

Master Class

By Richard Best



Musical Styles & Structures *

12-bar Blues

“The Blues” is an old music form. It dates from the early 19th century and evolved from work songs and spirituals. The form has been standardized at 12 bars in three 4-bar phrases, with the melody and harmony ranging from simple to complex. It is a favourite of younger musicians because of its simplicity and ‘authentic’ feel. Jazz musicians love it for its versatility, rich potential and quick thematic resolution. Blues has a number of distinct sub-styles including Chicago blues, West Coast blues, Boogie-woogie, and many others.

Some 12-bar blues you may have heard of:

Johnnie B. Goode • Kansas City • St. Louis Blues • Crossroads • Blue Suede Shoes • Jump Jive an' Wail
• Tutti Frutti • Crazy Little Thing Called Love • All Blues

32-bar/Rhythm Changes

Probably only the 12-bar blues is a more popular music form than the 32-bar structure. In fact, the expression ‘rhythm & blues’ comes from a style of performance that relies predominantly on these two musical forms. The term ‘rhythm changes’ refers to the structure and chord changes of George Gershwin's “I’ve Got Rhythm”. The song is made up of four 8-bar phrases in the form A-A-B-A, where A is the main 8-bar theme and B is the ‘middle 8’ – the bridge. Variations include ABAB, ABBA, ABAC, ABCA, and several others.

A few popular 32-bar tunes:

I’ve Got Rhythm • Over the Rainbow • The Flintstones Theme • We Can Work It Out • It's Only a Paper Moon • White Christmas • Whole Lott'a Love

Verse-Chorus-Bridge ('Pop' Tunes)

This song structure is very popular in, understandably enough, popular music, and is loosely based on 8-bar and sometimes 4-bar phrases. The format works well in a commercial sense since it tends to both ‘sell’ and ‘hook’ the listener. The verse presents the main theme of the song. The chorus or refrain adds a contrasting element that usually is more catchy and memorable than the verse – the hook. This is typically followed by a second verse and, again, the chorus – the sell. The bridge may be a contrasting vocal or a feature for a soloist. Then it’s back for the final verse, and wrapping it up with the chorus once again, e.g. V-C-V-C-B-V-C-C (although any arrangement that works is acceptable). No wonder pop songs tend to stick in your head.

For example:

The Gambler • Like A Virgin • Take Me Home Country Roads • I Can’t Get No Satisfaction • Sixteen Tons • Oh Bla Dee Oh Bla Da • You’ve Lost That Lovin' Feeling • Can't Buy Me Love

16-bar Blues

Less common than other song structures, the 16-bar blues is based on the 12-bar blues and incorporates an extra 4-bar phrase. There are no hard rules on how that 4-bar phrase is placed. Most common are a repeat of the first phrase, a repeat of the second phrase, or an added phrase between the second and third phrases. There are several other forms as well.

Some well-known 16-bar blues songs:

See See Rider • Watermelon Man • Oh Pretty Woman • I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man • Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen

* There are other popular musical forms in use, plus the standard forms are always being toyed with.