

12-BAR BLUES PODCAST

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Podcast 12

Hello. This is the twelfth in a series of podcasts dealing with different elements of music composition. It is also the second of two podcasts on the blues, specifically 12-bar blues. In the previous podcast I asked the basic question: What is the blues, a form, a way of performing or a state of mind? I concluded that one could state that it's all these things and more. I played four snippets of blues to give a small idea of the breadth of possible blues sounds. They sounded like this (PLAY FIRST FOUR BARS OF FIRST CHORUS OF "WEST END BLUES") and this (PLAY INTRO TO "I'M A STEADY ROLLIN' MAN") and this (PLAY "HOW BLUE CAN YOU GET" OPENING 15") and this (PLAY "CROSSROADS" 8"-19").

I also gave a little historical background about the origins of the term "blue", the so-called "blues scale", the harmonic progression most often used in the 12-bar blues and the basic AAB form that most blues verse lyrics take. I'd urge you to give a listen to the previous podcast if you haven't already to get this background information.

At the end of the first podcast on the blues I mentioned how much earlier the 1937 recording of Robert Johnson's Delta Blues song, "I'm a Steady Rollin' Man" sounded than Louis Armstrong's 1928 rendition of "West End Blues". One big reason for this is that in the 1920's and 30's Delta Blues was music of the rural south where change came slowly while jazz increasingly became music of mainly northern urban centers such as Chicago, New York and Kansas City where fashions, including those in music, altered more quickly. However, this landscape began a real modification as rural blacks left the South by the thousands seeking work in large industrial cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and New York. The so-called Great Migration happened in two waves, the first beginning slowly after World War I and becoming a flood in the 1930's, and the second happening after the Second World War. This created a cultural shift as well as Delta blues moved to the cities and kept its roots but evolved to both a more sophisticated and more regular format. While the first generation of northern blues musicians such as Big Bill Broonzy sounded in essence similar to earlier players, by the mid-1940's the use of electric guitar and ensemble playing changed the sound to what we now call urban blues. The 12-bar three-chord format remained, as did the AAB verse form and the subject matter, mostly songs about unhappy love or more upbeat songs about longing and physical desire. However, the sound which evolved in the hands of musicians like Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, Little Walter and many others became both more powerful and more polished.

No one has become better known for playing and singing blues in the past 40 years than B. B. King. Like many another blues musician, King began life in a sharecropping family in rural Mississippi, but early on developed a love of music, specifically the blues. He learned to play guitar and began performing. At 21 he moved to Memphis, Tennessee, became a DJ at a large radio station and began hearing urban blues, with T-Bone Walker as his biggest influence. By the mid-1960's he began being noticed by rock musicians like Eric Clapton and John Lennon and became known by white audiences for the first time. He never looked back.

The example I've chosen, "How Blue Can You Get?" by Jane Feather, is typical of the urban blues sound as exemplified by B. B. King. It uses an ensemble of trumpets, saxophones, piano, bass and drums along with King playing Lucille, his red Gibson hollow-bodied guitar. It opens with a 4-bar introduction featuring King on guitar backed by piano, bass and drums. Then follows the first verse with King's singing again backed by the rhythm section and answered by Lawrence Burdine on alto saxophone. Let's listen to the intro and first verse. (PLAY OPENING THROUGH 57".)

There were two main reasons I chose this song. The first is to demonstrate differences such as instrumentation and amplification and similarities such as the basic 12-bar progression and the subject matter between this song and the previous examples. The second reason is because "How Blue Can You Get?" contains a stop chorus. As the name implies a stop chorus is a verse in which the normal blues progression stops so the composer can make a point. This song has a fairly typical stop chorus in which the music stays on the tonic not for the usual four bars but for eight. Not only that, but the entire band alternates short punctuating chords with King's singing. As we listen to the clever rhyming couplets we hear how Jane Feather the songwriter gets her point across in a semi-humorous fashion. Note also how after the stop chorus ends the music moves to the subdominant to begin the final eight bars of the progression and the lyrics move to the second and third lines of the first verse to finish off the song. Here it is. (PLAY 1' 39"-2' 38".)

I mentioned Eric Clapton earlier. From his earliest days growing up in England he was exposed to many different styles of music, but fell in love with the blues, primarily urban blues played by musicians such as Muddy Waters and B. B. King. He has always looked upon himself as a blues musician more than as a rock guitarist and in fact, left his first successful group, The Yardbirds, when their sound veered away from the blues and into more commercial rock music.

As a white musician playing a form developed by black men and women, Clapton has always been aware of the debt he owed to earlier giants and in recent years has worked hard to get proper crediting and royalties paid to the estates of pioneering blues musicians. He showed his homage to earlier musicians also by recording his own versions of blues songs composed by others. The example I'm using today, "Crossroads", as performed by Eric Clapton's late 1960's band Cream, is a Robert Johnson song, originally called "Cross Road Blues". There are a great number of differences between the two versions. One of the differences is instrumentation: solo bottlenecked acoustic guitar for Robert Johnson and electric guitar, bass and drums for Cream. Second, the underlying rhythm of the Johnson version is swung while the Cream version is in straight rhythm (one of the primary differences between urban blues and most rock music, even rock-blues, is the basic underlying division of the beat: swung for blues, straight for rock). Interestingly enough, in some of Robert Johnson's work in this song there is some straight rhythm guitar strumming underneath his swung singing, which makes for a very interesting rhythmic tension. The final big difference is in the amount of flexibility shown, both in the singing and in the overall approach to form. While Eric Clapton shows some variation from verse to verse in his vocal line, Robert Johnson shows much greater freedom in range, rhythm and melodic content, as well as in the form. He adds beats, shortens or lengthens phrases to suit his whim, and treats both the song and the 12-bar blues form with great elasticity. On the other hand, the regularity

of the Cream approach, both rhythmically and in terms of form, helps give their version its relentless drive. Let's listen now to the openings of the two songs so you can hear these differences. Here's the beginning of Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" (PLAY "CROSS ROAD BLUES" OPENING 42"). Now here's the first verse of "Crossroads" as performed in concert by Cream in San Francisco in 1968 with Eric Clapton singing. (PLAY "CROSSROADS" 8"-52"). With such a short amount of time available to record songs in the 1930's, usually a limit of around 3 minutes, musicians like Robert Johnson didn't have time to include instrumental solos which they undoubtedly played when performing live. There is also some sense of time limitation in some studio recordings of the 1960's, but this is more due to the desire to have songs played on the radio, where stations were much less likely to program songs much over 4 minutes. However, no such limitation existed in live performance and fortunately we have live recordings of groups such as Cream available. Let's listen to the second instrumental break, in which the band plays a full three choruses of 12 bars each. And check out not only Eric Clapton's guitar work, which increases in intensity and movement with each successive chorus, but also the corresponding increase in activity of Jack Bruce on bass and Ginger Baker on drums. And yes, there are only three of them playing, with no overdubbing or electronic sleight of hand to augment the actual notes the musicians play. (PLAY "CROSSROADS" 2'40"-3'44") Is this a different approach to the blues from the other examples I've given in the two blues podcasts? Sure. Is it any less valid? I don't think so. Each version of this song as well as the other songs I've featured has things to recommend it. That's one reason I've chosen the music I have: to show how rich the blues heritage is and how varied the approaches to this simple form. And what I've played only scratches the surface.

Okay, so now maybe you're interested in trying your hand at creating a 12-bar blues. What do you do? Well, the first thing, especially if you have little previous exposure to the blues, is to listen to blues, lots of blues in different styles. Want to listen to rock blues? Check out Eric Clapton some more. Urban blues? B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy. Jazz blues? Bessie Smith, Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus. These are only a few of many, many artists and only three of a variety of flavors of blues. Once you have blues in your ears, start simply: a melody over the 12-bar harmonic progression I outlined earlier. Be careful with the blue notes; it takes a while for them to become a natural part of the vocabulary if you've never composed in this idiom before. Also keep in mind that no matter what's written down, blues needs to be flexible both melodically and rhythmically in order to sound authentic and this takes time and practice. While it's possible to write 12-bar blues over a single chord it's trickier than you might think as variety has to be accomplished through the melody alone. If it's a vocal blues, remember the AAB verse form. If it's instrumental only, remember that blues all starts with the voice so make the tune singable. Blues musicians would say they're singing from the heart, even when it's purely instrumental. Keep that in mind and with enough listening and experience you too can create successful 12-bar blues. Next time I'll be giving the first of three podcasts on harmony. Please join me.