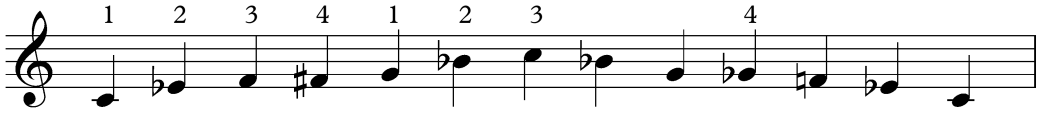
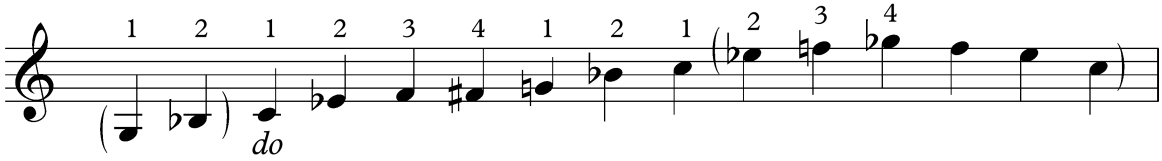
MU 1310 (Feurzeig) Keyboard: 12-Bar Blues

Practice the C blues scale with your right hand. The suggested fingering is easy to remember: the thumb is always on the tonic and dominant.

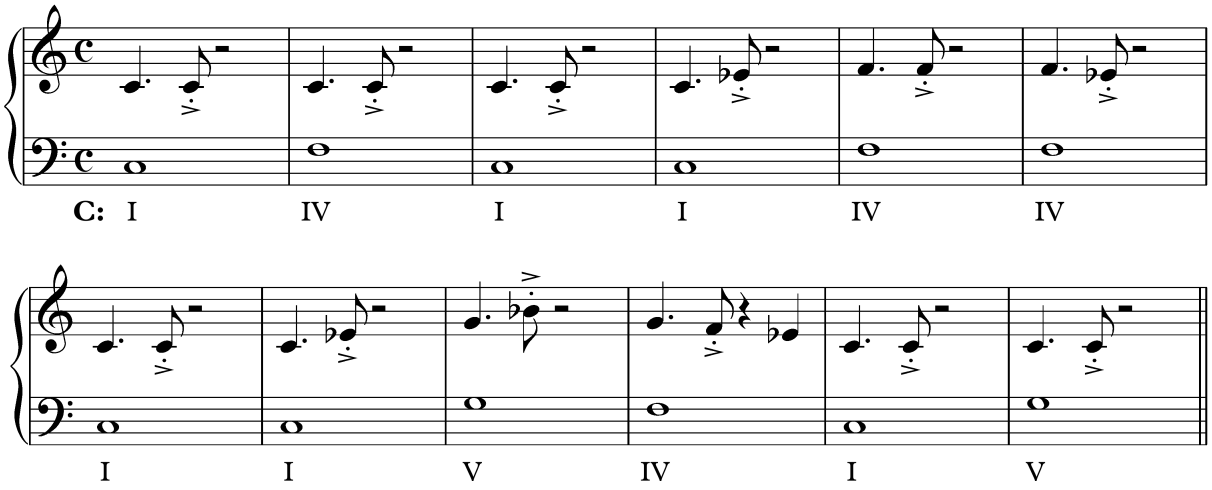


Here it is extended below and above a single octave. (This will not all fit on the Nektar SE25.)



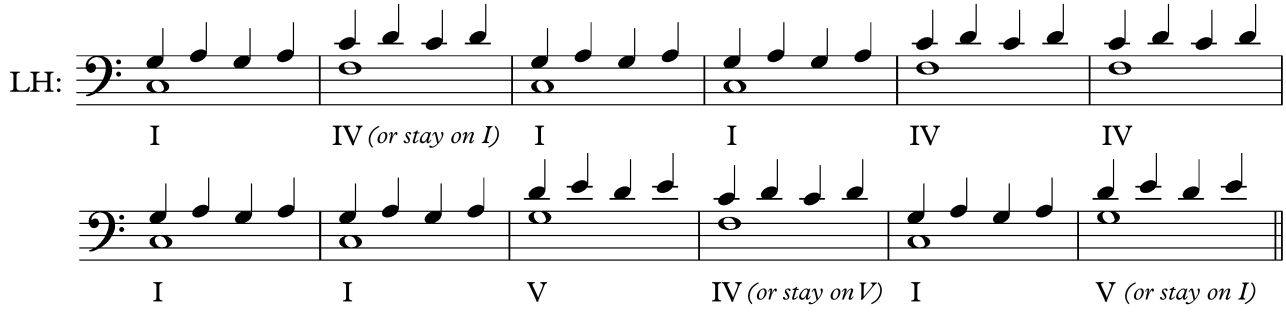
<u>Keyboard Texture no. 1: LH root and fifth, RH melody</u>

In the LH, play the roots of a 12-bar blues progression in the bass. Keep time with your foot. Once the pattern is ingrained in your hand, start playing along in the right hand using the blues scale. Keep it simple. It is idiomatic to play short repeated gestures, such as the following simple Charleston rhythm. Think of the scale as **a collection of notes to choose from**, not something you need to play up and down the full octave in scale order. It's not even mostly about the pitches: what matters is playing in strict time, expressively, with a variety of articulation and dynamics.



See if your keyboard or music app can accompany you with a drum pattern as you play.

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

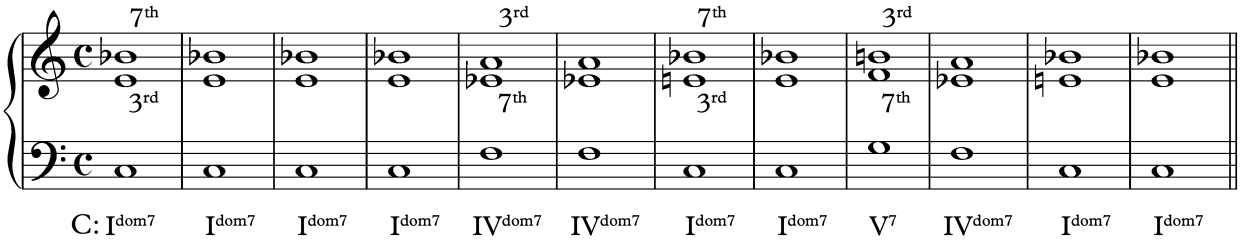


Keyboard Texture no. 2: LH root and fifth, RH 3rd & 7th

The characteristic chord quality of the blues is the dom^7 (major-min^7 chord). In blues, all three harmonies (I, IV, and V) are typically played as dominant-quality chords.

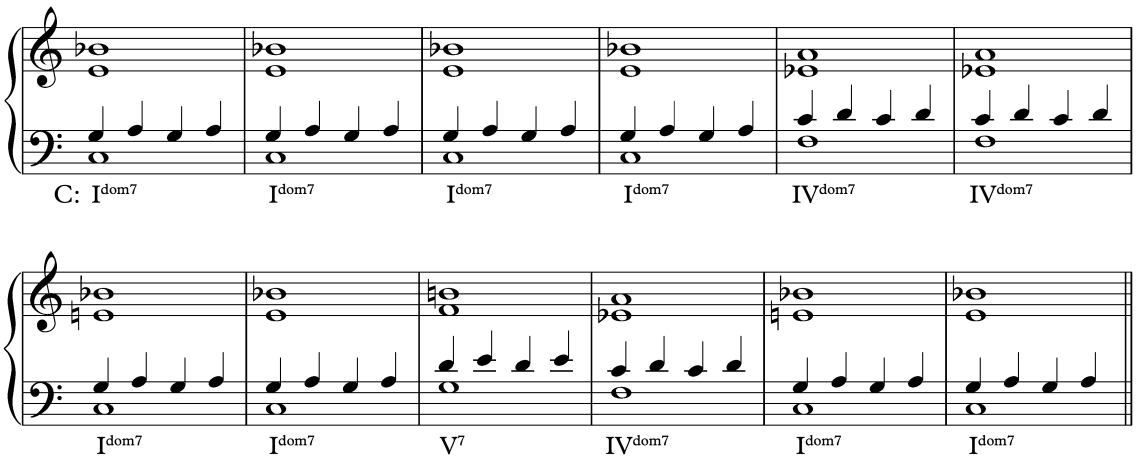
When playing chords in the middle register with the right hand, the chord root can be omitted, because it is present in the bass (played by the LH in the arrangement below). The chord fifth is also commonly omitted: the perfect fifth (actually the perfect 12th) is present as a strong overtone (harmonic) of the root pitch, and for this reason, 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 still retain their perceived quality.

This leaves **only the chord 3rd and 7th** as essential to play in the right hand. Alternating which chord element is on top makes for a voicing pattern with simple, smooth voice leading that is easy to play.



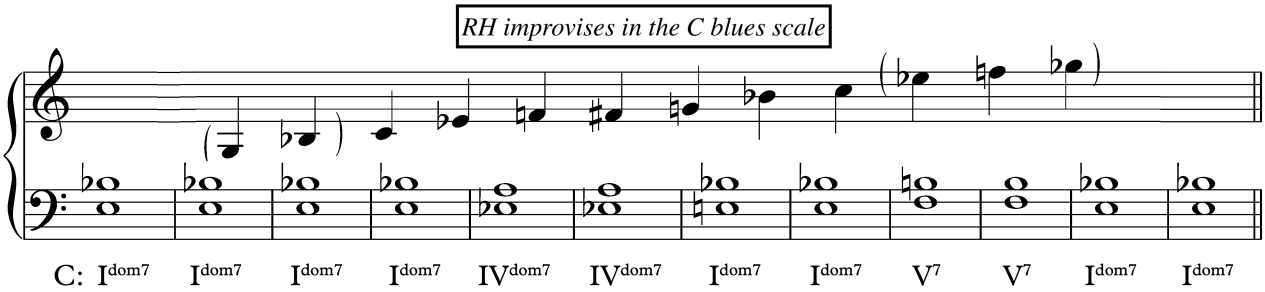
Note: **All** the chords above are dominant seventh quality, but the V^7 roman numeral does not require the "dom" because it is naturally this quality, i.e. it needs no accidentals. (The natural sign on the B is just cautionary, to cancel the preceding B♭.)

You can also add the fifths back in the LH, either in whole notes or via the walking 5-6 pattern:

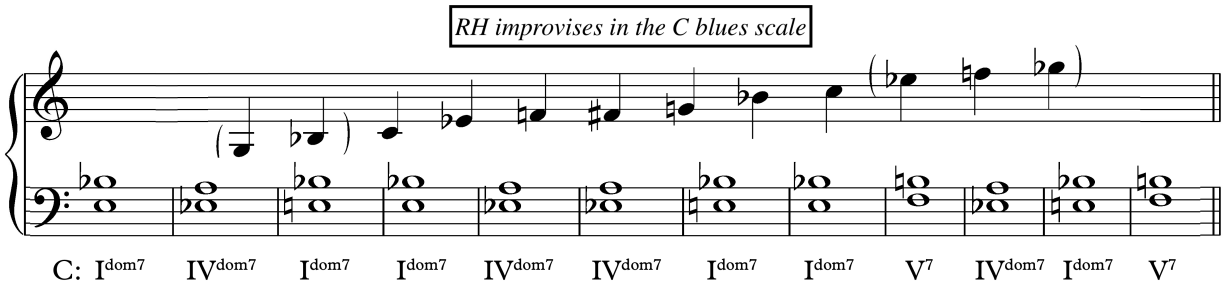


Keyboard Texture no. 3: LH third and seventh, RH melody

The same 3rd/7th voicings can be used as a left-hand accompaniment for a right-hand melody. The root is absent; it could be supplied by another instrument, such as a bass guitar. Or it may be omitted altogether in solo piano playing and simply implied—this is a subtle but commonly used voicing. Here are those voicings using the simplest possible version of the 12-bar progression.

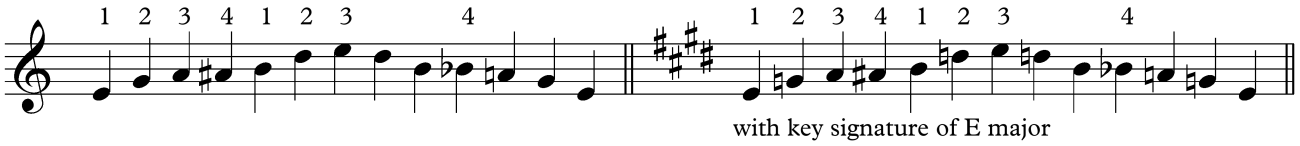


The example below includes the optional chord changes to IV in bar 2 and 10, and to V in m. 12.

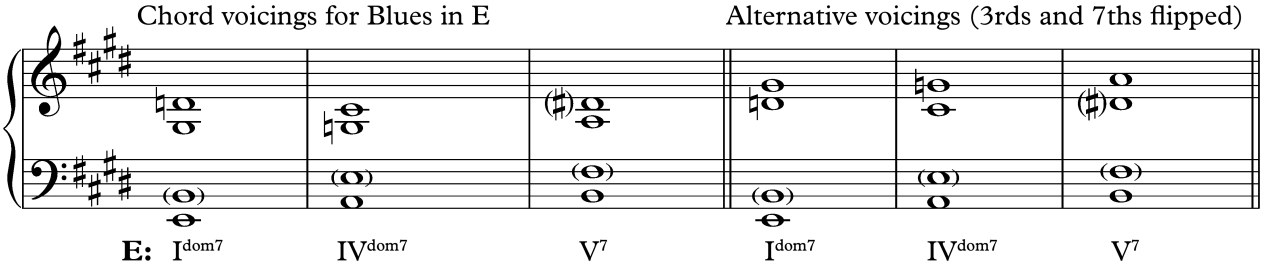


Notice that the thirds of the I and V chords (scale degrees major $\hat{3}$ and major $\hat{7}$ respectively) conflict with the $\flat\hat{3}$ and $\flat\hat{7}$ in the blues scale. What some analysts have dubbed the ***melodic/harmonic divorce*** is characteristic of the blues. It leads to expressive tensions: for example, when the $\flat\hat{3}$ degree of the blues scale is played in the melody over the I^{dom7} chord, which contains the major $\hat{3}$ scale degree, or when the subtonic ($\flat\hat{7}$) of the blues scale is played over the leading tone (major $\hat{7}$) in the V^7 chord.

Although the blues scale is based on the minor pentatonic, blues are usually notated with a major key signature. Here is the blues scale in E, first without key signature, and then as it would normally be notated. (It is all white notes except for the $\sharp\hat{4}$ / $\flat\hat{5}$. The keyboard fingering here is the same pattern as for C blues, with the thumb on $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{5}$.)



Here are the voicings transposed to the key of E. You can also flip the positions of the 3rds and 7ths. Note: With a major key signature in effect, you must lower the sevenths of the I^{dom7} and IV^{dom7} chords. (The D♯ in parentheses is just *cautionary*, to remind you that the D♮ of the I^{dom7} chord is cancelled.)



Playing melodies and chord progressions in different keys is a time-honored method for learning musical patterns deeply. When you play a tune or a progression or a scale in only one key, you are familiarizing yourself with a certain fingering pattern or physical layout on your instrument, probably relying heavily on your ***visual*** and ***muscle memory***. When you play the same thing in multiple keys, you generalize the musical relationships and begin to *feel* and *hear* them intuitively. Playing in many keys (which look and feel different on the instrument or in notation) fosters ***auditory-musical memory***.

The other most important tool for developing deep, musical understanding is ***singing***. Instruments have keys and fingerings that determine what pitch is produced; the visual/tactile factor allow you to bypass more auditory paths in your brain. With singing, there is no such visual/tactile feedback; you can only sing what you *hear* in your inner ear. Try singing the chord roots as you play the blues progression, or singing simple melodic gestures within the blues scale as you play chords or a bass line.