Playing the Blues

The 12 bar blues is the most commonly occurring chord progression in the blues. It is a chord progression that lasts for 12 bars, or measures. These 12 bars repeat throughout the course of the song.

The music is typically made up of 3 chords: **the I, IV and V chords** of any given key.

Keys, scales & chord structures

In any key, the starting note is often referred to as the **root note** or **tonic note**.

So in the **key of C** major, the note (root/tonic) of **C** would be marked as 1, and the chord of C would be marked as I (in Roman numerals).

The I, IV & V chords

We know that in the key of C, the notes of the scale are as follows:

C D E F G A B

C is the root note and is marked as 1. **F** is the 4th note in the scale and **G** is the 5th. As mentioned above, chords within a key follow the same pattern. BUT they are marked with Roman numerals, rather than numbers. So in the key of **C** – the I, IV and V chords are as follows:

C	F	G
(I)	(IV)	(V)

This idea applies to **any key**. You just count up from the root note of the key.

So if a song is in the key of A, you work out the notes of the A major scale, which are:

A B C# D E F# G#

Looking at the key of A then, we can see that the I, IV and V chords are as follows:

A	D	E
(I)	(IV)	(V)

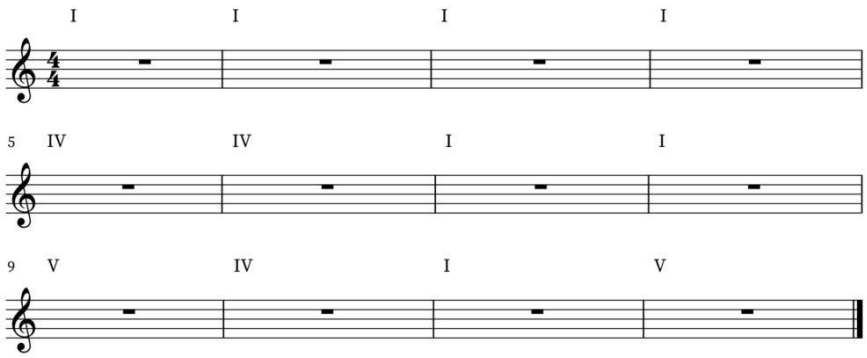
This formula applies to ANY key.

The pattern of the 12 bar blues

Now we know the structure of the 12 bar blues and how to apply it to different keys, we need to learn how the I, IV and V chords fit together within the progression.

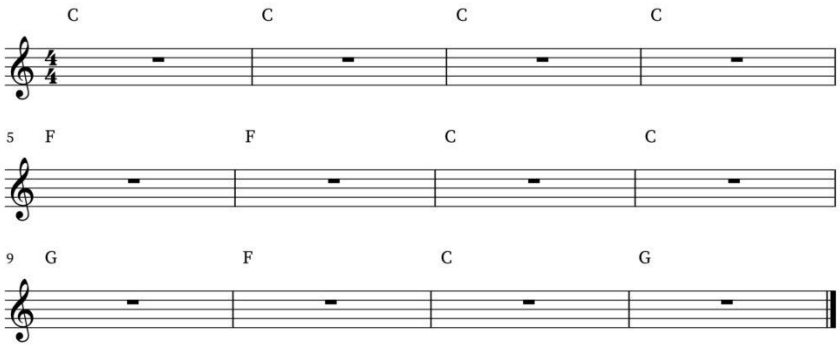
The 12 bar blues is easiest to understand if you break it down into 3 sections – each one 4 bars long.

12 Bar Blues



This shows you how the progression is structured. In the key of C, that would look like ....

12 Bar Blues in the Key of C



The next steps

The chords outlined here may not be exactly the same as the chords that blues musicians would use. They often don't play straight major chords, as we have done here. Instead, they may play what are known as Dominant 7th chords. These chords sound less 'happy' than straight major chords and they add a tension to the music that sounds distinctly bluesy. Instead of the chords in the music above, in the last bar try playing **G7** instead of **G**. Listen to the difference it makes. Musicians will explain that it creates a "tension" that is resolved by playing a **C**. Experiment with others. Try playing all the chords as dominant 7ths.

The basics of rhythm & time signatures

Rhythm consists of two basic parts:

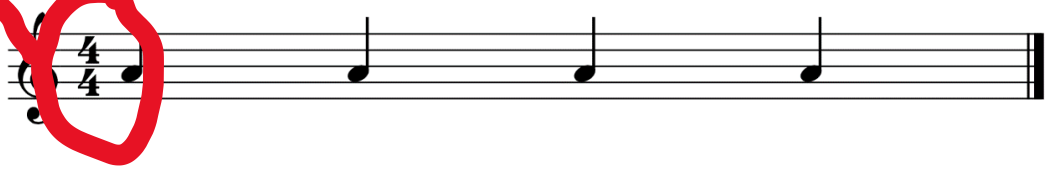
1. the **tempo** simply refers to how quickly the beat moves. The faster the tempo, the quicker the pace of the song. So Hot Tamales starts with a slow tempo that gets faster and faster. The beat is the same, but the tempo increases.
2. the **beat** is the pulse of the music that keeps it driving forward. It is what you feel when you find yourself tapping your foot along to a tune.

Written music is broken down into bars. These contain notes.

The basic note values are as follows:

Semibreve	Minim	Crotchet	Quaver
			
4 beats	2 beats	1 beat	½ beat

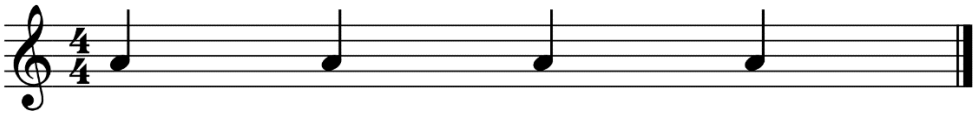
A **time signature** simply tells you how many beats there are in each bar. Blues is usually in 4/4 time (also referred to as 'common time'): This means there are four beats to each bar.



Straight time

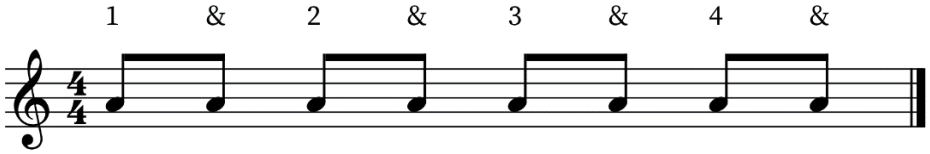
Understanding these basics of rhythm and time signatures is very helpful in getting to grips with some of the common rhythms you encounter in blues music.
This is where we need to look at **straight time** and **shuffle time** (also commonly referred to as 'swing time').

Straight time is nice and easy to understand. Let's look again at a bar in 4/4 timing:



The measure above shows 4 one-beat notes. So, counting is very simple. All you need to do is count 1, 2, 3, 4 for each of the 4 notes.

To create different feels and moods, these notes are split into subdivisions. In straight time, these beats are always split into **equal subdivisions**. So the notes in the example above can be divided into eight ½-beats, 16 ¼-beats and so on.
In an example using eight ½ beats, a single bar looks like this:



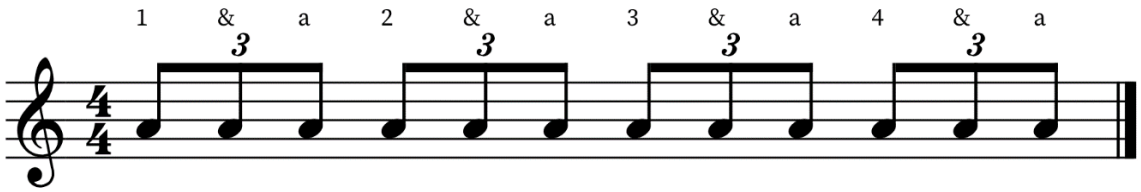
This is often referred to as an 8 beat rhythm. You can see that above each note, there is either a number, or an '&', so counting the beats in the bar becomes a case of:

1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and

Shuffle time

Whilst it is very useful to understand how straight time feels, if you try and play a 12 bar blues progression in straight time, it won't sound right. It just doesn't sound bluesy.

This is where shuffle time comes in. This is a **very** common blues rhythm, which is constructed by taking a beat and dividing it into three, creating **triplets**. This is what a bar of triplets looks like:



Here you can see that above each note the numbers and letters have changed. This is because you count triplets as follows:

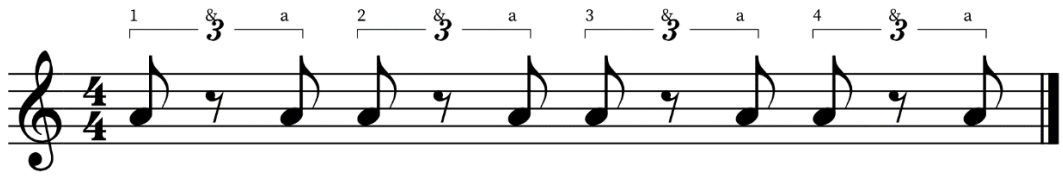
One & a, Two & a, Three & a, Four & a.

Again though, this rhythm doesn't quite capture the essence of the blues. It still wouldn't sound right as 12 bar blues.

This is because there are **no spaces** between any of the notes. Generally speaking, it is unusual to play every single note of this rhythm in a 12 bar blues. Instead, you play an adapted version of this rhythm, which is what you find in the blues shuffle.

The blues shuffle

The blues shuffle is constructed using triplets as above. Typically, though, the middle note of the triplet is omitted and replaced with a rest. So its rhythm is a bit like the beginning of The Archers: "Dum Dee Dum Dee Dum Dee Dum, etc:



Rather than being a straight, walking beat, it bounces (or if you are a blues player, it limps: same thing different speed). When you break the triplet groups up in this way, the rhythm sounds **much** bluesier.

You still need to follow the 'One & a, Two & a' rhythm. It is just that now the '&' represents a pause between the first and third note in each triplet grouping. So you play the first note of the triplet, miss the second, play the third and then go on to play the **first** beat of the next triplet.

The first and last note of each triplet is a downbeat, and the last note in each triplet is an upbeat.

So when you group the triplets together, you move quickly from the upbeat of one triplet group to the downbeat of the next triplet group.