

## MU 009 (Feurzeig) Keyboard Lab Handout: 12-Bar Blues

### Version 1: LH roots and fifths, RH melody

Practice the blues scale in C with your RH. The fingering given is comfortable and easy to learn.

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 1 2 3 4 1 2 1 2 3

Now play the roots of a basic 12-bar blues progression in the bass. Keep time with your foot on 2 and 4. Once the pattern is ingrained in your hand, start playing along in the right hand using the blues scale. Keep it simple. For example, it is idiomatic to play 2-note gestures such as the following. Think of the scale as **a collection of notes to choose from**, not necessarily something you play up and down a whole octave in scale format.

I IV I I IV IV

I I V IV I V

Fanciness and flash are not important; it's not mostly about the notes. What matters is playing rhythmically, in strict time, and expressively, with a variety of articulation and dynamics.

When this becomes comfortable, you can add a perfect fifth above the bass, and from that note you can play a simple alternating 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> blues figure. This adds a little texture while turning your left hand into a motor, helping to keep the time.

I IV I I IV IV  
(or just stay on I)

I I V IV I V

Now transpose everything to E. The E blues scale can be played with the same fingering. This scale has only one black note, a feature it shares with the A and D blues scales. In the left hand, though, you have to deal with black notes for the first time. (Note that none of these upper left-hand notes is in the blues scale. They can be used to create tension and grittiness between the melody and the harmony.)

(with key signature of E major)

**Version 2: chord voicing using the 3<sup>rd</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup>**

The characteristic chord quality of traditional blues is the dom<sup>7</sup> (major-minor7 chord). In blues, it is typical for all three primary triads, I, IV, and V, to be expressed with Mm<sup>7</sup> chords. This makes for a voicing pattern with very simple, smooth voice leading that is also easy to play.

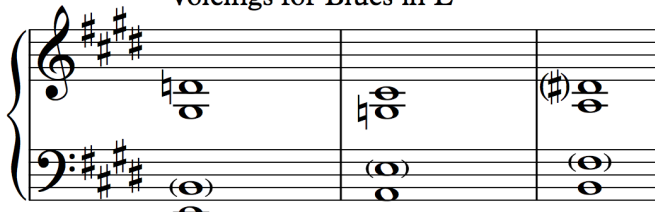
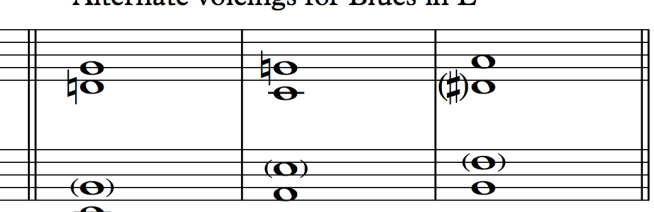

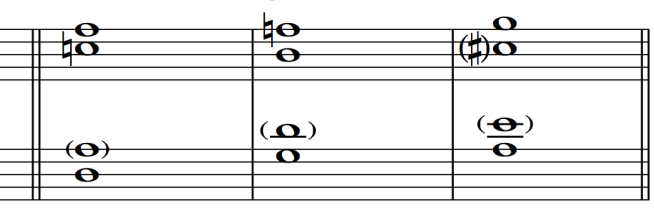
C: I I I I IV IV I I V IV I I

The voicings above do not contain a fifth. This is also common. Because the perfect fifth is present as a strong overtone (harmonic) of the chord root, chords containing a p5 above the root (i.e. major and minor triads and the seventh chords based on them) can omit the chord fifth and retain their quality. But you can also add the fifth back in the LH, or the walking 5-6 pattern:


C: I I I I IV IV

I I V IV I I

Below are the same voicings in E and in D. You can also flip the position of the chord 3<sup>rd</sup>s and 7<sup>ths</sup>.


<p style="margin: 0;">Voicings for Blues in E</p>  <p style="margin: 0; text-align: center;">E: I                  IV                  V</p>	<p style="margin: 0;">Alternate voicings for Blues in E</p>  <p style="margin: 0; text-align: center;">I                  IV                  V</p>
<p style="margin: 0;">Voicings for Blues in D</p>  <p style="margin: 0; text-align: center;">D: I                  IV                  V</p>	<p style="margin: 0;">Alternate voicings for Blues in D</p>  <p style="margin: 0; text-align: center;">I                  IV                  V</p>

These same 3<sup>rd</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> voicings can be used as a LH accompaniment for RH melody. The root is absent from the harmony. It could be supplied by another instrument, such as a string bass, or it may be omitted altogether in solo piano playing and simply implied. This is a subtle but commonly used sound. Here are those voicings using the simplest version of the 12-bar progressions.



C: I    I    I    I    IV    IV    I    I    V    V    I    I

The example below uses additional chord changes to IV in m. 2 and 10 and to V in m. 12.



C: I    IV    I    I    IV    IV    I    I    V    IV    I    V

Here is the C blues scale fingering for reference.

