

How to play Blues Rhythm Guitar like the Blues Masters

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About the Author

Introduction: How to Think like a Blues Guitar Master

Do you know the feeling when you are requested to 'play something', whether being called out by a family member or at a jamsession? Do you often feel that you don't know what to play or that you repeat yourself far too much, when confronted with such a request?

When you watch the blues masters play, they are having fun on stage. They seem to be performing from a place within themselves that is free and carefree. A place where they don't have to think 'what to play' anymore.

Perhaps you think that you should be born with some kind of natural talent and that you probably don't possess this talent. The truth is that the masters of blues guitar aren't born with this talent. They just knew how to attain that level in their guitar playing by exposing themselves to the right exercises and activities.

If you want to play just like the masters, you have to learn how to get to this level of mastery yourself.

There is one very important thing that all people who ever attained mastery have in common; they consciously or subconsciously know how to make use of 'application' when they practice. When they learn a new lick, chord or concept they immediately start to apply the information they're learning.

Blues masters always practice for mastery. They do this by practicing application. It may almost sound too good to be true, but it's that easy; if you want to master your instrument, you have to practice in a way so that over time you will attain this kind of mastery.

A lot of people nowadays search the internet for guitar tabs, which is great. But you have to understand that these tabs are only a means to an end, some are even incorrect. Blues masters didn't rely on tablature when they learned how to play. They listened to the music and applied what they learned, instead of jumping from one tab to the next. In this ebook we will use tablature as a way for you to grasp the concepts and try them out yourself, but remember that tablature isn't written in stone, it's just a way to communicate what is being played, but in the end you should listen to the music. Let me repeat the above statement again:

Application will lead you to mastery

This is especially true in a style that is 'easy' to get in to, like the blues. With the words of B.B. King; *"the blues is the easiest style to learn but the hardest to master"*.

As you'll learn in this ebook, there are countless ways to form blues riffs and be creative with them. The examples we'll look at are there to spark your creativity in your rhythm guitar playing. These chords, riffs and scales can be expanded in a thousand different ways and the best way to make progress with these chords etc. is to apply them in many different ways. So let's start exploring how powerful the concept of application can be to your rhythm guitar playing. Let's start practicing for mastery.

I. Expanding your Rhythm Guitar Playing

A. How to Transform your Basic Blues Riffs

One of the features that makes the blues so fun to play is that the basic structure of a standard blues progression (the so-called 'twelve bar') isn't all that complex. This simplicity makes this structure perfect to 'embellish' the chords and riffs we play.

There are a lot of options to use these embellishments, but let's first start with the basic twelve bar progression. [Listen to Example 1](#)

The tablature shows a 12-bar blues progression in 4/4 time. The first four bars are labeled A7, the next four bars are labeled D7, and the final four bars are labeled E7, D7, and A7. The tablature shows fret numbers for strings T, A, and B. The rhythm is a steady eighth-note pattern: 2-2-4-4-2-2-4-4.

Let's call this very easy riff 'riff A'. The guitar part in this tablature is just one of the many possible ways to play such a twelve bar. Another way to play the same twelve bar would be by using seventh-chords.

Now we'll play the same 12 bar, but this time use these open chords. [Listen to Example 2](#)

The diagrams show the fingerings for three chords: A7, D7, and E7. A7 has fingers 1, 1, 1 on strings 2, 3, 4 and finger 3 on string 5. D7 has fingers 1, 2, 3 on strings 1, 2, 3 and an open string 4. E7 has fingers 1, 3, 2 on strings 1, 3, 4 and finger 4 on string 2.

Play these chords over the twelve bar. You find the exact structure by looking at the chord names above the measures in the 'riff A' progression.

Before we'll delve into ways to expand on these beginner riffs, it's important that you can play this right. If you can't play this already, you need to be able to play such a basic blues in riff form and in chords, before we continue.

Ok, I admit, we want to move away as quickly as possible from this kind of guitar playing.

It gets boring if overused and it sounds quite amateurish! But this doesn't mean we have to move away from the idea of using twelve bars to play the blues. The twelve bar progression is the backbone of the blues and it is the basis of thousands of blues songs. So it's quite common, but this doesn't mean it should be boring at all. Let's take a look into some of the ways to put some variation into this twelve bar progression.

Now we can look at some other ways to play the basic riff. [Listen to Example 3](#)

8va
4/4
A7
Sra
E
B
G
D
A
E
2 2 4 4 2 2 3 2 2 2 4 4 2 2 3 2
0 0 0 0 0 0 3 4 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 4

8va
4/4
Sra
T
A
B
2 2 4 4 2 2 3 2 2 2 4 4 2 2 3 2
0 0 0 0 0 0 3 4 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 4

Here we are playing the same shuffle-rhythm, but with a little variation inserted at the end of each bar. This spices things up a little and gives it a forward moving feeling.

The good news is that we can now use this new riff to 'embellish' our twelve bar. We can insert this riff wherever we want as long as we play over the A7-chord. If we want to use this riff over the D7 or E7 chord, we'll have to transpose this riff, which in this case means that we just have to play the two added notes on the D-string for the D7 chord and on the E-string for the E7 chord.

You don't have to feel that you'll need to now only use this new riff over the whole progression. We can switch between riff A and riff B whenever we want, as you'll see in the tab on the next page.

[Listen to Example 4](#)

A7

D7

A7

E7

D7

A7

B. Combining Riffs & Chords

Let's look at other variations we can use. We can add chords to the twelve bar by playing the open chords we just looked at.

In the next example we use a variation on riff B, instead off riff A. [Listen to Example 5](#)

A7

25

5-5-X-5 5-5-X 5-5-X-5 5-5-X

5-5-X-5 5-5-X 5-5-X-5 5-5-X

6-6-X-6 6-6-X 6-6-X-6 6-6-X

5-5-X-5 5-5-X 5-5-X-5 5-5-X

7-7-X-7 7-7-X 7-7-X-7 7-7-X

5-5-X-5 5-5-X 5-5-X-5 5-5-X

2-2 2-2-2-4-4 2-2 2-2-2-4-4 2-2 2-2-2-4-4 2-2 2-2-2-4-4

0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0 0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0

D7

A7

29

2-2-X-2 2-2-X 2-2-X-2 2-2-X

1-1-X-1 1-1-X 1-1-X-1 1-1-X

2-2-X-2 2-2-X 2-2-X-2 2-2-X

0-0-X-0 0-0-X 0-0-X-0 0-0-X

2-2-4-4-2-2-4-4 2-2-4-4-2-2-4-4 2-2-4-4-2-2-4-4 2-2-4-4-2-2-4-4

0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0 0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0

E7

D7

A7

33

0-0-X-0 0-0-X 2-2-X-2 2-2-X 2-2-X-2 2-2-X

3-3-X-3 3-3-X 1-1-X-1 1-1-X 1-1-X-1 1-1-X

1-1-X-1 1-1-X 2-2-X-2 2-2-X 2-2-X-2 2-2-X

2-2-X-2 2-2-X 0-0-X-0 0-0-X 0-0-X-0 0-0-X

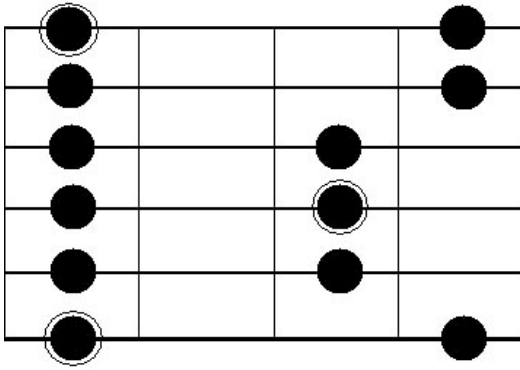
2-2-X-2 2-2-X X X 2-2 2-2-2-4-4 2-2 2-2-2-4-4

0-0-X-0 0-0-X X X 0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0 0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0

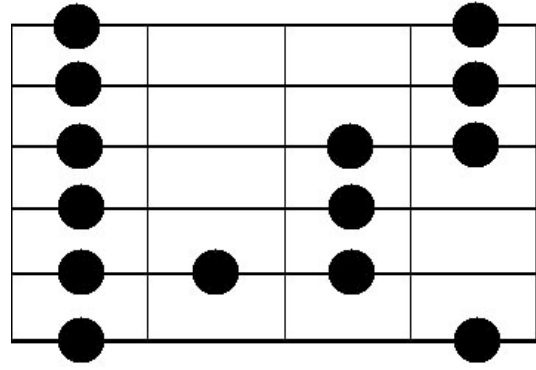
C. Riffs based on the Blues Scale

In the last examples we added chords and variations, but let's look at some other possibilities in which you can start to build your own blues riffs.

A lot of blues riffs are build upon the minor pentatonic or blues scale.



A minor pentatonic scale



A blues scale

We can for instance take any of these two very closely related scales and base a blues riff on that. Let's give it a shot. [Listen to Example 8](#)

If you are having trouble with the rhythm of this example, try playing it at half speed. Simply tap your foot to the quarter notes in the example below. If you find this a lot easier, just start playing twice as fast and you'll get the example above. [Listen to Example 9](#)

II. Creativity Exercises

A. Making your Rhythm Guitar Playing sound more Interesting

In these exercises I'll give you some ways to bring creativity to your rhythm guitar playing. A lot of guitarists can improvise a good solo, but when it comes to playing rhythm they're sometimes clueless about how to make their guitar playing more compelling.

Let me ask you a question;

Do you know which elements can make your rhythm guitar playing more interesting?

First think about these answers. Coming up with the answers to this question is a big part of the solution. I'm betting that if you have a hard time coming up with the answers to this question, then you'll probably feel like your guitar playing 'lacks something'.

How do I know? Because the answers that you should give to this question basically cover all the possible ways in which you can make your guitar playing 'come to life'. We call this 'phrasing'; it's the way we choose to express a musical idea.

Phrasing is one of the utmost neglected parts in becoming a better guitarist. A very small percentage of all the guitar teachers out there even bother to talk about phrasing, and even a smaller percentage actually train their students to develop their phrasing.

But let's get back to our original question;
Which elements can make your rhythm guitar playing more interesting?

We can make a riff or chord progression more interesting by:

- playing with different rhythms
- thinking about dynamics such as playing one part louder and another part quieter
- adding techniques such as slides, hammer-ons & pull-offs, vibrato, etc.
- note choice
- playing with more feeling, using more conviction in your playing
- timbre (think about the pick-ups you use on your electric guitar, the neck pick-up gives a totally different, more 'mellow' sound than the bridge pick-up, which sounds more brighter)
- and many more...

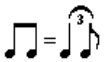
Each of these elements can be expanded into an ebook of itself, so for now let's talk about two of these elements; rhythm and dynamics.

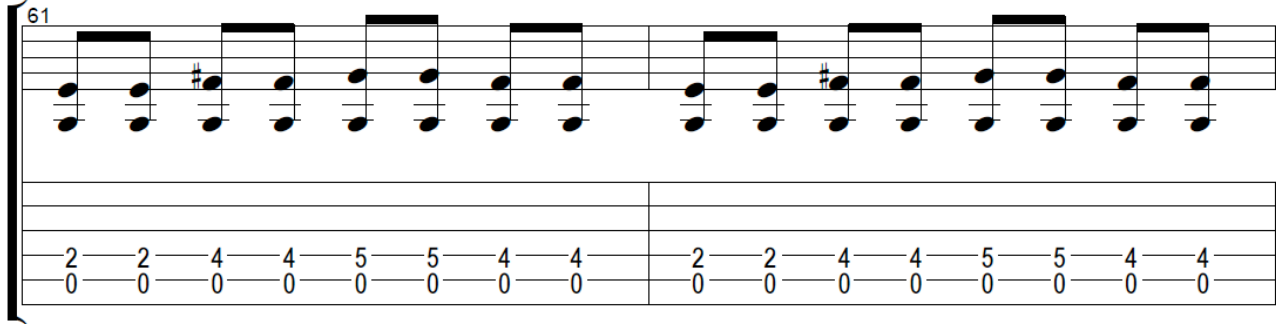
Creativity Exercises for Rhythm:

- Exercise 1: Shuffle Rhythm vs. Straight Rhythm

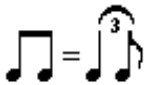
All sound examples in this ebook so far were played using a shuffle rhythm. As you're probably aware of this shuffle rhythm is very common in blues music.

Let's start off with this basic blues riff that we already played in chapter 1 of this ebook. [Listen to Example 10](#)

A7 

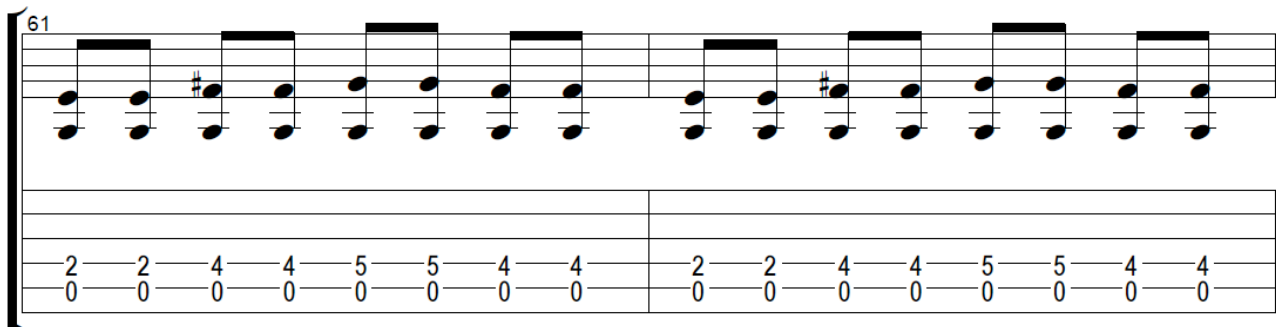


It's very common to see this next symbol being notated above the tablature or notation if we are playing a shuffle rhythm in common time (4/4).



In this ebook I purposely left out this sign, because all examples (with the exception of the next) are played in shuffle rhythm anyway. In the next example we don't use the shuffle rhythm, but play this riff using a 'straight rhythm', which brings a more rock 'n roll-feel to it. [Listen to Example 11](#)

A7



As you can hear, there's a big difference between this straight rhythm and the shuffle rhythm. Experiment with playing shuffle riffs with straight feel and vice versa.

- Exercise 2: Tweaking the Length and Order of the Notes

Let's try making some notes longer and also mixing up the order of the notes.

[Listen to Example 12](#)

A7

63

2-2-4-5-4-2 2-4-5-4-2 2-4-5-4-2 2-4-5-4-2
0-0-0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0-0-0

Here is another variation. [Listen to Example 13](#)

A7

67

$\frac{1}{4}$ $\frac{1}{4}$ $\frac{1}{4}$ $\frac{1}{4}$

2-2-5-4 2-5-4 2-5-4 2-5-4
0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0 0-0-0-0
3 3 3 3

Did you know that the riff for satisfaction by the Rolling Stones was written by changing the rhythm of this basic blues riff from shuffle to straight feel and by tweaking the length of some of the notes? Look up this classic riff and you'll instantly get why they say that blues is the mother of all popular music.

Creativity Exercises for Dynamics:

In this exercise we're simply going to play a part more quiet, and then play a next part louder. As simple as this may sound, it is something that is overlooked in the playing of tens of thousands 'intermediate' blues guitarists. You can immediately pick out an intermediate guitarist from a higher intermediate or advanced guitarist if you listen for this seemingly obvious point.

- Exercise 1: accenting different notes from this riff A

Take a look back at riff A. Now try to add an accent to some of these notes. Listen to the next two examples and try to come up with your own.

[Listen to Example 14](#)

[Listen to Example 15](#)

- Exercise 2: letting your guitar playing 'breath'

We have looked at many different examples so far and will look at much more in the reminding chapter. While these examples are great to get started with, nothing will sound really good as long as you don't let your rhythm guitar playing really 'breath'.

Have you ever watched a band or jamsession where the sound of the two guitars in a way 'clashed' with eachother? There are many different reasons as to why this happens, but the most important one is that these guitar players don't understand the concept of musical dynamics.

In a jamsession you should be able to 'back down' your volume if your swapping solos back and forth. Intermediate guitarists play at the same volume every time, without giving attention to what the other guitarist is doing.

Next time you are jamming with another guitarist (or musician in general) try 'backing off' a bit when playing rhythm, as a way to give 'space' to the lead guitarist to use dynamics to make his soloing more interesting.

So for instance, if you hear that the guitarist that is soloing is playing quieter, also back down in volume. Or you can just decide to start playing a part more quiet and watch the lead guitarist pick up on this idea. You will soon find yourselves playing as quiet as possible, giving the music 'a breather' and observe how this change in dynamics totally affects everything from band dynamics to the reaction of the crowd (prepare yourself for some cheers here).

You can also use this idea the other way around. Simply try to play as loud as possible. There might be some issues with muting technique when you hit all the strings. If you are unable to mute all the unwanted strings when you play, don't bother playing sloppy when you do this exercise for now, since laying out all the foundation exercises to develop a reliable muting technique, would require an ebook by itself. For now just focus an raw power and emotion instead of 'perfect technique'.

Here are some examples of a rhythm guitar riff played louder and then quieter.

[Listen to Example 16](#)

B. Expanding your Rhythm Guitar Self-Expression

Self-expression shouldn't be only for lead guitarists. As a rhythm guitarist you can also add your own 'feel' to the mix. The blues is an excellent style to do this. While it's true that some songs or rhythm styles are less open for interpretation, there are countless examples where we can choose to be really self-expressive when playing rhythm parts.

How can you expand your rhythm guitar self-expression?

The answer is simple; practise all the things that we talked about in a creative way.

This is the application that we talked about. We can talk about more elements and engage in more exercises, but I first want you to really apply what I have written here.

You should practice creative application in your practice sessions. There are a lot of different things you can do to get better in this area, but for now let's try stick to the exercises for rhythm and dynamics and try to be creative as possible with these.

C. About inspiration: what to play if you don't know what to play

Inspiration is overrated. The most creative musicians usually aren't born with talent to 'play' with music. They just discovered ways to practise their creativity, like we did in the previous exercises.

That being said, it can happen that you have more creative ideas on a certain day and that the next day you don't know what to do. This isn't that bad if you are just practicing by yourself, because there are exercises you can do to overcome this. But if you are in the middle of a jamsession or your playing for a friend or family member, this can feel disorientating. In that case you have to fall back on riffs you already know. For instance, if you are in a jamsession playing rhythm parts, you have different options. We looked at ways to embellish riffs in the previous chapters of this ebook and will look at some examples of several twelve bar progressions in the upcoming chapter. If you don't have inspiration you can use memorised riffs like this. You will also get better at improvising rhythm parts as your rhythmic awareness deepens and other guitar skills like technique improves.

Performance Tips

If you have the goal to not only play the guitar all by yourself, but play for and with other people, then these upcoming examples are a very good starting point. Not only will you be able to play something from start to finish, you can also use these examples in jamsessions.

What I want you to do right now, is memorise these examples, get them under your fingers and go out and play this for one person first. This step is crucial, once you get to that point (or if you already are at the point where you can comfortably sit down and play 'something' for another human being) you can start looking into jamming with another guitarist/musician. Just realise that these are just examples, over time you should delve in and be creative with them and try to create your own riffs by tweaking little parts of these riffs. Don't worry that you can't come up with something 'good', you will become more creative with these examples over time by focusing on creativity exercises like the ones we talked about.

third twelve bar:

A7

49

5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X
 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X
 6-6-X-6-X-X-X-X | 6-6-X-6-X-X-X-X | 6-6-X-6-X-X-X-X | 6-6-X-6-X-X-X-X
 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X
 7-7-X-7-X-X-X-X | 7-7-X-7-X-X-X-X | 7-7-X-7-X-X-X-X | 7-7-X-7-X-X-X-X
 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X

D7

A7

53

X X X X X | X X X X X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X
 3-3-X-3-X-X-X-X | 3-3-X-3-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X
 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 6-6-X-6-X-X-X-X | 6-6-X-6-X-X-X-X
 4-4-X-4-X-X-X-X | 4-4-X-4-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X
 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 7-7-X-7-X-X-X-X | 7-7-X-7-X-X-X-X
 X X X X X | X X X X X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X

E7

D7

A7

57

5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 3-3-X-3-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X
 7-7-X-7-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X
 6-6-X-6-X-X-X-X | 4-4-X-4-X-X-X-X | 6-6-X-6-X-X-X-X | 6-6-X-6-X-X-X-X
 7-7-X-7-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X
 X X X X X | X X X X X | 7-7-X-7-X-X-X-X | 7-7-X-7-X-X-X-X
 X X X X X | X X X X X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X | 5-5-X-5-X-X-X-X

B. Example 2

In this second example we'll add open chords and bar chords to riff A and B in the first and second twelve bar progression and conclude with a scale based riff.

[Listen to Example 18](#)

first twelve bar:

A7

13

3 3 7

3 3 7

3-3-X-3 3-3-X 3-3-X-3 3-3-X

2-2-X-2 2-2-X 2-2-X-2 2-2-X

2-2-X-2 2-2-X 2-2-X-2 2-2-X

2-2 2-2-2-4-4 2-2-X-2 2-2-X 2-2 2-2-2-4-4 2-2-X-2 2-2-X

0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0 0-0-X 0-0-X 0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0 0-0-X 0-0-X

D7 A7

17

3 3 7

3 3 7

2-2-X-2 2-2-X 3-3-X-3 3-3-X

1-1-X-1 1-1-X 2-2-X-2 2-2-X

2-2-X-2 2-2-X 2-2-X-2 2-2-X

2-2 2-2-2-4-4 0-0-X 0-0-X 2-2 2-2-2-4-4 2-2-X-2 2-2-X

0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0 0-0-X 0-0-X 0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0 0-0-X 0-0-X

E7 D7 A7

21

3 3 7

3 3 7

2-2-4-4-2-2-4-4 2-2 2-2-2-4-4 2-2 2-2-2-4-4

0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0 0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0 0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0

second twelve bar:

A7

25

5-5-X-5 5-5-X
 5-5-X-5 5-5-X
 6-6-X-6 6-6-X
 5-5-X-5 5-5-X
 7-7-X-7 7-7-X
 5-5-X-5 5-5-X

D7

A7

71

X X
 3-3-X-3 3-3-X
 5-5-X-5 5-5-X
 4-4-X-4 4-4-X
 5-5-X-5 5-5-X
 X X

E7

D7

A7

75

2-2 2-2-2-4-4
 0-0-3-4 0-0-0-0

third twelve bar:

A7

1

7-7-5-5 7-7 7-7-5-5 7-7 7-7-5-5 7-7 7-7-5-5 7-7

5-5 5-5 5-5 5-5

D7 A7

5

7-7-5-5 7-7 7-7-5-5 7-7 7-7-5-5 7-7 7-7-5-5 7-7

5-5 5-5 5-5 5-5

E7 D7 A7

9

9-9-7-7 9-9 7-7-5-5 7-7 7-7-5-5 7-7 7-7-5-5 7-7

7-7 5-5 5-5 5-5

Learn About [Improving Your Blues Guitar Soloing](#)

About the Author

ANTONY REYNAERT

Blues Guitarist & Teacher

Born in Belgium, Antony learned to play classical piano at the age of seven.

At the age of 17, he saw a friend playing the guitar and later got intensely into guitar.

During high school he practiced for more than 5 hours a day.

At the age of 19 he found a teacher who was just perfect for him, and learned to play blues and country-influenced music as well as other styles.

Later, he traveled to Ireland to study with Trevor Darmody, founder of the Waterford Academy.



Antony is currently studying jazz-guitar, and being mentored by worldclass virtuoso Tom Hess. He regularly gives guitarlessons and workshops on both a national and international level.

Antony feels great joy in teaching others and helping them improve their abilities. As executive director of both Guitar Training Studio and Casa da Musica he is training students of all ages and backgrounds on the guitar in his hometown Ostend as well as in the city of Ghent and leads a team of high skilled teachers to deliver the best music education in piano, drum and voicelessons.

His debut album "Spirits in Revolution" combines a wide spectrum of musical influences and styles, while still staying deeply rooted in the blues.

It is his goal in life to become the best musician he can be and to share his music with as many people as possible!

To listen to his music visit www.antonyreynaert.com.

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