

A close-up, high-angle photograph of a guitar's body and strings. The wood grain of the body is a rich, warm brown, showing natural texture and some wear. The strings are silver-colored and run diagonally across the frame. The bridge and part of the soundhole are visible in the upper right corner, with a dark interior and a light-colored binding.

approachable music

THE **BLUES** FOR SOLO GUITARISTS

How to mix chords and scales
over the 12 bar pattern

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introduction

Over the years, learning the blues has largely become a multiple-person affair — at the very least, someone usually needs to play the rhythm while someone else plays the solos.

But the thing is, the players of old mostly handled every facet of a blues tune by themselves. They sang it, played the rhythm, took all the solos and didn't have to rely on anyone else to be around for a song to sound complete.

Most of the time, you probably play guitar all by yourself, and if you go about it right, you don't need anyone else, either.

Here's a 10-step, sustainable approach that you can use to play the blues when it's just you and your guitar.

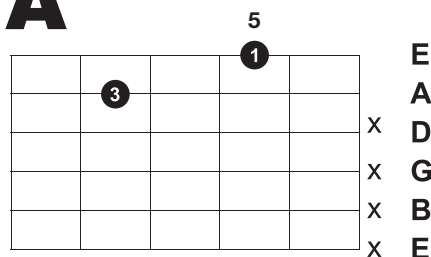
step 1: pick up a few useful chords

Any type of solo guitar playing requires you to weave individual lines of music around chords. Most commonly, the blues requires you to know three chords, contingent on which key you're playing in. In the key of A, the three chords are A, D and E. You can use any variation of these chords, including the basic open ones you learned when you first picked up a guitar.

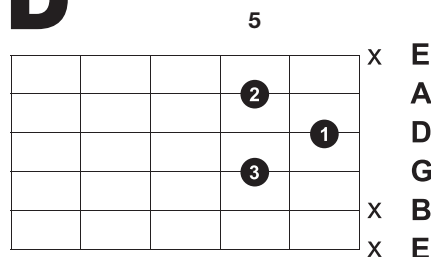
But when you're playing solo style, you also want to make use of chord shapes that allow your hand to move efficiently between the rhythm and lead playing, so that you can more intuitively do complex things. That said, here are some useful variations of A, D and E.

Chord variations for A, D and E*

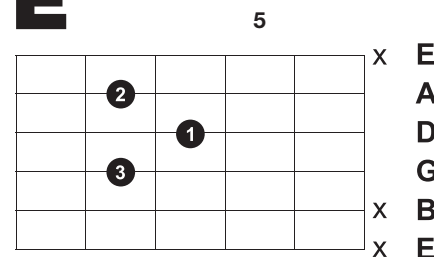
A



D



E



Notes and Tips

- You might think of blues chords as "7" chords, such as A7, D7 and E7. This is somewhat of an oversimplification of things. The blues is actually built on top of basic chords, with a note called the **flat 7** — usually shown as "**b7**" — added throughout as an embellishment. The b7 is the actual the note that makes a basic chord a "7" chord and is one of the notes that creates a bluesy sound. In general, any note that creates a bluesy sound, called a **blue note**, has more impact when used as an addition rather than the foundation. This doesn't mean you won't use "7" chords. It just means that you don't have to, and even when you do, it's better to think of them as basic chords with alterations. This mindset will give you a lot of flexibility as you advance with the blues.
- The A chord is a basic power chord, while the D chord is a variation that contains the b7. The E is just like the D, but two frets up.
- All of these chords are best played with a solid, deep palm mute.

* While chord charts are often rotated counterclockwise, these are shown in a way that depicts how the chord would look in pictures and video tutorials. If this bothers you, just rotate it counterclockwise...

step 2: get a feel for swing eighths

One of the characteristics that makes blues so distinct is its rhythmic quality — it swings, ya dig? The swing rhythm comes from a 4/4 strum based around triplets, which is a music term meaning that instead of a beat divided into two, it's divided into three.

Somewhat confusingly, triplet notes are considered eighth notes, and while you would usually count a four count that contains straight eighth notes as **1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and**, you count one with triplets as **1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet**.

The most common triplet-based, four-count strum pattern for blues is called "**swing eighths**." The swing eighths pattern is played by hitting a downstroke on each number, playing nothing over the "trip-" syllables and then finishing off the sequence with an upstroke on the "-let" syllables. You also need to heavily accent the 2 and 4 beats of the count.

Swing eighths strum pattern



= DOWNSTROKE



= UPSTROKE

X = REST



= ACCENT



Instructions, notes and tips

- For best results, use a metronome. Start around 50 bpm, and work toward 120+. Each click is a number and thus, a downstroke.
- When you play the blues, you don't really need to use a full-sounding strum. You want more of a muted attack. So, start the swing eighths pattern with muted strings, and then every once in a while, throughout the count, throw in a chord. Most players achieve this by keeping a chord in position, but not pressed down during the muted parts. Then, when they want to add the chord, they simply press down and then, lift back up. There's not really a rhyme or reason as to when you add the chord. It's mostly about feel.
- Throughout the whole process, keep a good palm mute, and really lay into those accents on the 2 and 4.

step 3: get the 12-bar progression down

The most important part of the blues is nailing down the basic chord progression.

Most people are unaware, but there are actually multiple progressions that can be used for the blues. Far and away, though, the most common one is called the **12 bar blues**, so named because to get through the whole thing, you have to play 12 full four counts, called **bars** or **measures**, terms that are used interchangeably.

It can't be overstated that to be an effective blues player, you absolutely have to know the 12 bar blues like the back of your hand.

Realistically, glossing over the chord progression is the number one reason people fail to gain traction with the blues.

To be any blues player worth your salt, it's not enough to simply know it. You have to know it to the point that you never make the mistake of getting lost in it. The reality is that everything blues players do is centered around a chord progression, and you can know all the fancy licks in the world, but if you stumble through the chords, it makes you look like a rookie.

One final thing to note about the 12 bar blues is that in its purest state, the final bar is actually another A chord, but most of the time that measure is used to help send the progression back to the beginning and is called a **turnaround measure**. While there are many ways to play a turnaround, in this case, going to the E is the simplest and safest choice.

The 12 bar blues chord progression

The diagram illustrates the 12-bar blues chord progression in four variations, each consisting of 12 measures (4 counts per measure). The progression is shown as a sequence of chords (A, D, E) and rests (X) over 12 measures, with each measure divided into four counts (1, 2, 3, 4). The notation uses a circle with a dot for a chord and an upward arrow for a rest. The first variation shows a standard A7 progression (A for measures 1-4, D for measures 5-8, A for measures 9-12). The second variation shows a D7 progression (D for measures 1-4, A for measures 5-8, D for measures 9-12). The third variation shows an E7 progression (E for measures 1-4, D for measures 5-8, E for measures 9-12). The fourth variation shows an A7 progression (A for measures 1-4, E for measures 5-8, A for measures 9-12).

A

1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet 1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet

A

1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet 1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet

D

1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet 1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet

A

1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet 1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet

E

1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet 1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet

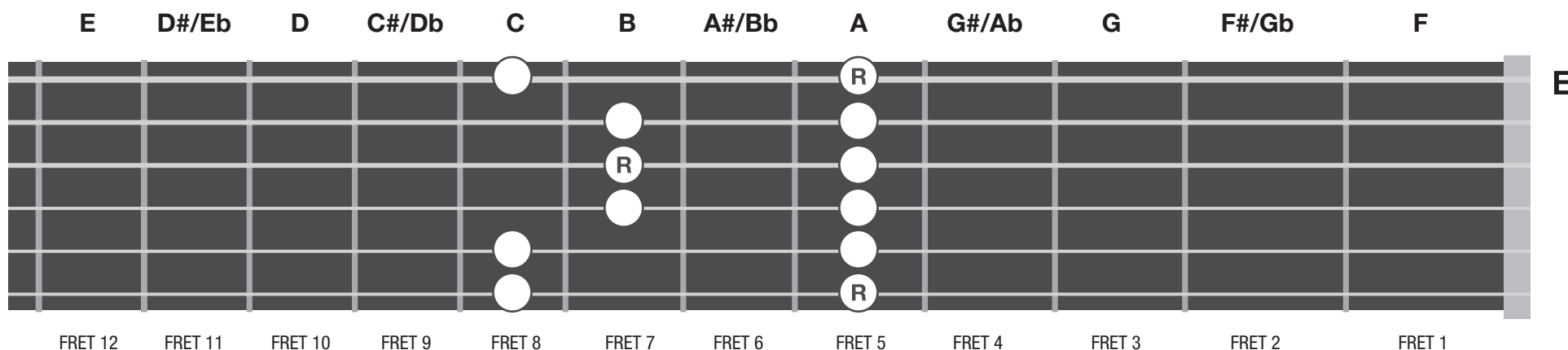
A

1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet 1 triplet 2 triplet 3 triplet 4 triplet

step 4: learn the Am pentatonic scale

The quickest and most effective way to approach improvising blues licks is to learn the pentatonic scale, and then learn how to move it around and manipulate it for what you're doing. There are two versions of the pentatonic scale, the major and the minor. To play either version on the guitar, the patterns are the same, they're just played in different places. In total, there are five different patterns, called **positions**, and they all connect to each other. At this point, however, you'll only need to learn one, the **first position the minor pentatonic in the key of Am**.

The first position of the Am pentatonic scale



Instructions, notes and tips

- Use a one-finger-per-fret approach. Your index finger should play all the notes on the fifth fret, your pinky should play all the notes on the eighth fret, and your ring finger should play all the notes on the seventh fret.
- To find the first position of the minor pentatonic in any key, go up the chromatic scale on the low E string until you reach the note that coincides with the key you want. Then, play the pattern from there. For example, if you want to play the D minor pentatonic scale, go all the way up to the 10th fret with your index finger, where the D note is, and play the pattern from there.
- Take note that your index finger on the low E string coincides with a root note. Eventually, you'll want to learn all the notes by scale degree in the pentatonic scale, but it's particularly useful to at least know where all the roots are in the pattern.
- Most guitar players who are interested in playing the blues have learned some variation of a blues scale. Whatever that scale is to you, it might be best to leave it behind for now and start fresh. You can figure out how to mix it back in as you get more comfortable with this approach.

step 5: make up some guitar licks

Once you've got a handle on the first position of the Am pentatonic, spend some time using it to improvise some **guitar licks**.

Ideally, guitar licks work like a story: they have a **starting point**, a **middle section** and an **end**.

The starting point can really be any note in the scale you want, and the middle section could be any collection of notes you want. But the best place to end is on the root note.

Now, you don't have to finish every single line on the root, but it's the one place that will give you a 100%, full sense of completion, so it's good to use it when you want to communicate that something has come to an end.

As you string together licks — also known colloquially as **lines** — another thing you'll want to consider is that due to the guitar's wide range in sound, it's best to use the notes on particular strings for specific purposes.

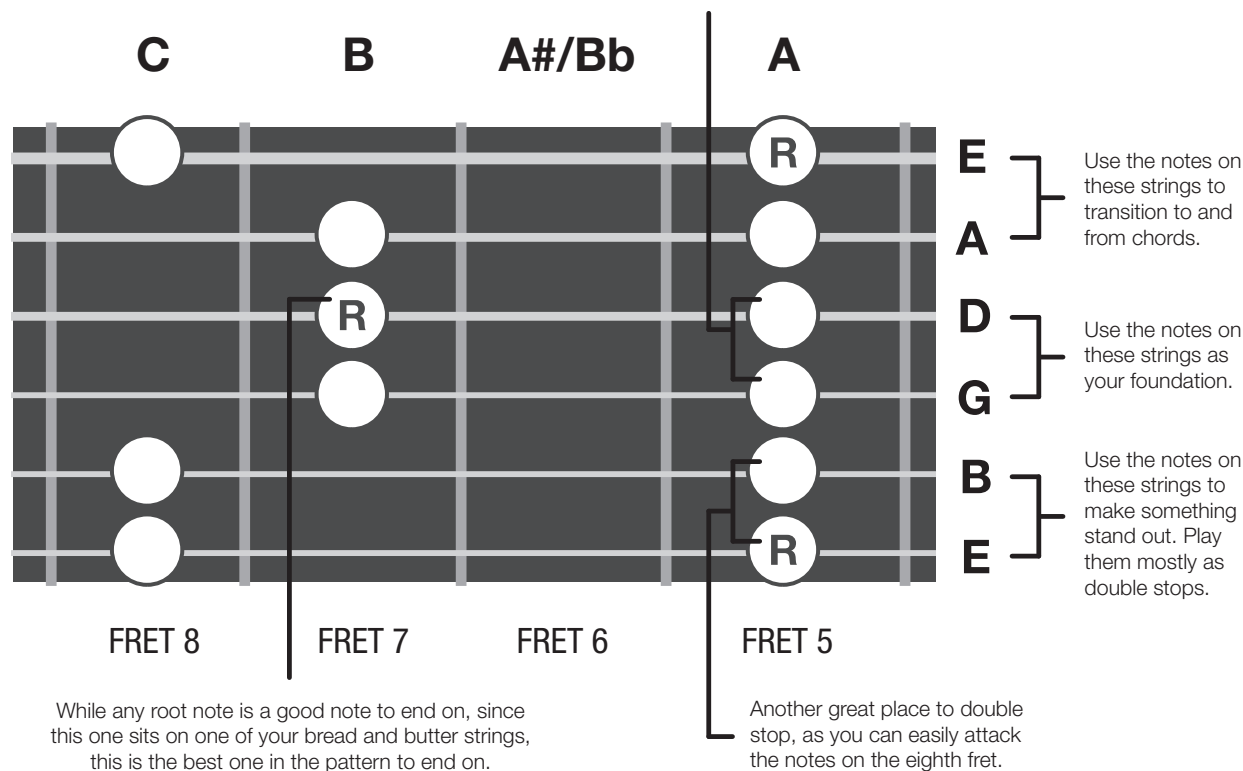
For the most part, you'll want to center your licks around the notes on the D and G strings. These are your bread and butter notes.

When you really want something to stand out, use the notes on the B and E strings. These notes are best played mostly as double stops, which give your licks a little more weight.

The notes on the low strings, E and A, are best used to transition to and from a chord. They'll sound too muddy to stay there for too long.

Pentatonic scale ending notes and string purposes

A great trick is to barre these two notes and play them either individually or together as a double stop. From this barre position, you can attack the notes on seventh fret, again, either individually or as double stops, and then return to these notes — without ever lifting your finger.



Double Stops

A double stop is any two notes played together as a chord shape. While they are not technically a chord, they kind of imply one, and will give more structure to your licks. Especially useful is a double stop played like a barre chord with your index finger. You can anchor it, then attack other notes in the scale while constantly returning to original position without ever lifting your finger.

step 6: combine a chord and a lick

Half the battle of getting started with the blues for solo guitar is gathering all the pieces. At this point, you now have the chords, the strum pattern, the chord progression and the scale, so it's time to start putting it all together.

Ultimately, your end goal is to be able to mix chords and licks across the entire 12 bar progression in perfect time. To achieve this, the sequence you'll follow is the same for each bar, so it's best to get the process down for the first measure and then duplicate it for the other 11.

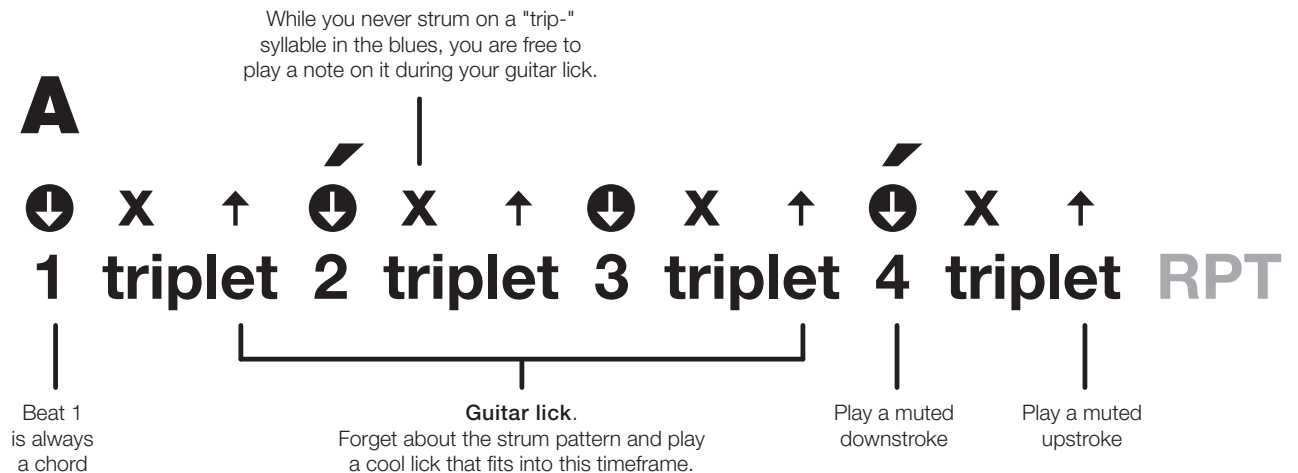
Here's the formula each measure follows:

- **Beat 1** is always a chord.
- The **"-let"** syllable of **beat 1** is always the first note of your lick, which also covers the **entirety of beats 2 and 3**.
- Play a muted downstroke on **beat 4**. You do not have to be in chord position for this.
- Wherever you played the muted downstroke, play a muted upstroke on the **"-let"** syllable of **beat 4** to finish out the sequence.

To begin mixing chords and licks, play the A power chord on beat 1. Next, begin your lick, which should start at beat 1's "-let" syllable and cover all of beats 2 and 3. Then, mute the strings, and play a downstroke at the top of beat 4 and an upstroke on its "-let" syllable.

Repeat the process by playing the A again on beat 1. Continue and repeat ad nauseam.

Formula for combining a chord and a lick in a measure



Instructions, notes and tips

- Eventually, you want to be able to seamlessly go back and forth between a full 12 bar turn of strumming swing eighths and a full 12 bar turn of combining chords and licks.
- For the lick, you can play anything that covers the timeframe — you're not tied to the strum pattern. Something to note, though, is that guitarists tend to separate the idea of rhythm and lead playing, but they're directly connected. You'll have an easier time going between them if you think about "strumming" the individual notes of the lick — just like you would any chord.
- Until you're 100% comfortable with this technique, **count out loud**. Timing is critical, and it's crucial that you're always in the right place at the right time. Go really slowly, and keep your licks minimal at the beginning. If you can't count it, it's too complex.
- If your lick is short, cover the rest of the timeframe with muted up- or downstrokes. The purpose of muted strokes is to imply structured rhythm without you actually having to play a chord. They give you time to reset or return to chords from up the neck and also serve as a failsafe — in solo style, you can always strum, and a muted stroke is never wrong.

step 7: combine chords and licks across the whole 12 bar blues progression

Realistically, the hardest part of learning to play the blues for solo guitar is gaining the ability to combine chords and licks over one measure consistently and in perfect time.

But once you've nailed down the technique for one bar, you can duplicate it as many times as you want. As you work through a progression, the only thing that really has to change is the chord you play on beat 1. You don't change the process, and you can use the same scale.

You can even use the same exact lick across each measure, regardless of what chord it follows. Of course, as you get more comfortable with the process, you'll want to vary your licks to make things more interesting.

But for now, simply take the last step and get through the whole 12 bar blues pattern, combining the appropriate chord with a lick in every measure. You'll want to work through this until you can do it in perfect time and are always on the right chord at the right time.

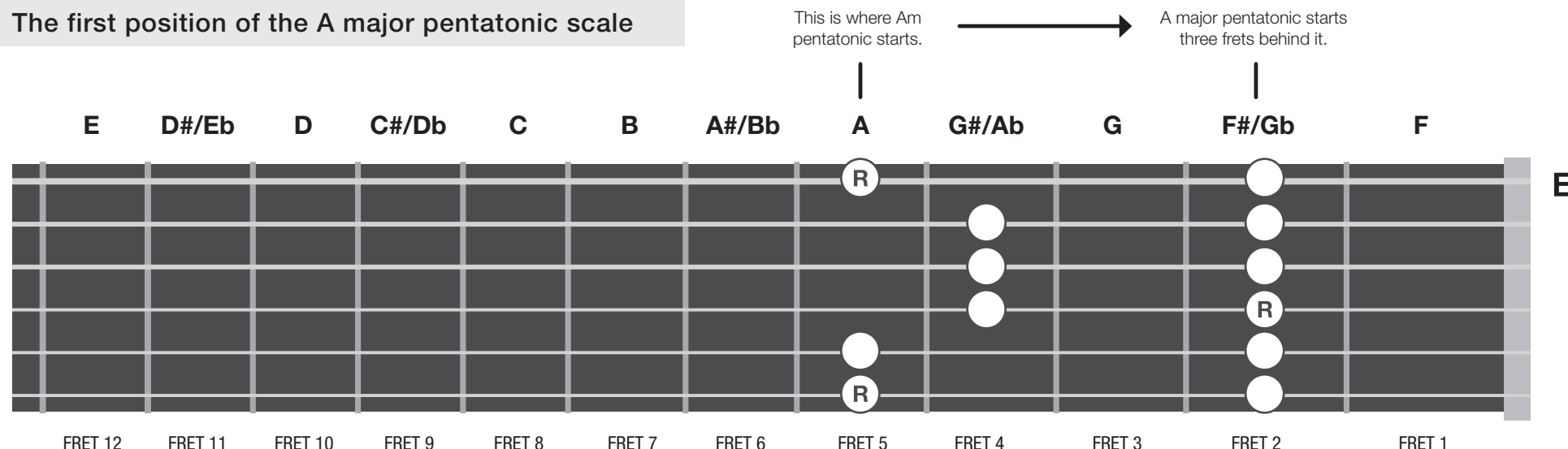
Being able to do this is simply the gateway to all the stuff that makes blues playing fun.



step 8: learn the A major pentatonic

While the Am pentatonic scale can help jumpstart your blues playing, it's kind of overkill when it comes to blue notes. In general, blue notes have more impact when they contrast some of the more vanilla notes in the key. So, a better scale to use as a foundation for improvisation in the key of A is really **A major pentatonic, which can be found by moving the Am pentatonic pattern three frets back**. Now, your index finger starts the pattern on fret 2.

The first position of the A major pentatonic scale



Instructions, notes and tips

- As a general rule, whenever you solo in a major key, use the major pentatonic scale — not the minor. **The minor pentatonic should really only be used over a minor key and in the blues.** With experience, you might also use it to inject a quick blues feel where it fits. But don't force it.
- The major pentatonic should be your new, default scale for soloing because most songs are in major keys. To find the first position in any key, go up the chromatic scale on the low E string until you reach the note that coincides with the key you want. Then, move your index finger three frets back and play the pattern from there. For example, if you want to play the D major pentatonic scale, go all the way up to the 10th fret with your index finger, where the D note is, then, move your finger three steps back to the seventh fret and play the pattern from there.
- Take special note that in the major pentatonic, you end up playing the root note on the low E string with your pinky. In fact, all of your root notes in the pattern are in different places than where they were in the minor.

step 9: dress up the major pentatonic

Mostly, you can approach improvising in the major pentatonic as you would the minor — you'll still want to make good use of double stops and also want to use each string set for their appropriate purposes.

But there are a couple things you can do in the major that can take your playing up a notch.

First, you might notice that a basic open A chord covers a few scale notes on fret two. By playing this chord instead as a **three-note barre chord with your index finger**, you can play it like a chord on beat 1, and also use it like an anchored double stop for the guitar lick. From there, you can attack other notes in the scale while never leaving the chord position, which makes switching between rhythm and lead as intuitive as it gets.

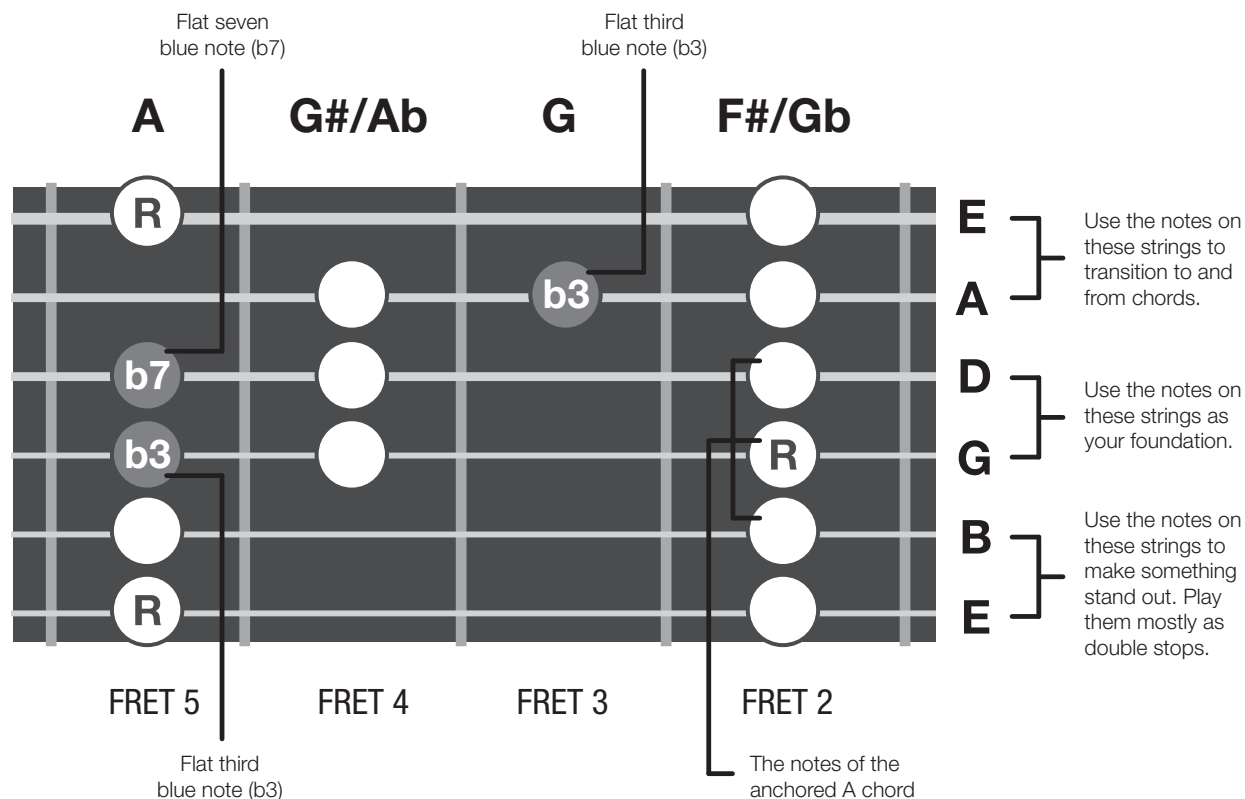
There are also two important blue notes that can be mixed in to your licks that can give you a bluesy sound without going overboard.

The flat seven note (**b7**), can be found on the fifth fret of the D string and the flat third (**b3**), which is considered the ultimate blue note, can be found in two places: on the A string of the third fret and G string of the fifth fret.

Any of these notes can be used in addition to the other notes in the major pentatonic.

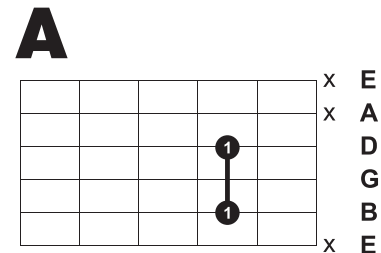
While there are other places within the pattern to find these blue notes, these instances are the easiest to use from the anchored A chord.

A closer look at the A major pentatonic scale



A note on the anchored A chord

Note that the anchored A chord chart instructs you not play the open A string. Ultimately, this is a movable chord. Sure, when you're in the key of A, you can play open A, open low E and open high E, but you can't do that when you move the chord to other places, and that's what makes it so valuable. Learn it from the outset as movable — you'll thank yourself later.



step 10: have a basic approach for mixing major and minor pentatonic scales

In every type of music, your default scale for creating guitar licks should be the major pentatonic scale, and realistically, save for special circumstances, you should avoid using the minor pentatonic all together.

The blues, of course, would be considered a special circumstance. Because of the music theory behind it, the minor pentatonic has a lot of blue notes that fit well into the style.

But rather than overdo it by using the minor pentatonic exclusively, it's better to take advantage of it by having a solid approach.

At this point, it should be noted that like anything else in music, the blues can be transposed across all keys. With that in mind, here are some rules of thumb to start with:

1. Over the A chord (or any other 1 chord), play the major pentatonic.
2. Over the D chord (or any other 4 chord), play the minor pentatonic.
3. Over the E chord (or any other 5 chord), play the minor pentatonic.

This approach works well because even though you play the minor over more chords, you actually play the major over more measures. This will help spread out your use of blue notes without you having to think about it too much.



how to make a full blues arrangement

There are tons of songs that are essentially just lyrics over the 12 bar blues pattern, and if you're into singing, you can make full arrangements that can highlight both your vocals and blues improvisation.

Here's a formula, with some tips, for making a basic blues arrangement:

1. Start with an intro consisting of one full turn of the 12 bar progression. Over the A, or 1 chord, combine chords and licks. Over the D (4 chord) and the E (5 chord), strum swing eighths.
2. Sing a couple verses while strumming through the progression.
3. Take the first instrumental break by essentially repeating the intro, except make your licks over the 1 chord a little different.
4. Sing another verse or two while strumming through the progression.
5. Take the main solo — two turns through the progression. For the first turn, combine licks and chords over the 1 chord and the 4 chord, but still just strum the 5 chord. For the second turn, combine licks and chords over the entire progression.
6. Sing any final verses while strumming through the progression.
7. Repeat your intro, and end on a 1 chord right after the 12th bar.

Of course, there are lots of ways to create arrangements. But this method can help you mix up your approach to the 12 bar pattern so that it doesn't sound monotonous as it's played over and over again.

Ultimately, it gives an arrangement dynamics. It starts off tempered in the intro, gets a little more complex during the first instrumental break, then builds to a climax in the solo before coming to an end.

At the end of the day, you want your arrangements to follow the same formula as your licks — they'll be at their best when they have a distinct starting point, middle section and ending.



5 songs that use the 12 bar progression

Blues songs in the 12 bar format are really just templates for personal improvisation. While you might think that you have to play the licks from a particular recording note for note, consider that historically, performers typically shared songs, and each had their own versions that reflected their personal style of play.

At the end of the day, you'll have more fun playing the blues if you forget about what licks a particular artist used in a recording and started improvising with a blank slate.

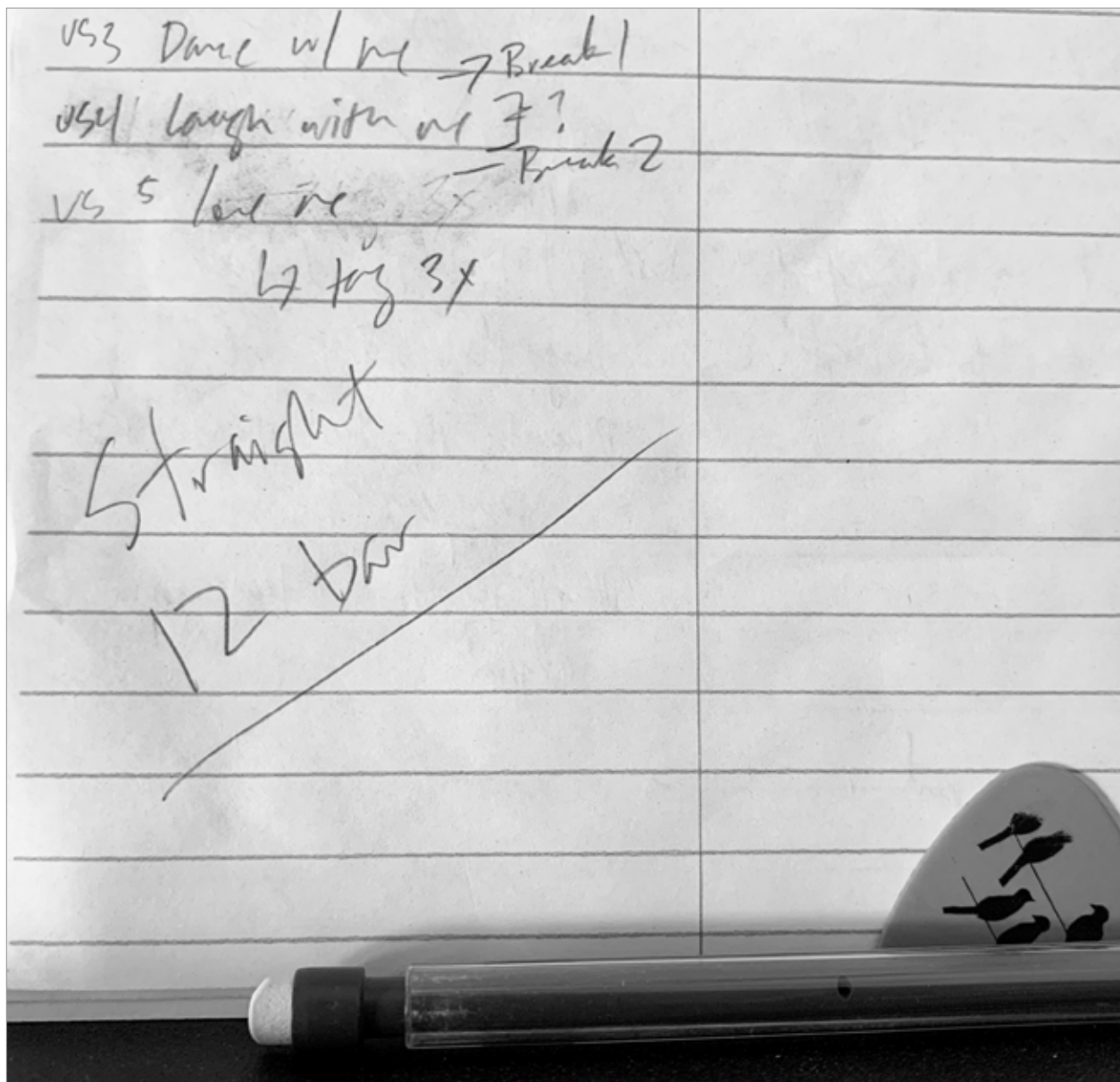
From there, you can explore your own tastes, skills and influences, and all those things will add up to your own unique style if you let them.

Here are five blues songs that are simply lyrics over the 12 bar pattern:

- **Pride and Joy** (Stevie Ray Vaughan)
- **Hey, Hey** (Big Bill Broonzy)
- **Let the Good Times Roll** (B.B. King)
- **Cross Road Blues** (Eric Clapton's version)
- **Forty Days and Forty Nights** (Muddy Waters)

These recordings are great examples of what really awesome players can do with the simple template of lyrics and the 12 bar pattern.

Now, it's up to you to find out what you might do with the same template.



how to build on this foundation

The techniques in this guide are only a starting point. Ultimately, there are only two main rules solo guitarists must always follow. **They can never get lost in the chord progression and never lose the rhythm.** Besides that, there's complete freedom to do whatever you want within the boundaries of the progression. But it's a constant balancing act to play licks without making them so long as to drop the rhythmic structure.

In many ways, the two rules are related, and you'll avoid a lot of problems by playing a chord (or something that implies a chord) on beat 1 of a measure and then filling out any spaces with muted up- or downstrokes. But, feel free to explore the limits, as well.

Personally, I often play licks that cover two measures, getting away with it by using double stops and bass notes to imply chords. The best advice is to start from a standpoint of strumming and gradually increase the amount and length of licks throughout the progression. That means, if you want a lick to run through the 4 beat — do it. **But, always, once you lose the rhythm, you've taken it too far.**



going beyond the blues

At the end of the day, the blues is simply built on a chord progression, the major pentatonic scale and a few added notes for embellishment.

The technique of mixing chords and licks, however, is not exclusive to the blues and can realistically work over any chord progression in any style. You'll just have to remember to remove the minor pentatonic scale and probably, depending on how they sound, any other blue notes from the equation.

The easiest way to start exploring how this works beyond the blues is to find a song with a simple progression and start combining chords and licks perfectly throughout.

Use the basic open chords and improvise with the major pentatonic only. As a basic guide for soloing, follow the rhythm of the song's melody. You don't have to play the melody note for note, just follow its phrasing rhythmically. When it's time to sing, simply strum the progression.

You'll really be able to run with this concept by learning all five positions of the major pentatonic scale, as well as how to move it. Some positions simply work more intuitively with certain chords, which will make your left-hand movements more efficient, so you can do complex things more quickly.

Plus, it's a minimal amount of work to really gain a strong foundation for advanced playing. Know the five positions well, and difficult music concepts become much easier to learn.



next steps

The quality of your blues playing is directly impacted by how grounded you are in the fundamental guitar skills. There are simply things you have to know, such as the basic chords, how to strum and how to transpose for the capo.

If you lack in any of these skills, you're ultimately going to reach limitations with your learning, and thus, your playing.

For help clearing up any blind spots you might have on the guitar, [click here for more PDF guides](#).

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