

## Jim Bruce 36 Guitar Lesson Guide Notes

After purchasing the pack of guitar lessons, people often email me asking about the level of difficulty for the different songs and to suggest a path through the course. First of all, it isn't really a coherent course - that is, it isn't intended to progress in levels of difficulty, but rather present a wide variety of fingerpicking blues guitar styles.

There's a couple of reasons for this. One, I didn't really intend to produce a pack of lessons! After seeing a video lesson on Youtube, I thought I'd try my hand at it and so the first one was created (That'll Never Happen by Blind Blake.) People liked it and so I carried on, jumping from one style to another, as this is how I play when performing. I like different songs for different reasons, from the complexity of the happy ragtime guitar to a slow delta blues in E or A, or bottleneck in open G.

Another thing that struck me was that I was also learning a lot from the lesson creation, either delving into my established techniques (and improving them), or learning new ways of playing. I often learned complete new songs and styles, just so I could make a lesson for them - about 50% of the lessons fit into this category. Discovering the playing of guitarists like Sam Chatmon, Pink Anderson, Floyd Council and Scrapper Blackwell has been a joy.

OK - where to start? This depends a little on your level, but let's say you are comfortable with basic finger picking. The easiest chord structure to play is a basic blues in E. Of course, there are many ways of playing in this key, and it's one of the challenges of the blues to find ways of bringing variation into the music so that it doesn't bore an audience - the blues can be very boring if we are not careful!

### Songs in E

Woman Called Mary  
Baby Please Don't Go

These songs by Texas blues man Lightnin' Hopkins are a great introduction to blues picking. They use the monotonic thumb beat and are relatively slow. Should be played with lots of feeling and care.

Key To The Highway  
Hey Hey  
Worryin' You Off My Mind

These three Big Bill Broonzy songs show how to swing in E. The bass is still monotonic, but it often brushes several strings at time - it's another way of doing it in E. You'll find different licks here, reflecting a different approach to the blues compared to Lightnin' laid back Texas country style.

Livin' With The Blues by Brownie McGhee also 'swings it' and uses chord inversions higher up the neck to produce yet another flavor.

Blues Before Sunrise  
Kokomo Blues

For me, Scrapper Blackwell was one of the most interesting blues guitar players. Kokomo was the original 'Sweet Home Chicago', and copied by Robert Johnson, while 'Sunrise' shows the great diversity and the possibilities in this key, with many instrument variations. The bass is still monotonic, but isn't always apparent, as the thumb is sometimes used for a treble string.

#### Blues in A

Blues Day Blues is one of my favorite Scrapper Blackwell songs. It has the trademark variations in the instrumental breaks and the words just ring true 'I'm sittin' here thinking, as the rain comes pouring down' - you can just picture him sitting there.

#### Love in Vain Me and The Devil

These songs by Robert Johnson are of course classic pieces in the key of A. Still using the single thumb stroke, the effect is almost hypnotic when combined with the high treble notes and his voice. RJ had the uncanny ability of making his guitar and voice appear asynchronous, that is not linked in timing. Mostly, we time our singing to coincide with timing marks in the music, or it gets really difficult to sing and play at the same time. It seemed as though Johnson could sing on the beat, off it, or at any period between. It's a skill that the best blues men mastered - the guitar is independent of the singing.

#### Untrue Blues Careless Love Weeping Willow

Blind Boy Fuller was a superstar in his time, for a variety of reasons. he could play monotonic bass or alternating, so ragtime was a feature of his repertoire. Much of his playing can be traced back to Gary Davis, who was his teacher for a while. The structure is more complex than the previous songs in A, and in Untrue/Careless Love, Fuller uses Am to full advantage in making the songs feel sad.

#### Goin' Down Slow

Back to a Texas style monotonic bass beat with Mance Lipscombe - yet another way of producing an appealing sound with a slightly different set of licks.

#### Hesitation Blues

For any kind of blues, Gary Davis was the master, producing incredibly complex arrangements. Listen how Hesitation hardly ever repeats itself. Uses an alternating bass pattern.

#### Open D

#### Police Dog Blues Down The Country

The two Blind Blake songs chosen here have very much the same structure and chords, but are quite different in flavor and playing skill required. 'County' is much slower and bluesy sounding, while Police Dog is fast and ragtimey sounding. Use the slower 'Country' piece to get into the chord structure and picking technique (alternating bass and two finger patterns) and then learn Police Dog slowly before building up to the speed Blake played it, which was pretty formidable. The trick here is to play it accurately and fluidly at speed while singing at the same time - good luck!

Dropped D

Statesboro' Blues  
Chump Man Blues  
CC & O Blues

Open D can be very hypnotic, alternating the thumb between the low bass D and the middle D string, and these three songs demonstrate the approach of three different blues men. This version of Statesboro has the same structure as McTell's original, but not the same timing, which was idiosyncratic and peculiar to McTell's style.

Pink Anderson's CC&O Blues shows another approach, with high inversions up the neck and Blake shows how to play fast intricate runs in dropped D. He also varies the bass timing of his alternating bass pattern, which is interesting.

Key of C

As you can see, this key tends to produce songs with an up-beat ragtime, or Piedmont feel, although there are the usual exceptions such as Down and Out by Scrapper Blackwell. They mostly use an alternating bass thumb pattern, but the master blues men could break out of this anytime and use the thumb on the treble strings, for example. Pieces in C tend to have more chords than the keys of E, A, or D. I've listed them in order of difficulty:

Satisfied/Pallet On The Floor - a delicate and very rhythmic approach by Mississippi John Hurt. Not too hard, but make it flow.

Truckin' Little Baby - the classic from Blind Boy Fuller. Most Piedmont style pickers had a version of this song.

Down and Out - Blackwell shows us an inventive approach using unusual chords for this slow classic - not too difficult.

Early Morning Blues - nice and slow - a great intro to Blake's work in C.

Glory Of Love - Big Bill Broonzy swings along with a Tin Pan Alley classic. Monotonic bass with a swing!

Reap What You Sow - Mance Lipscomb

Tootie Blues - A Blake piece. Quiet slow, but watch out! He doubles up on the timing now and again!

Guitar Chimes - quite slow Blake instrumental, but extremely varied in it's approach. It doesn't repeat itself in over 3 minutes!

South Carolina Rag - one of the two tracks recorded by Willie Walker. Fast and slick (he taught Gary Davis)

Southern Rag - another fast Blake piece with alternating bass and triplets.

West Coast Blues - alternating bass from Blake, but with a difference. Try out Blake's famous thumb rolls, when he plays two bass notes in place of one!

Diddie Wah Diddie - all of Blakes techniques in one song. Another variation on the 'Truckin' Little Baby' theme, but with complexity taken to the extreme.

Key of G

That'll Never Happen No More

A great introduction into Blake's approach to G - it's slow and we can hear every note.

Too Tight Blues  
Come On Boys

These two have much the same structure as 'That'll Never Happen' but are much faster, and so challenging.

Dupree Blues - the other track from Willie Walker, slower paced but oozes with technique and excellent timing variations.

Poor And Ain't Got A Dime by Floyd Council shows an approach which is a cross between Piedmont and Chicago swing style picking - very nice to play. the bass is alternating, but sometimes not! Great feel and not too difficult.

Open G

Walkin' Blues  
Crossroads

I learned these two just so I could teach them, as bottleneck is not my style of playing. Couldn't leave them out, though as they represent the definitive Mississippi delta blues. Not difficult technically, but it takes a while to get the feeling and to sing at the same time.

Mobile Texas Line

This is another way to pick in open G. I made up this pattern to mimic the sound of the Tom Rush version of this Leroy Carr song (he flat picks it.) It's a bit tricky until you get the feel of it.