



TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

EIGHT-BAR BLUES

From the Mississippi Delta to Chicago, most blues follow the twelve-bar chord pattern which, along with the three-line verse form, is one of the defining elements of the genre. But the prevalence of this harmonic progression is also one of the music's limiting factors — without sufficient variety in tempos and grooves, the blues can get repetitious. Blues compositions that depart from of the 12-bar form therefore can provide a welcome change-up and so are worth learning. Foremost among these are eight-bar blues, famous examples of which are “Sittin’ on Top of the World,” by the Mississippi Sheiks, “Come On In My Kitchen,” by Robert Johnson, “Key to the Highway,” by Big Bill Broonzy, “How Long Blues” by Scrapper Blackwell and Leroy Carr, and “It Hurts Me Too” by Elmore James. For this issue, we’ll look at eight-bar blues progressions and try a Chicago-style solo that uses several important harmonica techniques.

Unlike the 12-bar blues, which more or less sticks to the same form with a few variations, eight-bar blues can follow several different patterns. The first step to understanding these is to know what the primary chords are in the keys most often used by guitarists, who are harmonica players’ most frequent musical mates. This information is given in Table 1.

TABLE 1

BLUES CHORDS IN SIX COMMON GUITAR KEYS				
I	IV	V	V7 of II	V7 of V
A	D	E	F#7	B7
C	F	G	A7	D7
D	G	A	B7	E7
E	A	B	C#7	F#7
F	Bb	C	D7	G7
G	C	D7	E7	A7

The three main chords in a key are the I, IV, and V (or the often substituted V7) chords, which are based on the

first, fourth, and fifth steps of the scale respectively. Table I groups these and other chords by column, and the keys are grouped by row. In the key of A, for example, A is the I chord, D is the IV chord, and E is the V chord. The 12-bar blues form, which uses the I, IV, and V chords, is given below with the most common variations.

12 BAR BLUES

/ I / I or IV / I / I / IV / IV / I / I / V / IV / I / V or I //

In the second measure, the IV chord can be substituted for the I. In the last measure, the V chord is usually used when the verse is to repeat, and the I is used for the ending.

Several eight-bar patterns appear below. The first five of these use the I, IV, and V only. The remaining three also use chords known as secondary dominants, which, briefly, are out-of-key chords based on tones five steps up from chords within the key (you can also think of it as a dominant seventh chord on the second step of the scale). In table I, the secondary dominants are shown in the two columns on the right. When two chords appear in the same measure separated by a hyphen, each chord will get two beats instead of the usual four.

8-BAR BLUES PATTERNS

“Key to the Highway”:

/ I / V / IV / IV / I / V / I / V or I //

“Sittin’ On Top of the World”:

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

“Come On in My Kitchen”:

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

“It Hurts Me Too”:

/ I / I / IV / IV / I / V - IV / I / V or I //

“How Long Blues”:

/ I / I / IV / V7 of V / I / V-IV / I -IV / I - V or I //

“Sportin’ Life”:

/ I / I / IV / IV / I - V7 of II / V7 of V - V / I / V or I //

“Salty Dog Blues”:

/ V7 of II / V7 of II / V7 of V / V7 of V / V7 / V7 / I / I //

If you play guitar, try playing the chords to the eight-bar blues songs above in each of the six keys shown in Table I, or get a guitar-picking friend to play them for you and try blowing some riffs over the chords.

The solo, "Behind the 8-Ball," is loosely based on Howlin' Wolf's version of "Sittin' On Top of the World." Because it quotes the famous ending tag, though, it is actually nine bars long instead of eight. This solo uses several techniques we have learned in these columns.

In the pickup measure, we have a tongue slap on 4-blow, which is indicated by the "s." over the note. Then, in the first measure (after the pickup), we have a headshake on 4 and 5-draw, which indicated by the "H.S." over the notes and is done

by shaking your head sideways to rapidly alternate in between two holes. The second measure calls for repeated grace note bends on 4-draw. On the last beat of the third measure, you have to play a subdivided triplet, a more complex rhythm than usual. You can learn the timing by counting "One-and-trip-and-let-and." In the fifth measure, you have another headshake, this time on 3 and 4-draw, and in the 7th measure, you have a double note bend on 3 and 4-draw. In the last measure, there is a classic ending with octave tonguing.

Behind the 8-Ball



Slow; ♩ = approx. 60

C - Harmonica

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