

12-Bar Blues

The “12-Bar Blues” is a chord and phrase structure used to create countless blues, jazz, rock, pop and hip-hop songs over the last 150 years. It was first written down by W. C. Handy in the early 20th century but the form and genre had long-since been perfected by other, less prominent African-American musicians. To create a typical 12-Bar Blues in the “key” of G, we use a G chord for measures 1-4, a C chord for measure 5-6, another G chord for measures 7-8, a D chord for measure 9, C for measure 10 and back to G for measure 11-12. Chord building, harmony and key changes are addressed in detail in Method Book II Level IX. For now, you should know that a 12-Bar Blues can be played in any key or using any chord as its starting point.

Chord diagrams for G, C, D, and G are provided above the corresponding measures of the musical notation.

In the blues style, eighth notes are played with a swing feel, rather than with a straight or even feel. When you hear swinging eighth notes, you’ll notice that there is more emphasis on the first eighth note than the second in each eighth-note grouping. Try saying the words “LONG-short, LONG-short, LONG-short, LONG-short” or “DOO-bah, DOO-bah, DOO-bah, DOO-bah” to feel how they swing. The eighth-note arrangement of 12-Bar Blues below should be played with a swing feel:

King of the Delta Blues

We can’t very well introduce the 12-Bar Blues form without also introducing one of the most influential guitarists of all time from any genre. Blues musician Robert Johnson (1911–1938) changed the course of 20th Century music with his landmark recordings made in the 1930s, but his life was poorly documented. One of the first members of the “27 Club” – a group of gifted musicians who died far too young – the cause of his death at the age of 27 is listed as “unknown.” In 1961, his legend had almost completely faded when his recordings were reissued, inspiring artists from around the world with playing that, 30 years later, was still utterly groundbreaking. Johnson’s influence on Rock and Roll was so profound, that he was posthumously inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in its first induction ceremony in 1986.