

# **Blues Guitar 101 – Rhythm Chops**

## **Essential Blues Rhythm Guitar Techniques**

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## The Shuffle Rhythm

Before you learn how to play blues riffs, take a look at the most important aspect of blues rhythm guitar, the rhythm.

Not all blues is played with a shuffle feel, but it's a good place to start, as this rhythm is the foundation of many blues songs that you learn.

The shuffle feel is based on 8<sup>th</sup> notes, two notes per beat, where the first note is held a bit longer than the second note on each beat.

So, rather than playing even 8<sup>th</sup> notes, two equal notes on 1 beat, you play a longer first note and a shorter second note.

This is sometimes written, or taught, as triplets, three notes on each beat, but you only play the first and third notes.

So, rather than play, 1-trip-let, you play 1-let, holding the first note for both 1 and trip.

If this is confusing not to worry, it's written out and played for you below to get this shuffle sound into your hands and ears quickly.

Now that you know what a shuffle rhythm is, here's an example of a line played twice with a shuffle feel.

The first two bars are written as a triplet, playing quarter then 8<sup>th</sup> for each triplet.

Then, the second two bars play the shuffle rhythm in  $8^{th}$  notes, and the  $8^{th}$  = shuffle symbol is on top of the first bar of the second line.

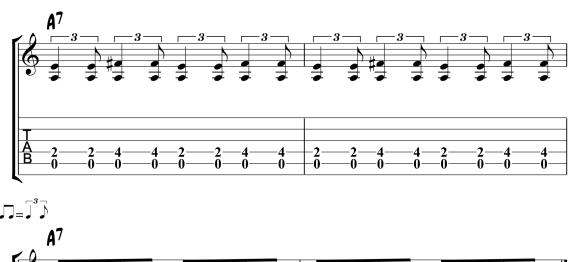
This symbol is often used to indicate that you play in a shuffle feel if there's no written indication of how to play the music.

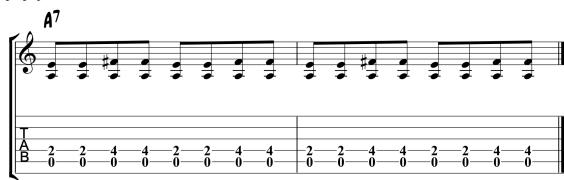
Notice that both lines sound the same, but the second line is much easier to read and follow on the staff and tab.

This is why the  $8^{th}$  = shuffle symbol and plain  $8^{th}$  notes are used instead of triplets; it's easier to read and gets the same result.

As you use the shuffle rhythm in a large part of this eBook, spend some time jamming along to the audio track and nail that rhythmic feel.

After you know what a shuffle is, how it's written, how it sounds, and can play it on guitar, move on to the next section.





## **Essential Shuffle Riffs**

Now that you know what a shuffle rhythm is and how it sounds, you can learn essential blues shuffle riffs on guitar.

There are 10 riffs in this section, 5 in open position to get you started, and 5 with barre chords to move around the fretboard in different keys.

These riffs can be used over any blues song you jam on, which you choose depending on the groove, tempo, and feel of the tune.

Some blues songs have specific shuffle riffs that you learn and play for that specific tune.

But, most of the time, the groove is up to your discretion as the rhythm guitarist.

Because of this, knowing a number of solid shuffle riffs gives you enough variety to fit into any blues tune you're jamming over.

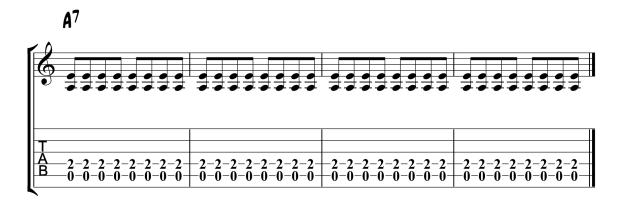
## **Shuffle Riff 1**

The first example uses a straight shuffle rhythm, all 8<sup>th</sup>-notes, and focuses on one chord.

If you're new to shuffle riffs and groove, this is the best place to start.

While it may be easy on your fretting hand, getting this chord to have a solid shuffle feel takes time and focus in the practice room.

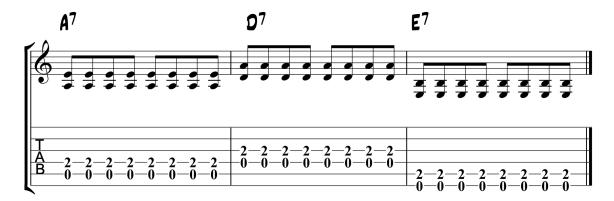
When you have this one-chord example under your fingers, take it to the blues in A chords below.



Now that you can play this shuffle riff over A7, here it is over the I, IV, and V chords in an A blues.

Work the riff over each chord separately, then bring them together over the backing track to jam over the entire A blues form.

When ready, take this riff to other keys, and play it over backing tracks in those keys, to take it further in your playing.



#### Shuffle Riff 2

You now expand the previous shuffle riff by adding a second note to the underlying chord.

When doing so, you create movement in your riff, and play one of the most recognizable shuffle blues riffs of all time.

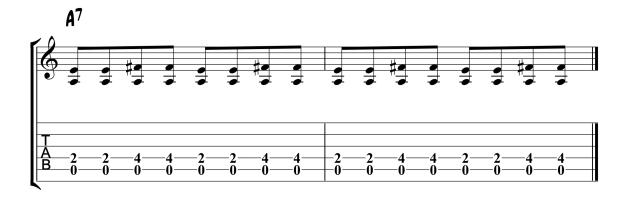
Here, you play the original chord, A and E, the root and 5<sup>th</sup>, on beats 1 and 3 of the bar.

Then, on beats 2 and 4, you raise the 5<sup>th</sup> to a 6<sup>th</sup>, E to F#, to create the melodic movement mentioned earlier.

Use your index finger on the  $2^{nd}$  fret and ring finger on the  $4^{th}$  fret to make this riff flow smoothly on the fretboard.

While you can use your pinky on the 4<sup>th</sup> fret, and some players do, save that finger for other notes when you expand this riff in future examples.

## **Audio Example 4**

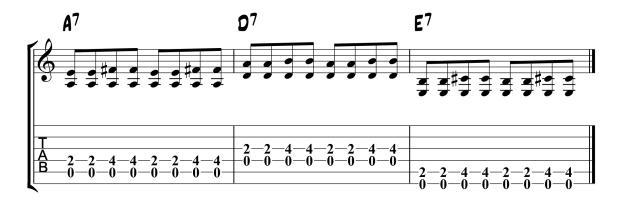


Now that you can play this shuffle riff over A7, here it is over every chord in an A blues progression.

Play the riff over each chord separately, then bring them together over the backing track.

When ready, take this riff to other keys to take it further in your playing.

#### **Audio Example 5**



#### **Shuffle Riff 3**

You now bring your pinky finger into play with an expanded version of the riff you just learned.

Here, you put your index finger on the  $2^{nd}$  fret, ring finger on the  $4^{th}$ , and pinky on the  $5^{th}$  fret.

The riff starts off with two plucks/strums of the A-E chord, root and  $5^{\rm th}$ , on beat one.

From there, you alternate playing the  $6^{th}$  (F#) and b7 (G) with the  $5^{th}$  (E) on the other three beats.

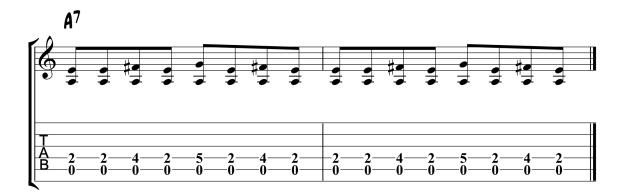
As you climb up these notes and frets, keep your index finger down on the 2<sup>nd</sup> fret E note.

This acts as an anchor, holding your fingers close to the fretboard, and preventing your ring and pinky from pulling your hand out of position.

It's not a huge reach between these notes, but it's enough to lift your hand out of place if you're not careful.

Keeping your index down on the fretboard prevents that unwanted shifting from happening with this riff.

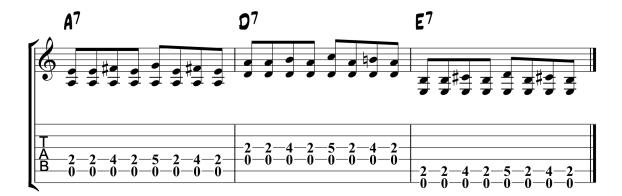
#### **Audio Example 6**



Now that you can play this shuffle riff over A7, here it is over the I, IV, and V chords in an A blues progression.

Work the riff over each chord separately, then bring them together over the backing track to jam with it over the whole A blues form.

When ready, take this cool-sounding shuffle riff to other keys, and play it over backing tracks in those keys to expand it in your playing.



#### **Shuffle Riff 4**

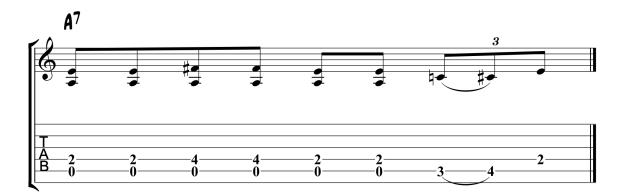
The final open-position shuffle riff features a triplet lick on the 4<sup>th</sup> beat.

Here, you play the  $2^{nd}$  riff from earlier on the first three beats of the measure, then change things up with a bass riff on beat 4.

The key is to switch between the two-note chords and the single-note lick smoothly, which takes time in the practice room to get down.

If you find yourself getting stuck with this riff, work the final beat on its own, then when that triplet is smooth, bring it all together.

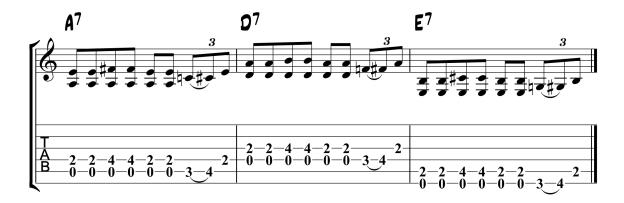
Mixed chord and lick riffs are common in blues songs, so while they're a challenge, they're worth spending the time on in the practice room.



Now that you can play this riff over A7, here it is over the I, IV, and V chords in an A blues.

Work the riffs over each chord first, and then bring them together to jam them over the A blues form.

When ready, take this shuffle riff to other keys and play it over backing tracks to take it further in your playing.



#### **Barre Chord Shuffle Riff 1**

You now move on to barre chord shuffle riffs, which you use to move up the neck and into other keys.

Here, your index finger acts as the open string did in the previous four shuffle riffs.

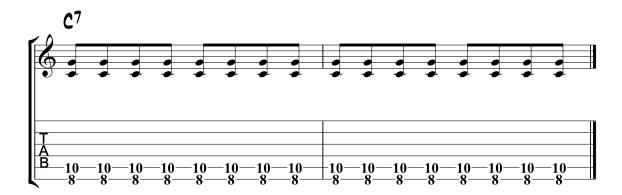
It stays static on the root note of each chord, anchoring you and allowing your other fingers to create movement over that note.

The first riff is the same as the first open-position riff, only this time over a C7 chord and up on the  $8^{th}$  fret.

Here, use your index finger on the  $6^{th}$  string and your ring finger on the  $5^{th}$  string to play each note in the riff.

When you have this riff down, take it to other chords and keys by moving on to the example below.

#### **Audio Example 10**

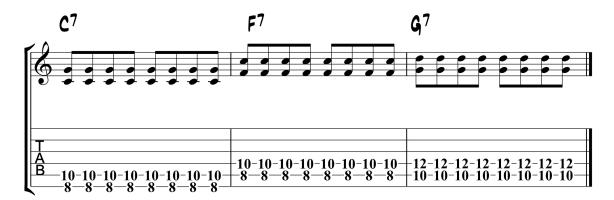


Now that you can play this barre chord shuffle riff over C7, here it is over the I, IV, and V chords in a C blues.

Work the riff over each chord separately, and then bring them together over the backing track.

When ready, take this riff to other keys to take it further in your playing.

## **Audio Example 11**



#### **Barre Chord Shuffle Riff 2**

Here, you bring the 6<sup>th</sup> into play as you use the root-5<sup>th</sup> chord on beats 1 and 3, then use the root-6<sup>th</sup> chord on beats 2 and 4.

Again, use your index on the  $6^{th}$  string, then alternate your ring and pinky fingers on the  $5^{th}$  string.

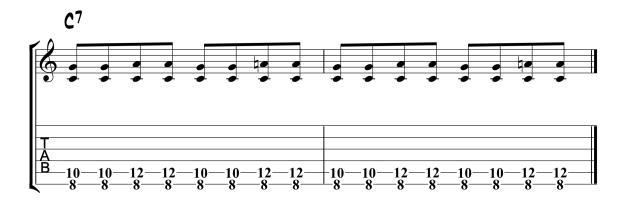
This takes time to get down, as the stretch between the ring and pinky might not be doable at first.

This is why you start this riff over a C chord, so you're higher up on the neck where the frets are closer together.

If it's still a challenge, move up to the 12<sup>th</sup> fret E chord, index finger on the 12<sup>th</sup> fret of the 6<sup>th</sup> string, and play the riff there.

When that becomes easy, move down to the 11<sup>th</sup>, then 10<sup>th</sup>, then 9<sup>th</sup>, and finally the 8<sup>th</sup> fret as you work back to the C riff below.

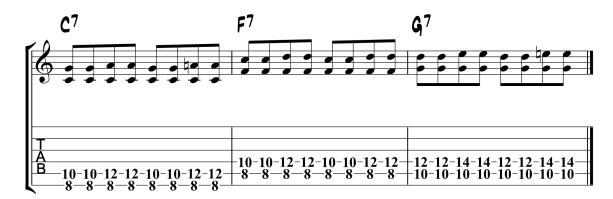
#### **Audio Example 12**



Now that you can play this barre chord riff over C7, here it is over the I, IV, and V chords in a C blues progression.

Work the riff over each chord, then bring them together over the backing track to jam this riff over the whole C blues form.

When ready, take this shuffle riff to other keys and play it over backing tracks to take it further in your playing.



#### **Barre Chord Shuffle Riff 3**

The next riff uses three notes on the fifth string, the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and b7th, all played over the static root note on the sixth string.

Here, you hold down the 8<sup>th</sup> fret and use your ring to play the 10<sup>th</sup> fret, then pinky to play the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> frets on the 5<sup>th</sup> string.

Again, if this is tough to begin, take it higher up the neck where the frets are closer and move back down the neck from there.

Also, working on barre chords of any kind is hard on your fretting hand, especially your thumb.

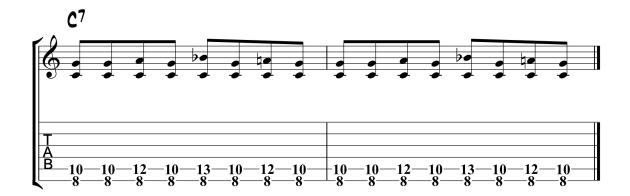
If your fretting-hand feels tired or sore, stop for a minute or two, shake it out, and then come back to the riff.

It takes time to build endurance and strength with these types of riffs, so short, focused practice is key in the beginning.

After you build endurance, you can jam these riffs as long as you like.

But, in the beginning, even 10-15 seconds of the riff followed by 45-50 seconds of rest is a good place to start.

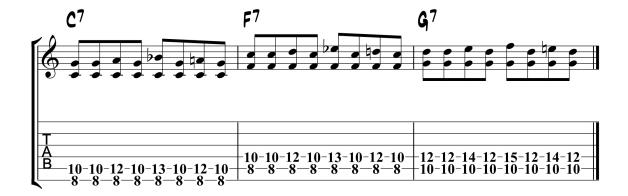
No point in hurting your hands just to learn a riff, take your time, rest when needed, and build your endurance slowly and safely.



Now that you can play this riff over C7, here it is over the I, IV, and V chords in a C blues.

Work the riff over each chord, then bring them together to jam this riff over the whole C blues form.

When ready, take this shuffle riff to other keys and play it over backing tracks in those keys to take it further in your playing.



#### **Barre Chord Shuffle Riff 4**

The final barre chord shuffle riff features a bend with your pinky finger on beat 4.

Though the bend is indicated at a 1/2 step, Eb up to E, it's more of a "pull" than a true bend.

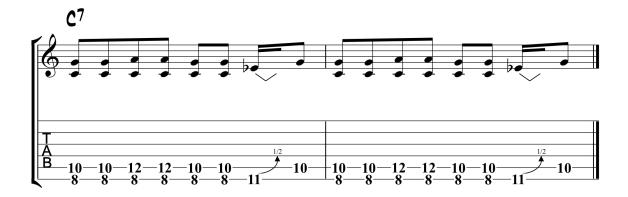
It's tough to bend a 1/2 step with your pinky on the  $6^{th}$  string, especially on lower frets, so do your best.

The goal is to create a "growl" in that part of the riff, so pull down the bend as far as you can, then play the next note from there.

Depending on the key, you can bend it further on different parts of the fretboard, and that's ok.

Sometimes the effect of the bend is what you're going for, not the full bend itself, which is the case here.

#### **Audio Example 16**

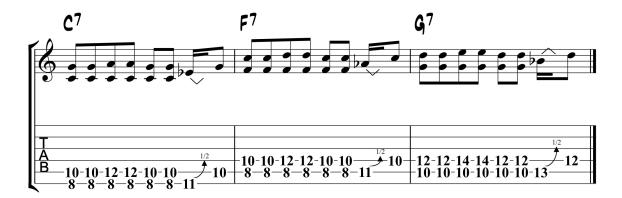


Now that you can play this barre chord shuffle riff over C7, here it is over the I, IV, and V chords in a C blues progression.

Work the riff over each chord separately, and then bring them together over the backing track to jam this riff over the whole C blues form.

When ready, take this riff to other keys to take it further in your playing.

#### **Audio Example 17**



With these open and barred shuffle riffs under your fingers, you have enough material to play rhythm guitar in any shuffle blues song.

As mentioned earlier, the key is to know which riff is best for the song you're playing at that moment.

You can even alternate shuffle riffs in different parts of the same song, further complicating the matter.

To make things easy on yourself, work these riffs in open and barred positions, and in as many keys as you can on the fretboard.

This prepares you to react in the moment by playing the right shuffle riff for the song, or section of a song, you're jamming over.