

CHORUS FORMS

(OR HOW TO CREATE REALLY COOL AND MEMORABLE BLUES HARP SOLOS)

VERSION 1.0

*(Disclaimer: This document presents information taught by David Barrett at <http://www.bluesharmonica.com/> and in books including *Improvising Blues Harmonica* published by Mel Bay. <https://www.melbay.com/Products/20943M/improvising-blues-harmonica.aspx> . If this introduction to the concept interests you I would strongly recommend you go to the source to explore further. I know of no better harmonica instruction.)*

SO YOU WANNA PLAY THE BLUES?

More often than not people are drawn to blues harmonica because they've heard the Chicago Blues greats and want to be able to conjure the same magic. It's a noble goal but it can appear out of reach. How do you know what to play? How do you remember it? How can you make it up on the spot?

In this document we'll look at a simple and systematic way of approaching a blues harp solo, how we can use repetition to our advantage and how we can vary our phrasing to maintain the listeners interest for the duration of an instrumental or long solo.

THE 12 BAR BLUES

If you're not already familiar with the 12 bar blues form it's a very good idea to get well aquatinted with it before starting. You can't improvise over the changes if you don't know what they are. I've written another document specifically introducing the 12 bar blues to harmonica players. It's available here: <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/introduction-to-12-bar-for-harmonica-players-part01-v1.0.pdf>.

Here's a diagram representing the 12 bar blues in the key of G for your reference.

G (I Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	G (I Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	G (I Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	G (I Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	
C (IV Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	C (IV Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	G (I Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	G (I Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	
D (V Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	C (IV Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	G (I Chord) <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	G (I Chord) <i>1 and 2 and</i>	D (V Chord) <i>3 and 4 and</i>

www.leedsharmonica.uk

WHAT IS IMPROVISATION?

For the purposes of blues harp, we think about improvisation not as creating something brand new on the spot but rather taking what we already know and re-using or re-purposing it to create something new.

You can think about licks you've memorised as words in your soloing vocabulary.

We're such skilled speakers that we don't plan out all our sentences before we speak. We have an idea in our head and we simply start speaking with the faith that because we've said the words so many times, and in so many situations and variations we'll say something coherent.

The same is true for blues harmonica. We learn a lot of licks, but as well as being able to play them in isolation, we need to develop the skill to weave them into our musical expressions.

The chorus forms process described in this document is not only an effective tool for memorising licks and learning how to use them most effectively but also a method for building powerful, memorable solos.

In other words, it's very, very cool stuff.

THE POWER OF REPETITION

There's another very important aspect of improvisation to understand. When we improvise we are **using repetition to create something memorable**.

Repetition is at the core of blues and blues harmonica. When we repeat a lick we are telling the listener that it's important and we're hammering the point home. We're giving them something they're going to hum later. Something to remember.

Effective repetition also gives our improvisations form and structure, making them sound more robust and better thought out.

In the context of improvising, we can take one lick and base a whole chorus around it by repeating it in a variety of ways. That means if you know 6 licks you can improvise a 6 chorus instrumental without breaking a sweat.

FINDING A LICK

Let's take things a chorus at a time (we refer to each 12 bar chunk of the song as a chorus).

Each chorus of our solo will have a main lick associated with it. We'll call this the **A** lick. It's what we're building the chorus around and we're going to repeat it at least a couple of times.

You can use almost any lick you like. Either one you've pinched from a recording, from another harp player or one you made up yourself.

Here's a lick I've stolen from Big Walter which I'll use for the following examples.

6+ 6+ 5 5+ 4 3' 3" 2

(Audio: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/A-Lick-Solo.mp3>)

THE AAA CHORUS FORM

We have a lick, so let's put it to work. The easiest and most repetitive way to do that is simply play the lick as many times as it takes to fill up the 12 bars.

Here's how that sounds:

<https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/AAA.mp3>

The lick is a little over 1 bar long - about five beats, so we can play it 6 times over the chorus and still leave a fair bit of space. Nothing wrong with that, space, or rests, are very important.

The diagram below shows the **AAA** chorus form. Each row represents 4 bars of the 12 bar form.

A	A
A	A
A	A

If our lick was a little shorter and fit comfortably into one bar we could play it twelve times, once for each bar of the chorus. In that case the diagram would look like this.

A	A	A	A
A	A	A	A
A	A	A	A

And if our lick were longer and ran over two bars we could play it three times like so.

A
A
A

Any way we do it, that's the **AAA** chorus form. It's very repetitive and not all licks will sound great in this context, but it's extremely useful for building tension before the climax of an instrumental or long solo, or perhaps to play quietly while another instrument solos.

THE AAA CHORUS FORM WITH FILLS

It won't take long before you're bored of playing the **AAA** chorus form so let's spice it up a bit and add some fills. A fill is just a little lick you can stick in wherever there's space for it. Typically this would be during bars 3-4, 7-8 and 11-12 as shown below.

A	FILL
A	FILL
A	TURNAROUND

You can take fill licks from anywhere, just like our **A** lick, however it's a good idea to experiment with genuinely improvising your fills. Just pick a hole to start on and see where it takes you. This is very tough at first and you're unlikely to be satisfied with your results. The more you practice, the more you listen to other harmonica players and the more licks you learn the easier it will become. The fills in the examples below are very versatile and should work in most situations.

Bars 11-12 should have a more traditional turnaround lick (or buildup to the next chorus) to take you back to the top of the form.

First Fill: 3' 3'' 2 2'' 1 2''

Second Fill: 34(shake) 45(shake) 34(shake)

Turnaround: (12) 2 2 1 1 1+ (12) 3+ (12) 1 1

(Audio: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/AAAFills.mp3>)

THE AAB CHORUS FORM

Time to add a new lick into the mix. We'll call this the **B** lick. Here's how the AAB chorus form lays out.

A	A
A	A
B	

So it's our **A** lick for the first eight bars our new **B** lick for the last four bars. The last four bars are a very particular point in the blues. There is much more activity in terms of chord changes and we're getting ready for our turnaround to take us back to the top.

We can think of bars 9-11 as our **V-IV-I** transition. While it's possible - and actually very common - to play any old lick here it's usually preferable to use a lick specifically designed to hit chord tones that relate to the changes. It really tightens up the sound because you're locking in with the band.

With that in mind, let's use this fairly typical **V-IV-I** lick for the first part of our **B** section.

V IV I Lick:
1 1 4 4 4+ 4 4+
1+ 4+ 3' 2 2

We can then use our traditional turnaround lick to fill out the last bar. These two licks together form our **B** section.

Here's how that sounds in the AAB chorus form: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/AAB.mp3>.

Again if your lick is short you can simply repeat it more often. In that case the AAB chorus form would look like this:

A	A	A	A
A	A	A	A
B			

Or if your lick is longer it would look like this.

A
A
B

And of course we can also play fills if we have the space. Here's what that would look like.

A	FILL
A	FILL
B	

(Audio: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/AABfills.mp3>)

THE ABAC CHORUS FORM

The final chorus form adds a third lick into the mix. This time we're going to change for the IV chord in bars five and six like this.

A	A
B	A
C	

Note: Since we are adding a lick in bars five and six, for this chorus form we'll call that one B, and the licks in the final four bars lick C.

Here's something we could use for our new B lick, and how the whole chorus sounds when played.

B Lick:
2+ 3+ 2+ 3+
2+ 3+ 2+ 3+
2+ 3+ 2+ 3+ 3' 2

(Audio: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/ABACcontrast.mp3>)

There's a few different ways of approaching this new B lick over the IV chord. The first is just to play something completely unrelated to the A lick. This is called a *contrast* and is demonstrated in the example above.

For the contrast lick, it really doesn't matter what you play, as long as it sounds good. It's a good idea to use lots of notes from the C chord/scale in this lick, so as to match closely with the band, or to really emphasise the chord change. We can label the contrast lick on our diagram.

A	A
B - CONTRAST	A
C	

The second option is to use the A lick again but this time make a slight change, to nod your head to the chord change. Typically you could change the note the lick ends on. Maybe add some shakes, flutters or other textures.

Here's an example of the slight change. Here I've changed the last few notes.

B Lick - Slight Change:
6+ 6+ 5 5+ 4 3' ' 3 5+

A	A
B - SLIGHT CHANGE	A
C	

(Audio: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/ABACslightchange.mp3>)

The final option for our B lick is what's called a *sequence*. In a sequence, we repeat the first lick but transpose it from the key of the I chord (G in this case) to the key of the IV chord (C in this case).

Often this can be a difficult concept to grasp, especially if you don't know much about music theory. It makes more sense when you hear it.

B Lick - Sequence:
 4+ 4+ 3' 3'' 2 2' 1 1+

A	A
B - SEQUENCE	A
C	

(Audio: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/ABACsequence.mp3>)

Listen to the difference in the sound when the B lick comes around. We're playing the same lick, just changing the key to match the IV chord.

THE A B C CHORUS "FORM" - THE ANTI-FORM!

Of course it's possible, and actually very common, not to repeat anything across the 12 bar chorus. That would look like this.

A
B
C

This one is an oddity. As there's no repetition, choruses that follow this form are unlikely to be memorable and will lack a sense of structure. In fact, since there's no repetition it's not really a form at all, just one lick after another until the chorus ends.

For this reason you should be very careful using this structure. That's why no audio example is provided here.

PRACTICE AND APPLICATION

The best way to get going with chorus forms is to simply try applying the different forms to some of your favourite licks. Here's some additional advice and troubleshooting.

MODIFYING THE A LICK

If the lick you've picked doesn't seem to be working very well don't be scared to modify it. There are many ways of doing this.

For example, if it seems too long, simply chop it up. Take the A example lick we've been using. We could make that fit into one bar by simply omitting the last few notes. Suddenly we have a very different sounding lick.

A lick shortened:

6+ 6+ 5 5+ 4

(AAB Chorus form audio: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/AlickchoppedAAB.mp3>)

Because the lick now finishes on the 4 draw (D, the fifth note of the scale) it feels unresolved. If you wanted you could replace the 4 draw with a 2 draw (G, the root note of the song). ABAC chorus form audio: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/AlickchoppedvariantABAC.mp3>.

You could go a step further and play the shortened lick for two bars then finish with the unmodified lick we started with to fill the next two. That sounds pretty cool. The whole four bars would then become our A lick. Here's how that sounds in the AAB chorus form: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/AlickchoppedandfullAAB.mp3>.

The point of all this is to demonstrate how you can experiment and vary things to achieve new, interesting phrases which are unique to you. Never be afraid to try something new or different while practicing. Often you learn more from your "failures" than you do your successes.

Just remember, repetition is key!

EXPERIMENT WITH DIFFERENT JAM TRACKS

You should definitely be using a jam track to practice this. Your timing (unless you're very skilled) will suffer as a result if you don't.

Pretty much any 12 bar jam track will do. If you subscribe to bluesharmonica.com (and you should if you're serious about learning to play blues harp) there are lots of tracks available there. I'm also a big fan of Jimi Lee's Groove Trax, Every Groove a Bluesman Needs to Know, which is [available via his website](#).

Try not to be too reliant on one track though. If you're used to playing against a shuffle groove try using the same licks over a rock beat, or a boogie, a slow blues, or whatever. You may find that you need to alter the rhythm of your licks to fit the music.

Here's our original A lick played over a rhumba groove in the AAA with fills chorus form. The notes are the same but notice how the rhythm has changed

to better match the groove. Audio: <https://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/chorus-forms/audio/AAAwithfillsRhumba.mp3>

OUTCOMES

There's a lot of information included in this guide and some of it has only been covered very briefly. Take your time. It can take a while for these ideas to sink in, and even longer to hone the skills you've learned.

Remember it's all about **repetition** and **memorisation**. By applying the chorus form process you're driving that lick from your short term memory into your long term blues vocabulary. The more vocabulary you develop the richer your improvisations become.

I hope you've found this useful.
Good luck!



Kevin Bishop
2018-11-09

AAA CHORUS FORMS

A
A
A

A	A
A	A
A	A

A	A	A	A
A	A	A	A
A	A	A	A

A	FILL
A	FILL
A	TURNAROUND

AAB CHORUS FORMS

A
A
B

A	FILL
A	FILL
B	

A	FILL
A	FILL
B	

A	A	A	A
A	A	A	A
B			

ABAC CHORUS FORMS

A	
B	A
C	

A	A
B - CONTRAST	A
C	

A	A
B - VARIATION	A
C	

A	A
B - SEQUENCE	A
C	