



## The Blues Contexts

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### Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate the contexts relating to the concepts of Blues melody and harmony, which include blues notes, sentence structure, chord progression, and reaction. These contexts are indispensable in demonstrating the significance of the blues. They are also materials that many composers employ in their creation of music in another genre, such as in Jazz blues. Blues is, therefore, an epitome of a rich musical tradition, elevated as a precious music culture, even though their original creators, those who suffered from slave trading and inhumane treatment, have no academic background in music.

*Keywords: Blues, Blues Notes, Blues Progression*

### 1. Introduction

It is irrefutable the blues is a basic form of many music genres. Influenced by Western music theory, it developed into many genres and traditions, such as Jazz, Rock 'n Roll, and R&B. Its origin by far owed to those suffering from the European and American slave-trading flourished in 1619AD-1800AD. At the time, the African continent had been subjected to colonization, while many of its populace were captured and traded as slaves to the New World. These slaves had been subjected to brutal treatments, racially, sexually, socially, and politically. As a consequence, they experienced various kinds of mental disorders, from mental strain to depression. In this harsh situation, music and songs are countermeasures in an effort of countering these painful experiences. They eased the horrible feelings. They consoled. They uplifted the mood. They entertained. As a result, blues music was born.

### 2. Objectives

This article aims to demonstrate the contexts relating to the concepts of Blues melody and harmony, which include blues notes, sentence structure, chord progression, and reaction.

### 3. Blues Contexts

Work songs had been heard frequently during the hours of daily work on the field among the slaves. They elevated the mood, as well as reducing the tension. Most of the songs described the nightmarish experiences of slavery. Normally, they were performed without instruments. Lyrics were spontaneously created at the singers' wit, usually sung by hollering, or shouting out, among the field slaves. These blue notes later evolved into blues music. Here is the reason why blues music is a representation of misery and sorrow. Slave hollers are the vocal expression of the distress and resentment of life on the field. Moreover, they stand as measures of communication because it was prohibited to talk during times of work. In hollers, we could find the constant variation of pitch, called bent.

The call-and-response is one of the communicative measures employed by the slaves. This performative form is derived from numerous African tribal rites (Tanner, Megill & Gerow, 2001) in which the vocal interaction between the ritual master and other participants is repeatedly enacted. This concept has a great influence on modern music, especially in Jazz, as observed in many live performances, in which each musician responds to another's calling. The Jazz trading fours are strongly influenced by this concept as well.



#### 4. Blues Notes

Blues notes have a unique melody. In Western musical theory, these notes could have been classified into two types the minor and the major blues scale. Here is its numeral structure 1-b3-4-b5-5-b7. Uniqueness in blues notes could be found in b3, b5 and b7. Had A minor blues scale been applied, it would be arranged as shown in Figure 1, with six notes appearing, A-C-D-E $\flat$ -E-G respectively. These blues notes, including C, E $\flat$ , G give a unique melody frequently heard in blues music. The rectangle in Figure 1 represents the blues note.



Figure 1 A Minor Blues Scale

Moreover, the major blues scale could also give blues melody as the minor scale could. Here is how it is written in numeral structure structure 1-2-b3-3-5-6. Figure 2 would depict C major blues scale. The rectangle in Figure 2 represents the blues note.



Figure 2 C Major Blues Scale

Figure 2 includes six notes, C-D-E $\flat$ -E-G-A. In a comparison of A minor and C major blues scales, the similarities of these notes are remarkable and the difference would be found in the tonic.

In A minor blues scale, there are A-C-D-E $\flat$ -E-G  
(among which, C, E $\flat$ , and G are identified as blues notes).

In C major blues scale there are C-D-E $\flat$ -E-G-A  
(the notes identified as blues notes are C, E $\flat$ , and G as well).

It is noticeable that notes in the A minor blues scale are similar to those in the C major one. These similarities make the sound dimension of these scales resemble. Here are the indicators of blues notes. What is shown in Figure 3 is an example of blues notes in the first four measures of *St. Louis Blues* by William Christopher Handy, a.k.a. W. C. Handy (1873-1958). All blues notes are in G major blues scale. The rectangle in Figure 3 represents the blues note.



Figure 3 First Four Measures of *St. Louis Blues*



Figure 4 also depicts the blues notes. Below are the first four measures of *Empty Bed Blues* by J. C. Johnson (1896-1981). The melody includes blues notes in B-flat minor blues scale. The rectangle in Figure 4 represents the blues note.



Figure 4 First Four Measures of *Empty Bed Blues*

Blues melody has also had a strong influence on Jazz blues as blues notes have been frequently derived in Jazz composition. Figure 5 is the first four measures of *Billie's Bounce* by Charlie Parker (1920-1955) in which blues notes have been integrated into the F minor blues scale. The rectangle in Figure 5 represents the blues note.



Figure 5 First Four Measures of *Billie's Bounce*

## 5. Blues Progression

As noted above, blue notes are significant to blues music tradition. They stand out as a recognized legacy in American music tradition, as the legacy of slaves suffered by colonialism and slave trading. A rich material for generations of musicians and composers, enriched by western music theory, these notes contribute to the birth and development of one of the most popular and characteristic music of modern American society—Jazz music. Apart from hollers, call-and-response, and blues notes, blues music has other, additional characteristics:

1. Its depressive tone reflects racism sexual oppression Excruciating social status, lack of freedom. In addition, there is also a fun emotional song as well, which creates entertainment.
2. The lyrics are characteristically poetic and could be divided into three parts: the first and second are repetitions, the third is a conclusion.
3. Chord progression comprises three chords: tonic, subdominant, and dominant.
4. The songs are typically twelve-bar sequence.

Blues songs usually convey miserable feelings. They show the listeners the anguished and distressful lives of slave laborers. The lyrics, if any, also act as a medium to show those feelings as well. Enslavement, subjugation, and oppression are the most common themes. Unsurprisingly, these themes have a full impact on musical tone and mood. Should we pay attention to them, we would be able to detect those grievous and depressive tones. The lyrics are regularly composed in verse, having repetitions, and comprising of three parts. The first two parts are the same verse, while the last, third part is the song's conclusion. This three-part concept is called a phrase. Each song contains three phrases. Each phrase contains four-bar phrases. The first and second ones are indicated by (A) with a repetition of verse. The third and last ones are indicated by (B).



It is reasonable to conclude that blues music has in its characteristic an AAB phrase structure (Terefenko, 2018), as seen below.

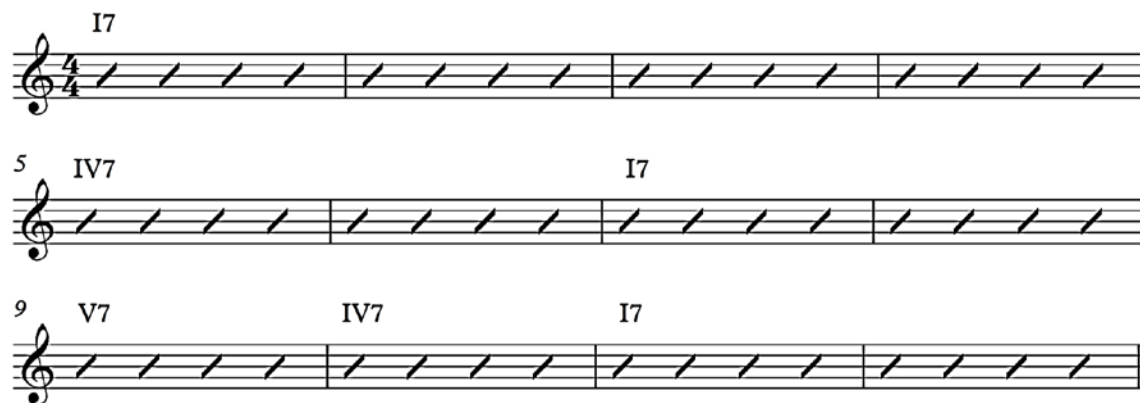
(A) *I woke up this morning with an awful aching head.* (Phrasing 1)

(A) *I woke up this morning with an awful aching head.* (Phrasing 2)

(B) *My new man had left me just a room and an empty bed.* (Phrasing 3)

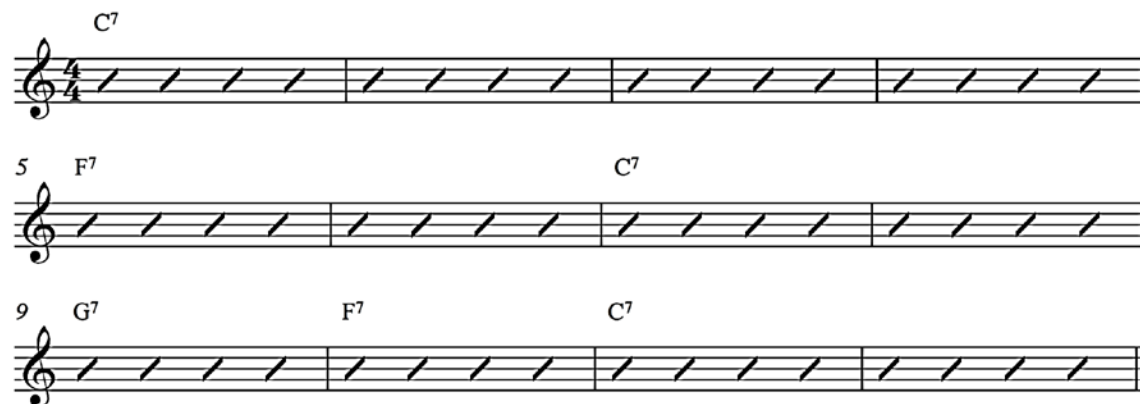
Generally, chord progression contains three chords: tonic (I7), subdominant (IV7), and dominant (V). However, it is not unusual for the dominant chord to be employed repeatedly in blues composition. In basic blues progression, there are typically twelve-bar measures in length. Chord progression has many patterns, but most composers favor this one, as seen below:

Measures 1 – 4:	I7
Measures 5 – 6:	IV7
Measures 7 – 8:	I7
Measures 9:	V7
Measures 10:	IV7
Measures 11 – 12:	I7



**Figure 6** Basic Blues Progression in Twelve Bars

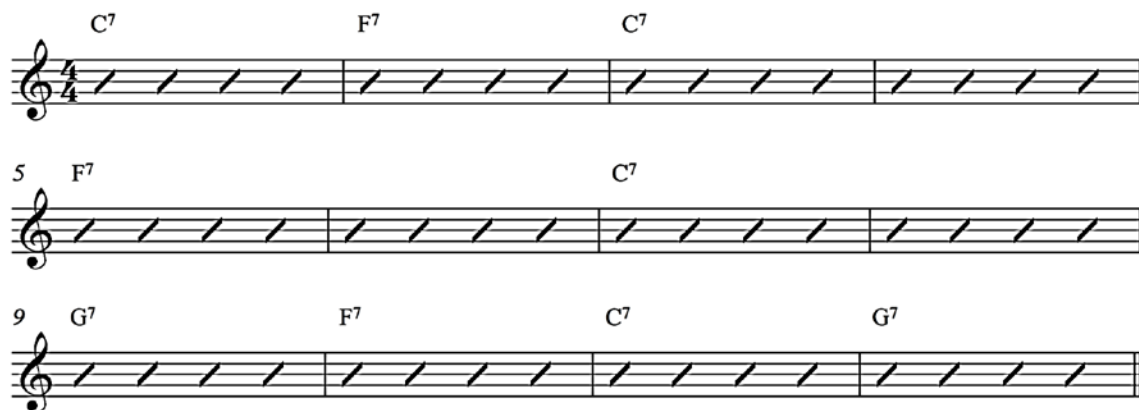
Figure 7 is a basic blues progression in twelve bars with a key of C, comprising of three chords: tonic (C7), subdominant (F7), and dominant (G7).



**Figure 7** Basic Blues Progression with a Key of C



Besides, the change of chords happens on many occasions in the second and twelfth bar measures. In the second measure, it would be a subdominant chord, or F7, while a dominant one, or G7, in the twelfth. There is a reason to explain this pattern. As having a slow tempo, it would be less vivid and colorful in sound dimension by employing I7 chords as shown in Figure 7. It is favorable to change to IV7 (F7) at the second measure. This change could add colorfulness to the existing sound dimension. By changing the chord to G7 in the twelfth measure makes it easier for the I7 chord (C7) in the first measure to reoccur (see the last example, comparatively). The basic blues progression shown in Figure 8 is often used as a key component of the blues progression. In jazz, the concept of performing blues chords is also often used. By rewriting the main melody on this concept of blues chord operation, or called “The Contrafact,” it could be summarized that the concept of the inspiration-led contrafact is an adaption, whether it is partially or, of the original structure, while creating new melodies at the same time (Sungwijit, 2020). Besides, blues chord operations are also frequently used in jazz music styles (Potter, Ullman & Hazell, 1993).



**Figure 8** Basic Blues Chord Progression in 12 Bars with Changes in Second and Twelfth Bars

Brought three-phrase lyrics to coalesce with the basic blues progression, as shown in Figure 9, the whole song would be divided into three parts—(A), (A), and (B), respectively—each part could convey an intended message and emotion to the listeners. However, in comparison with the melody, singers and the singing parts might be more effective. In blues performance, instruments play a minor role. They are there to enhance the mood, not to play the leading role. Nevertheless, the musicians would come to prominence in live performances as they are engaging in making a call-and-response with the singers. It is not only for the sake of vividness in sound but also an opportunity for the musicians to demonstrate their skills in instrument playing. Later, this concept had a considerable impact on Jazz music tradition, for it could be observed in techniques like trading fours or eights.

## 6. Call-and-Response

One member or one section of the band offers a musical phrase that is like a question. Another member or section of the band then follows it with a new phrase that is like an answer (Gridley, 2000). Figure 10 below demonstrates the concept of call-and-response, applied for singers and musicians, in *Empty Bed Blues*, a song is sung by Bessie Smith (1894 – 1937) in response to Charlie Green (1893 – 1935), a trombonist. There, the basic blues chord progression with twelve-bar measures, while the first three ones need an instrumental fill-in. The length has also been reduced from four to two bars, as the lyrics have been intact, allowing the musician to make a response, which becomes one of the most characteristics of blues music. It should be noted that there is no fixed rule on how you make a chord progression or call-and-response. It does not need to be done as mentioned above. Having discussed in this article is by far an attempt at explanation.



(A) *I woke up this morning with an awful aching head.* (Phrasing 1)

| I7 / / / / / | / / / / / | / / / / / | / / / / / |

(A) *I woke up this morning with an awful aching head.* (Phrasing 2)

| IV7 / / / / / | / / / / / | I7 / / / / / | / / / / / |

(B) *My new man had left me just a room and an empty bed.* (Phrasing 3)

| V7 / / / / / | / / / / / | I7 / / / / / | / / / / / |

Figure 9 Example of Lyrics and Basic Blues Progression

(Bessie Smith-Vocal)	(Charlie Green-Trombone)
<p>(A) <i>I woke up this morning with an awful aching head.</i></p> <p>  I7 / / / / /   / / / / /   / / / / /   / / / / /  </p>	<p><u>Instrumental Fill-in</u> (Phrasing 1)</p>
<p>(A) <i>I woke up this morning with an awful aching head.</i></p> <p>  VI7 / / / / /   / / / / /   I7 / / / / /   / / / / /  </p>	<p><u>Instrumental Fill-in</u> (Phrasing 2)</p>
<p>(B) <i>My new man had left me just a room and an empty bed.</i></p> <p>  V7 / / / / /   / / / / /   I7 / / / / /   / / / / /  </p>	<p><u>Instrumental Fill-in</u> (Phrasing 3)</p>

Figure 10 The Call-and-Response of Bessie Smith and Charlie Green



## 7. Conclusion

It cannot deny that blues music originated in slave culture, from Africa to the American culture, resulting in blues music as a representative of the blend of cultures and the source of valuable music. In this article, the author had discussed various concepts turning up time and again in blues music, including blues notes, blues scale, blues chord progression, phrase, and call-and-response. They appear time after time in blues music and have been adopted and applied to other genres. They play a significant role by giving rise to new types of music, one of which is blues Jazz, whose characteristics are the concepts of basic blues chord progression, call-and-response, and trading fours or eights. Since the beginning, music may have come truly far, but its development owes to its times and contexts. Musicians never make music out of nowhere. They need sources, inspiration, and materials. All of these belong to the history of music itself. New inventions never contain entirely new things. They need the past, and the materials from the past, to sustain and energize it. Blues music is one of the epitomes of this principle. It seems like a divine breath that could wonderfully revitalize, even resurrect, music once it reaches a hand to touch.

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