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MEL BAY'S CLASSIC BLUES LICKS FOR ELECTRIC GUITAR



by
**Fred
Sokolow**



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All guitars played by Fred Sokolow; bass, drums, keyboards by Dennis O'Hanlon. Recorded at O'Hanlon Music and Recording Services.



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INTRODUCTION

The blues is a language, and this book of licks is your blues lick dictionary. It contains the vocabulary you need in order to speak the language.

The licks in the pages that follow are divided into categories that will help you organize your thinking about the guitar fretboard, so that you can play the blues in all keys up and down the neck. Some licks are based on scales, some on chords. Some are associated with a particular artist. Most of them will sound familiar if you've listened to a lot of blues.

All the blues licks in this book are played on an accompanying recording. Listen to it as you read and play the music/tablatore, because timing is all-important, and timing is easier to hear than to read.

Like any other language, you learn the blues by imitating those who are already conversant. Besides listening to your favorite blues guitarists, listen to and imitate blues singers, pianists and horn players. There are '30s recordings of the great New Orleans clarinetist and saxophonist, Sidney Bechet, playing what any modern blues fan would call "B.B. King licks"—fifteen years before B.B. recorded. So if you want to play deep, genuine blues, listen to the great blues vocalists and instrumentalists of all eras, in addition to the popular blues guitarists of the moment. Then you'll learn how to use your blues vocabulary—the licks in this book—to form sentences, and "speak" the language of the blues with your guitar.

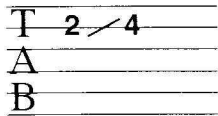
HOW TO READ TABLATURE

Tablature has an advantage over standard music notation: it tells stringed-instrument players which strings and frets to play; it indicates the exact arrangement.

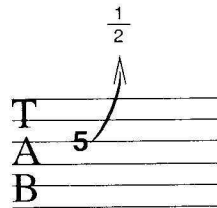
The 6 lines of the tab staff represent the 6 guitar strings with the lowest (heaviest) string on the bottom. In the example below, the "0" on the bottom line means: play the 6th string "open" (unfretted). The "2" on the 4th line means: play the 4th string/2nd fret. The "0" on the top line with a "2" below it means: play the 1st string (unfretted) and the 2nd string/2nd fret, simultaneously:



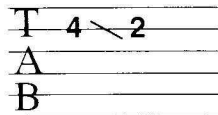
Here are a few left-hand techniques indicated in the tablature:



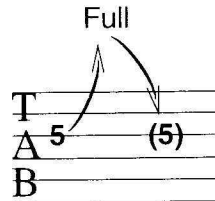
Pick the 2nd string/2nd fret, then slide up to the 4th fret



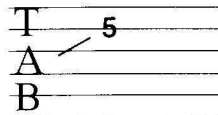
Pick the 3rd string/5th fret and raise its pitch a half step (one fret) by stretching it up with your fretting finger



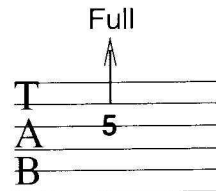
Pick the 2nd string/4th fret then slide down to the 2nd fret



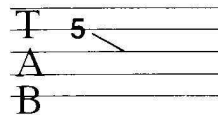
Pick the 3rd string/5th fret and raise its pitch a whole step (two frets) by stretching it, then release it to its original fretted pitch



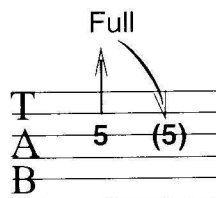
Pick the 2nd string a few frets behind the 5th fret, then slide up to the 5th fret



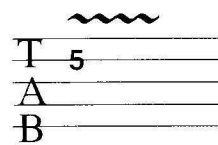
Pick the 3rd string/5th fret when you have already raised its pitch a whole step by stretching it



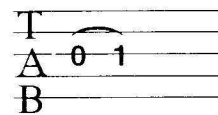
Pick the 2nd string/5th fret, then slide down a few frets.



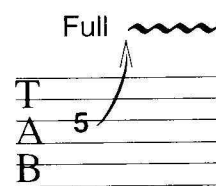
Repeat the above process and then release the string so that it returns to its fretted pitch



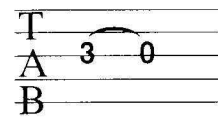
Pick the 2nd string/5th fret, and wobble the fretting finger back and forth for a tremolo effect



Pick the 3rd string unfretted, then hammer onto the 1st fret by striking the string suddenly with a fretting finger



Pick the 3rd string/5th fret and stretch it up a whole step, then create a vibrato effect by repeatedly stretching the string with your fretting finger and releasing it



Pick the 3rd string/3rd fret, then pull off to the open 3rd string by plucking downward on the fretted string with your fretting finger

First-Position Key-of-E Licks

For practical reasons, many blues guitarists favor the key of E. Muddy Waters, Lightning Hopkins, Jimmy Reed, Arthur Crudup and Guitar Slim are just a few blues giants who almost always played first-position E licks. If they wanted to sing in another key, they used a capo so they could play their favorite key-of-E patterns and chords. One of T-Bone Walker's main contributions to electric blues guitar was that he made the E licks moveable, so they could be played in any key without a capo. They are the foundation of modern blues picking, and any serious blues player learns them. Besides, they still sound terrific in a modern blues context—listen to Stevie Ray Vaughan's "Pride and Joy."

E Blues Scale

Here's the E blues scale, and some first-position chords:

You can bend the notes that are "starred".

Scalar Licks

The licks that follow are based on the above E blues scale. You can play them throughout a tune, regardless of chord changes, as long as the song is in the key of E.

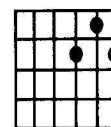
8 9 10

11 12 13

Turnarounds

A *turnaround* is a two-bar phrase at the end of a chord progression that puts a period at the end of the sentence and "sets up" a repeat of the progression. A blues turnaround usually ends on the V chord (for example, B7 in the key of E), except at the end of a tune, when it ends on the I chord (E). Here are some typical turnarounds, many of them based on a moveable D7 formation:

D7 f.



14 15

(24) (25) E7

24 25 E7

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

2 2 0 4 3 4 3 4 3 3 2 3 2 3 4 3 3 3 4 1 1

Up-the-Neck Licks

The first of these is sometimes called the "train whistle" lick, because acoustic blues pickers played it to imitate that lonesome sound.

(26) (27) (28)

26 27 28

7 7 0 9 9 7 12 10 12 10 10 8 9 10 (10) 8 9 9

$\frac{1}{4}$ $\frac{1}{4}$ $\frac{1}{4}$ $\frac{1}{2}$

Scales versus Chords

Books and teachers tend to emphasize scales when teaching the blues. But most accomplished blues players constantly mix *single-note scales with chord-based licks*. If you want an authentic, down-home blues sound, always keep the chords in mind, whether you're playing key-of-E first-position licks or the blues box licks of the next chapter.

THE FIRST BLUES BOX

The "Blues box" is a scale position on the guitar fretboard. It's a very versatile scale; like the E blues scale, you can use it throughout a tune, regardless of chord changes. It's a pentatonic (five-note) scale, but the five notes are just guidelines. Many blues licks include other notes, as you will see.

The F Blues Box

The F blues box, below, is exactly the same as the E blues box (in the previous chapter) moved up one fret. That's because an F chord is the same as an E chord moved (barred) up a fret. In the E blues scale, every string is played open (unfretted) at some point; in the F blues box, every string is played at the 1st fret. The first fret is your *home base* in this key.

The diagram shows the F Blues Box scale in 12/4 time. The scale is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The scale consists of the following notes: F1, G1, A1, Bb1, C1, D1, E1, F1. The first fret is marked as the home base. The scale is divided into two sections: E Blues Box (frets 1-5) and F Blues Box (frets 6-10). The F chord diagram is shown to the right of the scale, with a circled 'F' above it. The F chord diagram shows the following fret positions: 1st fret on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th strings; 3rd fret on the 5th string; and 4th fret on the 6th string. The F chord diagram is labeled 'F CHORD (for left hand position)'. The scale is written on a six-line staff with the following fret numbers: 0 3 0 2 0 2 0 2 0 3 3 1 4 1 4. The notes are marked with asterisks (*) to indicate where to bend (choke) the strings.

Play the F chord (pictured above) to get your left hand in position to play the blues box. Don't fret the chord while playing the scale, but use it as a reference point. You can bend (choke) the starred notes.

Finding the First Blues Box

The fretboard diagram below shows you how to find the blues box that is appropriate for your key. The 1st and 6th string are the *root* (keynote). For example, the 1st string / 3rd fret is G, so play the F formation (Ff.) at the 3rd fret to locate the G blues box:

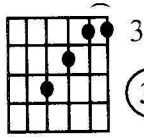
The diagram shows the fretboard with notes on the 1st and 6th strings. The notes are: E (1st fret), F (2nd fret), G (3rd fret), A (4th fret), B (5th fret), C (6th fret), D (7th fret), E (8th fret), F (9th fret). The G blues box is shown as a G chord formation (Ff.) at the 3rd fret. The G blues box scale is shown in 12/4 time, with the following notes: G1, A1, Bb1, C1, D1, E1, F1, G1. The scale is written on a six-line staff with the following fret numbers: 3 6 3 5 3 5 3 6 3 6. The notes are marked with asterisks (*) to indicate where to bend (choke) the strings.

To play in the key of A, move the G blues box up two frets (to the 5th fret), because the 1st string at the 5th fret is A. For the key of C, play the box at the 8th fret, and so on.

The Licks in the rest of this chapter are in the key of G.

Blues Box Licks

Many of the licks that follow duplicate the E blues licks of the last chapter, but they are moveable, blues box licks in the key of G. Play the F formation at the 3rd fret to get your left hand in position.



29

30

31

32

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34

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36

37

38

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40

41

42 43 44 Ending Lick

T-Bone Walker got a jazzy sound by playing (and often bending) 6ths and 9ths. In the key of G, the 2nd string / 5th fret is the 6th (that is, the 6th note in the G major scale) and the 1st string / 5th fret is the 9th:

45 46 47

Hammer-on and Pull-off Blues Box Licks

A hammer-on is a note you sound with your fretting hand, by "hammering onto a string" (fretting it suddenly and forcefully). A pull-off is a note you sound with your fretting hand by plucking down on a fretted string. Hammer-ons and pull-offs allow you to play speedy licks like these:

48 49 50 51 52 53

Double-note (Chuck Berry-style) Licks

Chuck Berry uses the blues box to play his famous signature licks (like the intro lick to "Johnny B. Goode"), but he plays two notes at a time. His double-note licks are staples in rock and blues.

54

55

56

57

58

59

60

61

Chord-based Licks

The following licks are based on the F formation / G chord.

62

63

64

Turnarounds

These moveable turnarounds are based on chords and on the G blues box.

65 G7 D7 G7 D7

66 G7 D7

67 G7 D7 G7 D7

68 G7 D7

69 G7 D7 G7 D7

70 G7 D7

71 D7 G7

Playing "With the Changes"

Basic blues progressions have three chords: the I chord, the IV chord and the V chord. The numbers I, IV and V refer to the major scale of your key. For example, G C and D are the first, fourth and fifth notes in the G major scale, so in the key of G, G (or G7 or G9) is the I chord, C (or C7 or C9) is the IV chord and D (or D7 or D9) is the V chord.

Usually, when using blues boxes to solo, you use the box that corresponds with the I chord throughout the song, regardless of chord changes. However, you can also play "with the changes." Some licks work especially well for the IV or V chord:

C (IV Chord) Licks

72 73 74 75

D (V Chord) Licks

76 77 78 79

You can move the blues box around to fit the "changes"; for example, in the key of G, you can play C blues box licks (at the 8th fret) when a C chord occurs in the tune, or D blues box licks (at the 10th fret) when there's a D chord.

(Blues Box at 10th fret) (Blues Box at the 8th fret) (Blues Box at the 3rd fret) (Blues Box at the 10th fret)

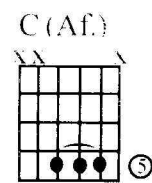
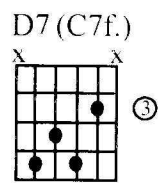
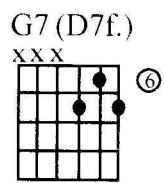
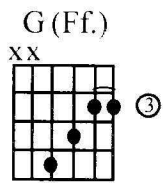
80

D7 C7 G D7

Mixing Chord-based Licks with Blues Box Licks

It enriches your playing to play scalar licks and chord-based licks in the same solo.

Here are some chords that relate to the blues box; they are in many of the above licks:



THE SECOND BLUES BOX

A Theoretical Digression

When faced with the prospect of learning four or five blues boxes (scale positions), students of the blues often ask this question: "If all the blues boxes are based on the same pentatonic scale, and you're just re-shuffling the same five notes, who needs a second, third or fourth blues box?" Good question, but it contains several false assumptions:

1) *Like European classical music, the blues is consistent in terms of logic and musical arithmetic.* Wrong. It's not as European as it is African, and it's based on folk tradition, which is often idiomatic, illogical and enigmatic.

2) *The blues is based on pentatonic scales.* Actually, the blues includes many notes other than 1, b3, 4, 5 and b7, including notes "in-between" the twelve tones of Western music. The Pentatonic model is an over-simplification, and another attempt to explain the blues in terms of European traditions.

3) *The blues boxes all contain the same five notes.* They don't. Each position lends itself to different "accidental" notes outside the pentatonic scale. The third box is especially idiomatic and different from the others.

True, teachers often present the blues boxes as if they all contained the same pentatonic scale, but this is not relevant to the playing of B.B., Albert King, or any other blues masters you could name. Back to the language metaphor: as in other languages, many of the blues' rules of grammar are made to be broken, and no logical explanation is available, just *tradition, custom*.

So why do you have to play several different blues boxes? 1) B.B. does it; 2) for variety's sake (each box lends itself to different, unique licks); and 3) to reach higher notes. 'Nuff said.

Finding The Second Blues Box

You can use this box to simulate many of those classic Albert King licks. Not all of them, because he used an open tuning and tuned several frets lower than usual, which allowed him to do some outlandish string-bending.

Here's the second box in the key of G. You could carry it through to all six strings, but most players use only the top three or four:

The image shows a musical staff in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The melody consists of the following notes: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter), B3 (quarter), A3 (quarter), G3 (quarter). Below the staff is a fretboard diagram for the top four strings (E, A, D, G). The fret numbers are: E string (5, 8), A string (5, 7), D string (6, 8), and G string (6, 8). Two asterisks are placed above the 6th and 8th frets on the D string.

You can find the second blues box by playing the appropriate F formation and moving it up three frets:

Two fretboard diagrams are shown. The first is labeled 'G' and shows a G major chord shape starting at the 3rd fret. The second is labeled '2nd Box' and shows the same G major chord shape starting at the 6th fret.

You can also locate it with the connecting licks that link the first box to the second:

93 94 95

IV and V Chord Licks

Some second blues box licks sound appropriate with the IV or V chord (C or D, in the key of G) because of their ending note, or because of an unusual bent note:

96 97 D or C 98 D

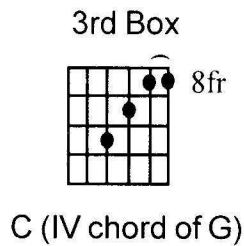
99 D 100 C 101 C

THE THIRD BLUES BOX

Open this box to find B.B. King trademark licks. The third position lends itself to radical string-bends and some non-pentatonic, major-scale sounds that are, nevertheless, all blues.

Finding the Third Blues Box

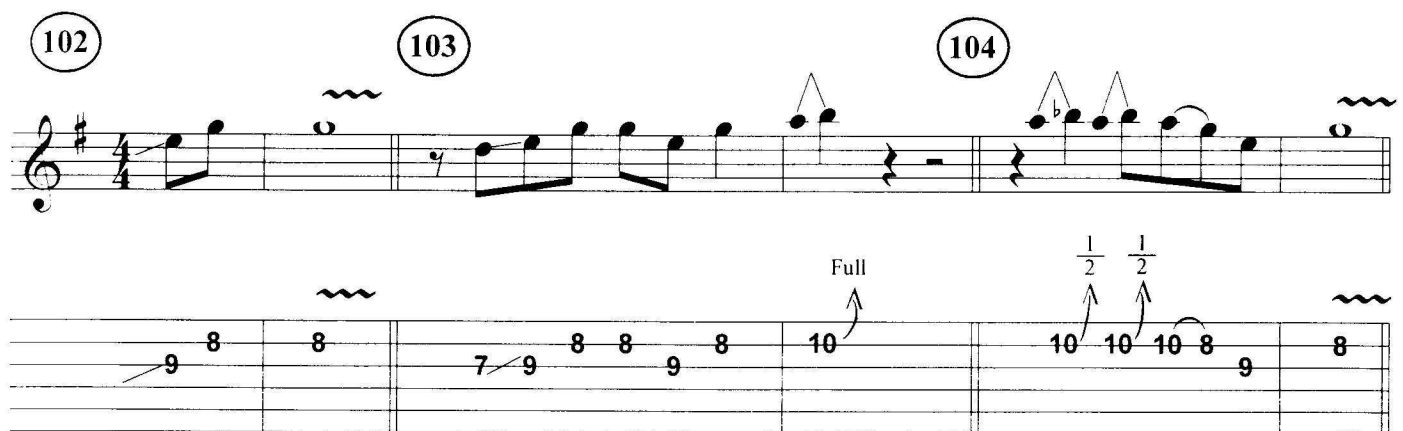
Position your fretting hand for the third blues box by playing the F formation five frets above the I chord. This is the same as playing the IV chord. In the key of G, for example:



In the last chapter, you found the second blues box in the key of G by sliding up to the tonic (G) note on the 2nd string / 8th fret with your ring finger. You can find the *third* G blues box by sliding up to the same G note (2nd string / 8th fret) with your *index* finger.

Scalar Licks

Play these licks with the I, IV or V chords in the key of G. The last few licks are especially appropriate with the IV or V chords, as indicated.



105 106 107 108

1/2 1/2 1/2 1/2 Full Full

10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 9 8 10 8 9 10 10 8 11 8

109 110 D or C 111 D or C 112 D or C 113 D

Full Full 1/2 1/2 Full 1/2

10 10 10 8 9 8 10 10 10 10 8 9 9 8 10 9 8 9 8 9 10 9 (9) 7

Bends and Overbends

Bending or choking a string is raising its pitch by stretching it up with your fretting finger. Most bends raise the fretted note's pitch a half or whole step, but B.B. King, Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, Eric Clapton and all your favorite string-benders have been known to bend notes one-and-a-half tones (three frets) or even two whole tones (4 frets) higher than their normal pitch:

114 115 116

1 1/2 Full 1 1/2 1 1/2 Full 2

10 10 9 8 10 8 10 10 10 8 9 8 11 (11) 8 9 8

THE FOURTH BLUES BOX

Finding the Fourth Blues Box

To position your fretting hand for this box, play the tonic note on the 3rd string with your middle finger (for example, in the key of G, play the 3rd string / 12th fret). You can also use the moveable, 5th string root, tonic minor chord as a reference point. In other words, in the key of G, play this 5th string root / Gm chord:

Gm

10fr

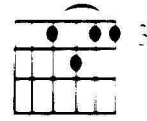
abbreviated Gm

10fr

Scalar Licks

CHORD/RHYTHM LICKS

Every good lead guitarist has a vocabulary of rhythm or backup licks to play when a singer or other instrument takes the lead. Many backup licks are chord-driven. For example, the following rhythm licks are based on this G7 chord formation:



131 Moderate Shuffle

132 Straight Four

133 Moderate Shuffle

G7

134 Fast Shuffle

135 Straight Four

Moderate Shuffle

136

137

Moderate Rock

138

139

140

G7 G7 C7

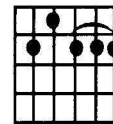
When playing a blues tune, many guitarists move one chord formation around and play the same lick for all three chords. For example, here are the last four bars of a twelve bar blues in G, using the first of the previous rhythm licks:

Moderate Shuffle

141 D7 C7 G7

The following rhythm licks are based on a ninth chord with a 5th string root. A fledgling B.B. King noticed T-Bone Walker using this chord and remarked that it was the first time he saw a blues player use a jazz chord formation. Many of the licks are based on sliding up or down to the destination chord from a fret lower or higher; others involve a two-fret slide on the top three strings.

B9



142 Slow Blues

G9 B9 C9 Gb9 G9

143 Fast Shuffle

Fast Rock

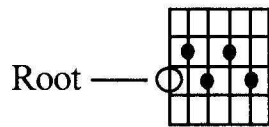
144 G9

Moderate Rock

145 D9 Db9 C9 Db9

146 G9

Here are similar rhythm licks that are based on a ninth chord that has an "invisible" 6th string root; you don't play the root, but you can visualize it where the circle indicates, to properly locate the chord:



148

Slow Blues

Moderate Shuffle

147

G^b9 G9 B9 C9 G^b9 G9

You can combine the 5th string and the 6th string root / ninth chords in a rhythm part:

Moderate Rock

Fast Rock

149

G^b9 G9 B9 C9

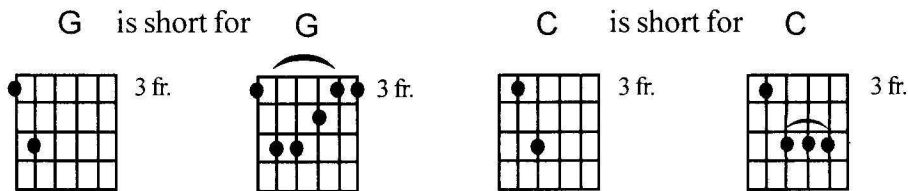
150

G9 C9

Making them Moveable

Here's how the same double-note boogie figures look when you make them moveable. As the first figures (below) illustrate, you can move "up a string" to go up a fourth. For example, the G figure below becomes a C figure when you move it from the 6th and 5th strings to the 5th and 4th strings. This is the backup technique Chuck Berry popularized at the dawn of rock and roll. It has been a staple in blues for many decades.

It takes two fingers to play these figures.



(157) G (158) C G (159) (160)

(161) (162) Straight Four (163)

Single-Note Key-of-E Figures

In addition to the above double-note boogie figures, there are many popular linear (one note at a time) first position, key-of-E boogie figures. Like the double-note licks, they can be moved up a string to become A licks.

164 E

165

166

167

168 E

169 A

Making them Moveable

Here are the same linear boogie figures made into moveable licks:

170 G7

171

172

173

Slow Blues

174

Moderate Shuffle

175

Moderate Rock

176

Moderate Shuffle

G

177

C

PRACTICE SUGGESTIONS

Play along with your favorite blues recordings, ignoring the lead guitarist and ad-libbing your own solos and backup licks.

Practice two or three licks at one sitting. For example:

- Play first blues box licks throughout a tune, repeating three or four of your favorite licks over and over.
- Then play along with the same song, emphasizing three or four different first blues box licks.
- Once you've exhausted the first blues box licks, move on to the second blues box and repeat the same process, playing along with the same song.
- Do the same thing with third and fourth blues box licks, double note licks and so on.

Find some key-of-E tunes and practice your E licks.

Consider it a major accomplishment if you learn one or two new licks every several days.

If you would like to do more in-depth study of blues guitar, these Mel Bay/Fred Sokolow blues books, CDs and videos may be of interest:

- Electric Blues Guitar Video & Booklet (95655VX): how to play electric blues guitar
- Beginners Blues Guitar Video & Booklet (95208VX): acoustic blues
- Best of Blues Guitar Book & CD (94138BCD): fingerpicking acoustic blues tunes in the styles of the masters
- Learn Bottleneck Guitar Book & CD (94571BCD): how to play slide
- Slide for the Rock Guitarist Book & CD (96186BCD): open & standard tunings