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Standard 12 Bar Blues

I'm sure you have heard of the blues being 12 bars, 12 Bar Blues, etc. Well, it's true; any 12 bar blues has a pattern. There are only three chords used. The chords are the I chord, the IV chord, and the V chord. These chords are also known as the tonic, subdominant, and dominant chords. So, for instance, in the key of E major, the three chords that we would use would be Emaj (I), Amaj (2), and Bmaj (3). For sake of space and time, I'll be using the I, IV, and V method of notation for naming these chords in the pattern. The pattern is this: The first four bars in the 12 Bar Blues are made up of the tonic (I). The next two bars consist of the subdominant (IV), followed by two more bars of the tonic. Next, there is one bar of the dominant (V), one bar of the subdominant, and then one bar of the tonic. Last but not least, the dominant chord is played for the final bar, resolving the progression back to the tonic (which starts a new passage of 12 bars). Here's An example of a 12 bar blues progression each letter is one measure.

I - I - I - I - IV - IV - I - I - V - IV - I - V

Hopefully now you will understand the concept being conveyed here about how long each chord is played and which chord is played for the duration of the 12 bars.

Like I mentioned, that's a very basic 12 bar blues, and doesn't have as much harmonic function as newer blues forms. This is because the basic form of blues does not contain the dominant 7th chords which technically are major third, perfect fifth and b7 intervals in the chord. You could substitute chords for the V here are some examples: E7, E7#9, E9, E11, and E13 these are all possible substitutes for dominant chords. The use of the dominant chords add the tension that gives the blues its unique sound.

As long as you remember the basic pattern for the 12 bar blues (illustrated in the first example of this section), you can keep adding, and altering onto the chords as long as they remain in the parent tonality. Remember to always try and be original and make it sound good. Too complicated is not always good, as simple as just straight major chords can sound better than something too strained or complicated.

A Quick-Change Blues progression is a variation of the 12 bar blues and is almost the same as the regular blues, in this variation the second bar contains the IV chord, and not the I chord. You see this in a lot of newer blues songs.

Set up a practice routine that is manageable for you, be consistent and realize everyone learns at a different rate.