47 Hot Tips On
Playing Smokin' Blues Guitar
By Claude Johnson

This report will give you some key ideas about how to play blues guitar. This is just a small sample of material from my new guitar course: “How to Play Smokin Blues”

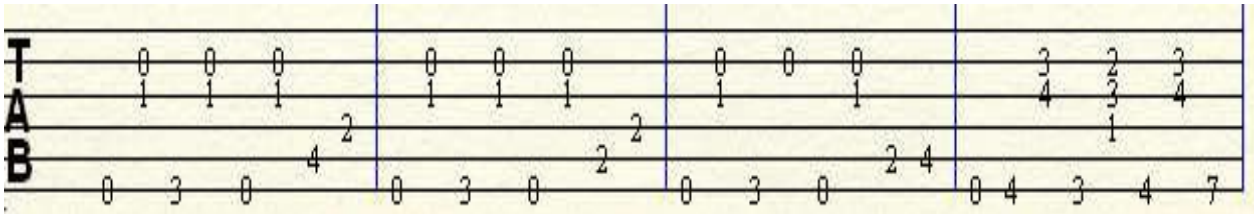
1. Blues is really a vocal art form. Blues started a long time ago in African-American communities in the United States, mostly as field hollers or work chants. Originally, blues consisted of repeating a vocal line 4 times, and later evolved into more complex structures such as repeating a line twice, changing it, and then concluding with another vocal line.

   But here's the point: Blues started as a kind of singing. Nowadays, you might see a lot of fancy young guitar players filling up every bar of a song with screaming guitar licks, but this is not really in the blues tradition. The vocals come first. I believe that the song should come first in any kind of music. The fancy guitar solos should be a compliment to this.

   You should focus on understanding the basic structure and feel of the old-time blues to get a solid grasp on the idiom.

2. The second point to understand when playing the blues is that what you play will depend on the musical group context. In other words, when you're playing by yourself on one guitar, you can play a much more complex arrangement than you would play if you were playing in a 6 piece blues band.

   Here's an example of “complex” arrangement for blues guitar when you would be playing just by yourself:



ETC....

A lot of blues guitarists, such as B.B. King or Albert Collins really don't play much rhythm guitar at all, but have a large band and just sing and play some lead guitar licks.

3. The common common chord progression is simply known as a “12 bar blues”, which looks like this:

I7	I7	I7	I7
IV7	IV7	I7	I7
V7	IV7	I7	V7

So what does this mean? This really goes back to basic music theory. The roman numeral “one” (I) “four” (IV) and “five” (V) are used here. That's why the 12 bar blues is often referred to as a “ONE FOUR FIVE” progression.

The “7” refers to the fact that the chord types are dominant 7.

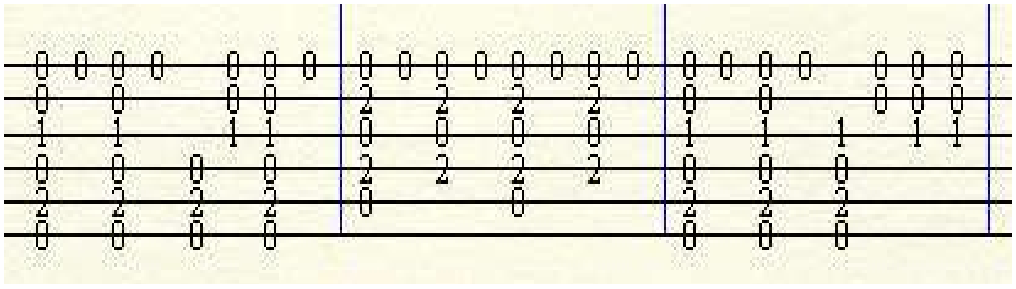
I won't go into the entire theory , but for example in the key of A we have the following chords:

A7	A7	A7	A7
D7	D7	D7	D7
E7	D7	A7	E7

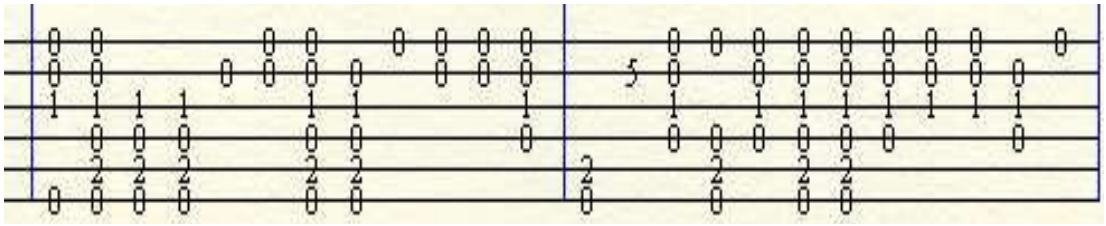
Notice each chord gets one bar for a total of 12 bars.

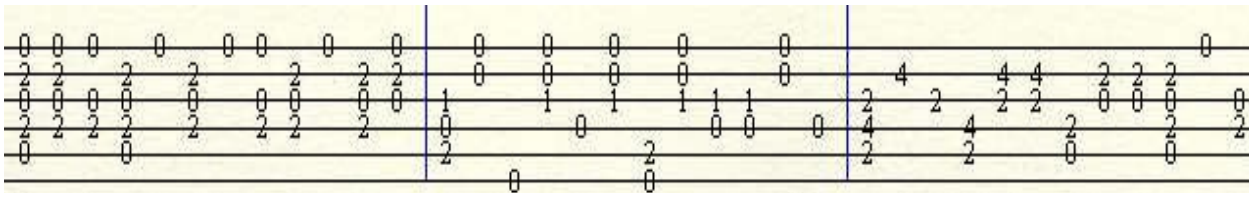
A dominant 7 chord has a very bluesy sound.

Try working the E7 and A7 chords back and forth for a blues feel in the key of E:



4. Here's a complete 12 bar progression:





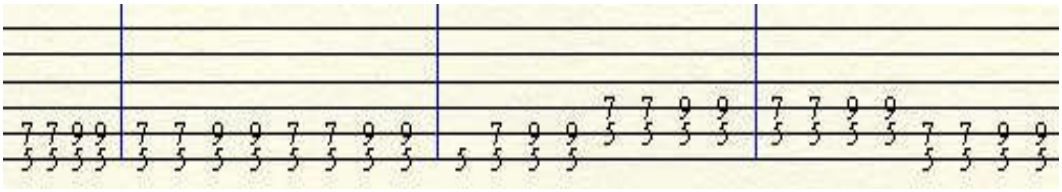
5. You can substitute major chords instead of Dominant 7 chords for a slightly different sound that still works well in the blues progression:

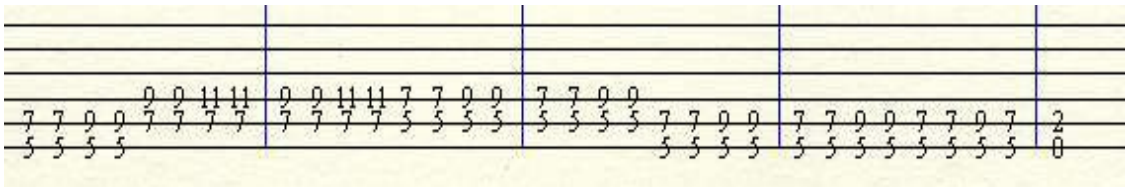
E	E	E	E
A	A	E	E
B	A	E	B

6. Try playing the 12 bar blues progression using both open chords and barre chords. While using barre chords, you will find that you can play all three chords without moving around too much on the neck. For example, in the key of A, you have barre chord at the 5th fret with the root on the low E string, and then on the IV, you have the barre chord at the 5th fret with the root on the A string.

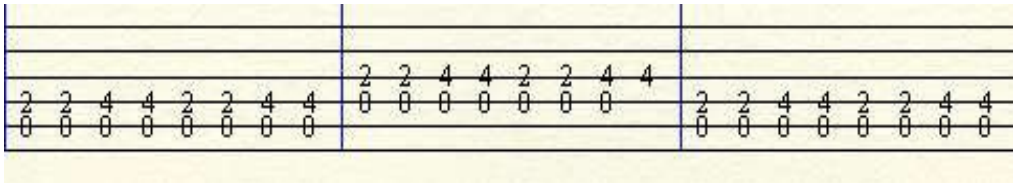
7. You can play the 12 bar blues pattern with different strumming rhythms or strumming patterns. For example, you can strum a triplet pattern for each bar. Just count “1 2 3” for each chord. You can also divide up the triplet feel into 2 parts , such as holding the chord on “ 1 2” and strumming again for “3”... This is like a shuffle feel.

8. You can alternate between the 5th degree and 6th degree of the scale in a true blues shuffle pattern like this:

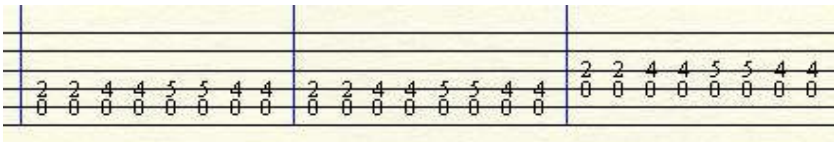




This is the most common blues guitar rhythm. This example is in the key of A, but you can move it up or down the fretboard to explore other keys. Also you can use open strings to play in certain keys:

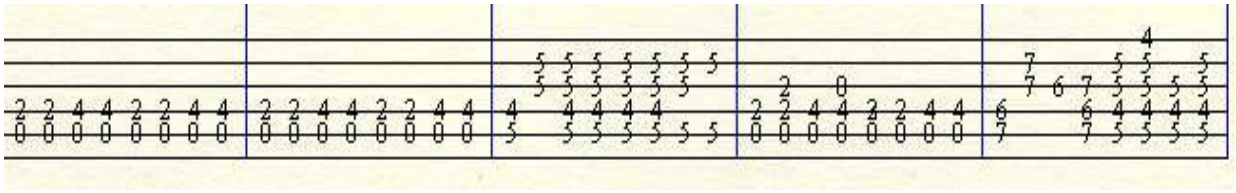


9. You can add the 7th degree as well like this:



Try adding a little palm muting to help the rhythm feel.

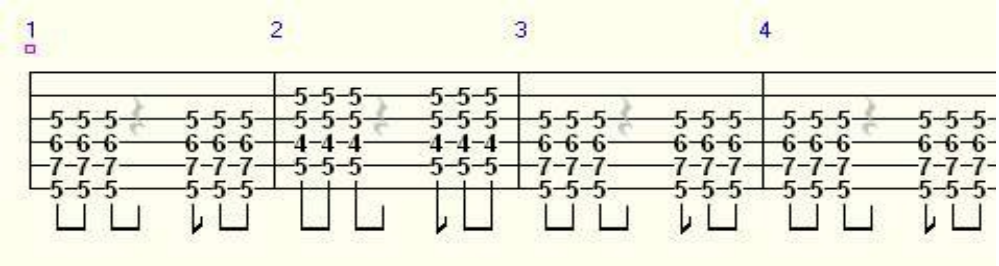
10. Another technique you can do is to alternate between normal chords and the shuffle rhythm.



You can see in this example, we have a new kind of chord – D9 and E9.
This is a very useful blues chord. In this voicing we have no 5th degree.

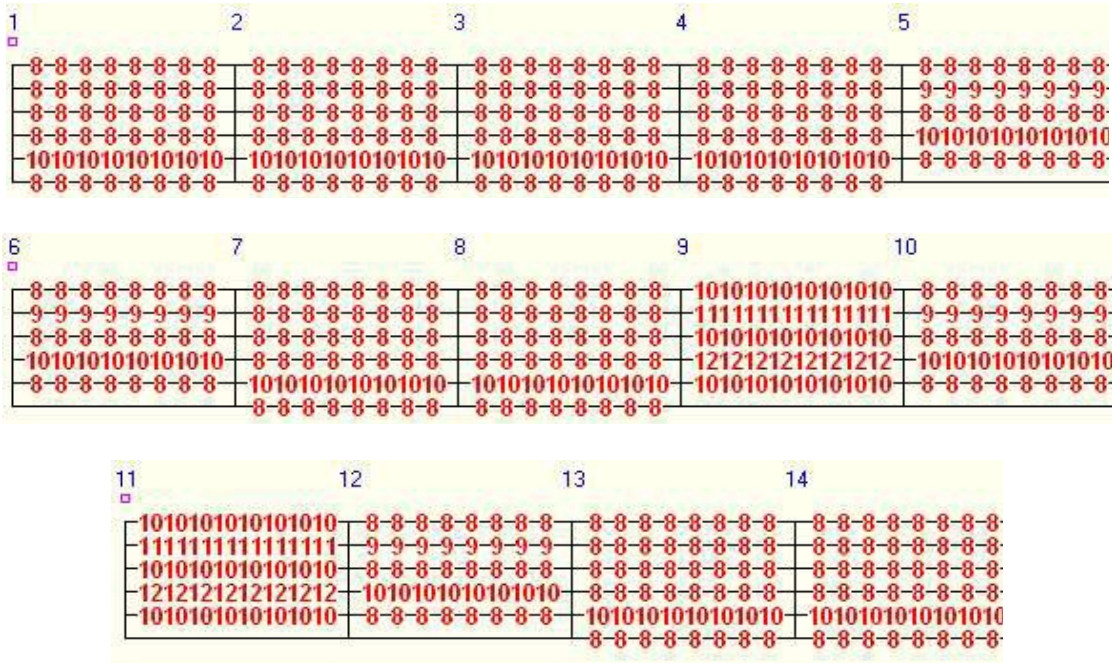
By the way, these are all examples from the 3-DVD course: "How to Play Smokin' Blues", where I explain everything in a lot more detail and you watch it on your TV.

11. You can combine the triplet feel with 9 chords like this:



13. You can add a note on the top string to change the 9 chord into a 13th chord. Just add the 13th degree of the scale.

14. Another idea is to use minor chords as the chord type. This is a minor blues. Here's an example of a 14 bar structure with a slightly longer turn around.

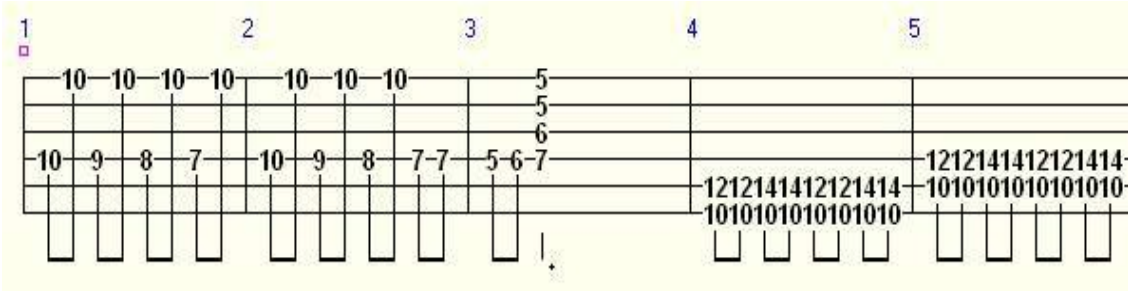


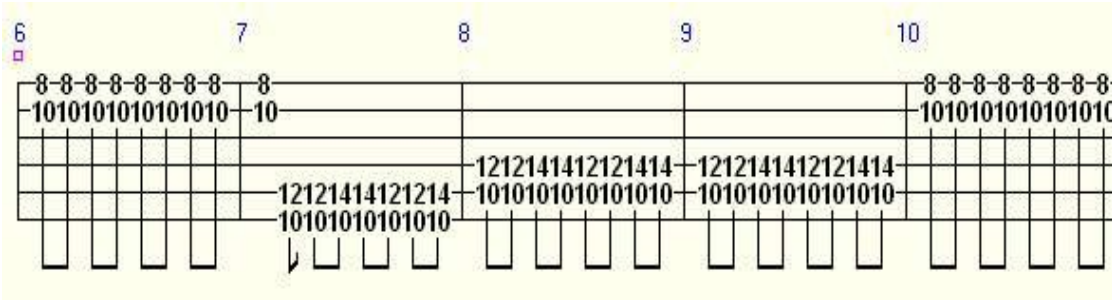
15. You can add variations to minor by sliding a half step into the chords and also by changing the progressions slightly as you see above.

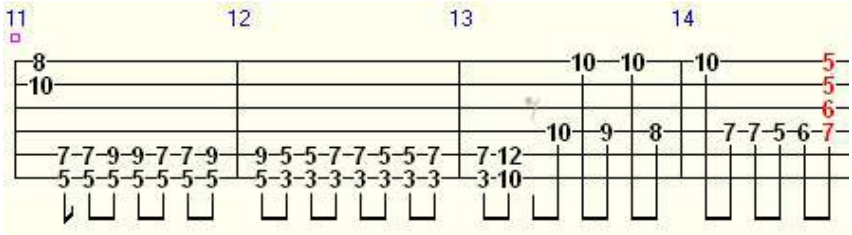
16. You can also use a #9 chord on the V of a minor blues:

This is like the chord Hendrix uses on Purple Haze. This is like the 9 chord we played earlier but the pinky is up 1 fret to make the 9 sharp. Another idea is to play the V chord as a dominant 7 chord in a minor blues.

17. The popular blues song “dust my broom” could be arranged very simply like this. Notice the interesting intro lick :





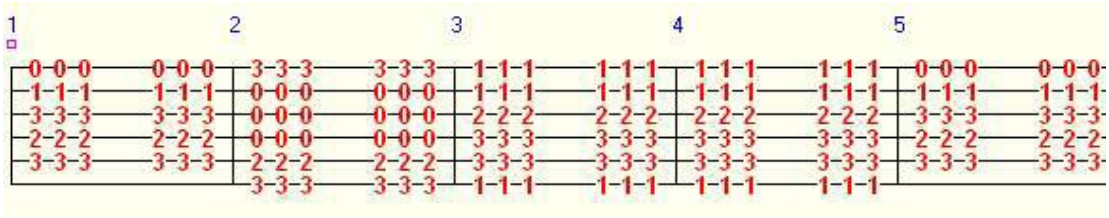


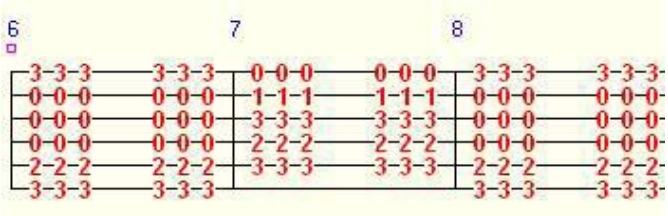
Again, please watch the DVD to hear how this fits together, but the last 2 bars are called the turnaround, which are very important, and we'll talk more about this shortly.

18. Another common chord structure is an 8-bar blues, which can have many variations. Here's the most common:

    I V IV IV
    I V I V

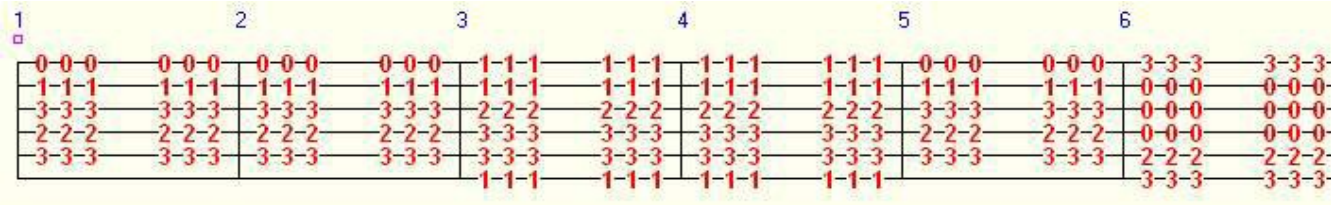
    So in the key of C:

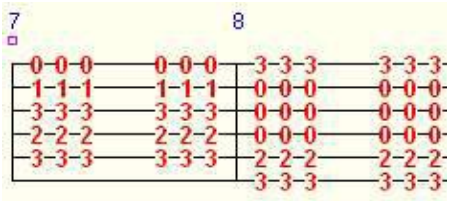




This is found in the song “key to the highway”

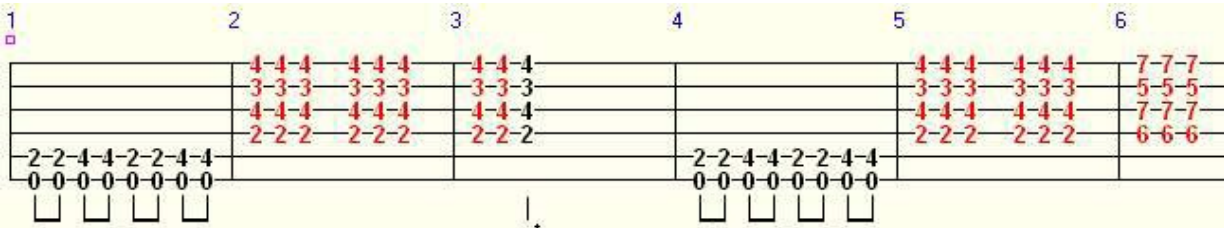
Here's another variation:





And there are others.

19. Going back to the 12 bar blues, one way to spice up your playing is not to play the normal open or barre chords, but find other voicings across the neck. For instance:



Here we see the E7 on the top 4 strings. Try moving the 7 chord around to all the different inversions going up and down the neck, and also experiment with different strings (middle 4 strings, lower 4, etc) Also try voicing the 7 chord with no root (just 3rd, 5th, 7th), or even try (3rd, 7th, 9th) :)
3-note voicing are very powerful.

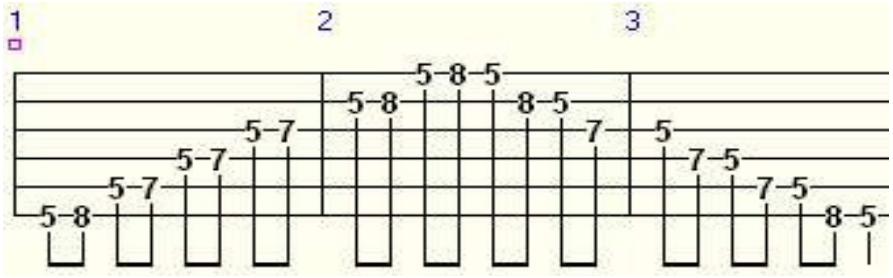
20. Give your 3-note chords a slight (¼ note) bend to make them more bluesy!

21. As far as voicings go, there are no limits. You can try just the root and 7th. You can also try ending a blue progression on an augmented chord.

22. If you are playing solo, one cool idea is to use a drone approach: Play an open string and then let it ring out while you play melodies on the higher strings.

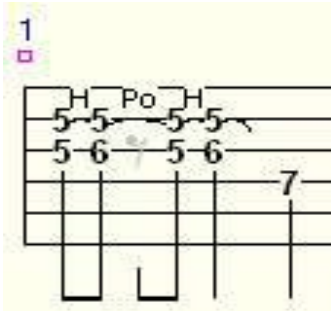
23. Learn the pentatonic scales all over the neck. These notes can be used for both lead and rhythm guitar.

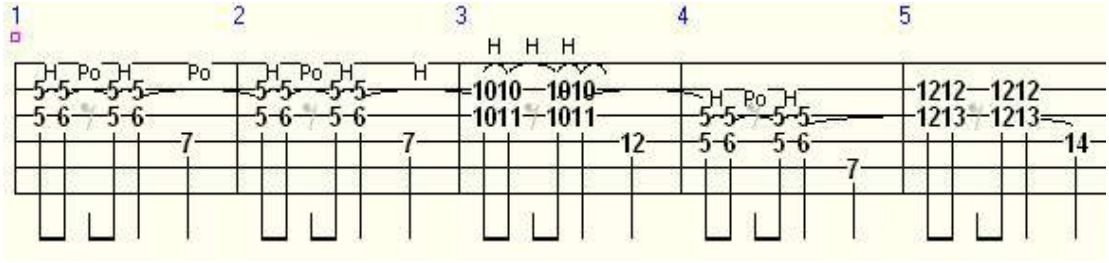
For example, in the key of A, here's one pattern:

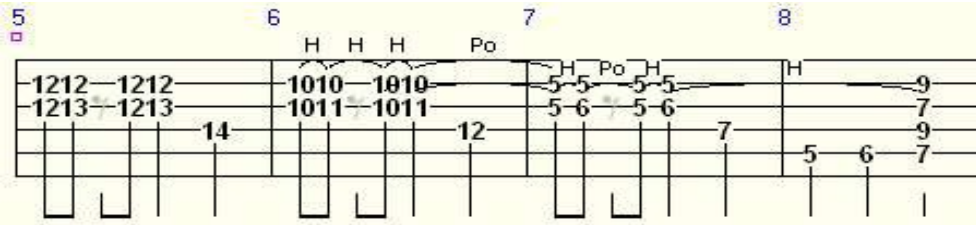


24. Notice that the A pentatonic scale contains the note "C" but the A chord contains C#.
Playing the minor 3rd and major 3rd together is the blues sound. Usually the chord is played with major 3rd and the minor 3rd melody goes over it.

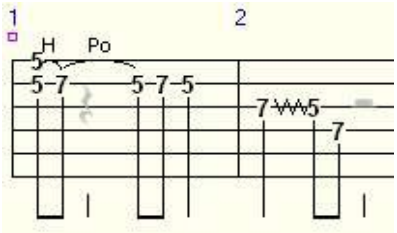
You can use it in all kinds of riffs. For instance:



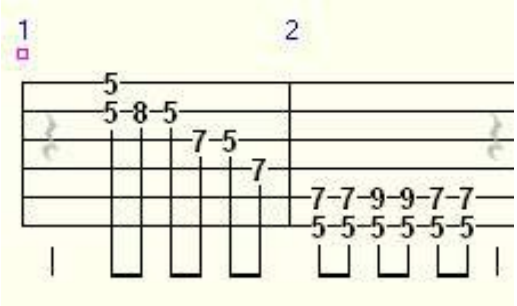




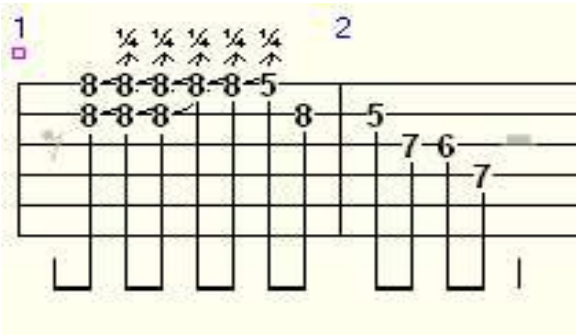
25. Here's another note you can throw in – the 3rd of the 3rd: In the key of A, (F#)



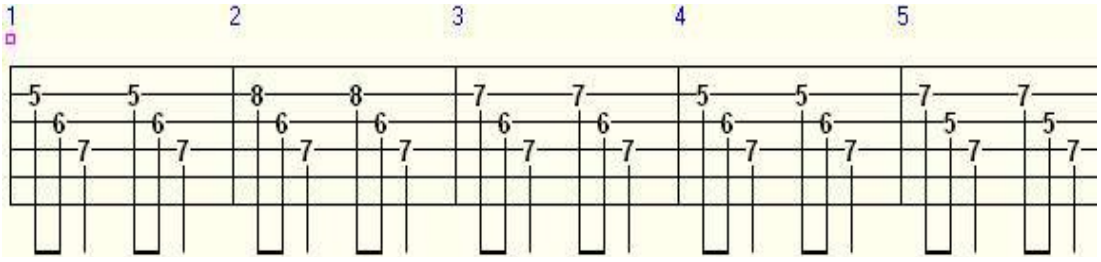
26. Try simple descends down a pentatonic scale as another riff idea:

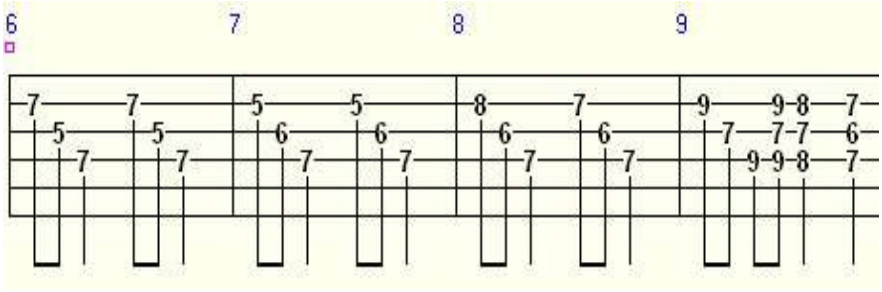


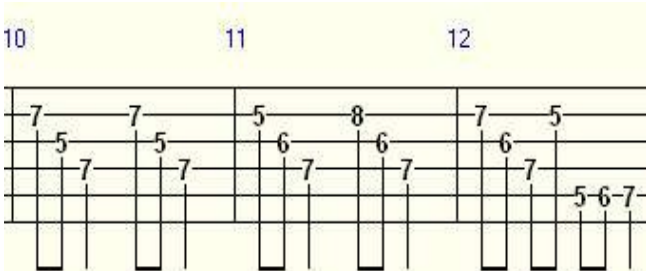
27. quarter note (slight) bends can be used with the pentatonic riffs too:



28. Another idea is to pick out notes of a chord with a triplet pattern:

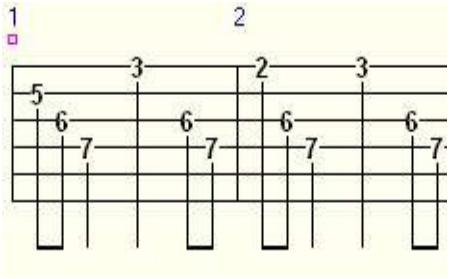




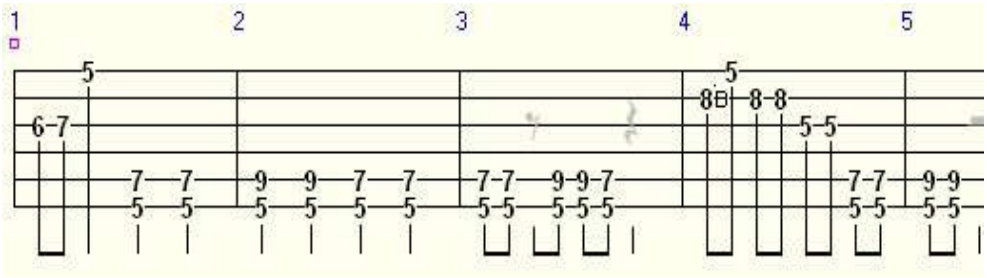


Notice this is the same idea as we saw earlier: Using the 7th, 6th, and 5th degrees of the scale.

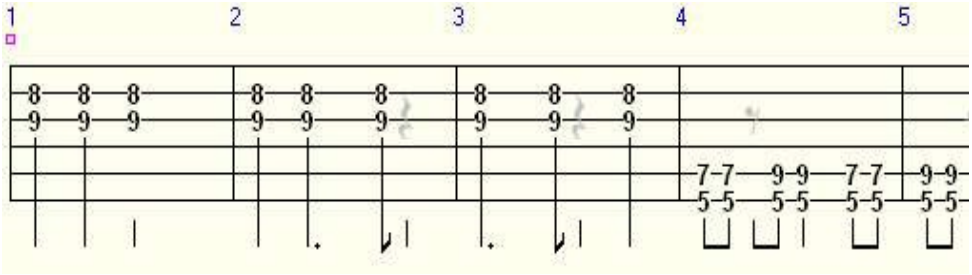
29 . If you want to get fancy and use a stretch voicing, you can do so like this:



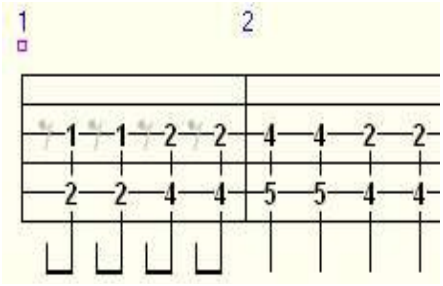
30. Alternate the shuffle pattern with pentatonic licks for endless blues riff varations. Here's one to get you started:



31. Here's another cool riff just outside the main pentatonic position:



32. Here' a totally different idea – take the 2 fretted notes on an E7 chord and start sliding them up the neck , keeping in the key.



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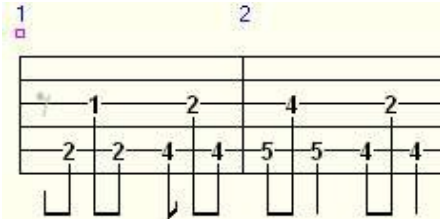
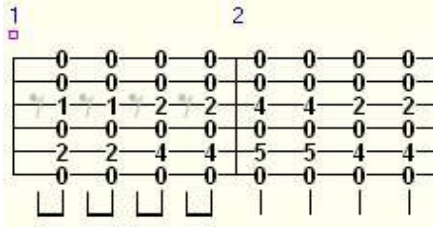
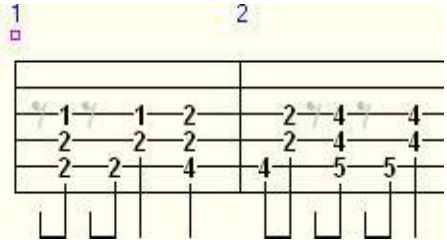


You can use a triplet feel here as well.

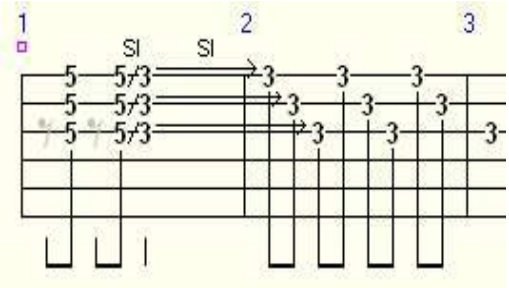
33. Try adding open strings to this idea:



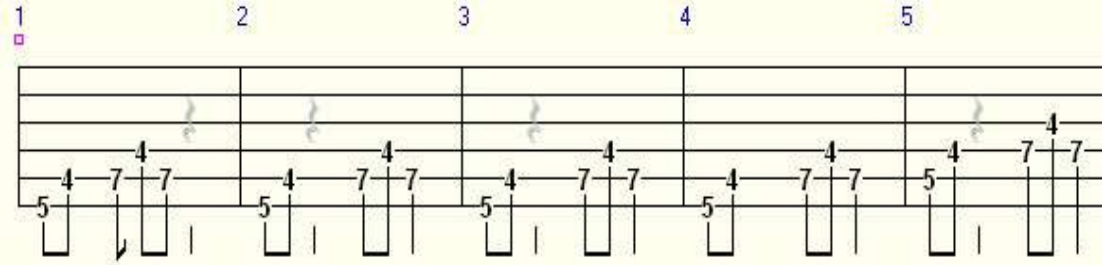
34. Here's another variation on this theme:



35. You can play 9 chords on the top 3 strings (looks like a minor triad, but actually is 9 chord without the root)

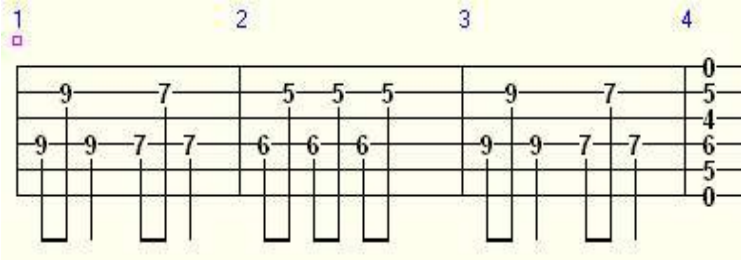


36. You can play basslines on the guitar as a riff like this:

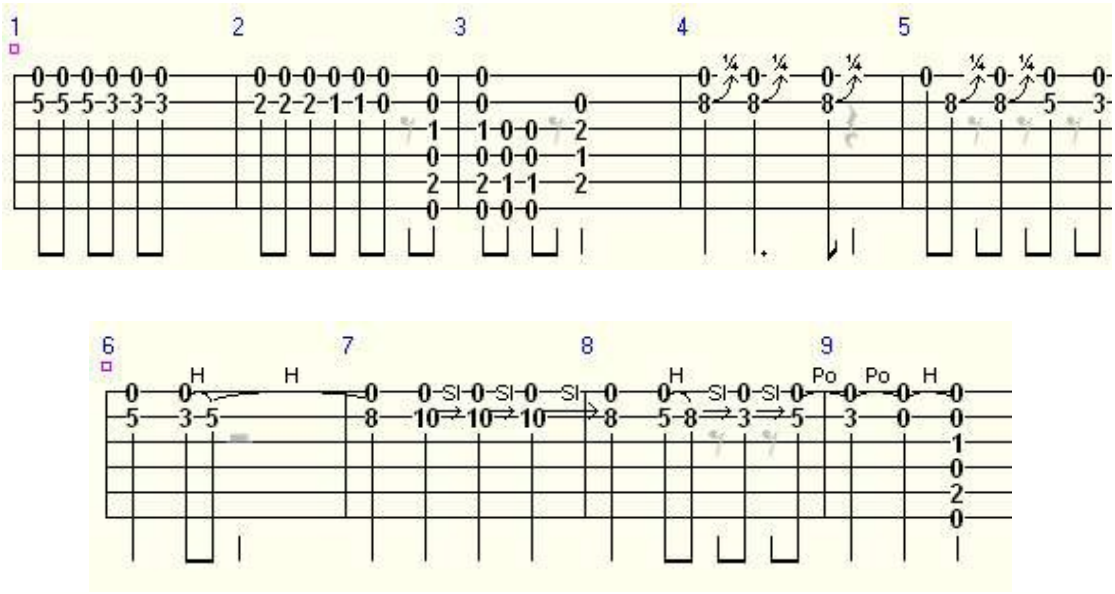


You can also combine basslines with chords.

37. Another idea is harmonization patterns on the inner strings:

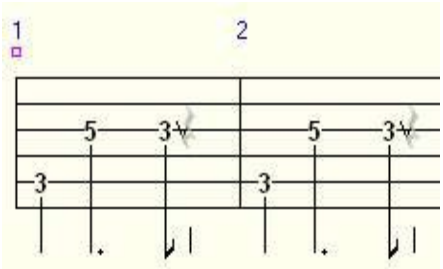


38. Another idea is to use the high E string as the drone:

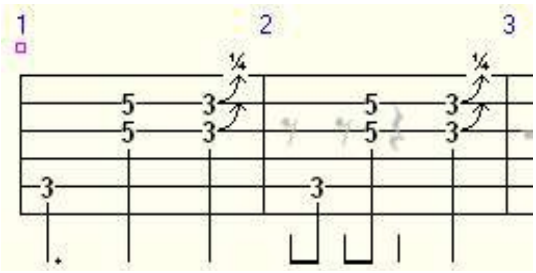


As you can see, there are countless ways to form blues riffs.

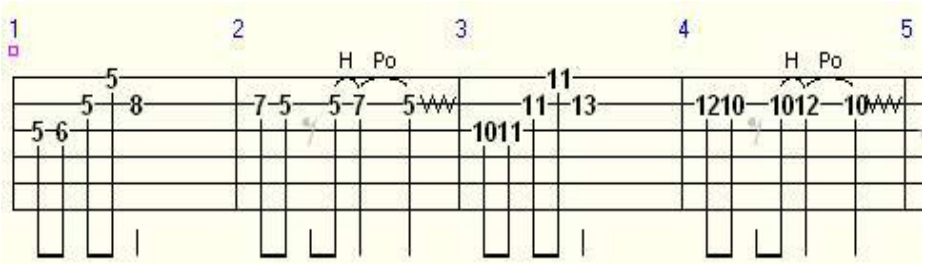
39. How about a simple melodic riff?



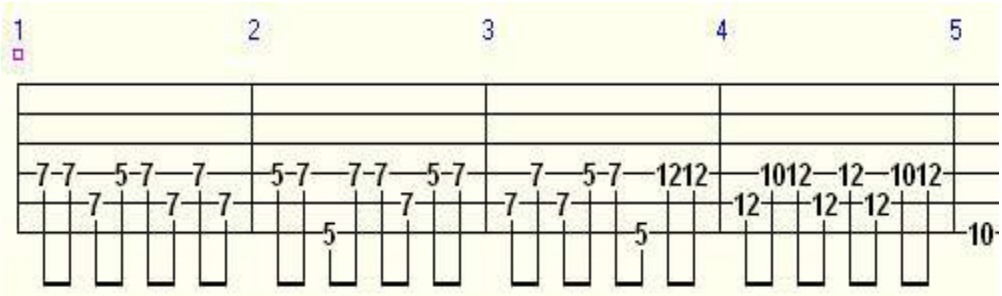
Or



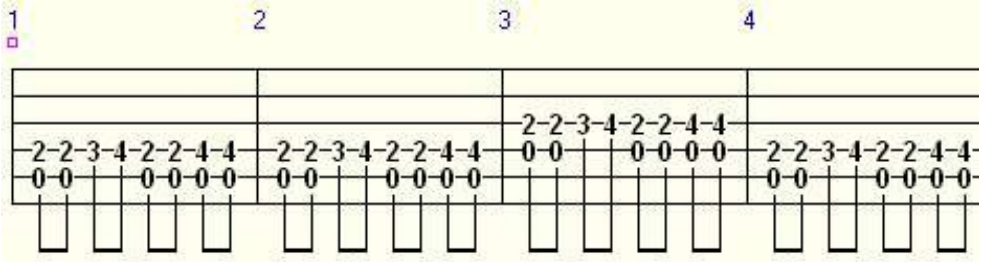
40. Here's another single note idea:



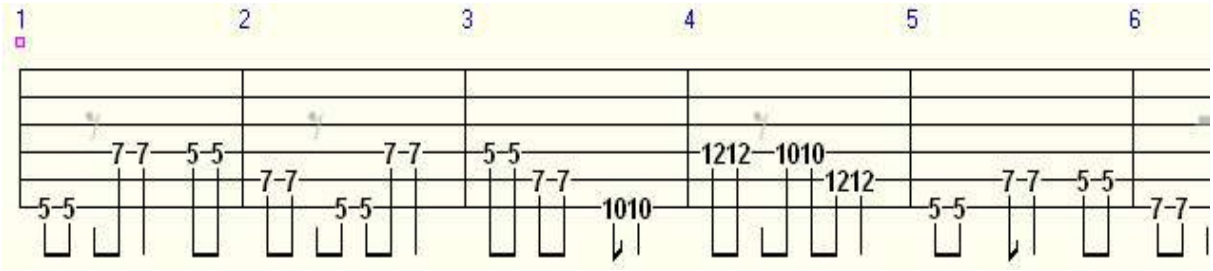
41. Or this one:



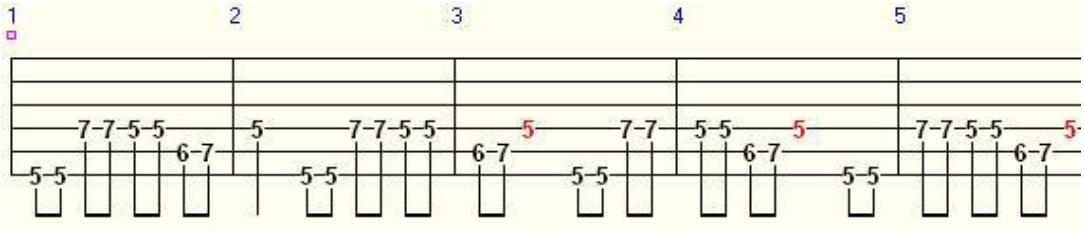
42. Here's a classic way to combine a walking bassline with a shuffle riff:



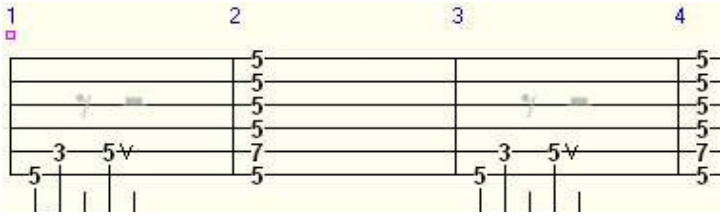
43. Here's another classic walking bassline idea:



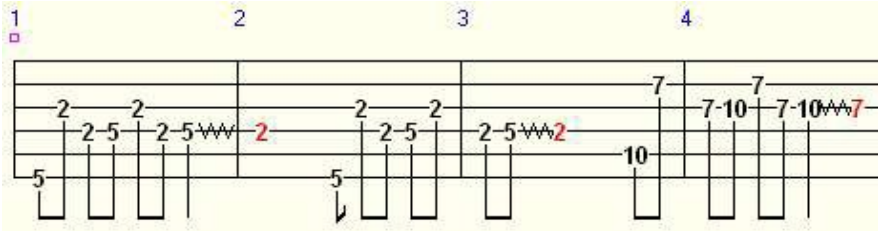
44. Yet another variation, and notice the use of the passing tone:



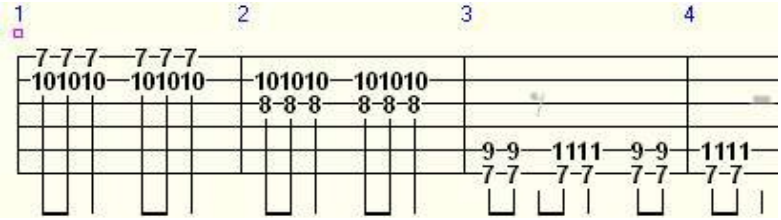
45. You can apply this walking bassline idea to a minor blues:



46. You can also incorporate octaves into your playing.



47. Here's one more idea:



I hope this has been an interesting taste of the possibilities. This is just a taste of what you will discover inside my "How to Play Smokin Blues" course on DVD.

In the actual course, you'll see everything demonstrated very clearly, and what you've seen here doesn't even cover 20% of what's in the course.

We go a lot deeper into all these ideas, and into completely new realms that I didn't have time to cover in this short report... Things like:

Lead guitar for blues
Slide guitar for blues
Country blues (including playing multiple parts at the same time)
Harmonization patterns
Turnarounds
Jazz chords and progressions for blues
and much more....

I hope you have enjoyed this report and I invite you to check out the entire blues course to get the real "full meal deal"

"How to Play Smoking" Blues includes 3 DVDs with over 3 hours of intense blues instruction, 245 tabbed examples, and 10 cool bonuses...

Click Here to Learn More about the Blues Course