

Comping for Twelve Bar Blues

I think the first thing every budding blues guitarist needs to know about is **comping** (playing accompaniment) for lead players. There are certain chords, chord progressions and **riffs** (rhythm figures, or r. f.'s) that are universally understood to embody the blues.

The minute you hear these riffs, there's no question in your mind; that's the blues.

Keys and Chords

I guess I need to assume that you know how to form basic chords, and I hope that you have a feeling for which chords might appear together in the various musical keys. Let me present just enough material from two of my other books, *Guitar From Scratch* and *Music Principles for the Skeptical Guitarist, Volume One: The Big Picture*, to get us playin' the blues as quickly as possible.

For our present purposes, keys are groups of chords that naturally hang together. For a given key, one of those chords gets appointed by the others to be Fearless Leader, and the key is named after that one. So in the **Key of A**, the **A** chord is boss and is called the **Tonic chord**. Just to be clear, the **A** chord belongs to other keys as well, but only in the **Key of A** does it wield supreme power (you know, brings the coffee and donuts).

The **Tonic chord** is the strongest and most stable chord in its own key, and for most songs played in that key, it will be the first, last and most frequently played chord. The other chords that belong to the key (the toadies and the minions) can be determined by applying some basic music theory that, simple though it may be, we are *not* going to take the time to do now. For all practical purposes, here's all you need to know:

- (1) Pick a key and lay out the 7 letters in the Musical Alphabet starting with the **Tonic**.
- (2) Assign the numbers 1 through 7 to the sequence of notes (the **Tonic** is number 1).
- (3) Pick out the **4th** and **5th** letters in the sequence.

The **Tonic chord**, also known as the **1 chord**, and the **4** and **5 chords** are the only three chords we care about in basic blues. Here's how it works for the **Keys of A** and **E**, the two most commonly played keys in the blues:

Key of A:

| | | | | | | |
|----------|--------|--------|----------|----------|--------|--------|
| (A 1) | B 2 | C 3 | (D 4) | (E 5) | F 6 | G 7 |
|----------|--------|--------|----------|----------|--------|--------|

Key of E:

| | | | | | | |
|----------|--------|--------|----------|----------|--------|--------|
| (E 1) | F 2 | G 3 | (A 4) | (B 5) | C 6 | D 7 |
|----------|--------|--------|----------|----------|--------|--------|