

# Classic Blues and New Orleans Piano Styles: Lesson 11

## (How to improvise with 1-Bar Blues Licks)

by Ron Drotos

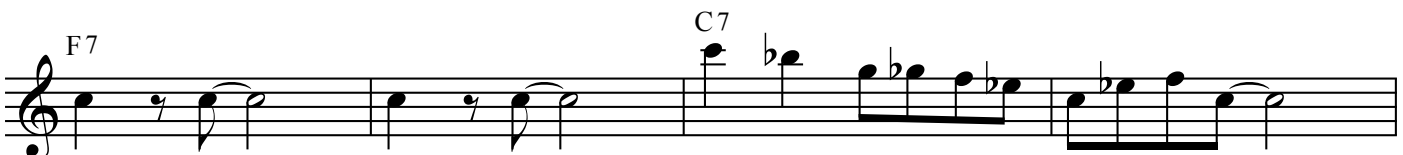
Blues "Licks" are simply short phrases that you can memorize and use while soloing. You can learn traditional blues licks from recordings, or make up your own. Licks that are very short and rhythmic are sometimes also called "riffs," like I've been calling them in some of the previous lessons. In this series of lessons on licks, however, I'll be using the term "lick," because some of them will be short and some long. (I hope that makes sense!)

Let's start by looking at a few short 1-bar licks and how to use them to construct 12-bar blues choruses. You can use whatever LH accompaniment you like, and experiment with both "straight" and "swing" 8th notes. (Be sure to watch the video for a thorough explanation.)

1. Here's a simple, 1-bar blues lick



2. Here's an easy yet very effective way to use a 1-bar lick in a solo.  
Play the lick in m.1, repeat it in m.2, and then freely improvise in m. 3-4.  
Do the same for each 4-measure phrase.



I made the lick fit the chords here.....



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3. Here's the exact same blues chorus, but with one significant change:

For the 3rd phrase, I abandoned the lick and freely improvised.

Musical notation for exercise 3, showing a blues chorus with three phrases. The first two phrases use a specific lick, while the third phrase is a free improvisation. Chords C7, F7, and G7 are indicated above the staff.

4. You can also keep the lick's rhythm, but play it on different pitches.

(This works best when the lick has a "catchy" rhythm, like this one does.)

Musical notation for exercise 4, showing the same blues chorus as exercise 3, but with the lick's rhythm transposed to different pitches in the third phrase. Chords C7, F7, and G7 are indicated above the staff.

5. Here's another 1-bar lick to practice with.

6. And another.

Musical notation for exercises 5 and 6, showing two separate 1-bar licks on a single staff.