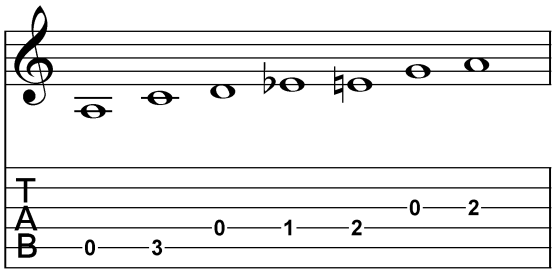
Chapter Two: Blues Scales

Blues is an irresistible tonality for a guitar player. Often new players are drawn to the instrument because of a desire to play the blues. To play the blues is a fascinating undertaking because it can be both simplistic and yet intangibly tricky to master. The blues scale is fairly simple to play (particularly if you have mastered the minor pentatonic), yet it is remarkably expressive and seductive. It allows each player to apply their own style and take their own approach. Perhaps this is why there are so many players who sound unique within the scope of blues. Listen to, B.B.King, Eric Clapton, Gary Moore, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Robert Cray and many more. The blues and the guitar are bound inseparably. There is a vast legacy both traditional and modern to investigate when studying the blues, from Robert Johnson to Robben Ford. Each has its place and as a player you should take note of everything out there and develop your own style accordingly.

There is more to playing the blues that the blues scale, it is possible to take a more jazzy approach, paying more regard to the chord sequence using arpeggios etc. However the blues scale is a good place to start. The scale itself is the same as the minor pentatonic with the addition of one extra note. This is the "blue note" or the flat 5th. Lets take a look at the notes in an A blues scale.

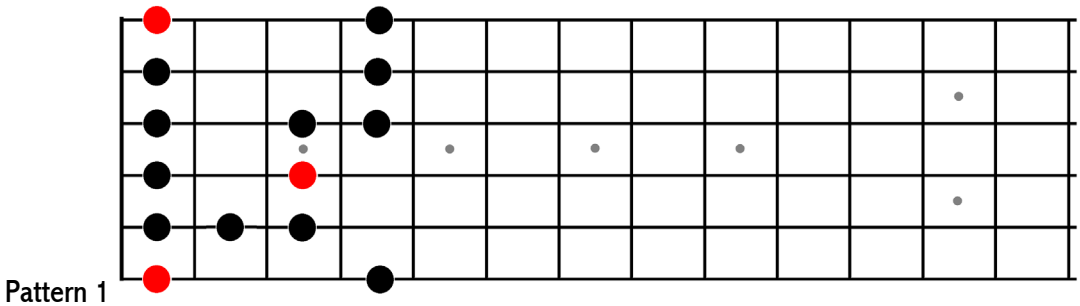


A Blues Scale

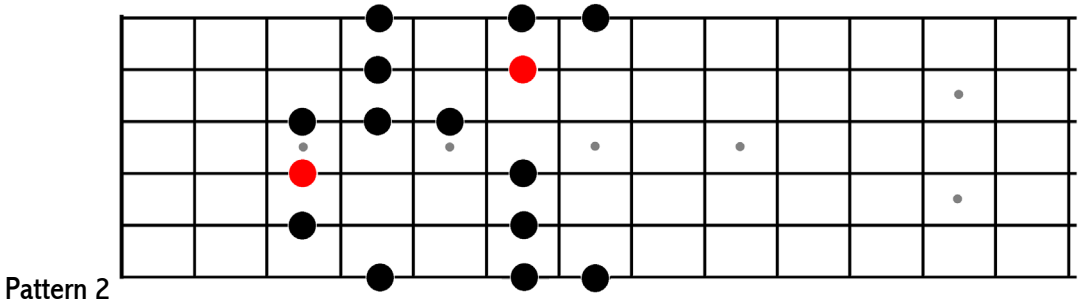
Once again it is important that if you are going to learn to improvise with this scale that you learn how it sounds. So, let us deconstruct this scale and look at the intervals that make up a blues scale.

Note	Interval
A	Root
C	Minor Third
D	Perfect Fourth
E♭	Flat Fifth
E	Perfect Fifth
G	Minor Seventh

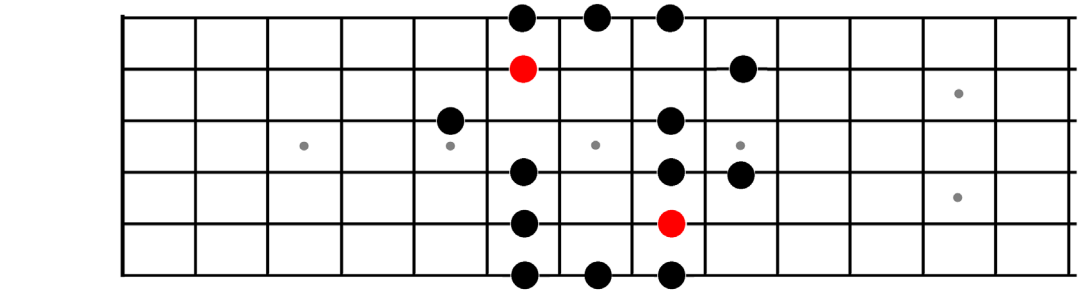
If you have learnt the minor pentatonic scale then the blues scale will be easy as there is only one additional note. Like before you should be able to hear the sound of the scale in your head. If you can't, then it is your fingers doing the taking and not your brain. Learn to sing the scale! There are five patterns of the blues scale. If you have learnt the minor pentatonic patterns then all you have to do is learn where the blue note falls in each scale.



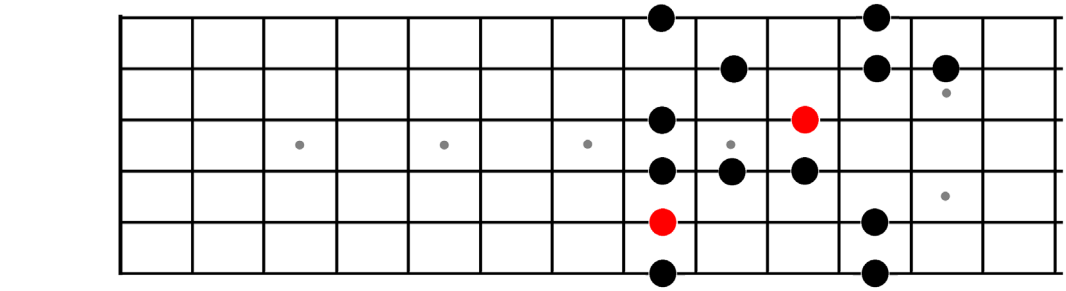
Pattern 1



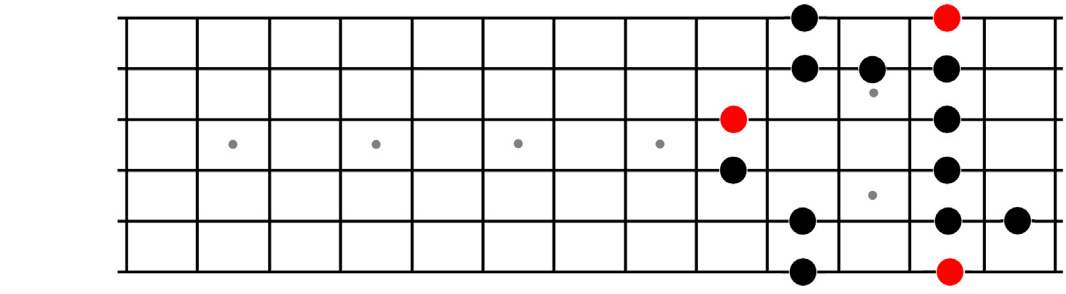
Pattern 2



Pattern 3



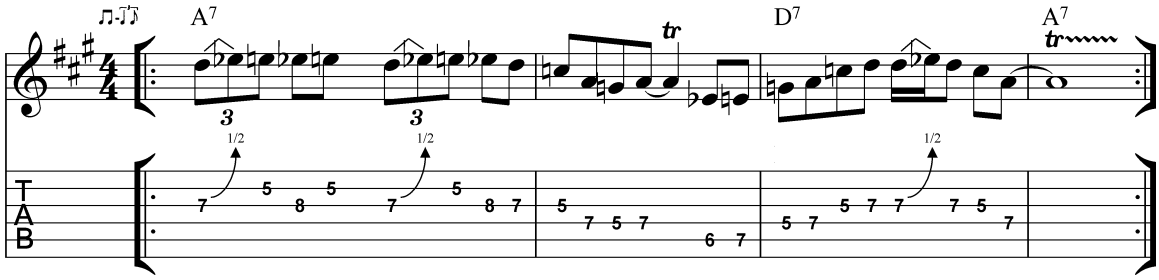
Pattern 4



Pattern 5

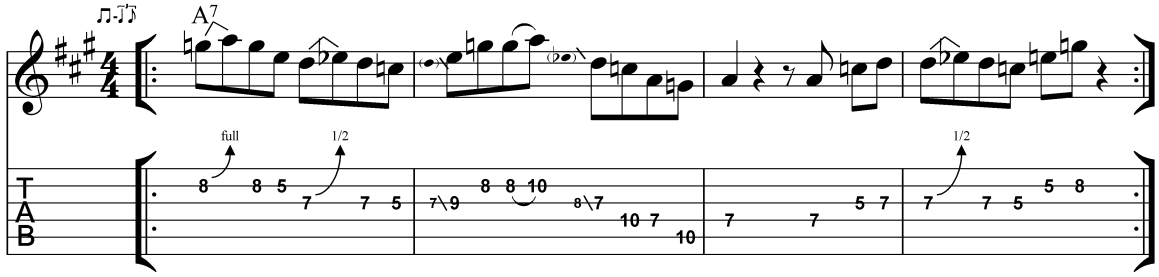
Exercise 1

For this exercise we use the pattern 1, however we change the key to A. For this phrase we bend to the Eflat on the third string. We also play the E flat an octave down on the 5th string. This enables us to make what is otherwise a minor pentatonic scale sound "bluesy".



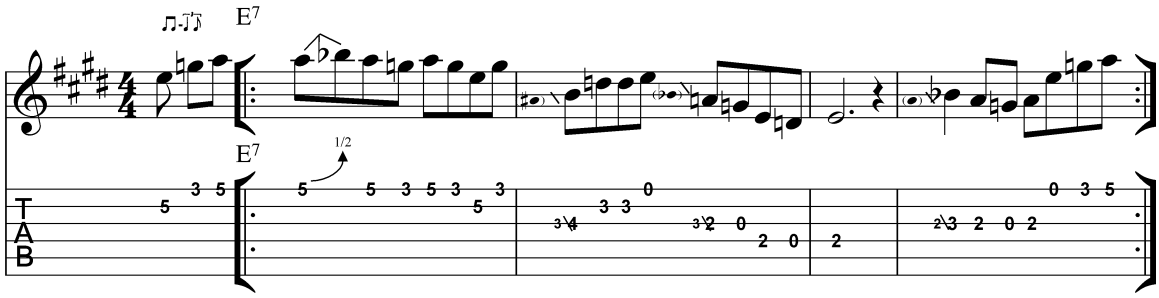
Exercise 2

For this exercise we use the pattern 1 and pattern 2, again we change the key to A. This phrase is a typical Chicago Blues type of line. Watch out for the slides, which take you from one pattern to the next.



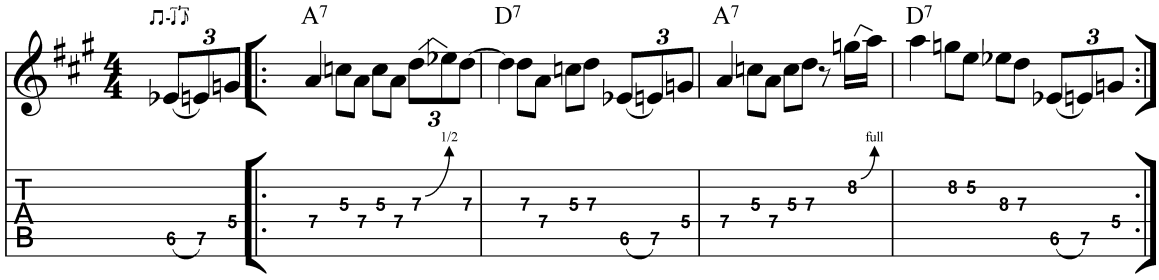
Exercise 3

For this exercise we pattern 1 but in open position which puts us in the key of E. This figure uses slides and open strings to create a classic bluesy lick.



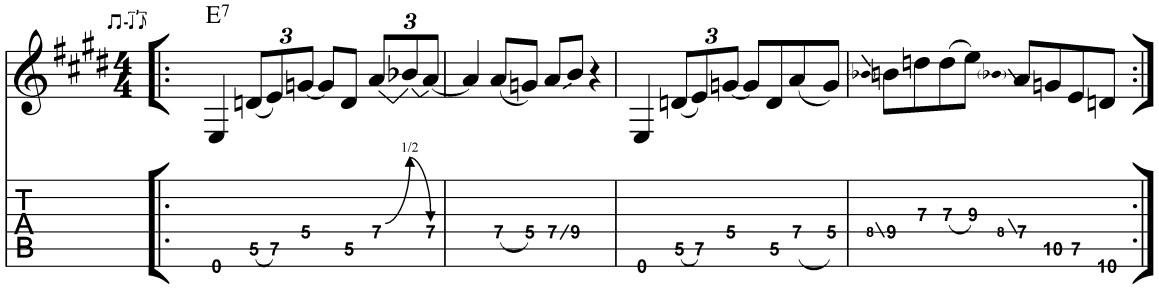
Exercise 4

For this exercise we use the pattern 1, however we change the key to A. This figure uses a bends to create another bluesy lick.



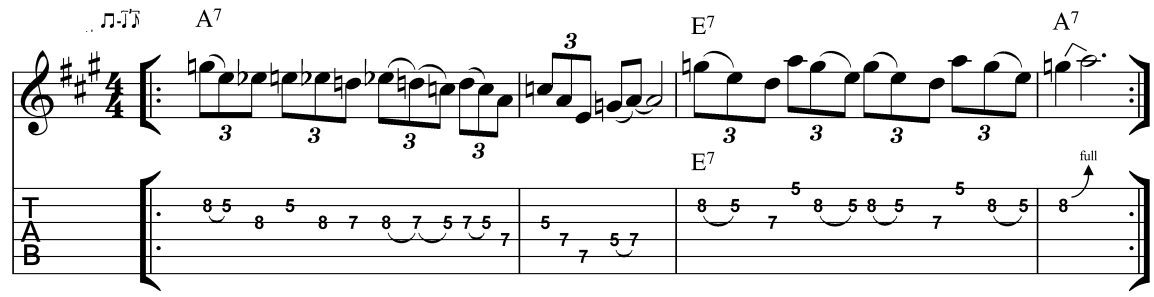
Exercise 5

For this exercise we use a combination of patterns 2 and 4. We are also in the key of E. This exercise once again uses of bends, slides and open strings.



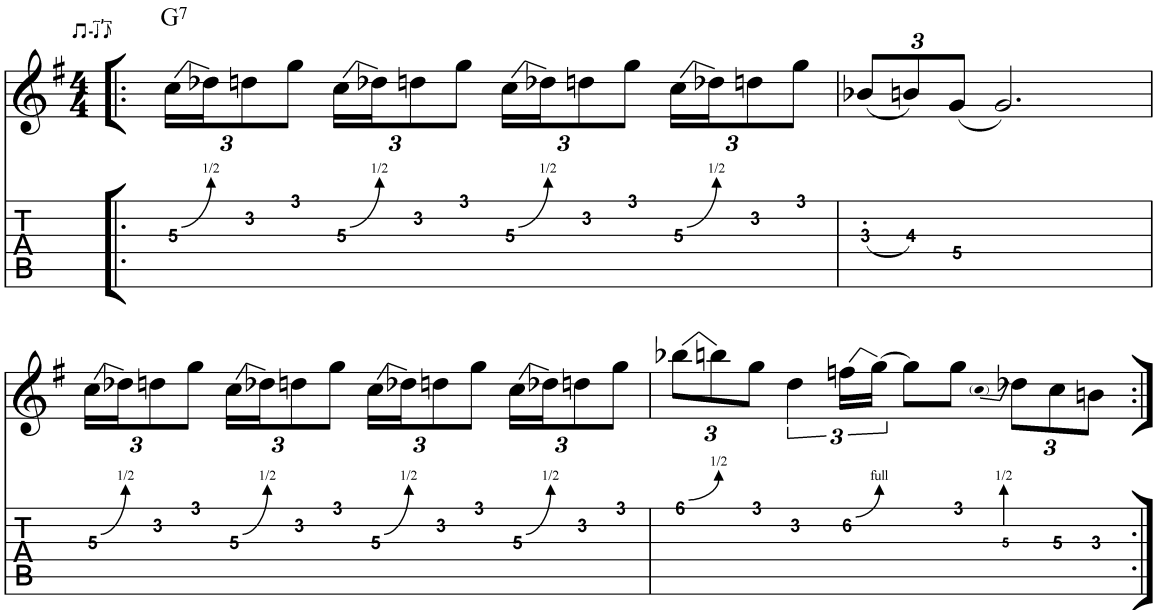
Exercise 6

For this exercise we use pattern one. We are in the key of A for this straightforward blues lick.



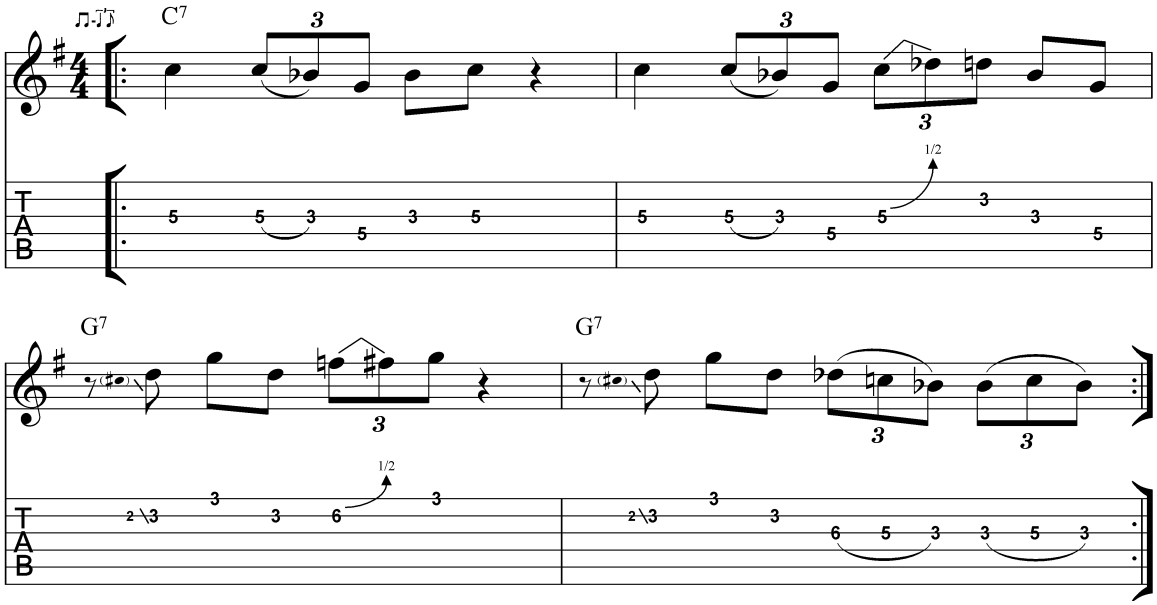
Exercise 7

For this exercise we use pattern one. We are in the key of G. This lick is more of a riff that will fit over any shuffle blues. This exercise we will use as the first four bars of a blues sequence. The opening riff is reminiscent of Chuck Berry.



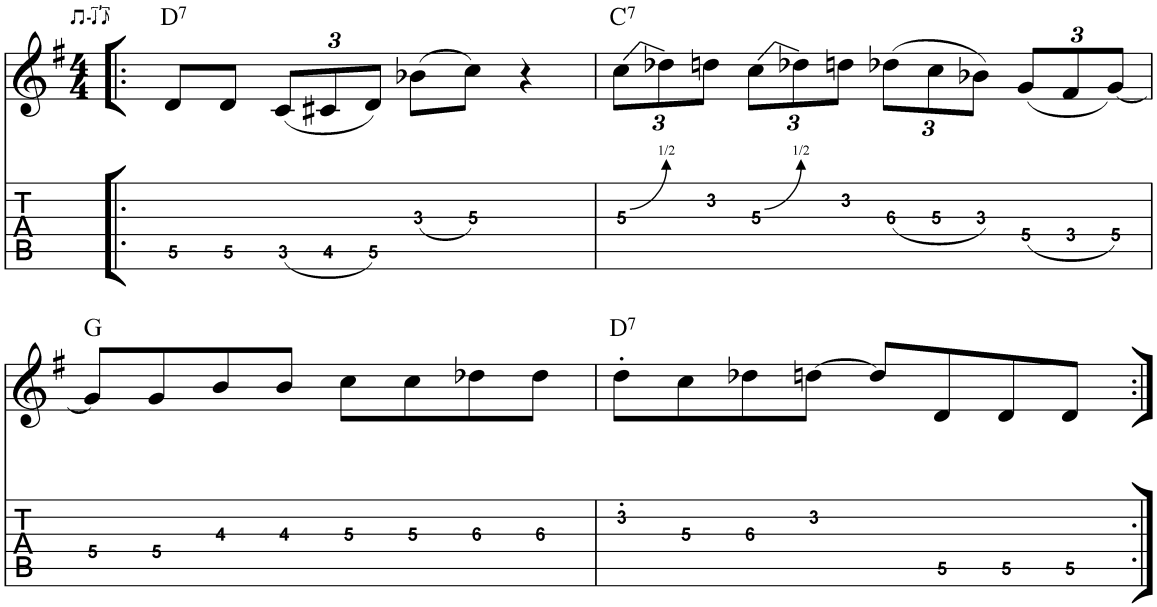
Exercise 8

In the next four bars of the sequence, we use subtle slides and bends to compliment the blues feel.



Exercise 9

In the final four bars of the sequence, we use some chromatic runs to create a typical blues turnaround.



Exercise 10

For this final exercise we put together all three sequences of Ex 7, Ex 8, and Ex 9 to create a full twelve bar solo in the key of G.

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