

# An Overview of Blues Music Theory

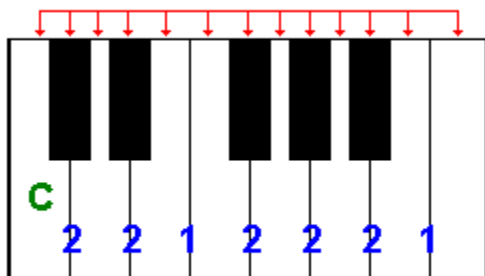
## The Major Scale

Western Music Theory starts with the Major Scale. This is a diatonic (7 note) scale that begins again on its' eighth note. For ease of example it is typical to use the Key of C Major.

In this key melodically the scale looks like this:  
C D E F G A B C. (ex 1)

In the C major scale (as well as all major scales) the half steps occur between the third and fourth and seventh and eighth notes of the scale. In western music the position of the whole (whole tone) and half steps (semi tone) changes the tonal character of the scale or mode as they are sometimes referred. In this scale the notes all occur on the black keys of the piano and therefore is a “natural” major scale, meaning there are no sharps or flats in this scale.

1 Semi-Tone Interval between each Note



Semi-Tone intervals between White Notes

Western music also focuses on the major scale from a harmonic perspective. When we stack groups of three notes together this creates a “chord”. By grouping the first, third, and fifth notes of the C Major scale we get a C, E, and G. This creates a major chord or “triad”. Major chords have a major third and perfect fifth while minor chords have minor thirds and perfect fifths.

If we harmonize the major scale it looks like this: (ex 2)

<b>I</b>	<b>ii</b>	<b>iii</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>vi</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>
<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>

The roman numerals in large case indicate a Major chord based on these three notes and the roman numbers beginning in lower case indicate that the triad based on those three notes is a minor chord.

Western music bases much of its chord progressions based on the three major chords built on the I, IV, and V chords of the scale. The blues has become known to use these three chords almost exclusively.

The 12 bar blues form puts the primary chords in a 12 bar form in a number of different ways. Here we will look at the two most popular: (ex 3)

<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>IV</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>V</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>V</b>

The difference between the above progression and the next is that the IV chord is added on the second bar: (ex 4)

<b>I</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>IV</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>V</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>V</b>

Here is an eight bar form that is less frequent but still very popular: (ex 5)

<b>I</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>I</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>

These forms are also generally repeated by the bass line in a blues song as well. The basic bass line is quite often played “transposed” for each of the I, IV, and V chords respectfully. (ex 6 8 bar, ex 7 12 bar)

## The Minor Scale

The minor scale is another diatonic scale that is the other predominant scale in Western Music as well as theory. In the Key of C it looks like this: (ex 8)

C D Eb F G Ab Bb C

Looking at this scale we see there are half steps between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> notes of the scale.

## Pentatonic Scales

Many cultures folk music is based on a five note scale (pentatonic). The music the slaves brought with them from Africa followed this tradition.

There are two widely used pentatonic scales, the minor pentatonic and the major pentatonic.

The *minor* utilizes five of the seven notes from the minor scale. They are (in the Key of C): (ex 9, 11)  
C Eb F G Bb

So it is the minor scale with the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> scale degrees omitted.

The major pentatonic omits the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> scale degrees of the major scale.  
C E F A B (ex 10, 12)

## Blues Melody

In it's simplest **form**, it consist of three lines in **AAB form**. The first 4-measure line (motif) [motif, motive] is repeated with a slight variation, and then a new motif is introduced in the third and concluding line.