The Blues

The blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal tragedy expressed lyrically.
- Ralph Ellison

It is a Holy ritual of brass incantation and feel good percussion
- Albert Murray

More can be said about the blues than other musical form. It is simultaneously one of the most basic and universally applied musical ideas to be advanced in the last 150 years. It is a musical form that can simultaneously deal with the simplicity and complexity of life while providing a clear structure for an improviser (or story teller) to tell their story. It is deeply emotional yet flexible enough to convey stories of tragedy, romance, comedy, and satyr. Many times the blues is used to get students started with improvising - and that is a good thing- but what we need to be very aware of is, just like specific poetry, there are time honored ways to improvise over this form. In order to produce an effective blues solo the tradition must be honored.

When Hamlet asked the age old question, "to be or not to be," what he was really asking was whether it was worth the struggle. This is nothing more than the Blues. The common misconception is that the Blues are sad, but the Blues are both the ailment and the cure, the problem as well as the solution. Everyone has and understands the Blues, because everyone has paid their dues in some way. The Blues are a musical structure designed to provide an expressive outlet for performers to come to terms, deal with, make fun of, and even stave off their struggle. That is the ironic nature of this music; the subject of the verse may say one thing, but the feeling of the music says something else.

Basic Overview

- The Blues is a recurring 12 measure form
- The Blues consists of 3 phrases each lasting four measures
- The Blues uses I7, IV7, and V7 Chords, though it is common for musicians to use a ii-7 in the final phrase
- The blues often uses vocal inflection and deeply emotional nuance.
- The Blues uses Call and Response, Repetition, Riff, Question-Question-answer

Progression

Using Roman Numerals, the blues can be represented like this:

I^7	IV^7	I^7	I^7
IV^7	IV^7	I^7	I^7
ii^{-7}	V^7	I^7	I^7

Here is what that would look like in the key of C:

C^7	F^7	C^7	C^7
F^7	F^7	C^7	C^7
D^{-7}	G^7	C^7	C^7

The last phrase of the blues is referred to as the "Turnaround." Here is where the improviser can apply their repertoire of ii-V-I licks. It is also where the musical question that is asked in the first two phrases is answered.

Soloing Formulas

The blues is more than just a sequence of chords. It is poetry set to music. In the same way that poetic structure exists like Haiku, Limerick, and Sonnet, soloing over the blues requires that the soloist have some level of understanding of tried and true formulas. Blues as a vocal folk art form often followed a structure where the first two phrases were the same, with a contrasting third phrase. This is often where the singer presented the problem, repeated the problem and then resolved it in the third phrase. Below is an example:

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above have mercy, now, save poor Bob if you please

Below are a variety of formulas that can be used when soloing over the blues. These formulas related to the vocal structure above and provide organization to your ideas for improvisation:

Structure 1:

a
a
b (Turnaround)
*See Joshua Redman on Jig a Jug 1:38

In this structure the 'a' ideas can last four measure or two measure with the use of adequate space to complete the four measure phrase.

Structure 2:

a a
b a
Turnaround
*See Sonny Stitt on Blues Counter Clockwise 4:57

In this structure the 'a' and 'b' ideas are each 2 measures followed by a four measure turnaround phrase.

Structure 3:

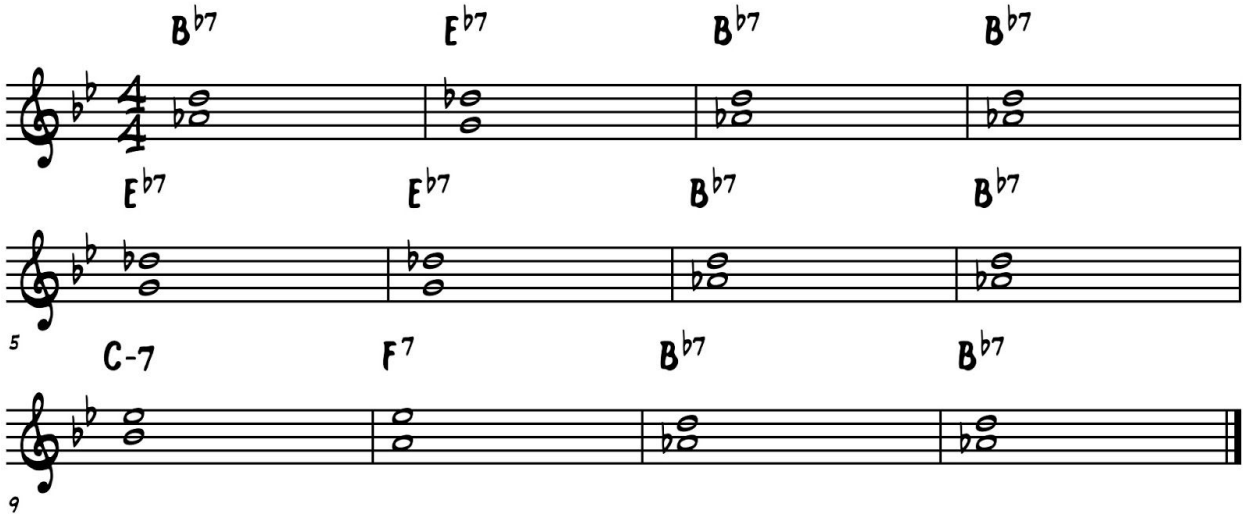
a
a(up a fourth)
Turnaround

In this structure the 'a' ideas can last four measure or two measure with the use of adequate space to complete the four measure phrase.

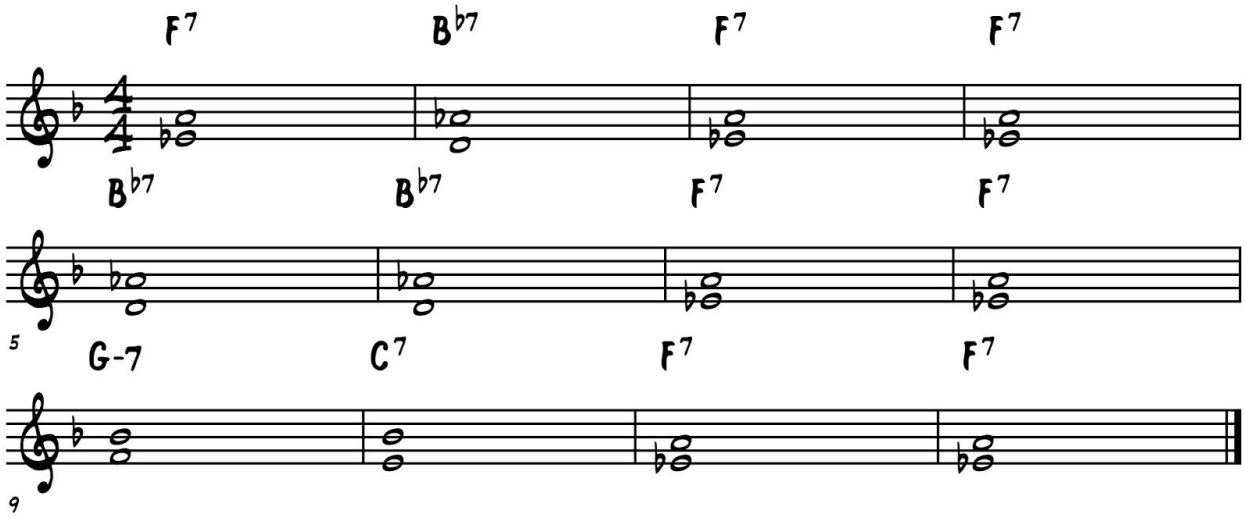
Guide Tones (C Instruments)

Guide Tone are the 3rds and 7ths of chords. Not only do these pitches communicate chord quality they also create essential harmonic direction to the music. The relationship of these pitches are unique in the blues. Thirds and sevenths create smooth chromatic voice leading if we move from the third of one chord to the seventh the next.

Bb Blues



F Blues



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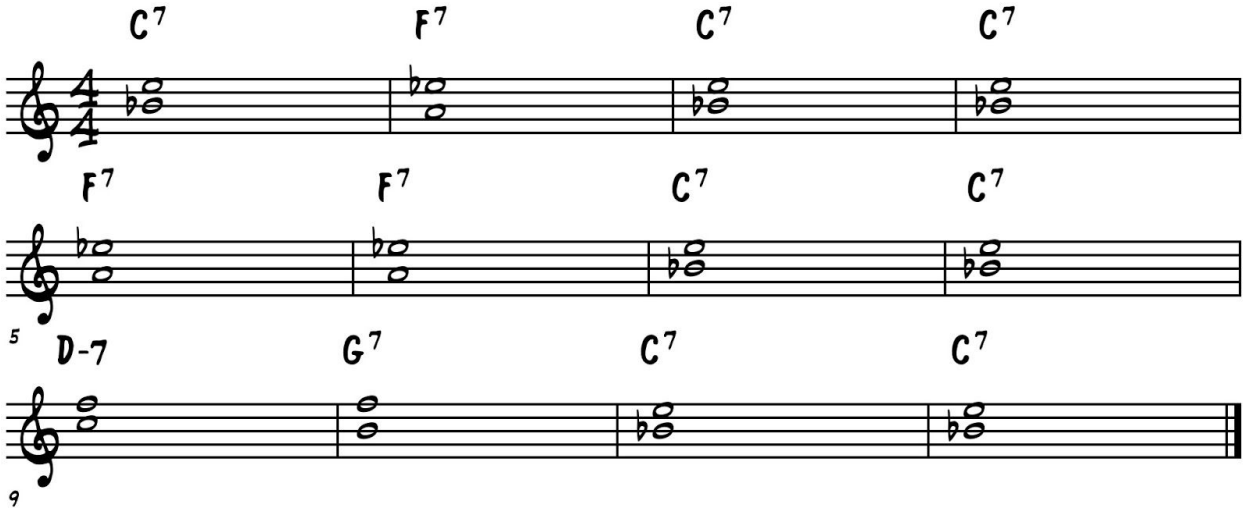

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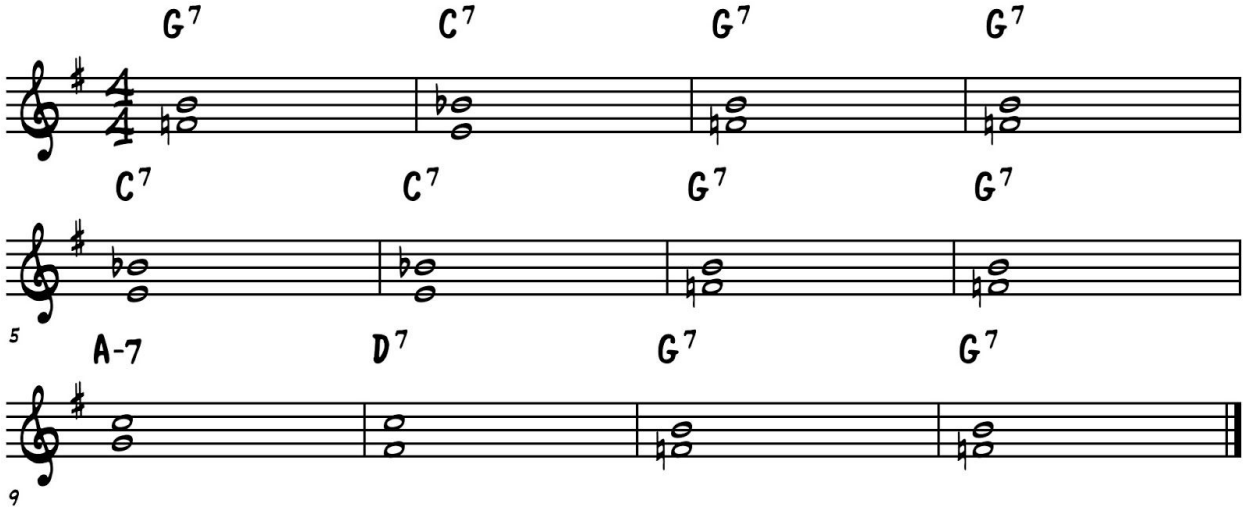

Guide Tones (Eb Instruments)

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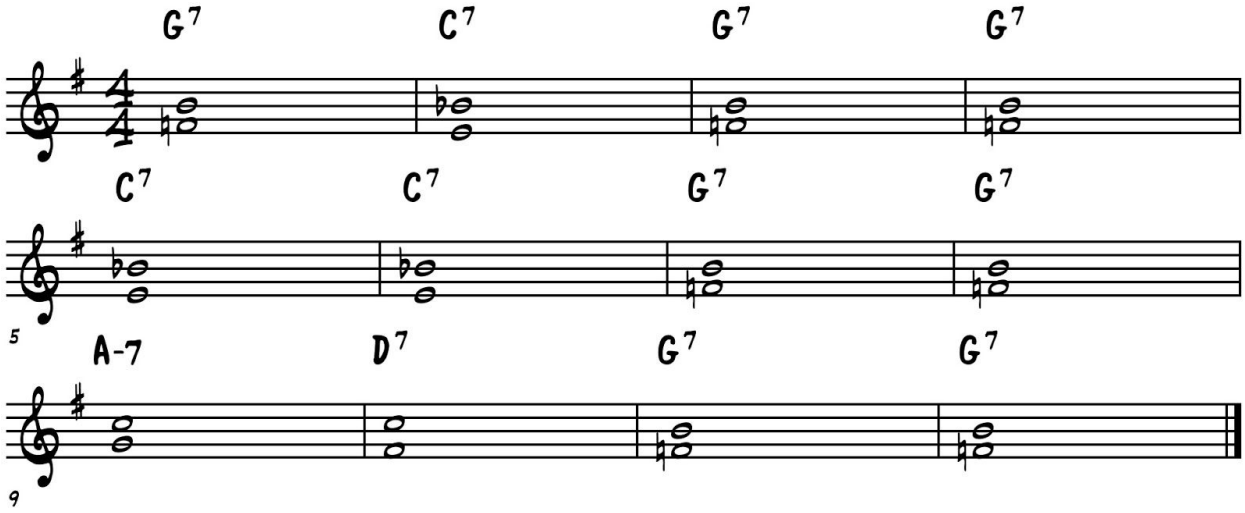
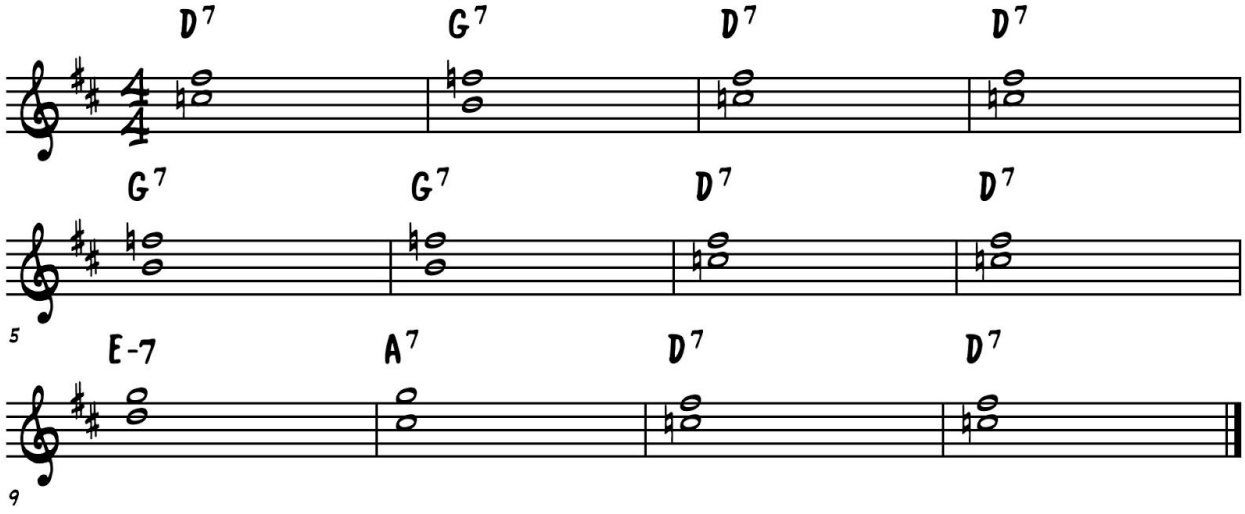


F Blues



Guide Tones (Bass Clef Instruments)

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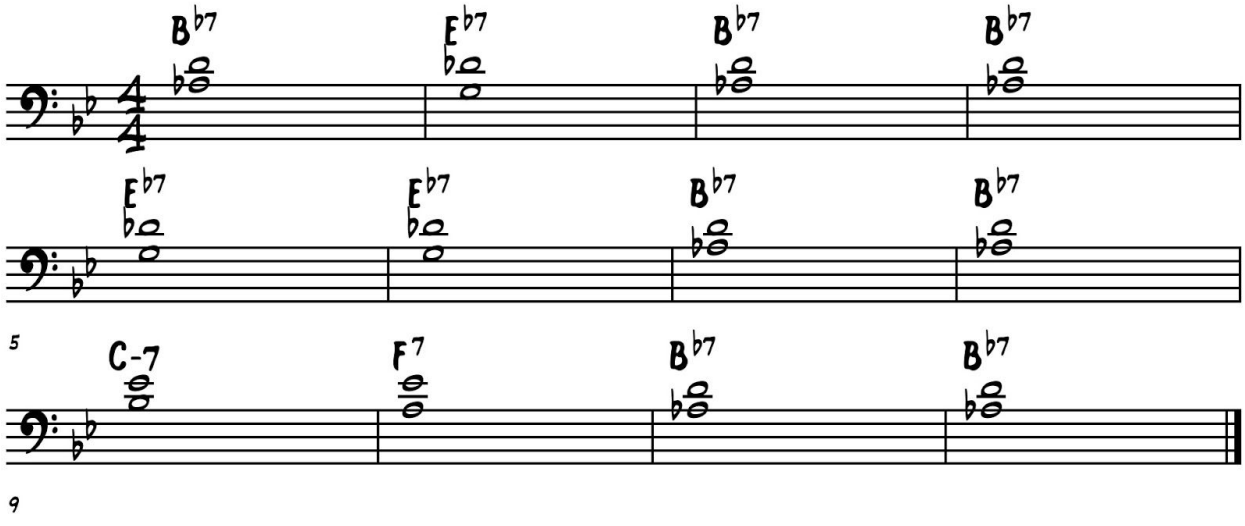
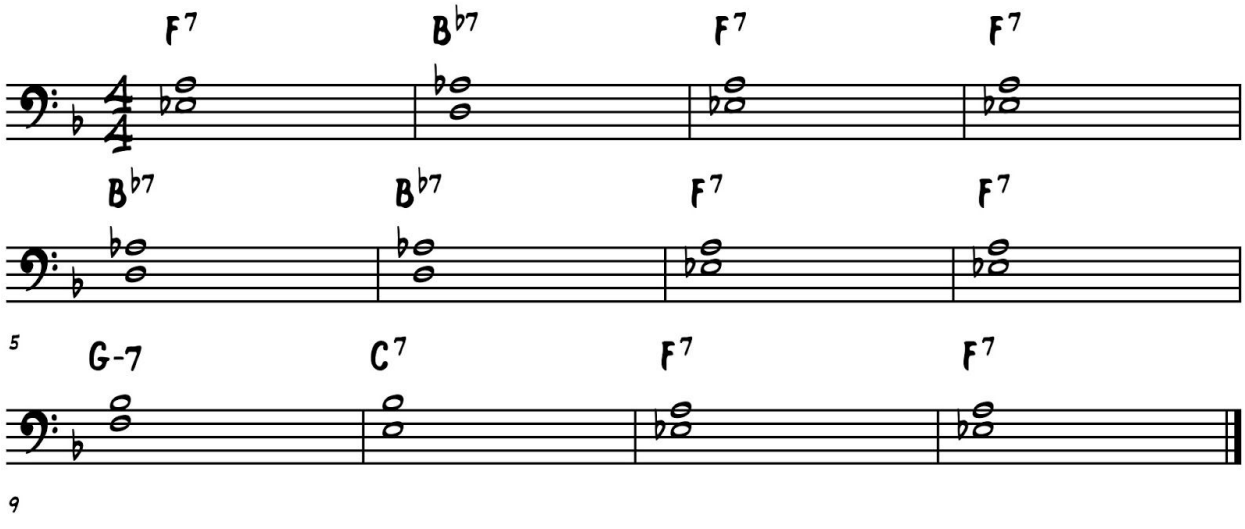
F Blues