

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’

A guitar tab diagram for the 'The Blues Riff in A'. The strings are numbered 1 to 6 from top to bottom. The notes are: String 1: 5; String 2: 5, 8, 5; String 3: 7 with a bend arrow (♯), 7, 5; String 4: 7, 7 with a wavy line (vibrato); String 5: (empty); String 6: (empty). Below the strings, the fingering is indicated as: 3 (with a bend arrow), 1, 1, 4, 1, 3, 1, 3, 3 (with a wavy line). The numbers 2 and (2) are placed below the first and last notes respectively.

‘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

A photograph showing a close-up of a hand bending the third string of a guitar. To the right is a guitar tab diagram showing the third string with a note at the 7th fret marked with a bend arrow (♯). Below the strings, the fingering is indicated as 3 (with a bend arrow), 2, and 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

A photograph showing a close-up of a hand flattening the first finger across the first and second strings. To the right is a guitar tab diagram showing the first and second strings with notes at the 5th fret. Below the strings, the fingering is indicated as 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

A photograph showing a close-up of a hand arching the second and third fingers. To the right is a guitar tab diagram showing the notes from the previous steps: String 1: 5; String 2: 8, 5; String 3: 7, 5; String 4: 7, 7 with a wavy line. Below the strings, the fingering is indicated as 4, 1, 3, 1, 3, 3 (with a wavy line).

The ‘Bend & Release’ Riff

For ‘*The Bend & Release Riff in A*’, bend the third string/ seventh fret, and while the note is still ringing, *release* the bend back to the string’s original pitch. The () around the seventh fret indicate the note is still ringing or being sustained from the previous bend without being plucked again. Like ‘*The Blues Riff in A*’, vibrato is applied to the last note played. The finger numbers to fret with are shown below the Tab, along with the additional support fingers used for bending and vibrato shown in ().

Bend & Release Riff in ‘A’

A guitar tab for the 'Bend & Release Riff in A'. The strings are numbered 1 to 6 from top to bottom. The notes are: 5th fret on string 3, 7th fret on string 3, a bent 7th fret on string 3 (indicated by a ^ and a (7) in parentheses), and 5th fret on string 3. On string 4, there is a 7th fret note with a vibrato line (wavy line) above it. Below the tab, fingerings are indicated: string 3 has '3 1 3' under the first three notes, and '3^ (3) 1 3' under the last three notes. Below the last note of string 3, '(2)' is written. Below the last note of string 4, '(1)' is written.

Play The Riffs ‘Verbatim’

Try to copy both ‘*The Blues Riff*’ and ‘*The Bend & Release Riff*’ *verbatim*, meaning a note-for-note replication of the tabs and audio/video examples. Setting a priority to concentrate on copying these standard Blues riffs note-for-note will develop the ability later to learn and to copy other riffs ‘by ear’ without having to rely on written notation. Most of the legendary Blues guitarists never had the advantage of using videos or even Tab notation to learn Blues riffs. Instead, they would constantly listen to and literally wear out records learning and copying riffs by ear.

Combining Riffs

All notes played from ‘*The Blues Riff in A*’ and ‘*The Bend & Release Riff in A*’ are found within the standard ‘A’ Pentatonic Minor box pattern (see right). To hear how both riffs harmonize together, try playing a combined or extended riff (shown below) by playing both riffs together in succession. This will develop a sense of how a guitar solo can be constructed or built by combining riffs.

‘The Blues Riff’

A fretboard diagram for 'The Blues Riff' showing notes on strings 5, 6, 7, and 8. String 5 has notes at frets 5, 7, and 8. String 6 has notes at frets 7 and 8. String 7 has notes at frets 7 and 8. String 8 has notes at frets 5 and 8.

Bend & Release Riff

A fretboard diagram for 'Bend & Release Riff' showing notes on strings 5, 6, 7, and 8. String 5 has notes at frets 5, 7, and 8. String 6 has notes at frets 7 and 8. String 7 has notes at frets 7 and 8. String 8 has notes at frets 5 and 8.

‘The Blues Riff’ & ‘The Bend & Release Riff’ - Combined

A guitar tab for the combined riffs. The strings are numbered 1 to 6 from top to bottom. The notes are: 5th fret on string 1, 5th fret on string 2, 8th fret on string 2, 5th fret on string 2, 7th fret on string 3, 5th fret on string 3, 5th fret on string 3, 7th fret on string 3, a bent 7th fret on string 3 (indicated by a ^ and a (7) in parentheses), 5th fret on string 3, 7th fret on string 4, 7th fret on string 4 with a vibrato line (wavy line) above it, 7th fret on string 4, 7th fret on string 4 with a vibrato line (wavy line) above it.

The Riffs Are Moveable

The same concept that applies to moveable box patterns will also apply to riffs. Both ‘*The Blues Riff*’ and ‘*The Bend & Release Riff*’ are *moveable*, and can be played along any fret position or *key*. For an additional challenge, try playing both riffs in combination together in different keys. For example, the Key of ‘F’ Blues along the first fret position requires the fretting fingers to stretch more. The Key of ‘D’ Blues along the tenth fret position requires more focus in order to get clarity because the frets are positioned closer together, especially when applying bending and vibrato technique.