



**TEACHER'S GUIDE:**

**12-BAR BLUES, THE  
FRAMEWORK OF BLUES MUSIC**

**WITH KEVIN BURT & HAL REED**

**A-3; 9:26 MIN**

# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of the video, “12-Bar Blues, the Framework of Blues Music,” the students will be able to:

1. Describe the sound of 12-Bar blues music by its’ structure.
2. Explain that blues music tells stories of the past and present.
3. List some different forms of music with a 12-Bar framework.



# 1. DESCRIBE THE SOUND OF 12-BAR BLUES MUSIC BY ITS' STRUCTURE.

## Video:

Playing chords in any key, known as 1 (I), 4 (IV), and 5 (V) chords, in this sequence: I, IV, I, V, IV, I, V (the turnaround). When you play these chords, it adds up to 12 bars (or 12 measures, with each measure getting 4 beats) of music.

## Additional Learning

*"This is a certain sequence of chords, commonly known as the twelve-bar blues, and there have been literally thousands of songs composed in this pattern". (Wald, p. 4)*

*For example, in the Key of A, the A chord is the I chord, Count A-B-C-D-E, the D chord is therefore the IV chord and the E chord is the V chord.*

*1-2-3-4-5*

*Blues 12-Bar structure can be played and sung in any key. In the key of A, the 12-Bar is: A (I) chord is played for 4 measures; the D (IV) chord is played for 2 measures; then the A (I) chord is played again for 2 measures; that is followed by the E (V) chord for 1 measure; the D (IV) chord for 1 measure; then the A (I) chord for 1 measure, and back to the E (V) chord for 1 measure, which is known as a "turnaround," as it turns the music around and you can start the 12-Bar sequence all over again from the beginning. A traditional form for blues lyrics is the first two lines are the same (the second line repeats the first line) and the last line is similar to a "punch line" or some sort of answer, conclusion or question that rhymes with the last word of the first two lines. Example: "Bright lights, big city, goin' to my baby's head; Bright lights, big city, goin' to my baby's head; I tried to tell that woman, but she don't believe a word I said," (Jimmy Reed).*

## References

*Lomax, A. (1993). The Land Where the Blues Began. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.*

*Wald, E. (2004). Escaping the Delta. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers Inc.*

## 2. EXPLAIN THAT BLUES MUSIC TELLS STORIES OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

### Video:

Blues is improvisational, tells a story, about the past and the here and now.

### Additional Learning

*"Bright Lights, Big City" by Jimmy Reed is featured in this video. The song was written after Mr. Reed was driving through a city at night, on his way home, and "the lights was so bright 'til you couldn't hardly see how to drive...". When he got home he told his wife, Mary (Mama Reed), about his experience. She told him that he should write a song and call it "Bright Lights, Big City." ("Jimmy Reed, The Legend - The Man," VEE-JAY Records, 1965)*

*"...one of the music's greatest strengths had always been that it expressed what listeners were experiencing in their daily lives...". (Wald, p. 232)*

*In live performance, blues musicians often invite school students to talk about what bothers them and they construct a blues song from their experiences, which range from being tired of doing homework, to having a fight with their brother or sister, to being teased by someone in their class. This has been one of the most popular exercises in our blues education program. And the students like it when the blues musicians tell personal stories in their original blues music.*

*"Orphaned by their society, the itinerant Delta bluesmen created songs that appealed...for sympathy and a place to hang their hats. As we shall see in what follows, it was the degree to which each bluesman experienced the sense of pain and loss that accompanies the disappearances of parents, which determined the way they sang the blues...Those who had been traumatically orphaned and heartbroken early in life became...the most heartfelt wailers later on.... All were damaged by poverty, by homelessness, by Jim Crow justice...". The stories they told are in the following excerpts of song lyrics: "Lord, I'm a poor boy and a long ways from home, And I ain't gonna be treated this away." "I'm broke and I ain't got a dime. Every good man gets in hard luck sometimes." "I'm a good old boy, just ain't treated right, Freezin' ground was my foldin' bed last night." (Lomax, pp.362-363)*

#### References

Lomax, A. (1993). *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Wald, E. (2004). *Escaping the Delta*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers Inc.

### 3. LIST SOME DIFFERENT FORMS OF MUSIC WITH A 12-BAR FRAMEWORK.

#### Video:

The 12-Bar blues style, or format, has permeated every style of music. The blues style is in many genres of music, from gospel music to country, rock 'n roll, heavy metal, rap and so on. The format isn't always apparent, but it is there (as a basis), and you can find it.

**Answers to Multiple Choice Quiz:**

1. B 2. C 3. B

#### Additional Learning

*"...the 12 bar blues scheme has morphed, changed in musical inventions. The blues influenced everything from TV show theme songs (Batman Theme), to pop rock songs."*

*"...12 Bar Blues also became the common expectation apparently for the blues/rock/pop audiences."*

*"...the 12 bar blues progression is more than just a one-time-only trend. It is the very basis for musical engineering, even to this very day."*

*"Blues reaches beyond the threshold of its genre and becomes renewed and recycled in the numerous movements of music. Without the very foundations of the 12 bar blues scheme and blues as a whole, the music that shapes the musical world as we know it, would be completely different." (The 12 Bar Blues: Going Beyond the boundaries of Genre by Lantz Shifflett)*

# QUIZ – MULTIPLE CHOICE

For a Google Form version of this quiz, go to:  
[MVBS.org/Teacher-Resources](https://www.mvbs.org/Teacher-Resources)

**1. What is the structure of the 12-Bar blues that gives the music a recognizable sound?**

- a. 2 beats per measure that stay on the same chord for 6 measures at a time and then repeat
- b. 4 beats per measure with changes between the I-IV-V chords for 12 measures
- c. For 12 bars, the music repeats the I-IV-V chords of the first measure

**2. What do the lyrics of blues songs often tell us?**

- a. To be careful of who you hang around with
- b. The bad day a person is having
- c. Different stories of the past and present

**3. What are some different forms of music with a 12-Bar framework?**

- a. Classic music and opera are based on blues music
- b. Rock, country, rap and heavy metal
- c. Square dance and polka music, especially

# QUIZ – SHORT ANSWER

For a Google Form version of this quiz, go to:  
[MVBS.org/Teacher-Resources](https://www.mvbs.org/Teacher-Resources)

1. What is the structure of the 12-Bar blues that gives the music a recognizable sound?

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2. What do the lyrics of blues songs often tell us?

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3. What are some different forms of music with a 12-Bar framework?

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## MUSICIANS:



### KEVIN BURT

Kevin Burt is recognized as one of the Midwest's top blues heritage educators. This honor was given to him by the Governor of Iowa, Chet Culver in February of 2009. Kevin is a registered artist and artist educator with the state of Iowa Arts Council. He has also written and published a classroom harmonica method book called

“Just Play It: an introduction to blues harmonica.” His approach is simple, education through entertainment.

For more than 25 years Kevin Burt has been electrifying audiences throughout the Midwest, dispelling the myth that true blues has no roots in Iowa. His soul-inspired presentation is unique and consistently gets him compared to a range of artists, including B.B. King. Kevin is a self-taught musician (vocals, harmonica, and guitar) whose smooth, warm vocal presentation has a welcome mixture of music and infectious humor audiences of all ages seem to enjoy. His voice and presence are powerful.

Kevin has won many awards and played many festivals both solo and with his band, the Instigators. His awards include Best Entertainer in Iowa City (three times), Best Band in Iowa wCity (three times), and Iowa Blues Challenge Champions. He was named as one of the top 25 unsigned blues bands in the world by the International Blues Challenge Competition.



### HAL REED

Hal Reed has been playing harmonica with Kevin Burt, as a duo, for over 25 years in classrooms across Iowa. Born in Sardis, Mississippi, Hal held residency in the Quad Cities for over 30 years before returning his home state to live, in the fall of 2020. During that time, Hal performed countless blues shows throughout Iowa and as

a volunteer, taught students across the state about the history of blues music. For over 20 years, Hal has given his time to the annual Winter Blues Camp programs at the River Music Experience in Davenport, Iowa. These classes allowed him to spend one week each year training a group of students from 8-18 years old in the blues music tradition.

Most of Hal's life is dedicated to educating those around him about the original Delta style of blues that he grew up with in Mississippi. He was mostly influenced by his grandfather, a talented southern folk-blues artist. Hal's love for the blues inspired him to pass it on from generation to generation.

Hal is a two-time winner of the Iowa Blues Challenge. In 2004 he won in the band category and in 2019, the solo/duo category. In 2006, Hal won the Outstanding Volunteer of the Year from the Mississippi Valley Blues Society. In 2018, he was inducted into the Quad City Blues Hall of Fame.



# BLUES EDUCATION EVALUATION

Your participation in this short evaluation helps ensure future grant funding to support this program. Please submit feedback regarding the course you have just completed, including feedback on course structure, and content.

*Please visit the link below!*

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**THANK YOU!**





## MISSISSIPPI VALLEY BLUES SOCIETY

Our mission is to ensure the future of a uniquely American art form by fostering greater public appreciation through performance, education, and preservation of the Blues Heritage.

*Mississippi Valley Blues Society, a nonprofit organization*

*The Education Committee is dedicated to increasing the public's knowledge, understanding and appreciation of blues music through live and remote performances and by providing information about the music and its' history, which includes the musicians (past and present) who play it. Education Committee programs are provided for no cost to the public.*

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