page until you can feel a solid groove. It helps to partially damp the strings with the heel of your hand to get a more percussive sound. You can damp a little or a lot. Some blues players dampen the strings so much that you can't really hear the notes! In this case, the bass line is just acting as a drum, and it doesn't even matter what notes you play. This can be useful if you are playing something where it's hard to reach the right bass notes. But usually, a middle ground where you can hear the tonality but with a nice percussive thump to each note is the best approach.

There are many good keys for playing blues on the guitar. For now, we're going to stick to the key of A, mostly because the 3 bass notes you need, A, D, and E are all on open strings, which is convenient. But as we go along, feel free to experiment with similar ideas in other keys

Once you can play the bass line, go on to the second example, adding chords on the first beat of each measure. You can play the chords anywhere you like. Start with the suggested positions and then try other chord voicings you may know. The important thing is to keep that bass line going at all times!

The third example shows one alternate set of chords you can use. As you can see, you don't have to play full chords. This example plays just 2 notes out of each of the chords. Play with sliding into the chords, adding to vibrato, etc. These things are easier to do with simple 2 note chords like this.

The fourth example introduces some rhythm in the chords. Again, this is an initial starting point. Try your own rhythms. The point is to be able to play a "rhythm guitar" part against the bass line, keeping them both going strong and tight. If you're new to fingerpicking, this step may take a while. Take your time before moving on.

Blues in A - First Steps

Bass line for basic 12 bar blues. Play with bass notes damped with heel of hand.

1 **A**

5 **D** **A**

9 **E** **D** **A** **E**

Adding harmony: play 1st position chords on the first beat of each measure.


1 **A7**



5 **D7** **A7**





9 **E** **D7** **A7** **E**

More Harmony

Adding harmony: 2 note chords


1 **A7** 



5 **D7**  **A7** 





9 **E7**  **D7**  **A7**  **E7** 

The first section shows a 4-measure progression of A7 chords. The second section shows a 4-measure progression of D7, A7, A7, and E7. The third section shows a 4-measure progression of E7, D7, A7, and E7. Each measure includes a guitar tab with fret numbers and fingerings for the top three strings (T, A, B).

Adding a simple rhythm.

1 **A7** 

5 **D7**  **A7** 

9 **E7**  **D7**  **A7**  **E7** 

The second section adds a simple rhythmic pattern to the chords. The first section shows a 4-measure progression of A7 chords with a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes and eighth notes. The second section shows a 4-measure progression of D7, A7, A7, and E7 with the same rhythmic pattern. The third section shows a 4-measure progression of E7, D7, A7, and E7 with the same rhythmic pattern. Each measure includes a guitar tab with fret numbers and fingerings for the top three strings (T, A, B).

Turnarounds

By this point, you should be playing a pretty solid rhythm and bass blues. You could use this to accompany yourself singing, or another player who is soloing. But things may be sounding a bit bland and not terribly interesting. So we're going to start adding a few little things to spice it up a bit.

An important element of blues is the turnaround. You can use turnarounds in many places, as intros, endings, even between chord changes. But the most common place is the last two bars of each chorus. A turnaround is just an interesting lick that feels like it leads back to the beginning. If you were singing a blues, you would probably sing four lines over the verse, but not sing over the turnaround (tho anything is possible). The turnaround is where the accompaniment gets to play something a little flashy.

Try the example turnaround on the next page, and then try to work them into the last 2 bars of your blues. The example shows one way, but you can play any of the turnarounds, along with whatever variations you have come up with for the main section.

We'll look at more turnarounds later. For now, focus on being able to play a chorus, end with one of these simple turnarounds, and go right back into a new verse. Once you can do that, you should start really sounding like your playing a blues!

Turnarounds

Simple descending chord turnaround

A7 A F7 E7

Tablature for simple descending chord turnaround:

- Measure 1: A7 (8fr)
- Measure 2: A (5fr)
- Measure 3: F7 (7fr)
- Measure 4: E7 (6fr)

Alternate descending chord turnaround

A7 A F7 E7

Tablature for alternate descending chord turnaround:

- Measure 1: A7 (8fr)
- Measure 2: A (5fr)
- Measure 3: F7 (7fr)
- Measure 4: E7 (6fr)

Another descending chord turnaround

A A F E

Tablature for another descending chord turnaround:

- Measure 1: A (5fr)
- Measure 2: A (5fr)
- Measure 3: F (7fr)
- Measure 4: E (6fr)

Blues with Turnarounds

1 A7

5 D7 A7

9 E7 D7 A7 A F7 E7

Blues with Turnarounds:

- System 1: Measure 1 (A7), Measure 2, Measure 3, Measure 4 (A7)
- System 2: Measure 1 (D7), Measure 2, Measure 3, Measure 4 (A7)
- System 3: Measure 1 (E7), Measure 2 (D7), Measure 3 (A7), Measure 4 (A, F7, E7)

Variations and Finger Independence

Now would be a good point to work on adding more variations to the rhythm patterns of your chord changes. To do this, you need to be able to play with the right thumb and the fingers of your right hand working as independently as possible. Always keep that bass line thumping away, as you try to play other rhythms with your fingers. The examples on the next page are intended to help you play on different beats as well as suggest a few more possible rhythms to use.

Finger Independence

1

A7

2

A7

3

A7

4

A7

5

A7

6

A7

7

A7

8

A7

9

A7

10

A7

Bass Runs and Fills

Something that can add a lot of interest to your blues playing is a few well placed bass runs. You can break up the monotony of the straight bass line by adding little fills between almost any chord change. Adding bass runs requires a bit of concentration and focus. The important thing is to end on time and at the right note, so that it sounds like your line is taking you to the next chord change. The following page has examples of runs that move from A to D, D to A, A, to E, and so on. Try this, and figure out some more of your own. The example blues shows how these can be worked in.

Combine these with some nice turnarounds at the end, and you should be sounding like a complete band! You're only missing a melody, which is what we will explore next.

Bass Line Runs

Bass Run in A

A musical staff showing a bass line run in A major. The treble clef is empty. The bass clef has notes: 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A triplet bracket is over the 4, 2, 4 notes.

Transition from D to A

A musical staff showing a transition from D to A. The treble clef has a 'D' above the first measure and an 'A' above the second measure. The bass clef has notes: 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A triplet bracket is over the 4, 2, 4 notes.

Bass Run in D

A musical staff showing a bass line run in D major. The treble clef is empty. The bass clef has notes: 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A triplet bracket is over the 4, 2, 4 notes.

Transition from A to D

A musical staff showing a transition from A to D. The treble clef has an 'A' above the first measure and a 'D' above the second measure. The bass clef has notes: 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A triplet bracket is over the 4, 2, 4 notes.

From E to D

A musical staff showing a transition from E to D. The treble clef has an 'E' above the first measure and a 'D' above the second measure. The bass clef has notes: 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A triplet bracket is over the 4, 2, 4 notes.

From A to E

A musical staff showing a transition from A to E. The treble clef has an 'A' above the first measure and an 'E' above the second measure. The bass clef has notes: 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A triplet bracket is over the 4, 2, 4 notes.

Blues with Bass Runs

Measure 1 of a blues piece. Treble clef: A7 chord diagram (x0x2x46fr), notes 3-3, 2-2. Bass clef: 7, 0, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4. Triplet brackets are under the 4, 2, 4 notes in measures 1, 2, and 3.

Measure 5 of a blues piece. Treble clef: D7 chord diagram (x0x2x45fr), notes 2-2, 1-1. Bass clef: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4. Triplet brackets are under the 4, 2, 4 notes in measures 5 and 6.

Measure 9 of a blues piece. Treble clef: E7 chord diagram (x0x2x47fr), notes 4-4, 3-3. Bass clef: 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 4, 2, 4. Triplet brackets are under the 4, 2, 4 notes in measures 9 and 10.

Doug Young, 2002 - GAC Bonus Night

Adding Melody

By now, you've got a good solid blues accompaniment happening. Your rhythm's solid, you're playing flashing sounding turnaround, and throwing in bass runs wherever you want. All that's missing from a complete blues solo is a melody. Whether you want to play a complete stand-alone acoustic guitar instrumental, or just throw in an instrumental break between sung verses, you need to be able to play the bass, rhythm, and a melody. Fortunately, you're already most of the way there.

The following examples show how to introduce a melody by simple adjustments to the chord shapes you been playing. Blues melodies don't need to be complicated. It's often more effective to play a simple line with conviction.

Repetition is also good. The following examples use one idea, with with two parts, a "call and response", where you play a line and then echo it with a similar line that sounds like an "answer". The same line is then transposed to the other keys. So you basically have a melody that is just one simple lick, but moved around the neck.

You can use this idea to keep some cohesiveness to your solo. Play a lick, and think of that as your main "statement". Now play a different lick. Now restate the original lick, over the IV chord instead of the I. Returning to the I chord, restate the lick again, or play a new one if you prefer. Now you're to the V chord, and the turn around. You're done! A whole verse of the blues as standalone solo.

From there, it's a matter of how much you want to work into the solo. Learn several different licks that can work over all chords, add bass runs, use different turnaround, and you can play different variations endlessly. Experiment with the examples that follow and see what you can do.

Adding Melody

A lick

A A7 A A7

A1

D lick

D D7 D D7

D1

E lick

E7

E1

E lick

E7

E2

Blues Instrumental #1

1

A A7 A A7

A lick

5

D D7 D D7 A A7 A A7

D lick A lick

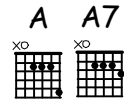
9

E7 D D7 A7 Ab7/AG7/A A F7 E7

E lick 1/2 D lick turnaround

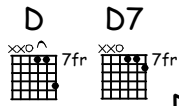
Blues Instrumental Solo #2

Adding Bass Runs



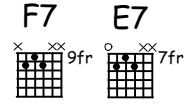
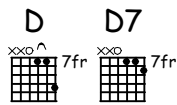
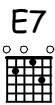
A lick A lick 1

1



D lick A lick

6



E lick 1/2 D lick turnaround

10

Expanding your Lick Catalog

You can go quite a long way by just adding more licks like those we've already tried out. Try the ones on the following page, expand on them, or make up your own. Then try them in a blues, with turnarounds, bass runs, etc.

Mix and Match

With a good collection of licks, you can now create your own blues by simply mixing and matching different licks. You can think of the blues format as a template into which you can plug any licks you like. The following page shows one form this template might take, along with an example, using some of the licks we've looked at previously.

This template approach also provides an easy way to start improvising a blues. Look at the example on page 17. Most of the structure is set, with places for bass runs, and turnarounds. You can use a stock lick as the "answer" portion of the tune, in bars 3 and 4 and 7 and 8. Repeating a lick in these spots will make your solo hold together, and make it sound like you know what you're playing. In bars 1 and 2, and 5 and 6, play whatever comes to mind. Just keep that bass line going.

Mixing and Matching

1 A A lick A lick (same or different)

T			
A	-	-	-
B	Bass Run		Bass Run

5 D D lick A Repeat 2nd A lick

T			
A	-	-	-
B		Bass Run	Bass Run

9 E E lick D Short D lick A E

T			
A	-	-	-
B		Bass Run	Turnaround

Mix And Match Example

A A7

1 A1 A3

5 D7 D5 A7 A3

9 E7 E1 D7 D5 A Turnaround

Mix And Match Example #2

Musical notation for measures 1-9. The notation is on a three-line staff with Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs. Measure 1 is marked with a '1' and contains a triplet in the treble clef and a bass line with notes 0-3-0-3. Measures 2-4 are marked with 'A2' and contain a treble line with notes 2-0-2 and a bass line with notes 0-0-0-0. Measures 5-7 are marked with 'D2' and contain a treble line with notes 2-5-2-0 and a bass line with notes 0-0-0-0. Measures 8-9 are marked with 'E3' and contain a treble line with notes 0-3-2-0 and a bass line with notes 0-0-0-0. There are also measures marked 'A5' and 'D3' with various treble and bass line notations.

Improvising Your Own Blues

Musical notation for measures 1-9. The notation is on a three-line staff with Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) clefs. Measure 1 is marked with a '1' and contains a treble line with a triplet (3) and a bass line with notes 0-4-2-4. The text 'Your A lick' is written in the treble clef. Measures 2-4 are marked with 'A3' and contain a treble line with notes 3-2-3-2 and a bass line with notes 0-0-0-0. Measure 5 is marked with 'A3' and contains a treble line with notes 3-2-3-2 and a bass line with notes 0-0-0-0. The text 'Your D lick' is written in the bass clef. Measure 6 is marked with 'A3' and contains a treble line with notes 3-2-3-2 and a bass line with notes 0-0-0-0. Measure 7 is marked with 'A3' and contains a treble line with notes 3-2-3-2 and a bass line with notes 0-0-0-0. Measure 8 is marked with 'E1' and contains a treble line with a triplet (3) and a bass line with notes 0-1-3-0. The text 'Your D lick' is written in the bass clef. Measure 9 is marked with 'E1' and contains a treble line with notes 0-1-3-0 and a bass line with notes 0-0-0-0. The text 'Turnaround' is written above the staff. The notation ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Single Line Improvising

From here, you can just keep going, expanding on what you can play. One thing you can do is to explore single line soloing based on pentatonic scales, blues scales, or "blues boxes". These are all thoroughly explored in dozens if not hundreds of books on blues and rock soloing. The difference here, is that you're going to keep that bass line going, throw in some bass runs, use those turnarounds and so on, all at the same time. The examples on page 19 just show the notes in a rock/blues pentatonic scale against the bass line. It's up to you to make a melody out of them.

You can also combine the chordal approach we've been using with the scales. Page 20 shows how to find some scale ideas around different chord shapes. You can be playing chords, like we've been doing, but add in any of the scales notes, to get a bigger sound.

Improvising using Blues Box Shapes

Am blues scale 5th fret

Am blues scale 7th fret

A major blues scale


Example 1 (Partial)

Example 2

Improvising Around Chord Shapes

Play any combination of notes, picking out melody with moving tones around chord shape


A



5-3-0 3-2-1-0 2

T 2
A 2
B 0


D



5-3-2-0 3-1-0 2

T 3
A 2
B 0


E7



0-3-0 2-1 2-0-2

T 0
A 1
B 2


A



8-7-5-3-2-0 2

T 5
A 6
B 7


D



8-7-5-3-0 3-1

T 7
A 7
B 0


E7



5-4-2-0 3-0 2-1

T 3
A 4
B 0


A7



10-9-7-5-3-0 3-2

T 8
A 9
B 0


D



10-8-7-5-2-1-0 3

T 7
A 7
B 0

E



12-10-9-7-4-3-2-0

T 9
A 9
B 0