

# 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 like the one below, 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 and C are shown above the first two staves. The first staff shows measures 1-4 with a G chord diagram above. The second staff shows measures 5-8 with C, D, C, and G chord diagrams above.

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:

Chord diagrams for G, D, C, and G are shown above the first two staves. The first staff shows measures 9-10 with a G chord diagram above. The second staff shows measures 11-12 with D, C, and G chord diagrams above.

**Robert Johnson, King of the Delta Blues** - Although Robert Johnson (1911–1938) is among the most celebrated masters of the 12-Bar blues, his life was poorly documented. He did not become famous until well after his death at age 27 when the landmark recordings he had made in the 1930s were reissued and spread around the world in 1961. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in its first induction ceremony in 1986. British blues guitarist Eric Clapton called him "the most important blues singer that ever lived" and Johnson ranked fifth in Rolling Stone Magazine's "100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time".

