

Standard Blues Riffs

A *riff* can be described as a sort of ‘musical sentence’, and in order to improvise the Blues, a musical vocabulary needs to be developed by copying and memorizing a collection of *standard Blues riffs*. There are many Blues riffs that have been passed on from generation to generation of guitarists, and some of these riffs will be presented in this lesson.

‘The Blues Riff’

‘*The Blues Riff*’ is named so specifically for this lesson. This riff has been around for years and variations of it are heard in dozens of classic Blues and Rock songs. The example to the right is played in the Key of ‘A’ Blues, using notes solely from the ‘A’ Pentatonic Minor box pattern. ‘*The Blues Riff*’ introduces two new soloing techniques for playing the Blues: *bending* and *vibrato*. The next section will describe how to play ‘*The Blues Riff in A*’ with a step-by-step approach.

The Blues Riff in ‘A’

1 5
2 5 8 5
3 7 7
4 7 7
5
6

3 1 1 4 1 3 1 3 3
(2) (2)

‘The Blues Riff’: Three Steps

Step 1: The Bend

Bending technique is applied to the first note played on the third string/seventh fret. In Tab, a bend is notated with an arrow (↗). Use the first, second, and third fingers together to push or bend the third string toward the bottom strings (*see right*). The first and second fingers are additional support fingers for bending, and are shown in () below the Tab. Using multiple fingers prevents the string from slipping, and also produces better tone. Make sure the fretting fingers are curved or arched in order to get better tone. With ‘*The Blues Riff*’, the bend stands out, so focus on getting as strong and clear-sounding a bend as possible.

Step 1: Use Multiple Fingers to Bend

1
2
3 7↗
4
5
6

3
(2)
(1)

Step 2: Flatten the First Finger

Flatten the first finger across the first and second strings along the fifth fret to play the next two notes.

Step 2: Flatten First Finger

1 5
2 5
3
4
5
6

1 1

Step 3: Descend Down the Box Pattern

Simply descend down the Pentatonic Minor box pattern, starting with the second string/eighth fret. *Vibrato* is used on the very last note of ‘*The Blues Riff*’, and is notated with a wavy line. *Vibrato* is a combination of shaking and sustaining a note. With vibrato, there isn’t as much of a change in pitch as there is with bending a string. Use the second finger (*shown in parenthesis*) as an additional support finger, and make sure both the second and third fingers are arched for better tone.

Step 3: Arch fingers

1
2 8 5
3 7 5
4 7 7
5
6

4 1 3 1 3 3