

10 Not so Standard Blues Forms Every Bassist Should Know

by Laura Greenberg

You've memorized the typical 12-bar blues chord changes, and may be wondering if that's all there is to playing blues, especially as a bassist. Although there are many tunes that follow the predictable 12-bar pattern, there are also plenty of blues standards that differ either a little or a lot. Some tunes use the same 1, 4, and 5 chords, but lengthen or shorten the 12-bar form. Other tunes maintain the 12-bar length and alter the chords.

All of these examples will likely come up if you are jamming with other blues musicians. Even though they may not be complex, any variation can be a challenge if the 12 bar form is deeply engraved in your mind and hands. Here are a few useful forms/songs to learn, that will come up over and over.

The examples in this article are written using the Nashville number system. This system uses numbers instead of letters to represent chords. The numbers are taken from the major scale:

In G Major: G A B C D E F#
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Typical 12 Bar Blues

C C C C
F F C C
G F C C

12 Bar Blues, Nashville Number Notation

1 1 1 1
4 4 1 1
5 4 1 1

1. With a **Fast 4 or quick 4** the second bar (which is normally a 1 chord) is swapped out for a 4 chord. Watch out for a fast 4 in slow blues tunes especially. It's not a huge or complicated change, but I guarantee you will kick yourself every time you miss that fast 4 (and you will)! Examples: "She's 19 Years Old" - Muddy Waters; "All Your Love" - Magic Sam.
2. **Starting on the 4** in a 12-bar blues is a simple but effective way to keep things interesting. Even though it is a really straightforward change, it's easy to mess this one up by going to the 5 chord too early, or by accidentally starting the next chorus on the 1. Examples: "Rollin' and Tumblin'" - Muddy Waters; "Mystery Train" - Junior Parker.

Fast 4/Quick 4

1 4 1 1
4 4 1 1
5 4 1 1

Starting on the 4

4 4 1 1
4 4 1 1
5 4 1 1

3. There are endless possibilities for the **last 4 bars** of any 12-bar blues. These 4 bars are the most likely to vary from tune to tune. In a jam situation, listen closely during the first time through the form for the chords the other musicians play. Examples: "Thrill is Gone" - B.B. King; "You're Gonna Need Me" - Albert King; "Tell Me What's the Reason" - T-Bone Walker; "Scuttle Buttin'" - Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Symbols from standard music notation can be added to Nashville Number Charts such as # for sharp and b for flat.

Last 4 Bars							
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
4	4	1	1	4	4	1	1
2	5	1	1	#5	5	1	1
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
4	4	1	1	4	4	1	1
5	5	1	1	5	4	b3	1

4. **16 bar blues** tunes usually **extend the 1 chord**, and keep the rest of the 12-bar form the same. The 1 chord lasts 8 bars, and often there is a stop before going to the 4 chord. Watch for hand signals from other musicians on stage, such as holding up 1 finger (which means "stay on the 1"). Also, always listen to the vocals/melody. Phrasing, intensity, and note choice make it clear that the 4 chord is coming; if these changes are not present, the 1 chord may continue longer than usual. Other parts of the typical 12-bar can also be lengthened to create the 16-bar form, for example, by extending the 5 chord. Listen to: "Oh Pretty Woman" - Albert King; "San Ho Zay" - Freddy King, "Sugar Coated Love" - Lazy Lester.

In the Nashville Number System, a triangle around a number indicates a hard stop.

16 Bar Blues							
Extended 1 Chord <i>(more common)</i>				Extended 5 Chord			
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
1	1	△	—	4	4	1	1
4	4	1	1	5	5	5	5
5	4	1	1	1	1	1	1

5. **8-bar blues** shorten the 12-bar length, but often stick to the typical 1, 4 and 5 chords. There are many possibilities for the order of chords in 8-bar tunes, so this is a trickier form to be prepared for. Watch out for an 8 bar bridge (often starting on the 4 chord) in otherwise typical 12-bar blues tunes. Check out: "Key To The Highway" - Big Bill Broonzy; "Walking by Myself" - Jimmy Rogers; "Just Your Fool" - Little Walter; "Sidetracked" (bridge section) - Freddy King; "I Hear You Knocking" - Lazy Lester.

8 Bar Blues							
1	5	4	4	1	1	4	4
1	5	1	1	1	5	1	5
4	4	1	1	4	1	4	1
5	4	1	1	4	1	2	5
1	4	1	1	4	4	1	1
5	4	1	1	4	6	2	5

6. **24-bar blues** may sound complicated, but these tunes just take the 12-bar form and double everything. The 1 chord is played for 8 bars, followed by the 4 chord for 4 bars and so on. Resisting the urge to change chords too early is the key to playing these tunes. Listen to “Slow Down” - Larry Williams; “Mustang Sally” - Wilson Pickett (also check out the version by Buddy Guy).

24 Bar Blues			
1	1	1	1
1	1	1	1
4	4	4	4
5	5	4	4
1	1	1	1

7. **Minor blues** tunes follow the standard 12-bar form, but some or all of the chords are minor in quality. For example, the 1 chord is minor, but all other chords are played as usual; the 1 *and* 4 chord are minor; or all of the chords(1, 4, and 5) are minor. When a minor blues is called, you may wish to clarify the chord quality (major or minor) with the other players. Further chord substitutions such as a fast 4 or #5-5 turn around are also common in these tunes. Listen to “As the Years go Passing By” - Albert King; “Who’s Been Talkin’” - Howlin’ Wolf; “You Got Caught” - JW-Jones; “Mr. PC” - John Coltrane (named for bassist Paul Chambers, this is a jazz standard).

Parts of chord symbols are added to Nashville number charts to indicate chord quality, such as “-“ for minor.

8. **“Stormy Monday”** by T-Bone Walker is the typical 12-bar bar length, but with a few chord substitutions. It has a fast 4 and a 2-5 turn around, and the band hints at further substitutions throughout the song. In Bobby ‘Blue’ Bland’s 1961 version, the less common chords 2, 3, and b3-, are emphasized, and this is the version many musicians expect to hear.

In the Nashville Number System, each number represents 1 bar of music. Underlined chords are part of the same measure. Here, each underlined chord receives 2 beats.

Minor Blues			
1 Chord is Minor			
1-	1-	1-	1-
4	4	1-	1-
5	4	1-	1-
1&4 Chords are Minor			
1-	1-	1-	1-
4-	4-	1-	1-
#5	5	1-	1-
All Chords Minor			
1-	1-	1-	1-
4-	4-	1-	1-
5-	4-	1-	1-

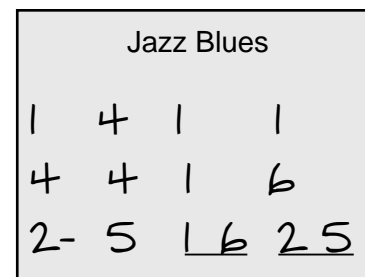
9. **“Jazz Blues”** is another example of a 12-bar form with chord substitutions. Jazz musicians call these changes ‘jazz blues’, although I haven’t really heard the term used in blues circles. Some blues bands venture into jazz territory and perform standards like “Tenor Madness” by Sonny Rollins. Listen to these chord changes in a bluesier context in the tune “Hold It” by Bill Doggett.

As a bassist, you can hint at these chords, throwing them in every once in a while in a swing/jump blues tune over the regular 12-bar changes. This can push the solo in a new direction, or just offer some interesting variation in the background (although it is best to save this idea for trio situations where no one is

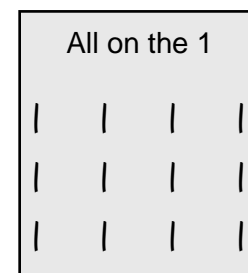
“Stormy Monday”			
1	4	1	1
4	4	<u>1 2-</u>	<u>3 b3-</u>
2-	5	<u>1 4</u>	<u>1 5</u>

actually playing chords). Conversely, the soloist might hint at these chord changes as well, and the bass lines should follow. Check out "Percolatin" by Little Charlie and the Nightcats to hear this, particularly during the solo section.

If you happen to be playing at a jazz jam, and a "blues" gets called, these are the expected chord changes. Within jazz, there are even further versions of these chord changes (flip through the Real Book for many examples). One noteworthy variation is Bird blues, named for Charlie Parker. These advanced chord substitutions are beyond the scope of this article, but are important to be aware of. Listen to "Blues for Alice" by Charlie Parker.



10. **All on the 1.** Rather than complicating the 12 bar form, there are plenty of blues standards that take the opposite approach. That is, only the 1 chord is played for the entire song. Even though this sounds easy, it can be a challenge to keep things interesting, particularly when developing forward momentum during solos. Examples: "Spoonful" - Howlin' Wolf; "Smokestack Lightning" - Howlin' Wolf; "Shake Your Hips" - Slim Harpo; "Rolling Stone" - Muddy Waters.



There are many more non-standard blues forms/tunes to know, but these ten examples are a great place to start. It's also worth noting that bands sometimes switch to standard 12-bar changes for solos (many of the listening examples listed throughout this article do just that). Knowing these forms in advance will help in a jam situation, but most important is to listen closely and to be prepared to adapt when the typical 12-bar is left behind.