

# **INTRODUCTION TO THE 12 BAR BLUES FOR HARMONICA PLAYERS - PART 01 (VERSION 1.0)**

## **REVISION HISTORY**

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## **AUTHOR INFORMATION AND FEEDBACK**

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## DISCLAIMER

This document is an original work written by Kevin Bishop. It is however based heavily on teaching by David Barrett at <http://www.bluesharmonica.com/>. The site is an invaluable resource for blues harmonica instruction. Players of any skill level would be well served by subscribing.

## SCOPE

This guide is intended for those who already have some experience on the diatonic harmonica, are able to play single notes cleanly and want to start exploring how to play blues. Some willingness to dabble in music theory would be greatly beneficial.

## RESOURCES

These are linked in the body of the text, listed here for convenience.

- The 12 Bar Form - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-blues.png>
- Chord Tones for Blues in G - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/chord-tones-blues-in-G.png>
- The 12 Bar Form with Cord names - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-in-G.png>
- Notes on a C Harmonica Including Bends - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/notes-on-C-harp.png>
- Position Playing - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/2017/09/music-theory-for-harmonica-players-part-6-position-playing/>
- Major Scales - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/2017/05/music-theory-for-harmonica-players-part-3-the-major-scale/>
- The Chromatic Scale - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/2017/04/music-theory-for-harmonica-players-part-2-the-chromatic-scale/>

- Why a C harmonica? - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/why-do-we-talk-about-c-harmonicas-all-the-time/>
- Big Boss Man by Jimmy Reed on Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/album/2PMRy0eJABQCG5glccW4pk>
- 12 Bar Blues Shuffle Jam Track on YouTube - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8RyBQE3g74&feature=youtu.be&t=40s>
- Playing the Changes - Root Notes - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-G-root-notes.mp3>
- Playing the Changes - Root Notes, Charleston Rhythm - audio - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-G-Charlston.mp3>
- Playing the Changes - Chording - audio - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-G-Chording.mp3>
- Playing the Changes - 3rds - audio - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-3rds-sub5.mp3>
- Playing the Changes - 5ths - audio - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-5ths.mp3>
- Playing the Changes - 7ths - audio - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-7ths.mp3>
- Playing the Changes - Arpeggios - audio - <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-arpeggios.mp3>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 12 bar is by far the most common form of blues. There are literally tens of thousands of recorded examples and new ones are jammed every day. You're probably already familiar with them even if you don't realise it. Pick your favourite blues song and the overwhelming probability is it will be in the common 12 bar form.

To pick a few examples out of the air, Muddy Waters' *Got My Mojo Workin'*, Jimmy Reed's *Big Boss Man* and Little Walter's *Quarter to Twelve* are all 12 bar blues. Different grooves and tempos but the underlying form is the same. This is one of the reasons blues musicians can play and jam with each other even though they may have never even met before. It's a common language.

## 2. CHORDS IN THE 12 BAR - PART 1

The 12 bar form uses just three chords, played in a specific order. For the moment we're just going to give them generic names so we don't have to worry about what key we're in. The conventional way to do this is with roman numerals. We're going to use what we call the One Chord (**I**), the Four Chord (**IV**) and the Five Chord (**V**). There's a very good reason why we're using **I**, **IV** and **V** rather than **I**, **II** and **III** but that's a subject for another time. Just go with it for now.

### 3. THE 12 BAR FORM

Below is a visual representation of the 12 bar form showing the chord changes along with the roman numerals which identify each chord. One round of the 12 bar form is called a *chorus* (usually if it's instrumental) or a *verse* (usually if there are lyrics).

Here's a link so you can download this diagram by itself: <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-blues.png>

You'll need this to refer to as we move on.

<b>I Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	<b>I Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	<b>I Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	<b>I Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	
<b>IV Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	<b>IV Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	<b>I Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	<b>I Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	
<b>V Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	<b>IV Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	<b>I Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and</i>	<b>I Chord</b> <i>1 and 2 and</i>	<b>V Chord</b> <i>3 and 4 and</i>

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### 4. COUNTING THE 12 BAR

Before we start playing, first we're just going to count along with a 12 bar blues. By taking the time to really get to know and understand the way it works you'll be in a much better position when you come to playing along.

Each of the boxes in the diagram represent one "bar" of music, or 4 beats. You can count *1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and* once for each bar. The exception is in the twelfth and final bar. Here there's a chord change half way through the bar, so the count is spread out over the change.

In our count the numbers represent the beat - or *downbeat* - while the *ands* occur in between the beats - or on the *upbeat*.

We'll use Jimmy Reed's Big Boss Man as an example. Stick it on now and listen through a couple of times before going on. You can find it on YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music etc. if you don't have it on CD. The specific version used while writing this is on Spotify here: <https://open.spotify.com/album/2PMRy0eJABQCG5glccW4pk>

Skip to the third verse which starts "*You got me workin' boss man*". When Jimmy sings "*You*" start your count and try to follow along with the diagram.

The lyrics are:

*You got me workin' boss man*

*Workin' round the clock*

*One little drink of water*

*And you won't let Jimmy stop*

*Big Boss Man*

*Can't you hear me when I call*

*Well you ain't so big*

*You just talk that's all*

The first four lines correspond to the first four bars of the blues. One line of lyric for each bar. Actually the fifth line bleeds between bars for and five, but just keep the count going. One *and* two *and* three *and* four *and*.

Play special attention to the places where the chord changes. You'll notice that the feel of the sound changes while the band switch to playing a different set of notes before coming back to the "home" feel of the I chord. Often the band will build up to a chord change. The drums may change their rhythm, the bass or guitar may do a little run to indicate the chord change is coming.

It might take a while for this to click with you but listen to the rhythm and try to count in time while following the diagram. You should be able to anticipate the chord changes after a while.

Once you can count out this verse with confidence, try working on the rest of the verses in the song. Each verse and instrumental chorus is structurally the same.

## 5. GETTING IT INGRAINED

Once you're bored of *Big Boss Man* try it with *Got My Mojo Workin'*, which is a much faster song. The feel is different but the form is the same. The lyrics don't always start and stop on the chord changes this time though so be careful. Just keep counting along until you can feel it.

Note that with *Mojo* it might take a chorus or two until you can slip into the groove, depending on the version of the song you are listening to. This is likely because the song does not start at the beginning of a standard 12 bar. There are many different ways to start a blues - and to end one too. We'll examine openings and endings in part 2. For the moment rest assured that it will settle down into our familiar pattern after a chorus or two.

Once your done with that, try counting to any blues you fancy. By this time you'll be able to notice quickly if you've stumbled on a blues which isn't a 12 bar as the chord changes won't match. Don't worry about these for now, just skip to the next track. It's probably a twelve bar.

You want to get this so deeply into you it's as natural as breathing. Count along when you're listening to music for pleasure, when you're driving, when you're in the bath, whenever. Listen to as many blues as you can, as often as you can and count along. After a while it should become part of you. You should be able to anticipate the changes without even thinking about it. You should be able to start a song at a random point and almost instantly recognise whereabouts in the form you are.

It takes time. It's not going to happen overnight. But if you want to play well, you need to have this down pat. Try to enjoy the process.

## 6. CHORDS IN THE 12 BAR - PART 2

We're going to start playing harmonica in a short while. There's just a bit more information to get to first. It'll be worth it.

So far we've learned what a 12 bar is, what it sounds like and how you can identify and count through one across different grooves and tempos. Before we start playing though we need to look again at chords.

We're going to use the key of G as an example, and we'll be playing a C harmonica in 2nd position. (Why? Here's why: <http://leadsharmonica.uk/why-do-we-talk-about-c-harmonicas-all-the-time/> . To learn more about positions try reading my post on leadsharmonica.uk about position playing here: <http://leadsharmonica.uk/2017/09/music-theory-for-harmonica-players-part-6-position-playing/> .

In the key of G the three chords we need are G, C and D. Most commonly blues uses a flavour of chord called a 7th. Here's a diagram showing the notes of these chords. The chords are made up of the 1st, 3rd, 5th and flat-7th notes of the major scale (more information on major scales scale degrees can be found here: <http://leadsharmonica.uk/2017/05/music-theory-for-harmonica-players-part-3-the-major-scale/>).

### Chord Tones for Blues in G

Chord	1st (root)	3rd	5th	b7th
<b>G7 (I Chord)</b>	G	B	D	F
<b>C7 (IV Chord)</b>	C	E	G	Bb
<b>D7 (V Chord)</b>	D	F#	A	C



Here's a link so you can download the diagram for your reference: <http://leadsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/chord-tones-blues-in-G.png>

Now let's add the chord names to the diagram of the 12 bar blues we've been using.

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

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You can download this diagram too: <http://leadsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-blues.png>

## 7 PLAYING THE CHANGES

### 7.1 PLAYING THE CHANGES - ROOT NOTES

The best place to start playing along with a 12 bar is simply to match the root note of each chord. i.e. Whenever there's a G chord we play a G note, whenever there's a C chord we play a C note and whenever there's a D chord we play a D note. It's not exciting and it doesn't sound very interesting but it's safe. You're guaranteed to match the music and not sound dissonant.

Here's a diagram showing all of the notes available on our C harmonica. If you're serious about playing well you really should commit this to memory.

### Notes on a C harmonica (including bends)

										B $\flat$	← Whole step blow bends
								E $\flat$	G $\flat$	B	← Half step blow bends
	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	← Blow notes
<b>C</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	← Hole numbers
	D	G	B	D	F	A	B	D	F	A	← Draw notes
	D $\flat$	G $\flat$	B $\flat$	D $\flat$		A $\flat$					← Half step draw bends
		F	A								← Whole step draw bends
			A $\flat$								← One and a half step draw bends

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All we need to do is find the notes that match the chord changes. For the first four bars where the chord is G (the **I** chord) you could play 2 draw, 3 blow, 6 blow or 9 blow. For bars five and six where the chord is C (the **IV** chord) you could play 1 blow, 4 blow, 7 blow or 10 blow. For bar nine where the chord is D (the **V** chord) you could play 1 draw, 4 draw or 8 draw. And so on for the rest of the form.

Check out this jam track on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/a8RyBQE3g74?t=40s>. It's a fairly slow, basic shuffle in the key of G. Nothing special but suitable for our purposes. Try playing along using the method described above. To start with just play one note for each bar.

Here's how it sounds: <http://leadsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-G-root-notes.mp3>

In the example the G (**I** chord) is played on 2 draw, the C (**IV** chord) is played on 1 blow, the D (**V** chord) is played on 1 draw.

That's great to practice - don't forget to try all the available root notes for each chord - but it probably won't keep you entertained for long. Once you've had enough of that try adding a little rhythm.

This next example is commonly called the Charleston rhythm. It's the same holes and notes as before but adding a bit of swing. <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-G-Charlston.mp3>

You can experiment and play any rhythm you like.

## 7.2 PLAYING THE CHANGES - CHORDING

Another approach you can try is chording. Lets take another look at our C harmonica and the notes of the chords we're using. Again, committing these to memory will pay off down the line.

**Chord Tones for Blues in G**

Chord	1st (root)	3rd	5th	b7th
<b>G7 (I Chord)</b>	G	B	D	F
<b>C7 (IV Chord)</b>	C	E	G	Bb
<b>D7 (V Chord)</b>	D	F#	A	C

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The first three chord tones for our **I** chord are G B D. The first three draw notes on our harmonica are also G B D. They're in a different order but that doesn't matter at all. If we draw on the first three holes at the same time we get what's called a G major triad. In other words, a perfectly workable G chord. We can play this chord in place of the G on the 2 draw we were using previously.

### Notes on a C harmonica (including bends)

										B $\flat$	← Whole step blow bends
								E $\flat$	G $\flat$	B	← Half step blow bends
	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	← Blow notes
<b>C</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	← Hole numbers
	D	G	B	D	F	A	B	D	F	A	← Draw notes
	D $\flat$	G $\flat$	B $\flat$	D $\flat$		A $\flat$					← Half step draw bends
		F	A								← Whole step draw bends
			A $\flat$								← One and a half step draw bends

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Similarly, if you look at the first three notes of the C chord you find C E G. The first three blow holes on our harmonica are C E G. That's a C major triad. A perfectly workable C chord. We can use this to replace the C note on the 1 blow we were using previously.

We do run into a problem with the **V** chord. There's no sensible way we can make a D major triad, or indeed a D7. While on the **V** chord you can substitute a single note, 1 draw for example as we used previously. This mixing of chords and single notes works out just fine.

This example mixes chords and single note playing: <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-G-Chording.mp3>

In the example a chord is played on both the down and upbeat for a total of 8 chords per bar. You could just play chords on the downbeat, or just on the upbeat, to create a different feel. Give it a go. During the last four bars single notes are used for the **IV** and **V** chord to make a pleasing sounding line. We'll go into the last four bars in more detail in part 2.

You may notice that if you were to spread your embouchure really wide to draw the first five holes you'd get another D and an F. That F makes up the full flat-7th chord. This is useful to know but has limited practical use. If you're chording the I chord you'll find it sounds better to stick to just the first three holes that make up the major triad.

You can, if you want, just draw and blow on the first and second holes when chording. The two notes you hit, while only two thirds of the triad, are enough to suggest the chord and it sounds great.

### 7.3 PLAYING THE CHANGES - 3RDS, 5THS AND 7THS

In addition to the root you can also play the 3rd, 5th and 7th. These numbers are called scale degrees. (to reiterate, more information about scale degrees can be found here: <http://www.leedsharmonica.uk/2017/06/music-theory-for-harmonica-players-part-4-scale-degrees/> .)

As you play through these examples you'll notice that although playing all 3rds, all 5ths or all 7ths sounds *okay* it's not something you'd really want to do very often in a real life setting. These examples are designed get you used to where these notes are and when to play them, rather than sounding satisfying musically. We'll touch on making these sound a little more interesting section 7.5 *Arpeggios* and in much more depth in Introduction to 12 Bar Blues for Harmonica Players Part 2.

Again, here's the diagram of the chord tones and the notes on the C harmonica (you really should be memorising these).

#### Chord Tones for Blues in G

Chord	1st (root)	3rd	5th	b7th
<b>G7 (I Chord)</b>	G	B	D	F
<b>C7 (IV Chord)</b>	C	E	G	Bb
<b>D7 (V Chord)</b>	D	F#	A	C

### Notes on a C harmonica (including bends)

										B $\flat$	← Whole step blow bends
								E $\flat$	G $\flat$	B	← Half step blow bends
	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	← Blow notes
C	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	← Hole numbers
	D	G	B	D	F	A	B	D	F	A	← Draw notes
	D $\flat$	G $\flat$	B $\flat$	D $\flat$		A $\flat$					← Half step draw bends
		F	A								← Whole step draw bends
			A $\flat$								← One and a half step draw bends

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The third note of the **I** chord (B) can be found on 3 draw and 7 draw. The half step blow bend B on the 10 hole is, for all practical purposes unusable. It's the right note but it's very a very challenging bend to achieve and doesn't sound great in this context.

The third note of the **IV** chord (E) is on the 2 blow, 5 blow and 8 blow.

The third note of the **V** chord (F#) is available only on the 2 draw half step bend and 9 blow half step bend. (Note that F# is the same note as G $\flat$ . For more information on this and the chromatic scale see <http://leadsharmonica.uk/2017/04/music-theory-for-harmonica-players-part-2-the-chromatic-scale/> ) That 2 draw half step bend is a challenging note to hit in tune, and if you get it wrong it sounds pretty bad. It's perfectly fine to just substitute the root note for the **V** chord (D). 1 or 4 draw works well. Here's an example using the Charleston rhythm. <http://leadsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-3rds-sub5.mp3>

We're not playing the root anymore but the note still sounds good with the music. This is called playing *in harmony*, or *harmonising*. Now let's do the same thing with 5th notes.

Referencing our diagrams again, we see the 5th of the **I** chord (G) is D. Which we can play on the 1 draw, 4 draw and 8 draw. The 5th of the **IV** chord (C) is G. We can play this on the 2 draw, 3 blow, 6 blow and 9 blow. The fifth of the **V** chord (D) is A which we can play on the 3 draw whole step bend, 6 draw and 10 draw.

In the next example I'm playing 5ths in the familiar Charleston rhythm. <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-5ths.mp3>

You can do the same thing with 7th notes but some caution is required. While it's very common for the band to play using 7th chords, some songs are played using just the major triad. This is very common in jump blues for example. If the other instruments are playing major chords and you play 7th notes the sound is quite dissonant. This can be used to great effect in the right situation but is not always desirable. As it happens, 7ths work okay with our jam track, so lets give it a go.

Again referencing the diagrams we can see that the flat-7th of the **I** chord (G) is F which is available on 2 draw whole step bend, 5 draw and 9 draw. The flat-7th of the **IV** chord (C) is B $\flat$ , which is available on the 3 draw half step bend and the 10 blow whole step bend. As a general rule wouldn't use the 10 blow whole step bend much, but if you've developed the skill to hit that note it can sound great in the right situation. The flat-7th of the **V** chord (D) is C which is available on 1 blow, 4 blow, 7 blow and 10 blow.

Here's an example of playing 7ths: <http://leedsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-7ths.mp3>

## **7.4 PLAYING THE CHANGES - ARPEGGIOS**

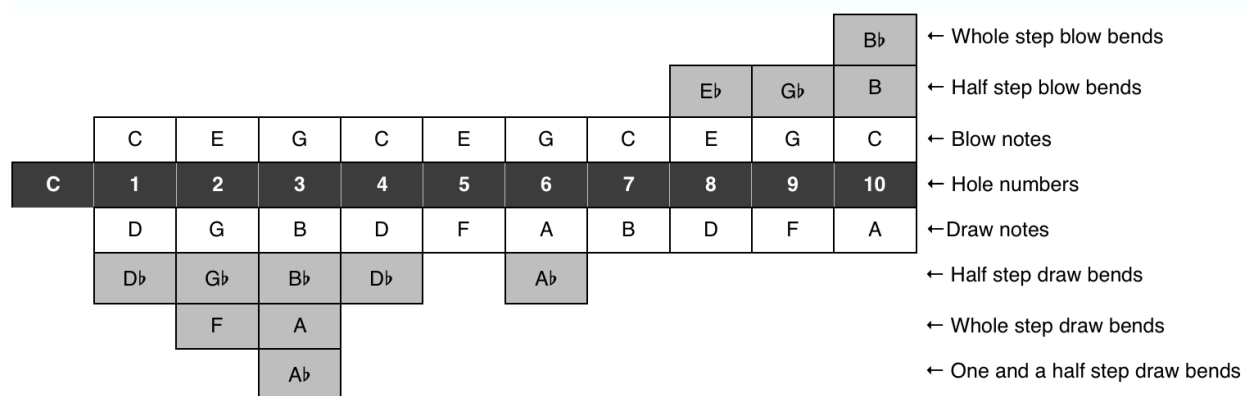
*Arpeggio* simply means playing notes of a chord one after the other. You can put them in any order and any rhythm that sounds good to you. Essentially it's taking the root, 3rds, 5ths and 7ths we've been using already and mixing them up. Here are those diagrams yet again.

### Chord Tones for Blues in G

Chord	1st (root)	3rd	5th	7th
<b>G7 (I Chord)</b>	G	B	D	F
<b>C7 (IV Chord)</b>	C	E	G	Bb
<b>D7 (V Chord)</b>	D	F#	A	C

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### Notes on a C harmonica (including bends)



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This time we can use any of the chord tones, in any order we fancy. I'm sure by this point you can identify where the notes for each chord are without having it spelled out, so I recommend you simply dive in and have fun with it.

In this example a *root-root-3rd-5th* pattern is played over each chord: <http://www.leadsharmonica.uk/resources/intro-12-bar/assets/12-bar-arpeggios.mp3>

## 7.5 PLAYING THE CHANGES - SUMMARY

If you've spent time working through these examples you'll be feeling you have a good grasp on the 12 bar form and how start playing along to it.



The idea has been to get you used to the feel of the 12 bar and how to play along with it from a structural point of view. This knowledge gives you the foundation you need for further developing your skills. There's a lot more fun stuff to dive into.

For example, you'll have realised it's possible and in fact normal to play notes outside of the chord tones. It's common to play a chorus where one lick is played repeatedly over the whole progression and that can sound great. Nonetheless, it's invaluable to know how to match the chord changes. It will strengthen your accompaniment playing skills, sharpen up your improvisation and help provide structure and definition to your solos.

## **8. REVIEW**

Hopefully this has been interesting and enlightening for beginning harmonica players. We've examined what a 12 bar is, how to count through one in different grooves and tempos and some strategies for playing along with the changes. We'll dive deeper in part two but in the meantime, happy harping!



Kevin Bishop

2018-01-23

<http://www.leedsharmonica.uk/>