

12 Bar Blues Improvisation

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Soloing, or improvising over the 12 Bar Blues Form is not particularly different from improvising over other musical forms. The same principles come into play.

Improvisation is a form of speaking.

You want to be articulate and use well-constructed sentences. The subject matter is entirely up to you. To determine what you want to play, the best place to start is by studying the players that came before you. If you like the way a certain guitar player, or players speak, then learn some of their sentences. Learn how to play what they play. Take that one step further and try to figure out why you like what they 'say'. Is it their note choices? Is it their interval choices? Is it their rhythmic phrasing? All or combination of the above? The opposite of this is to take note when you hear something you don't like and figure out why you don't like it. This will help you as you develop your own dictionary of phrases you gravitate towards.

Prerequisite knowledge includes, but is not limited to:

- Knowledge of the fretboard – know where your notes are
- Knowledge of scales – Major and minor, Major and minor pentatonic, diminished scales
- Knowledge of how chords are constructed, including basic triads and all extensions
- Corresponding knowledge of arpeggios, created by playing chords one note at a time
- Knowledge of the Blues Form that you are playing over

You want to speak in a way that is interesting, that is engaging to others.

Think of normal speaking situations. Do you remember that teacher in school that spoke in a monotone voice? Even if the information was good, the presentation was painful to endure. The class went by slowly. Don't construct your phrasing in a monotone way. Your audience will be bored, and their patience will be tested. In a similar vein, do you remember meeting folks that talk fast all the time? Again, the information may have been good, but it was hard to digest. The ear will tire quickly if not given a chance to rest. So, vary your improvisations accordingly. Most folks that listen to music listen to have a pleasurable experience, so learn to speak in such a way that folks find pleasurable.

- Avoid large intervals as they make the ear work hard. Apply the principles of voice leading (more in a minute)
- Know what changes you are playing over and land on chord tones as the chords change
- Develop your phrasing using imitation so the listener feels comfortable – establish a motif and vary it using rhythmic and/or harmonic variation
- Vary your phrasing so the listener isn't bored. Avoid running up and down scales
- Watch your volume – always check where you are in relation to the instruments around you. I like to think of it as finding the right place in 'the mix' of the surrounding sounds.
- Be expressive. Blues is an extremely expressive musical form.

Let's dive in a little deeper. We will start with voice leading. The term voice in this case refers to the notes you are choosing. You want to choose them in such a way that you lead your listener on an interesting musical journey. One of the principles of voice leading is to use notes that are close together. Avoid large intervals. An example of a large interval would be to play the I chord in the key of A as an open chord at the second fret and then jump to a barre chord at the 10th fret for your IV chord (D). This is more jarring to the ears than playing both the A & D as open chords, or playing them as barre chord shapes as say a "E shape" followed by an "A shape" with the barre at fret 5. Let's look at some more examples of going from A to D (intervals I to IV) and look for small intervals:

Play the A chord as a triad at fret 5 – C# fret 6 of D, E and A respectively on the fifth fret of the B & E strings. The nearest D chord triad is D-F#-A located at fret seven of the G & B strings for the D & F#, the fifth fret of the E string for the A. Now... analyze the movement:

C# moved one half step to D on the G string
 E moved a whole step to F# on the B strings
 A didn't move at all – static note in both chords.

Let's do this with the next inversion of the A & D chords a little further up the neck using D and E shapes

Play the A major triad as a D shape - 9th fret of G (E), 10th fret of B (A) and 9th fret of E (C#). Now change to D using the E shape – 11th fret of G (F#), 10th fret of B & E (A & D) respectively. Now, analyze the movement:

E moved a whole step to F# on the G string
 A did not move – it stayed on the 10th fret of B
 C# moved a half step to D on the 10th fret of E

Another way to understand these opportunities is to spell out the chords. We will use the I, IV and V chords in the key of A

<u>I</u>	<u>IV</u>	<u>V</u>	<u>I</u>
A	D	E	A
C#	F#	G#	C#
E	A	B	E

So where are the half steps? (the smallest interval) – C#- D when going from I to IV and G# to A when going from the V to the I. Half steps are the easiest on the ears as they are the smallest interval between two notes. Half steps are arguably the most important interval in western music.

Next – where are the whole steps? E-D, and E-F# when going from I to IV, B-A when going from V to I. Because the V chord is always a whole step above the IV chord, the chord movement is all whole steps.

Let's put this into practice. Using your favorite jam track in A, play a C# over the end of the I chord followed by a D when the I changes to the IV. That is a strong step. You went from the major third of the I chord, to the root of the IV chord. Your strongest chord tones are the third (it conveys major or minor to the listener) and the root note, as this is 'home base' for the chord. The five note is window dressing. Nice, but not necessary.

Now try the same thing when you go from the V back to the I. Play a G# over the end of the V chord followed by an A when the V changes to the I. Same strong step – you went from the major third of the V to the root of the I.

Most blues songs use, or at least imply dominant seventh chords. Let's spell out some ninth chords (dominant seventh chords with the ninth degree added) and see how the possibilities grow.

A	D	E	A
C#	F#	G#	C#
E	A	B	E
G	C	D	G
B	E	F#	B

We have now added the half steps of B-C (I-IV), C-B (IV-V) and F#-G (V-I).

We have added a few whole step opportunities as well. See if you can identify these on your own.

So – use voice leading in your chord selections, and in your improvisation. When comping, your chord selections will be easier on the ear, when improvising, incorporating half steps when moving from chord tone to chord tone is a clear way to lead your audience through the chord changes.

Note: Chord shapes that are physically close to each other on the fretboard are typically good when comping as the close physical proximity indicates close musical proximity.

Speaking of chord tones – these are your punctuation marks when improvising. They are great ways to end a musical sentence. Likewise, using the 2nd, 4th and 6th (which are also your 9th, 11th and 13th) degrees of the scale are a great way to extend a musical sentence when you want to.

Check out my handout entitled "Improvisation 101" for companion information to this article.

Enjoy!