

# Six Blues Bass Lines

Authentic 'Plug-And-Play' Formulas That Will  
Work Every Time

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# The Blues

It really pays to know how to get through a blues. It's almost universally known! If you got together with 3 other random musicians, you may not all know the same exact songs, but most people will know how to get through a blues.

Just in case you're not sure how the 12-bar blues is structured, let's recap really quickly.

In it's most basic form, the blues has just 3 chords. A '1-chord', a '4-chord' and a '5-chord'.

For our examples, let's say we're playing a blues in the key of A. That means the 1-chord will be an A7, the 4-chord will be a D7, and the 5-chord will be an E7.

If you put all the chords in order, you'll get this:

<b>A7</b>	<b>A7</b>	<b>A7</b>	<b>A7</b>	
<b>D7</b>	<b>D7</b>	<b>A7</b>	<b>A7</b>	
<b>E7</b>	<b>D7</b>	<b>A7</b>	<b>A7</b>	

I find it helpful to think of the blues in terms of 3 phrases that are 4 bars each.

The first phrase just hangs out on the 1-chord – the A7. In our 2<sup>nd</sup> phrase, we get 2 bars of the 4-chord, then 2 bars of the 1-chord again. Finally, in our last 4 bars, we get a bar each of the 5-chord and the 4-chord before finally coming back again to the 1-chord.

# The Formulas

Now that you know how the blues is structured, we can start playing around with some of these authentic blues bass lines.

## Formula #1

The first is very simple. All we're going to do is play the roots of all of the chords in 8<sup>th</sup> notes. That means we'll play A over the A7 chords, D over the D7 chords and E over the E7 chord. It doesn't get much simpler than this.

Musical notation for Formula #1, A7 chord. The notation consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef with a double bar line and repeat dots. It contains four measures of eighth notes: A, A, A, A, A, A, A, A. The bottom staff is a guitar staff with a treble clef and a double bar line and repeat dots. It contains four measures of the number 5 repeated eight times in each measure.

Musical notation for Formula #1, D7 and A7 chords. The notation consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef with a double bar line and repeat dots. It contains four measures of eighth notes: D, D, D, D, D, D, D, D; D, D, D, D, D, D, D, D; A, A, A, A, A, A, A, A; A, A, A, A, A, A, A, A. The bottom staff is a guitar staff with a treble clef and a double bar line and repeat dots. It contains four measures of the number 5 repeated eight times in each measure.

Musical notation for Formula #1, E7, D7, and A7 chords. The notation consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef with a double bar line and repeat dots. It contains four measures of eighth notes: E, E, E, E, E, E, E, E; D, D, D, D, D, D, D, D; A, A, A, A, A, A, A, A; A, A, A, A, A, A, A, A. The bottom staff is a guitar staff with a treble clef and a double bar line and repeat dots. It contains four measures of the number 7 repeated eight times in the first measure, and the number 5 repeated eight times in the remaining three measures.

This will work whether the blues your playing is straight or swung. For some examples of this exact kind of bass line check out these tracks:

[Led Zeppelin – Rock And Roll \(Straight 8th Notes\)](#)

[Lafayette Leake – Short Dressed Woman \(Swung 8<sup>th</sup> Notes\)](#)

## Formula #2

Next, we're going to add just one extra note to our first formula – the 5<sup>th</sup> of every chord.

Musical notation for Formula #2, first system. Bass clef, 4/4 time. The bass line consists of eighth notes: A<sub>2</sub>, G<sub>2</sub>, F<sub>2</sub>, E<sub>2</sub>, D<sub>2</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>, B<sub>1</sub>, A<sub>1</sub>. The first two measures are marked with A<sup>7</sup>, and the last two with A<sup>7</sup>. The guitar part shows a 7th fret barre across all strings in the first two measures, and a 7th fret barre across strings 1-4 in the last two measures.

Musical notation for Formula #2, second system. Bass clef, 4/4 time. The bass line consists of eighth notes: D<sub>2</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>, B<sub>1</sub>, A<sub>1</sub>, G<sub>1</sub>, F<sub>1</sub>, E<sub>1</sub>, D<sub>1</sub>. The first two measures are marked with D<sup>7</sup>, and the last two with A<sup>7</sup>. The guitar part shows a 5th fret barre across all strings in the first two measures, and a 7th fret barre across strings 1-4 in the last two measures.

Musical notation for Formula #2, third system. Bass clef, 4/4 time. The bass line consists of eighth notes: E<sub>2</sub>, D<sub>2</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>, B<sub>1</sub>, A<sub>1</sub>, G<sub>1</sub>, F<sub>1</sub>, E<sub>1</sub>. The first measure is marked with E<sup>7</sup>, the second with D<sup>7</sup>, and the last two with A<sup>7</sup>. The guitar part shows a 7th fret barre across strings 1-4 in the first measure, a 5th fret barre across all strings in the second measure, and a 7th fret barre across strings 1-4 in the last two measures.

It's a good idea to use the 5<sup>th</sup> **underneath** the roots of the chords. Do you notice how we started on the high A so we could use the E underneath it?

If you use the 5<sup>th</sup> **above** the roots, it sounds a bit strange – and not as strong. Also be sure to de-emphasize the 5<sup>th</sup> and keep the roots really strong on the down beats.

This kind of line works best at a slower tempo and with swung 8<sup>th</sup> notes. For a great example of this kind of bass line, check out the Pino Palladino line on John Mayer's version of *Every Day I Have The Blues*.

[John Mayer – Every Day I Have The Blues](#)

### Formula #3

Let's keep adding more notes to these lines. We've used the root and 5<sup>th</sup>, now let's add the 7<sup>th</sup>. Our formula for this line is just 1 – 5 – 7 – 1. That final '1' of each chord will be an octave above our first 1 and to begin with, we'll just use quarter notes – almost like a classic walking bass line.

First system of musical notation for Formula #3. The bass line consists of four measures of quarter notes: A2, A3, A4, A5; A2, A3, A4, A5; A2, A3, A4, A5; A2, A3, A4, A5. The chord symbol A<sup>7</sup> is indicated below the first measure. The fingering for each measure is 5, 7, 5, 7.

Second system of musical notation for Formula #3. The bass line consists of four measures of quarter notes: A2, A3, A4, A5; A2, A3, A4, A5; A2, A3, A4, A5; A2, A3, A4, A5. The chord symbols D<sup>7</sup> and A<sup>7</sup> are indicated below the first and third measures respectively. The fingering for each measure is 5, 7, 5, 7.

Third system of musical notation for Formula #3. The bass line consists of four measures of quarter notes: A2, A3, A4, A5; A2, A3, A4, A5; A2, A3, A4, A5; A2, A3, A4, A5. The chord symbols E<sup>7</sup>, D<sup>7</sup>, and A<sup>7</sup> are indicated below the first, second, and third measures respectively. The fingering for the first measure is 7, 9, 7, 9, and for the other measures is 5, 7, 5, 7.

If it fits the song, you could also double every note – and this can work whether it's a song with straight 8<sup>th</sup> notes or swung 8<sup>th</sup> notes.

That would look like this:

If you want to hear this bass line in a real world song, check this out:

[Buddy Guy – My Time After A While](#)

### Formula #4

Next, we get a classic blues bass line. This is one that you may have heard on heaps of recordings and it's kind of like the descending version of Formula #3. Instead of mostly going up, this bass line 'falls'.

We're using the exact same notes, just in a slightly different order. Check out Jaco Pastorius' version of *Fannie Mae* to hear this line in action. You'll notice he embellishes the line with a lot of triplets:

[Jaco Pastorius – Fannie Mae](#)

System 1: Bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3. Chord: A7. Fretboard: 5 7 5 7 | 5 7 5 7 | 5 7 5 7 | 5 7 5 7

System 2: Bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3. Chords: D7, A7. Fretboard: 5 7 5 7 | 5 7 5 7 | 5 7 5 7 | 5 7 5 7

System 3: Bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3. Chords: E7, D7, A7. Fretboard: 7 9 7 9 | 5 7 5 7 | 5 7 5 7 | 5 7 5 7

Again, you can play each note twice to make the line more active:

System 4: Bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3. Chord: A7. Fretboard: 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7 | 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7 | 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7 | 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7

System 5: Bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3. Chords: D7, A7. Fretboard: 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7 | 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7 | 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7 | 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7

System 6: Bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3. Chords: E7, D7, A7. Fretboard: 7 7 9 9 7 7 9 9 | 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7 | 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7 | 5 5 7 7 5 5 7 7

## Formula #5

Next, we're going to swap out the 7<sup>th</sup> of every chord with the 6<sup>th</sup> instead. This is a very melodic note choice and it makes for an incredibly versatile bass line. That means over every A chord, we'll have A – C# – E – F#, over the D chords, we'll have D – F# – A – B, and finally over the E chord, E – G# – B – C#.

If we play all these as quarter notes, we'll get this:

The first system of musical notation consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef staff with a double bar line and repeat dots at the beginning. It contains four measures of music, each with a quarter note and a sharp sign. The notes are A, C#, E, and F#. Below the staff, the chord symbol A<sup>7</sup> is written. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with two lines labeled T (top) and B (bottom). It shows four measures of fret numbers: 5 4 7 4, 5 4 7 4, 5 4 7 4, and 5 4 7 4.

The second system of musical notation consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef staff with a double bar line and repeat dots at the beginning. It contains four measures of music. The first two measures have quarter notes D and F#, and the last two measures have quarter notes A and B. Below the staff, the chord symbols D<sup>7</sup> and A<sup>7</sup> are written. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with two lines labeled T (top) and B (bottom). It shows four measures of fret numbers: 5 4 7 4, 5 4 7 4, 5 4 7 4, and 5 4 7 4.

The third system of musical notation consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef staff with a double bar line and repeat dots at the beginning. It contains four measures of music. The first measure has quarter notes E, G#, and B. The second measure has quarter notes D and F#. The last two measures have quarter notes A and B. Below the staff, the chord symbols E<sup>7</sup>, D<sup>7</sup>, and A<sup>7</sup> are written. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with two lines labeled T (top) and B (bottom). It shows four measures of fret numbers: 7 6 9 6, 5 4 7 4, 5 4 7 4, and 5 4 7 4.

You could play this exact bass line over a swung blues with no issues at all. The best thing about this formula though is its versatility. You can do so much with it!

Of course, you can do the obvious things like doubling every note:



A7

D7 A7

E7 D7 A7

When you do this, you can also play around with bouncing back and forth between different notes like this:

A7

D7 A7

E7 D7 A7

This is exactly the kind of line from the Elvis recording of Jailhouse Rock – a classic rock and roll track.

[Elvis Presley – Jailhouse Rock](#)

Instead of coming down from the 6<sup>th</sup>, you can also go up to the root of the chord, just like we did in Formula #3. Of course, then you have to come back down, but you can use the exact same notes you went up on.

This makes each phrase 2 bars though, which is fine, but you have to modify your approach when it comes to the 5-chord and the 4-chord in the last phrase. They're each only one bar long, so we have to revert to the original 1-3-5-6 formula for them:

As always you can double the notes and play swung 8<sup>th</sup> notes if you want to make a shuffle blues line out of it:

This kind of line is exactly what you'll find in the Jimmy Dawkins track, *Little Angel Child*.

[Jimmy Dawkins – Little Angel Child](#)

### Formula #6

Our final formula uses elements from all the other bass lines we've talked about so far. Like the last variation of the last formula, it's a 2-bar phrase, and this is another one you've probably heard hundreds of times before.

The formula for this one is: 1-3-5-6-7-6-5-3-1

Again, you have to modify your approach when we get to the last phrase because each chord only lasts one bar. In this case, I've just put in the first half of the phrase.

System 1: Bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. Chord: A7. Fretboard: 5 4 7 4 | 5 4 7 4 | 5 4 7 4 | 5 4 7 4

System 2: Bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. Chords: D7, A7. Fretboard: 5 4 7 4 | 5 4 7 4 | 5 4 7 4 | 5 4 7 4

System 3: Bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. Chords: E7, D7, A7. Fretboard: 7 6 9 6 | 5 4 7 4 | 5 4 7 4 | 5 4 7 4

If you doubled every note, you'd get this:

System 1 (Doubled): Bass line with double notes. Chord: A7. Fretboard: 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4 | 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4 | 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4 | 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4

System 2 (Doubled): Bass line with double notes. Chords: D7, A7. Fretboard: 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4 | 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4 | 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4 | 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4

System 3 (Doubled): Bass line with double notes. Chords: E7, D7, A7. Fretboard: 7 7 6 6 9 9 6 6 | 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4 | 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4 | 5 5 4 4 7 7 4 4

You can find this kind of line in tons of tunes, but perhaps the most famous is another Elvis recording, *Blue Suede Shoes*. This recording uses the simpler quarter note-based line:

### [Elvis Presley – Blue Suede Shoes](#)

Notice how we went from relatively simple lines, just using the roots of the chords and went all the way to phrases played across multiple bars using 5 different notes over every chord?

These lines are varied enough that they can get you through a ton of different playing situations.

Are there other ways to get through the blues form?

Absolutely! But these are a great place to get started, and once you've mastered these, there's nothing stopping you from learning even more.

I highly encourage you to go through and check out the recording examples I've provided for you. It's one thing to read about these formulas and understand them intellectually, but it's another thing entirely to hear *how* they're played.

In some ways, *how* they are played is even more important than *what* is being played.

Of course if you have questions or need some clarification, just let me know – I'm only an email away.

Thanks so much for downloading this guide, and if it's helped you, send me an email letting me know how. I'd love to hear from you.

Cheers,

LUKE

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