

MU 156 (Feurzeig) Play & Sing: 12-bar blues

The minimal upper register voicing for most chords is 3rd and 7th, which form the basis of so-called “rootless” voicings. For adjacent chords with roots a fifth or a step apart, this allows for parallel stepwise motion in both upper voices, which gives strong voice leading and is also physically convenient.

Musical notation for a 12-bar blues progression. The first six bars show chords C7, F7, and G7. The second six bars show chords C7, F7, and G7. The upper voice is marked with 3rd and 7th notes. Roman numerals I⁷, IV⁷, and V⁷ are shown below the staff.

Practice the 12-bar blues progression using one of the two sets of voicings. Count in 4 and keep good time, using a metronome. Precise rhythm is a key element of the blues.

Musical notation for a 12-bar blues progression. The upper voice is marked with Roman numerals I⁷, I⁷, I⁷, I⁷, IV⁷, IV⁷, I⁷, I⁷, V⁷, IV⁷, I⁷, I⁷. The lower voice is marked with Roman numerals (IV⁷), (ii⁷), (V⁷), and (V⁷).

The roman numerals below the staff show common variants. You can mix and match any of the alternatives.

Next, try this simple LH pattern to add rhythm and texture. Always play in strict time.

Musical notation for a 12-bar blues progression. The upper voice is marked with I⁷ and IV⁷. The lower voice is marked with I⁷ and IV⁷.

Musical notation for a 12-bar blues progression. The upper voice is marked with I⁷, V⁷, IV⁷, and I⁷. The lower voice is marked with I⁷, V⁷, IV⁷, and I⁷.

Practice “the” blues scale until it is familiar (at least to your RH). Experiment with fingerings. Think of it as a set of pitches to choose from, not something you ought to play as a melody. Go beyond the octave. For example, many characteristic licks use the 5th and 7th below the tonic along with the tonic and third above.

Musical notation for the blues scale.

Minimum requirements and extras for the play and sing:

You may do the Blues Play & Sing in any key.

1) RH plays mostly rootless voicings that include the 3rd and 7th.

extra: Add other notes (9th, 11th, 13th) as you like. Play characteristic rhythmic patterns like | ♩ . ♩ - | or | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | rather than just downbeat whole notes.

2) LH plays roots on key downbeats (bars 1, 5, 7, 9, 11) and keeps a steady quarter-note beat. Rhythm is key!

extra: Include the seventh in the pattern, or go beyond that to play a walking bass or more intricate pattern.

3) Sing along using (primarily) the blues scale. Minimum: simple characteristic licks. Remember to include sufficient space (rests) and don’t let the singing pull you out of time.

extra: Compose a rhyming text. Feel free to sing the blues about MU 156 or other academic woes. Remember, in many societies the ruling class tolerates musicians singing what cannot be said.

So long as you cover all elements (bass line, chords, singing), you may do this on guitar instead of piano.