

THREE BLUES HARMONICA APPROACHES TO THE IV CHORD

KEVIN BISHOP

[WWW.LEEDSHARMONICA.UK](http://www.leedsharmonica.uk)

INTRODUCTION

What do you do when the IV chord comes around? Do you just keep noodling away regardless, randomly blow a few holes and hope nobody notices until the I chord comes around again or stare blankly into space wishing you'd thought things through a bit better? Actually, what the hell is a IV chord anyway?

In this pdf we're going to identify the IV chord section of a twelve bar blues and three distinct approaches to playing over it that will help you achieve good phrasing, and ultimately play more satisfying solos.

There is an accompanying video on youtube with more discussion and playing examples. You can watch that here: https://youtu.be/28BoC8tkN_g

I'd also recommend another document I wrote on creating memorable solos using David Barrett's Chorus Forms concept. You can find that pdf at: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/Chorus-Forms.pdf>

This document takes a more in-depth look at bars five and six of the ABAC chorus form described in that pdf.

THE TWELVE BAR BLUES

Here's a diagram representing one chorus of the twelve bar blues. Each box represents one *bar*, or four *beats* (the exception is bar twelve, but that's a subject for another day). Typically this sequence repeats and repeats until the song ends.

I Chord	I Chord	I Chord	I Chord	
IV Chord	IV Chord	I Chord	I Chord	
V Chord	IV Chord	I Chord	I Chord	V Chord

Before we go on. Let's quickly explain why we're using these confusing numbers and numerals.

Here's a G major scale, with each note name numbered. These are *scale degrees*. The number denotes a position in a scale rather than a specific note.

Note Name: G A B C D E F# G
Scale Degree: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

If we're playing a blues in G, the chords we need are the first, fourth and fifth. That's G, C and D.

Here's a C major scale.

Note Name: C D E F G A B C
Scale Degree: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Same applies. If we're playing a blues we'll need the first, fourth and fifth. C, F and G.

The scale degrees enable us to talk generically without worrying about what key we're in. The progression will always be the first, fourth and fifth degree of whatever key the song is in. By convention these are written as numerals, hence **I**, **IV** and **V**.

One chorus of a twelve bar blues (in its most typical form, which is what we're looking at here) therefore consists of four bars of the **I** chord, two bars of the **IV** chord, two bars of the **I** chord, one bar of the **V** chord then one bar of the **I** chord. The final bar is split between the **I** and **V**.

THE IV CHORD

The section of the twelve bar blues we're interested in for now is bars four and five, where we get two bars of **IV**, with the **I** on either side (yes, there's another **IV** in bar 10 but, again, that's a subject for another day).

I Chord	I Chord	I Chord	I Chord	
IV Chord	IV Chord	I Chord	I Chord	
V Chord	IV Chord	I Chord	I Chord	V Chord

Many less experienced harmonica players will just continue to wail away and not acknowledge the chord change at all. That works... sometimes.... kind of. We can be a lot smarter though, and get better sounding solos as a result.

EXPLORING THE THREE APPROACHES

Blues is a repetitive genre, and repetition is the only method a musician has of establishing themes and making memorable music. As you practice the concepts explained below I recommend picking a **I** chord lick and sticking with it while you explore the options for the **IV**.

The **I** chord lick during the first four bars sets up a theme. It presents an idea to the listener and likely even repeats a couple of times to really drive it home. When we make a change for the **IV**, even a small one, we are presenting another idea. We're

taking the audience somewhere new, hopefully somewhere surprising. This creates a lot of interest. If we then *return* to the **I** chord idea for bars seven and eight the audience experiences a feeling of returning to familiar ground. Like coming home after a short trip.

When applying these approaches it's recommended that you always return to your **I** chord idea. Or at least something very close to it. It's very satisfying to listen to and it gives an identity to the improvisation.

Reference the YouTube video for playing examples. I'll link it again.

https://youtu.be/28BoC8tkN_g

APPROACH 1 - CONTRAST

This is the most straightforward. You've been playing one lick idea over the **I** chord so just play a different idea over the **IV**.

Structurally this is quite powerful. All the other instruments are switching from playing one chord to another, so if we change too we are acknowledging the chord change, and changing up when the band does. You'll immediately sound a lot more like you know what you're doing.

You can change your rhythm, you can change the textures you're using, you can change the notes you're choosing, you can change your volume. As long as you're doing something audibly different you're creating the feeling of movement and progression that we're aiming for.

APPROACH 2 - SLIGHT CHANGE

Blues loves repetition. But's what's even better than repetition? Repetition with a twist of lime!

For the slight change you essentially play exactly the same lick you were playing over the **I** but make just a small change to catch the listeners ear, and hopefully give them a pleasant surprise.

Changing just the last note is a common way to do this, and works especially well if you change it to something from the **IV** chord itself. (*Pro-Tip: The **IV** chord loves the blow notes.*)

This is satisfying for the listener because they've already heard you set up your theme during the first four bars. When the the change comes it seems like you're playing the same again, but that small change catches the ear and re-grabs the attention. And, because you're playing something different when the change comes you're acknowledging that too.

APPROACH 3 - SEQUENCE

Another very powerful option, which requires a bit more explanation.

Simply put, take the lick you played over the **I**, and change it to match the key of the **IV** chord.

Imagine we're playing a blues in G. The chords we're using are G, C and D. We're only interested in G (the **I** chord) and C (the **IV** chord). Remember we talked about this earlier?

Grab your C harmonica.

Here's the G and C major scales again.

G MAJOR

Note Name: G A B C D E F# G

Scale Degree: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

C MAJOR

Note Name: C D E F G A B C

Scale Degree: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

And here are the notes on our C harmonica.

										Bb
								Eb	Gb	B
	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	E	G	C
C	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	D	G	B	D	F	A	B	D	F	A
	Db	Gb	Bb	Db		Ab				
		F	A							
			Ab							

To illustrate this let's take a simple I chord idea in G. We'll play this twice over the first four bars.

Note name: B D E D E D B D
Scale Degree: 3 5 6 5 6 5 3 5
Harp Tab: 3 4 5+ 4 5+ 4 3 4

For our IV chord, we'll use the same scale degrees, but this time using notes from the C scale. Like this.

Note name: E G A G A G E G
Scale Degree: 3 5 6 5 6 5 3 5
Harp Tab: 5+ 6+ 6 6+ 6 6+ 5+ 6+

As if by magic it's the same lick in a different key.

Sequencing creates solos that sound and feel very substantial. You're locked in closely with the band and the changes. It's very satisfying to listen to. Bass players often

follow the same pattern of scale degrees across the chord changes, and their whole job is to hold the structure of the song together. Very cool stuff.

WRAPPING UP

And there you have it. Three distinct approaches to tackling the **IV** chord. Practice, practice, practice is the key. Spend some quality time with your harps and a jam track. If you know how to acknowledge the chord change you'll immediately sound so much more professional and in control. Your audience and (especially) your band will thank you for it.

Let me know how you get on. Thanks for reading.



Kevin Bishop

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