

12 Bar Blues Form – In Brief

Robert Higginbotham

The 12 Bar Blues Form is the most common form in Blues Music. We find it in country music and other musical genres as well, but nowhere near the extent we find it in the blues.

12 Bars means that we have 12 measures. They could be in straight 4 beats to a measure, or a 12/8 feel which consists of 4 triplets per measure. The shuffle feel splits the triplet into two beats. The first beat is the first two beats of the triplet, the second beat is the last beat of the triplet. This translates into “Long-short” which is often how the shuffle feel is described. Think of the sound of a horse shuffling down the street, which is where the term comes from.

In brief a 12 bar blues can be in different time signatures and ‘feels’.

Note that other forms include “8 bar”, “16 bar”, even “32 bar” but these are not nearly as common.

Sometimes the 12 bar blues form is referred to as a “I-IV-V blues” form. We need to pause and be sure we understand what these numbers mean, along with how they are communicated.

First off, we use roman numerals to indicate the chords in writing. Capital roman numerals indicate major chords, lower case roman numerals indicate minor chords. The numerals correspond to the first seven notes of the major or minor scale being used. Simply referred to as the “key you are in”.

i.e. “What key are we in?” “E”

So, if we are in the key of E, the E chord is referred to as the “I”, if we are in the key of E minor the E minor chord is referred to as the “i”. B is the fifth note in the key of E so the B chord is referred to as the “V”, or “v” if it is minor.

Typically, blues that are in major keys use all major chords. Minor blues forms often mix major and minor. Most blues uses 7th chords, along with extended 7th chords such as the 9th and the 13th.

Arabic numbers are used to describe the additional notes or “flavors” of the chord. For example, a “V7” chord in the key of E indicates a B7 chord, I7 indicates an E7, V7#9 would indicate a B7#9.

The relationship between these chords never changes. The IV chord is always 2½ steps above the I chord. 1 step on the guitar is 2 frets, so the root of the IV chord is always 5 frets above the root of the I chord. The root of the V chord is always 3½ steps, or 7 frets above the root of the I chord, or two frets above the IV chord.

The following table illustrates all 11 unique keys and their corresponding IV and V chords.

Key (I chord)	IV chord	V chord
A	D	E
A#/Bb	D#/Eb	F
B	E	F#
C	F	G
C#/Db	F#/Gb	G#/Ab
D	G	A
D#/Eb	G#/Ab	A#/Bb
E	A	B
F	Bb	C
F#/Gb	B/Cb	C#/Db
G	C	D
G#/Ab	C#/Db	D#/Eb

Note: when the same notes are referred to by two different names, these keys are “enharmonic”.
i.e. D# and Eb are the same note but will be written differently, depending on what key we are in. D# and Eb are enharmonic.

The preceding table needs to be studied, understood, and immediately retrievable in your mind’s eye. Make this a goal as you progress. This is important. Thank someone later.

Getting back to the 12 bar blues form.....

The basic form is:

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

A common alteration of the form is called the “quick IV”, where the I chord is replaced with the IV chord in measure 2:

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

Measures 11 & 12 are referred to as the “turn-around” and can be as simple as two measures of the I, or one measure of the I followed by a final measure of I-V, or a final measure of just the V.

There is a myriad of choices when it comes to the turnaround. If you are at a Blues Jam and someone calls out a song that you are not immediately familiar with, the four questions to ask are:

- “What key are we in?”
- “What is the feel?”
- “Does it have a quick IV?”
- “What is the turnaround?”

The best way to understand, and then learn, is to listen. Here are some classic blues songs to reference, with three of the four questions answered. When you are ready, answer the first question yourself. Please note that “Feel” is extremely subjective. Find the best term that works for you and the folks you play with.

Feel

Song	Artist	Feel	Measure 2	Turnaround
Sweet Home Chicago	Buddy Guy	Quick Jimmy Reed	Quick IV	I I - V
Sky is Crying	Stevie Ray Vaughn	Medium Slow Blues	Quick IV	I - IV I - V
Got my Mojo Workin’	Muddy Waters	Quick Shuffle	I	I I - V
Crossroads	Cream	“Like Crossroads”	Quick IV	I I
Hideaway	John Mayall & Eric Clapton	Quick Shuffle	I	I I - V
Bright Lights. Big City	Jimmy Reed	Quick Jimmy Reed	I	I I - V
Sweet Little Angel	B.B. King	Slow Blues	Quick IV	I V

This list is a small scratch in the surface, but it will help you discern the sound of the Quick IV and a few “popular” turn arounds. As you gain more experience, listen for these things and they will quickly be identifiable with a little effort.

Your ears are always the most important tool when learning music.