

Basic Blues Form

Fortunately, the musical form of the blues is a lot more clear-cut than its historical **underpinnings**! In early blues, when musicians performed by themselves, blues could be more free form. But as people began to play together, they needed a set form so they could keep together. By the early 1900s, when blues singers and instrumentalists started to perform in groups, a classic three-part lyrical form emerged: AAB. The first two lines of blues lyrics were alike (A, A), and the third was different (B). Here's an example from a blues song by B.B. King, "Everyday I Have the Blues":

- A *Everyday, everyday I have the blues.*
- A *Everyday, everyday I have the blues.*
- B *When you see me worried, baby, it's you I hate to lose.*

Classic blues form often follows a standard harmonic pattern based on the I, IV and V7 chords found in European-based music. With the blues, these three chords are played as 7th chords (the 7th degree of the scale is added to each chord). They are often played in 12 measures (or bars) of four beats each. This is what's known as the *12-bar blues*—a term that comes up a lot when you read about the blues.

12-Bar Blues

"A" Measures:	1	2	3	4
Chords:	C ₇ (I) ₇			
"A" Measures:	5	6	7	8
Chords:	F ₇ (IV) ₇		C ₇ (I) ₇	
"B" Measures:	9	10	11	12
Chords:	G ₇ (V) ₇		C ₇ (I) ₇	

Blues melodies are based on a blues scale. Derived from the major scale, the blues scale contains certain flatted (lowered) notes, especially the 3rd and 7th degrees of the scale. These flatted notes, often called "blue notes," appear in much African-American music and are an example of the African influence (*see scales below*).

W.C. Handy: "The Father of the Blues"?

In the early 1900s, when the blues was just emerging as a form of entertainment, the name W.C. (William Christopher) Handy stood out from all the rest. Handy called himself the "Father of the Blues," but he really only helped to popularize the style. He took credit for "discovering" the blues when he heard a Mississippi street musician playing his guitar with a slide in 1903, though we now know that blues was around long before this time.

Though we can't really say that Handy discovered the blues, it can be said that he was one of the new century's most important bandleaders, composers, and musical publishers. Born in Muscle Shoals, Alabama in 1873, and the son of a minister, Handy was the leader of an orchestra called the Mahara Minstrels. He was


also quite an **entrepreneur**, and through his sheet-music publishing business, he was the most important pioneer to popularize the blues.

But what he's most famous for is the publication of his self-penned "Memphis Blues," which, when published in 1912, set a new precedent for blues music. However, the song that truly jump-started the blues (and has remained probably the most recorded blues tune of all time) is Handy's "St. Louis Blues," published in 1914.

More to Come ...

From this rich tradition, many musicians in coming years would make names for themselves as pioneers in the blues. In the following articles, we'll take a look at some of these blues "legends," as well as other styles of music that were directly influenced by the blues—namely rock 'n' roll.

C Major Scale



C Blues Scale

