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by Jane Werry

INTRODUCTION: WHY (STILL) TEACH 12-BAR BLUES?

Teaching blues at KS3 has become something of an old chestnut. However, there is a lot of value to be had from including it in your KS3 plans. After all, it can cover all of the following:

- **Context:** it's a great example of history influencing music, and music being tied to identity.
- **Chords:** just how far one chord progression can go, and how this has been done in different decades.
- **Chords:** different ways of playing them, on different instruments.
- **Chords:** inversions, 7ths, substitutions.
- **Key:** why transpose, and how to do it.
- **Improvising:** how to do it, and with style.
- **Texture:** how to vary it, using stop time, solos, and call and response.
- **Songwriting:** lyric writing, structure and creating a sense of style.

To do all of this takes time – perhaps a whole term of one lesson a week. However, it's easy to create a shorter project simply by cherry-picking the bits you want to include. Because it's such a big topic, there are, of course, a million different ways of teaching it, and it's one of those projects that every music teacher uses at some point.

This resource does not intend to provide a definitive blues project: this is just one way of covering various aspects of the blues. Hopefully there will be some ideas here to give you some variety, or to add to what you already do.

GETTING STARTED: PLAYING THE CHORDS

Playing first, or contextual intro first?

My approach would be to play first, and contextualise later. It's also possible to build in a good dollop of theory and aural to the initial chords-learning phase, making it a meaty rather than dull starting point.

Start off by getting to grips with the degrees of a major scale by singing them. This vocal warm-up is called '1, 121' and is immensely useful and flexible. You can sing along to this video to get the ascending and descending forms, singing each note to its number. You can then reinforce the process by dividing the class into two, and singing the ascending and descending forms simultaneously, creating contrary motion.

Another approach is to sing the ascending form as a canon. Having done this, students should have a good sense of the degrees of the scale. You can make the point that you can move the 1 to any pitch to change the key.

WHICH KEY TO USE?

This may depend on the resources you intend to use. If you're using keyboards, or any combination of keyboards, xylophones and ukuleles, then C is the obvious choice. You can always diversify into keys that involve black notes later on. If, however, yours is a guitar-based classroom, you may want to start in G or A instead.

You may want to play a song in a key that's not its original key. There are many ways of changing the key of an audio track, but perhaps one of the simplest involves using Audacity software, which is available as a free download. You simply import your audio, specify how you want to transpose it, and then export. There is a video to explain the process in more detail here: [Audacity can also change the tempo if you want to make slower versions for playalong practice.](#)

The next thing you'll need is a 12-bar blues backing track. Fortunately, there are now hundreds of great backing tracks available on YouTube – just search for your chosen key and tempo. Put on the track and sing 1 at the start of each bar of chord I. Then challenge students to work out the other numbers required, by homing in on the bass note and singing up the scale to it. It won't take them long to work out that 4 and 5 are the other numbers required, and once you've sung root note numbers through a few verses, the structure will be on its way to becoming stuck in their minds.

Now – and only now – is the time to introduce anything visual. This can be the perfect moment to introduce the idea of Roman numerals to represent chords (as opposed to 'normal', Arabic numbers to represent degrees of a scale). You could show your class a grid like this:

I	I	I	I
IV	IV	I	I
V	IV	I	I

It's worth taking a moment to go over the way that Roman numerals work, just in case students are unclear about this. This is also the perfect moment to introduce the terms tonic, dominant and subdominant, strengthening understanding by asking the class what the prefix 'sub' means (as in subway, submarine, sub-standard etc) and pointing out that the subdominant is underneath the dominant. There are of course exceptions to this rule – let's not go into mediant and submediants for the moment – but for now, this will help students to understand and remember.

Of course, up until now we have only been singing the root notes of the chords. We need to progress on to chords themselves. This could be done vocally by adding in the other notes needed for each triad, but it is easier to embrace this as the natural point for moving into instrumental work.

If you're using ukuleles or guitars, you would now move into learning and practising the chord shapes for each of the three chords. However, the most flexible way to promote real understanding of the way that chords are constructed comes from using keyboards and/or xylophones at this point. There are two reasons for this:

- Playing chords on a keyboard or xylophone is very visual.
- The visual nature of the chords makes it easier to play around with inversions.

Do KS3 students need to know how chords are put together? Do they need to know about inversions? These are questions that crop up quite frequently in discussions between music teachers. My own view is that the earlier students develop an understanding of the way notes can be put together, the better. There is no way that flipping the order of the notes in a chord suddenly makes it too difficult for a KS3 student to understand. It adds to the fun, and the sense that there are many different ways of doing this.

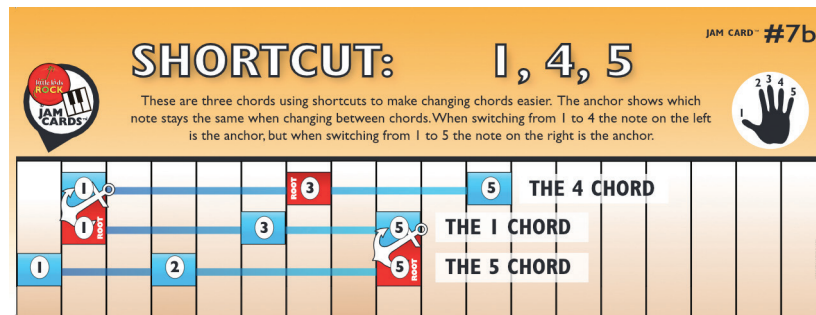
The piano jam cards from Little Kids Rock provide an easy visual for understanding and playing the inversions needed for I, IV and V. They are made for American paper sizes, so a little bit of playing about with enlarging is needed to make A4 printing the right size for slotting behind the notes of a keyboard.

You can make finding the right note for the root of chord I an aural exercise. Be careful not to give away which note is 1, and, having sung the root note numbers through several times with the backing track, challenge students to 'find the 1' on their instrument.

Once they've done this, it will be easy enough for them to count up the scale to find the 4 and 5. Keep playing through with the backing track running in the background. The other notes of each chord can now be added – remind keyboard players to use their right hands (the left hand needs to be reserved for putting in a bassline later) and to use good hand position, using fingers 1, 3 and 5. The best way to organise chords on a xylophone is to have students working in pairs: one playing the root note, and the other, with two beaters, playing the 3rd and 5th.

Model flipping the notes of chord I so the root is at the top instead of at the bottom. Ask whether this is still a C chord (or chord I in whatever key you are using). The correct answer is yes – but it is likely that some students will think otherwise to start with. Explore this, and point out that any chord with C, E, and G in it is a C major chord: the order of the notes does not change what the chord is.

Experiment with the inversions – this works especially well on xylophones, as pairs of students can switch who plays the root note. Next, ask students to identify which chords in our 12-bar progression share a note. The root note of I is also the 5th of IV, so it makes a lot of sense to keep this in the same place as an 'anchor note', inverting either the I or the IV as you play through the progression. This makes it more streamlined and rather more musical. There is also a common note between I and V, as you move from bar 8 into bar 9.



This is the Little Kids Rock piano jam card showing anchor notes and inversions for streamlined playing of I, IV and V: simply slot it behind the keyboard notes to match up with the notes of your chosen key.

Any keyboard player who is able to can add the root note in their left hand, while practising the inversions with their right hand. Students who are struggling could keep their hand in a root position shape and play without inversions, or even just play the root note. Another way of differentiating the chords is to play only on the first beat of the bar rather than on every beat, giving more time to think about chord changes. The important thing is to get everyone involved in playing the chords with the backing, and really absorbing how the 12-bar pattern feels.

As soon as your class is familiar with playing the chords, you can experiment with transposing simply by moving the 1 to a new note and working it out from there. Discuss why we might want to do this, including fitting the backing to someone's vocal range, and making the music suit the instruments that you are using (for example, blues in C works beautifully on ukuleles, but blues in A is much more suited to the guitar).

THE CONTEXT OF THE BLUES: A FLIPPED LEARNING APPROACH

If you want to maximise lesson time for practical work, you may want to cover the context part of your blues project through homework. One of the most efficient ways of organising homework – especially if you teach multiple classes in each year group – is to create self-marking quizzes.

Here are two ready-made quizzes that you can put straight into your chosen format. I use Show My Homework, but it's possible to do the same using Google Forms or Microsoft Forms.

First, students need to watch a short video that covers the early history of blues. Then they need to answer ten multiple-choice questions (here the correct answer is the first one – you will need to mix these up):

1. When did the blues really start?
 - late 1800s
 - early 20th century
 - in the American Civil War
 - 1990s
 - 1820s
2. What were the songs called that the sharecroppers sang in the fields?
 - Field hollers
 - Spirituals
 - Blues
 - Hymns
 - Folk tunes
3. What did the sharecroppers sing about?
 - Personal woes, lost love, cruelty of the police and oppression by whitefolk
 - What they were planning on having for dinner
 - Moving to Chicago
 - How much they enjoyed their work
 - Overthrowing the ruling classes and starting a revolution
4. What was the structure of early blues?
 - AAB
 - ABB
 - ABC
 - ABA
 - BAB
5. What is a jug band?
 - A band formed with home-made or recycled instruments
 - A band where you play on different-sized jugs
 - A band where you use cutlery to play the drums
 - A band that plays in pubs
 - A band that plays music in return for drinks
6. Which US city did jug bands come from?
 - Memphis, Tennessee
 - Atlanta, Georgia
 - Chicago, Illinois
 - New Orleans, Louisiana
 - Washington, DC

7. Which style of blues developed in Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s?
 - Urban blues
 - Delta blues
 - Electric blues
 - Vocal blues
 - Acoustic blues

8. What is the horizontal guitar called, that is used in blues?
 - Slide guitar
 - Banjo
 - Acoustic guitar
 - 12-string guitar
 - Balalaika

9. Who was one of the famous female early blues singers?
 - Ma Rainey
 - Ma Baker
 - Ma Belle
 - Ma Hubbard
 - Ma Perkins

10. Who was one of the most important early blues musicians, who has influenced songwriters ever since?
 - Robert Johnson
 - Robert Plant
 - Robert de Niro
 - Robert Palmer
 - Robert Downey Jnr

For a second homework, you could move forward to part 2 of the video and set a second quiz covering the development of electric blues:

1. What is the bluegrass guitar technique called?
 - Flatpicking
 - Cottonpicking
 - Flatiron
 - Fingerpicking
 - Blue strumming

2. Who was a famous bluegrass banjo player?
 - Earl Scruggs
 - The Duke of Earl
 - Earl Warren
 - Suggs
 - King Oliver

3. What caused the second great migration for African Americans?
 - World War Two
 - World War One
 - The American Civil War
 - The Great Depression
 - The civil rights movement

4. What inventions made a huge difference to how blues sounded?
 - The electric guitar and the amplifier
 - The record player and the radio
 - The television and video recorders
 - The drum kit and microphones
 - The mixing desk and the effects pedal

5. Who was one of the main stars of electric blues in the 1950s?
- Howlin' Wolf
 - Screamin' Coyote
 - Road Runner
 - Hollerin' Lord
 - Snoopin' Dog
6. Who was the 'King of the Blues'?
- BB King
 - Earl King
 - BB Duke
 - AB de Villiers
 - BB Gunn
7. What was one of his most famous songs?
- The Thrill Is Gone
 - Hound Dog
 - I Will Survive
 - Blue Suede Shoes
 - Smokestack Lightnin'
8. Which company developed the pickup that makes an acoustic guitar into an electric one?
- Gibson
 - Fender
 - Rickenbacker
 - Hohner
 - Epiphone
9. Who built one of the very first electric guitars?
- Les Paul
 - Les Dennis
 - Les Schwab
 - Dennis Paul
 - John Paul
10. What else did he invent?
- Overdubbing and multitracking
 - Tape recording and microphones
 - The bass guitar and slide guitar
 - The television
 - The video recorder

If your school uses Show My Homework, the first quiz here is already in the Community Resources section for you to use.

PERFORMING SOME BLUES PIECES FROM ACROSS THE DECADES

Because 12-bar blues chords are used in so many different styles, it's good to perform at least a couple of different pieces that demonstrate this. A good place to start is with some rock 'n' roll from the 1950s, with Elvis Presley's version of 'Hound Dog'. This works really well with classes because the rhythm is so catchy and the bassline pattern is so simple. At this point, students need to get a really good grasp on the way that bassline patterns are constructed from chord notes, and this one is triadic so it's a perfect starting point.

Play your class Elvis's version of 'Hound Dog', or better still show them a video of him performing it. What do they already know about Elvis? About rock 'n' roll? How would they describe his performance? Get them singing along: if they are shy about singing, 'doing an Elvis impression' can be a good way to lure them in.

Show the lyrics with the chords so students can see how they fit together:

You ain't nothin' but a			
hound dog C	Cryin' all the time C	C	You ain't nothin' but a C
hound dog F	Cryin' all the time F	C	You ain't C
never caught a rabbit and you G7	ain't no friend of mine! F	C	You ain't nothin' but a C stop

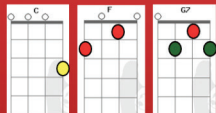
Ask students to pick out the rhythm that's used for the chords and bassline. Practise singing the song and playing the chords together, first by dividing the class in half (half singing, half playing chords) and then challenging students to sing and play at the same time.

From there, it's an easy step to convert the chords into a bassline, simply by playing each note in turn:

C E G

Keyboard players can try playing the bassline with their left hand while playing the chords with their right hand, using inversions if possible, and perhaps singing at the same time. You could move from whole-class performance to group performance at this point if you wished, making it clear that the three essential ingredients are chords, bassline and vocal line. A slide outlining the choices might help:

CHORDS
- when you play the notes all together



ukulele


C	C	G7
G	A	B
E	F	G
C	F	G7
G	A	B
E	F	G

keyboard or xylophone

SINGING: confidence and style

You ain't nothin' but a hound dog C	Cryin' all the time C	You ain't nothin' but a hound dog C
never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine! G7	Cryin' all the time F	You ain't nothin' but a hound dog C
never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine! G7	Cryin' all the time F	You ain't nothin' but a hound dog C

BASS (lowest part)
- when you play the notes one at a time



C E G




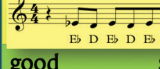
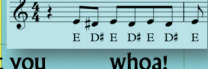


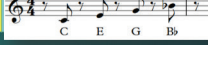

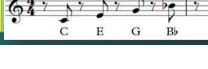

CEG when the chord is C
FAC when the chord is F
GBD when the chord is G

keyboard, xyllo or bass guitar

Can you perform Hound Dog in groups, with accuracy and style?

Having explored a rock 'n' roll song in detail, a move into the 1960s can offer some really contrasting, but still very accessible and enjoyable, blues pieces. James Brown's 'I Feel Good' works really well, as it has a few more details to add on top of a basic chord pattern:

WHOA!
I feel

good C 	I knew that I would now C 	I feel C 
good F 	I knew that I would now F 	So C 
good G ★ ★ 	so good F ★ ★ 	I got you C 
		whoa! C 
		I feel C 

C E G B \flat D

The red stars in the ninth and tenth bars indicate the chords being played on the second and third beats of the bar. The alternating semitone 'wiggles' in the first eight bars can be added by melodic instruments or keyboard. The rising arpeggio that starts in bar 11 is unison, and should be played by everyone: there are no chords at this point.

The bassline for 'I Feel Good' is a little more complex, and is a good challenge for a keyboard player or bass guitarist. These are the patterns for C and F. In the last four bars, the bassline follows the root notes of the G and F chords, and then plays the unison arpeggio.

Other 1960s songs that are accessible and fun to do include:

- **'Soul Bossa Nova'**: this features an easy root-root-5th bassline, and optional offbeat stabs.
- **'Mustang Sally'**: a must if you want to try out layering up backing vocals.
- **'Wipeout'**: this is especially enjoyable if you have any drummers in your class who can do the stop-time drum solo.

For something more modern, try 'Mercy' by Duffy, especially if you want a great song for female vocalists. The original is in G, so if you've not tried transposing the chords yet, this could be a good time to try it. The bassline is also made of a distinctive pattern that students will pick up easily.

Although it would have been great to start with the 1940s and work chronologically, 'In the Mood' is quite complex for a first blues piece, so it can work to go back in time and do it after looking at some other blues pieces. Even if you don't want to do the whole of 'In the Mood', students really enjoy learning to play a walking bassline. Start by showing students a performance of 'In the Mood' and ask them which decade or period of history they associate with the music. It's likely that they will have quite a good idea that this is from World War Two. Ask them to identify who in Glenn Miller's band is playing the bassline – fortunately in this video, the bass player is very prominent. They might also mention that the pianist might be playing the bassline with his left hand.

Show the class the walking bass pattern, pointing out the following things:

- The full pattern takes two bars to play.
- It starts by going up the notes of the chord, then up a white note and then up a black note.
- The same notes are used on the way back down.
- There are eight notes in the pattern.
- When the chord changes, the bassline needs to change too.
- When you have one bar each of G and F, you can only play the first four notes of the pattern.

Armed with this information, challenge the students to work out how to play the rest of the bassline. This is a much richer task than simply giving students the notes of the complete bassline and asking them to practise it, because this way they need to think about the patterns involved, and how they fit with the 12-bar chords.

Songsheets for more songs that use 12-bar chords can be found in the Little Kids Rock song bank here.

IMPROVISATION

Blues improvisation can be the topic for a great one-off lesson that you can drop into the project at any time, once the chords have been learnt and are fluent. It's also a great lesson to do when being observed, as progress is very tangible even for a non-specialist observer.

The takeaways for students should be:

- Improvisation does not have to be scary or complicated.
- It only needs a few pitches if the rhythm is good.
- It is not random.

This last point is essential to get across to students, as at least some of them will assume that you can just play any old notes without putting any thought into the process. As soon as possible after students come into the room, get them doing a two-note call and response with you over a blues backing track. Use the tonic and dominant notes of whatever key you're in. Students might be on keyboards, xylophones or any melodic instrument. Having only two notes makes the patterns you're playing easy to copy. Make sure that you include some interesting syncopated rhythms: the idea is to feel the backing and create something with a sense of style.

Afterwards, discuss what you did. Were you playing from music? No. How did you know what to play? You were making it up on the spot. Was it random? No – only two pitches were being used, and you were playing two-bar melodies that were in time with the backing. Explain that today's objective is to learn how to improvise *idiomatically* in the 12-bar blues.

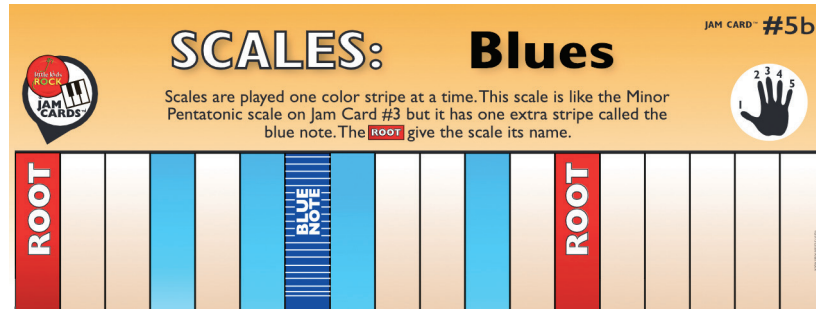
The first thing to do is to outline the structure – the improvisations will be given two-bar 'slots' within a call-and-response framework. The response can be anything you decide on – mine is borrowed from B flat 'Shuffle Blues' by Jamey Aebersold (transposed into C):

F# G G A G Bb A G _____

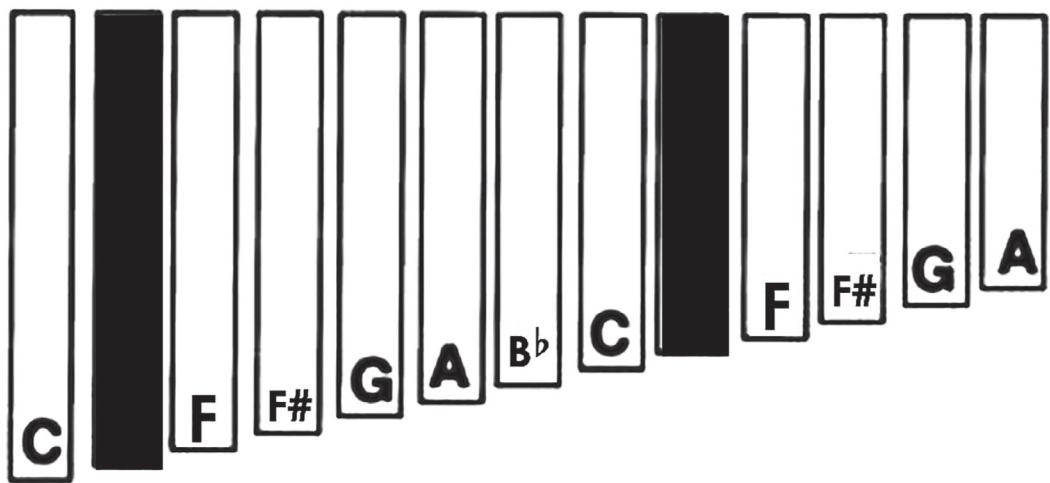
Teach this first, getting the class to play it over the backing track and fitting the response into bars 3-4, 7-8 and 11-12. Ensure nobody plays in the gaps where the improvisations will be. The great thing about having a response that everyone plays is that it gives everyone something to do other than waiting for their turn to come round.

Next, focus on the improvisations. Introduce the idea of the blues scale, and tell the class that they do not need to use all of the notes: we already know that two or three notes can make a good improvisation, as long as the rhythm is good.

It might be a good idea to start and finish on the tonic note in whichever key you are in, and try to include the 'blue' note that is the flattened 5th degree. There is a Little Kids Rock jam card to help keyboard players use the right notes:



Diatonic xylophones with 'spare' F sharp and B flat keys can also be used if you're improvising in the key of C: it is just the E flat that cannot be included. It just takes a couple of minutes to make sure that they are set up with the right notes; a diagram such as this one can help students get it right:



- Take off the Ds and Es.
- Move the Fs down one.
- Put on F sharps.
- Swap B flat for B.

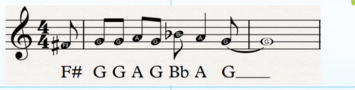
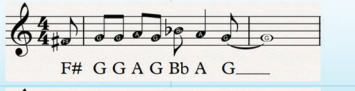
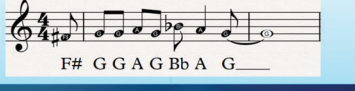
Xylophones can be very useful for less able students, as once they're set up, there are no worries about which notes can or cannot be used.

Model the difference between a good improvisation and several different sorts of bad one. Show one where you're playing all the wrong pitches, one where you just play up and down the blues scale in crotchets, and one where the rhythm ignores the backing track. In each case, ask students to identify what's wrong with it.

Then, with the backing still playing, get them to practise improvising at the right times, while you add the response after each two-bar chunk. This reinforces *when* to play, and also creates a safe environment because everyone is practising at the same time, creating sonic camouflage (although it will sound quite cacophonous at this point). You could also divide the class into two halves, with one side improvising and the other playing the response.

Once you 've done this enough for everyone to feel confident, establish an order for the improvisations, starting at one end of the room and working to the other. Now is the time for students to try improvising solo, interleaved with the tutti response.

Can you improvise **idiomatically** in a blues style within the 12-bar structure?

call	response
2-bar improv	
2-bar improv	
2-bar improv	

Once you've played through with everybody once, stop and discuss. Whose improvisations sounded the best? What were the good features about these ones? Point out the most common problems – these are likely to include using the wrong pitches, ignoring the tempo of the backing track, or playing at the wrong time.

Introduce a new idea to spur on the most able: repeating motifs. Even within a two-bar improvisation, some repetition can give style and a sense of shape. Model an example, perhaps something like this:



Go around the class once or twice more. The final time, make a video recording that you can assess later. Video is better than audio for this project, as you can see exactly who's playing what – to write all of this down would be impossible to do during the performance. It's quite easy to assess these improvisations: you will be able to pick out who's able to provide a stylish response that has some repeating patterns in it, and whose is more basic, or has incorrect elements to it.

THE ICING ON THE CAKE: STOP TIME, 7TH CHORDS AND TURNAROUNDS

There are a few more things to add to our voyage through the blues that are not too tricky for students to master, but represent good value in terms of musical learning.

The first of these involves creating a variety in texture by using stop time. Play students an example, such as this one, and ask them to identify how the chords are being played. The answer is that there are sparse, individual chords that allow the solo instrument to shine through. Ask students to replicate this using their instruments: a visual representation of when to play can be really useful here:

CHORDS WITH INVERSIONS AND STOP TIME

Tonic (I)= Dominant (V)= Subdominant (IV)=

★ C	C	★ C	C
★ F	F	★ C	C
★ G	★ F	★ C	(G) turnaround

We are learning to play 12-bar blues chords

Once this has been mastered, add in some upbeats:

CHORDS WITH INVERSIONS AND STOP TIME

Tonic (I)= Dominant (V)= Subdominant (IV)=

★ C	C ★★	C	C ★★
★ F	F ★★	C	C ★★
★ G ★★	F ★★	C	(G) turnaround

We are learning to play 12-bar blues chords

The crucial thing to realise here is that sometimes, such as between bar 4 and bar 5, the upbeat is on the old chord with the new chord on the beat, requiring a very quick change.

Most 12-bar blues pieces involve quite a few repetitions of the chord structure. As well as varying the texture using stop time, the final bar can be altered to propel us back to bar 1, by changing to chord V in the last bar. This 'turnaround' is an easy substitution for students to learn, and can also lead to learning about 7th chords by adding one in bar 12 for extra style.

WRITING BLUES SONGS

Students now have all the ingredients they need to be able to analyse examples of blues pieces aurally, and to compose their own blues songs. They have a range of ready-made blues basslines they can use, or enough knowledge about how they are constructed to create their own. They could include improvised melodies in a call-and-response structure, or write their own lyrics for a vocal line. A good summary of how to write blues lyrics can be found in this song. Stop time, 7th chords and turnarounds can be added as finishing touches for the most stylish results.