

Chapter 1

Every Day I Have the Blues . . . Hallelujah!

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering the roots of blues
 - ▶ Identifying the different parts of the guitar and how they work
 - ▶ Differentiating between acoustic and electric guitars
 - ▶ Looking like a blues player
 - ▶ Testing your blues guitar knowledge
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Playing the blues is a healthy way of expressing emotion — therapeutic even. The great irony about the blues is that it's *fun* — don't let those gloomy lyrics fool you for one second. Experiencing the blues is entertainment for both the listener and the player. Because the blues is fun and healthy, it draws people into jam sessions, crowded clubs, and grand concert halls.

To listen to the blues is to be healed. To play the blues is to be a healer. Want to help people? Forget about being a doctor; you're only allowed to see one patient at a time. And there's no pill you can prescribe for an ailing mojo. Be a blues player instead and help thousands at a time just by playing a smokin' blues riff on overdrive. Now, that's what I call medicinal!

The blues has a wide range of sounds, feels, emotions, and passions, and people have many different associations when you say the word *blues*. To some, the blues is the sparse-sounding acoustic fingerpicking of Robert Johnson. To others, it's the gritty sound of Muddy Waters in a crowded club on Chicago's South Side or the hard-rock wall of sound coming from a stadium playing host to Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, or Johnny Winter. It doesn't matter which particular image is conjured, because it's *all* the blues. After reading this book, playing through the examples, and listening to the CD, you may have a more complete and expanded picture of all that the blues can be.

Capturing the Blues Train from Its Departure Then to Its Arrival Now

As perfect as the blues is for the guitar, it didn't come from the guitar. The blues sprang from the unaccompanied human voice. There have been sad songs since the dawn of music, but the blues is a special kind of sadness that was born out of the African American experience at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. When the African-influenced field hollers and work songs met European folk songs, spirituals, and ballads (supported by harmonicas, banjos, guitars, washtub basses, fiddles, drums, spoons, and other instruments of the time) a unique form of music emerged that was neither wholly African nor European, but totally American.



Today, the blues can be anything from a solo acoustic guitarist strumming simple chords to a big band with a horn section, a lead singer, and background vocalists. Artists as diverse as blues diva Bonnie Raitt, rockabilly giant Brian Setzer (and his band), rock god Eric Clapton, and the great traditionalists B.B. King and Buddy Guy all play the blues. That sort of diversity proves how flexible, adaptable, and universal the blues is. It doesn't matter if you feel like crying in your beverage, listening thoughtfully, singing along, or dancing the jitterbug, you can find a blues format for any mood and occasion.

When Muddy Waters famously said, "The blues had a baby and they called it rock 'n' roll," he was both chronologically as well as metaphorically correct: Of all the popular forms of American music, blues was the first.

The pieces of blues that made the genre

The music that draws on the subjects of misfortune, infidelity, and bad karma for its inspiration pretty much sums up the blues. The great W.C. Handy, known as the father of the blues, once said that the blues were conceived in an aching heart, but it's pretty hard to tell what kind of guitar playing is appropriate for an ailing ventricle. However, you can identify certain common characteristics that help define blues guitar — including song structure, harmony, scales, and phrasing techniques. You can study and master these elements to create this special form of music that expresses a special kind of sorrow in song — special because it's not completely without hope, humor, irony, useful life philosophies, and, dare I say it, some joy. That's the blues for you.

I get into forms and progressions in Chapter 6, but you should know the song structure that makes the blues the blues. Besides the subject matter, blues uses a simple form that people can immediately understand. Classic blues consists of two lines that are the same in length and verbiage, followed by a third line that's different. Here's a quick example of the blues scheme:

Woke up this mornin' and I'm feelin' so blue.

Woke up this mornin' and I'm feelin' so blue.

My baby left me and I don't know what to do.

Believe it or not, that's the format that started it all. If you can think of a blues song — such as “Kansas City” or “Hound Dog” or “Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On” — you see that the formula applies.

The place of the blues' conception

The blues was born in the southern United States out of the African American experience in the fields and work camps that sprung up in the late 19th and early 20th century. Though many parallel developments took place, the most important growth occurred in a very specific part of the southern United States — the region in the state of Mississippi known as the Delta.



The “Delta” in Delta blues describes not the Mississippi River Delta, which is in southern Louisiana, but a vast alluvial plain a couple hundred miles to the north in northwest Mississippi. Many of the great early blues players were born and lived in this cotton-growing region, loosely outlined by the Mississippi River to the west, the Yazoo River to the east, Memphis to the north, and Vicksburg to the south.



The Delta isn't really a delta in the geological sense, nor is it limited to the state of Mississippi, because there were important developments and contributions from artists that came from Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana, too. In most uses, *Delta blues* denotes more of a style instead of a narrow geographic perimeter.

Rejoicing over 100 years of blues: The shifting shape of the genre

Now roughly 100 years old, American blues has become timeless music, and its success over the past half century can be attributed in part to those blues-rock musicians who've kept the blues' torch burning and brought successive generations into clubs, concert halls, and record stores.

The blues remains so relevant and compelling because its songs are about honest, human feelings. Or maybe it's because the blues captures the human condition in a way that slick pop music or digital electronica can't. Blues is the music of real people, real lives, and real life lessons.

As to why the blues-rock age saw the worshipping of so many rock gods, it seems that the blues was custom-made for six strings, so any development in

guitar technology, guitar styles, and creative guitarists themselves naturally include the blues. While bawdy singers front many a blues band, you'd be hard pressed to find a blues group without a guitar player to lend the sense of credibility, history, and heart that the blues demands. The guitar captures the nuances of blues soul in a way no other instrument can. Blues is simply the *perfect* guitar music.



The newer generation (born after 1970) is out there and coming into its own, too. I cover many of the most recognizable names in Chapters 12 and 13. To see such young players working so hard at mastering the craft, studying the history, and paying homage and respect to their blues elders encourages me that the blues is flourishing safely in the hands of the next generation.

The qualities that made blues cats hit the big-time

In addition to all the great chords, riffs, and solos you get in *Blues Guitar For Dummies*, you can also read about many of the most important blues guitarists who helped shaped the history of the blues and why you should care about them. A blues guitarist can be significant for many reasons, but the criteria I use for including the artists that I do in this book is that he or she must meet at least one of the following requirements:

- ✓ **He or she had great influence and a historical impact.** Muddy Waters, for example, merits inclusion not because of superior technique (although his playing was certainly formidable), but because he transplanted the blues from its acoustic, rural Mississippi roots to post-War Chicago, where it exploded into an entire movement that would define “Chicago blues” and influence everyone who played electric blues after that, including Eric Clapton and Stevie Ray Vaughan. No Muddy, no Stevie.
- ✓ **The guitarist has technique that is innovative or unsurpassed in virtuosity.**
 - Robert Johnson, for example, was at the tail end of the Delta blues movement and learned many of his licks from other players. But he was an extraordinary player and provided the best examples we have on record for Delta blues playing.
 - A lot of people tried to meld electric blues with the emerging heavy rock sound in the mid-1960s, but none quite as masterfully as Eric Clapton did. He was the best of a generation.
 - In the 1980s, Stevie Ray Vaughan was so good that you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who even got close to him in terms of raw talent.

- ✓ **The guitarist's style is unique or so highly evolved that it's responsible for his or her widespread success.** Sometimes you don't have to be the greatest player to achieve greatness. With many blues guitarists, it's not all about the technique, but the artistic work created with modest technique. Bonnie Raitt may not have the blistering chops of a Duane Allman or Stevie Ray Vaughan, but her beautiful tone, impeccable taste, and unmatched lyricism in world-class songs have advanced the blues into the mainstream like no other blues player has before.

Often a guitarist featured in this book has more than one of the three qualities in the preceding list. Take a couple of examples:

- ✓ T-Bone Walker, the great early pioneer of electric blues, was not only technically dazzling and innovative, but also historically significant as the first electric blues player to establish the guitar as a lead instrument, thereby influencing every great player in the succeeding generation.
- ✓ Jimi Hendrix is the best at everything as far as the guitar, the blues being no exception. He scores top marks in all three categories, so that's why he's in the book. Also, if you leave Jimi Hendrix out of any discussion about guitars and guitarists, people get really, really mad at you and make your life miserable.

You may or may not see your particular favorite blues guitarist in the pages of this book, which is understandable, as there are too many great blues guitarists for any book to list them all. But every guitarist you do read about here in some way changed the world of blues for the better — for listeners as well as other blues guitarists who heard them.

It's Not All Pain and Suffering — The Lighter Side of Blues

Built into the blues is its own sense of irony and even humor. How else could you sing of such misfortune if you didn't retain a sense of humor about the whole thing? It's not uncommon to see performers smiling while singing about loss and heartache, yet they're still totally sincere and convincing. It's maintaining that objective perspective — along with the hope of retribution and revenge — that keeps the blues performer going while airing his life's disappointments.

The blues isn't above parody, either, and this often includes the blues' strict sense of who's "allowed to have the blues" and who isn't. For example, you do not have a "right to sing the blues" if you live in Beverly Hills, make a

killing in the futures market, or think that “my baby done me wrong” means losing your villa in Tuscany to your spouse in negotiation.



Among the early African American blues artists, the word *baby* was sometimes used as code for the *boss man*. This way the performer could complain or take a shot at the overseer on the farm or plantation without him being any the wiser. Of course, the African American audience understood.

Surveying the Means to Make the Music: The Guitar in All Its Glory

Just as soon as people could utter the primitive strains of proto-blues music, they sought to reinforce their vocal efforts through instruments. Unfortunately, the Fender Stratocaster and the Marshall stack weren't invented yet, so people did what blues players always did in the early part of the blues' history: They made do with what was available. And in the rural South at the turn of the 20th century, that wasn't much.

Some of the first blues instruments included a one-string *diddley bow* (a wire stretched between two points and plucked with one hand while the other changed pitches with a bottleneck or knife dragged up and down the string) and a banjo, descendant of the African *banjar* that was constructed from a hide-covered gourd and a stick. The harmonica followed close behind. Guitars didn't arrive on the scene until after the Civil War when they were left behind in the South by Union soldiers.



All guitars have six strings (except for 12-string guitars, of course) and frets, whether they're electric or acoustic. You can play chords, riffs, and single-note melodies on virtually any guitar. When the first mass-produced electric guitars were publicly available, in the mid- to late '30s, blues and jazz players similarly flocked to them, and not too much attention was given to what kind of guitar was best for what style of music.

The low-fi acoustic guitar

Early blues musicians weren't professional musicians. They were ordinary working people who created their instruments out of household items: washboards, spoons, pails, and so on. If you were a little more industrious, you

could fashion a homemade guitar out of bailing wire, a broom handle, and a cigar box. Those fortunate enough to acquire an actual guitar would probably have an inexpensive acoustic guitar, perhaps picked up secondhand. As the blues became more popular, many musicians could make a living by traveling around to work camps and *juke joints* (which were roadside places without electricity that offered liquor, dancing, gambling, and sometimes prostitution) playing acoustic guitars and singing the blues for the weary working folk.

The semi-hollowbody electric guitar

Gradually, the different preferences of electric jazz and blues players started to diverge, with jazz players preferring the deeper hollowbody guitars and blues players choosing the thinner-bodied hollow guitars and the semi-hollowbody guitars. (The all-solid-wood guitar, or solidbody, hadn't been invented yet.) Many people consider the semi-hollowbody guitar, such as the Gibson ES-335, to be the ideal type of blues guitar. Driving this choice was the fact that the thinner guitars didn't *feed back* (produce unwanted, ringing tones through the amp) as much as the deeper-bodied guitars, and because blues players generally like to play louder than jazz players, feedback was more of a concern.



The Gibson ES-335 makes my list of one of the greatest guitars for playing the blues. See Chapter 18 for more of the best guitars on the market.

Solidbody electric guitars

Though pioneering rock guitarists like Scotty Moore with Elvis and Danny Cedrone with Bill Haley and the Comets were still playing hollowbody guitars, when rock 'n' roll hit town in the mid-1950s, some people were playing solidbody guitars, blues players included. Two of the most popular solidbody models, the Fender Stratocaster (Figure 1-1a) and the Gibson Les Paul (Figure 1-1b), were both released in the mid-'50s and are still as popular as ever and represent two different approaches to the solidbody guitar. Figure 1-1 shows these two guitars side by side.



In the early 1950s, B.B. King tried his hand with a Fender Esquire (similar to a Telecaster) and a Strat, but after he grabbed the thin hollow and semi-hollow Gibson that he named "Lucille," he never switched back. And Muddy Waters, who played an older, more traditional form of blues, was right in fashion with an early model goldtop Les Paul in the mid-1950s. He eventually settled on his iconic red Telecaster.



Figure 1-1:
The Fender
Stratocaster
and the
Gibson Les
Paul.

The Collision of Two Worlds: Acoustic versus Electric

Electric guitars came on the scene only in the late 1930s, and then only to those who could afford them. Thus, the acoustic guitar in blues had a long run, and the style continued even after the advent of the more-popular electric guitar. The acoustic guitar remained popular for other types of music (mainly folk and country), but for blues, the electric was the instrument of choice from about 1940 on.

Today, both acoustic and electric guitar blues exist. In fact, there are several sub-genres in each. Acoustic guitar includes

- ✓ *Bottleneck* or slide guitar
- ✓ Instrumental blues
- ✓ Singer-songwriter blues

Electric blues has two huge offshoots:

- ✓ *Traditional electric blues*, as practiced today by Robert Cray, Buddy Guy, and B.B. King
- ✓ *Blues rock*, which was started in the 1960s by British electric guitarists and continues on through Eric Clapton and John Mayer



Acoustics and electrics both produce great blues music, as will virtually any other type of guitar, whether it's an acoustic nylon-string classical or a purple metallic-flake solidbody with green lightning bolts. The blues is unrestricted when it comes to instruments.

Today, acoustic and electric blues each offer a guitarist a world of history, repertoire, styles, instruments, techniques, and heroes to study and emulate. It's no longer a conflict of "go electric or be a front-porch picker," as it may have seemed in the late 1930s. Many players, Eric Clapton being a notable example, are excellent acoustic-blues players and have paid tribute in concert and in recordings to their acoustic blues roots.



Though you should always strive for the best guitar you can afford, be aware that blues guitarists from Robert Johnson on often played cheap instruments like Stellas, Kalamazoos, and Nationals. Hound Dog Taylor performed timeless slide classics on 1960s Japanese solidbody guitars. Sometimes the funkier the guitar, the funkier the blues can be.

Getting a Grip on How Guitars Work

To understand why the guitar works so well for the blues, you must first understand how guitars work in the first place. In the next sections, take a look at how guitars produce their tone and how your approach to them makes them so expressive.

You've gotta use your hands — both of them

Of course, you play any instrument with your hands, but in the guitar, the two hands perform different tasks — unlike the piano or saxophone where both hands engage in the same kind of action. In a guitar, one hand strikes the strings (usually the right hand), and one hand decides what pitch to sound through fretting. The left hand's job doesn't end with just fretting, either. It has additional functions, too, when it comes to connecting notes together through slurs (covered in Chapter 10), which it can do without the right hand. The left hand is also responsible for two very important blues guitar techniques: vibrato and string bending (also discussed in Chapter 10).



The right hand is the engine that drives the sound. All the rhythm and dynamics (loud and soft sound) rests with the right hand, and you can't play even moderately fast and clean unless you've developed your right-hand technique (check out Chapter 5 for more info). But the training for the right hand is different than from the left. In the end, though, the two must coordinate to create music. (Chapter 4 gives you more info on training the left hand.)

Producing the tones: String vibration and pitch

A guitar is a string instrument, related to the violin and cello in that it generates tones by means of a vibrating string. You set the string in motion by striking or plucking it, which causes it to vibrate, which produces a musical pitch. For the sound to be heard by human ears, the vibrating string must be amplified in some way. In acoustic instruments, the body acts as the sound chamber, or acoustic amplifier. In electric instruments, the body contributes no amplification to the sound at all. Instead, the amplification is produced by the amplifier, which attaches to the guitar by a removable cable.

Some factors influence the string's pitch:

- ✓ **Fretting:** You can also change the pitch by shortening the string or, more practically, shortening its effective vibrating length. That's what you do when you *fret* (press a string to the fretboard at a certain location on the neck). You're playing shorter versions of the same string. Fretting allows you to play any pitch — flat, sharp, or natural — in the guitar's entire range. Check out Chapter 4 for more information about fretting.
- ✓ **Mass:** A string's mass, or thickness, influences its pitch. The thicker the string, the lower the pitch. That's why the low-pitched strings are thicker than the high-pitched ones.
- ✓ **Tension:** You can change a string's pitch by varying the tension of the string. Higher tension produces higher pitched notes. On a guitar, you tighten and loosen a string with the *tuning key* — a geared mechanism located on the headstock. Turning the tuning key is also how you tune the guitar, which is covered in Chapter 3.

Electric guitars only: Pickups and amplification

Getting your sound out of your electric guitar and to your adoring masses requires you to have command over not only your touch and technique but also the features and functions provided by your particular guitar. Two

important features of electric guitars (or plugged-in acoustic guitars) are the pickups and the amplification.



Pickups are the little metal bars that “read” the sound coming off the vibrating string and are important because they transfer the sound down the line. The *amplification* part of the system is what makes the almost inaudible signal loud enough to be heard.

An acoustic guitar (or unplugged guitar) is pretty much a what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of instrument. But when you bring the power of electricity into the picture, now that’s a whole other story. Although you strike the strings on an acoustic and a sound occurs by coming out of the body of the guitar and through the sound hole (or F-holes on an archtop guitar), when you play an electric guitar your sound filters through an amp and takes your sound to the screaming masses at Madison Square Garden. What the multitudes hear is the pickups underneath the strings “sensing” (they don’t “hear” because they’re not using acoustics) the motion of the string through disturbances in their magnetic field. That disturbance generates electrical current that gets sent through a wire out of the guitar to your amp (see Chapter 15 for more info on amps).

Performing and Looking Like a Blues Player

Never forget that playing the blues is supposed to be entertaining — even if only to yourself. And after you engage in the business of entertaining, you are, by definition, an entertainer and a performer. So start thinking like a star! The following sections help you to get into the groove of being a blues performer.

Expanding and filling your brain with know-how

Besides having a guitar and a copy of *Blues Guitar For Dummies*, you can take several other key actions to help you become a better blues player.

- ✓ **Groove to some tunes.** Listening to the blues is about the best thing you can do with your time when you’re not practicing the guitar, so start expanding your blues library with CDs and mp3s of classic blues recordings.



Listen to the blues not only as a casual observer but also as a musician. Listen to the chord changes and how the guitarist strums. Take note of licks or lead passages that are memorable. You may be able to use them in your own playing. (This is perfectly legal in blues.)

- ✔ **Get your nose in a book.** Read as much as you can in books and articles about the blues so you can sort out the history and discover the great artists who practiced this noble art. Knowing the different periods of the blues and the influences help in your appreciation. You can also check out Chapters 11, 12, 13, and 19 in this book. I cover a bit of history and the people who influenced blues guitar.
- ✔ **Rock out in your garage.** No matter how many records you listen to and books you read, you can't replace human interaction as a vital component in your blues education. Invite some guitar-playing friends over for a few jam sessions in your garage or basement (or wherever the noise may be the least annoying to those around you). Pairing yourself with one or two strong players can help make you a better guitarist because you're going to try to keep up with your friends.
- ✔ **Seek help.** Having a teacher is important because he (or she) can focus in on your particular weaknesses and bad habits and help bring those aspects of your musicianship up to snuff with your strengths. A teacher also guides you in your particular chosen style, recommending appropriate exercises and listening examples and providing an organized lesson plan on how to bring you closer to your goal. An experienced teacher or player can often help you pick out your first guitar and other gear purchases, too. Check out Chapter 14 for more info on buying guitars.

Looking the part

Many people decide they want to play the blues because they want to perform. Of course, performing can mean simply playing with a garage band on evenings or weekends or playing in public to perform. But either way, you definitely want to put on your stage face even when you're with a group of friends versus when you're shedding a tricky rhythm alongside your metronome in your bedroom.



First things first, acoustics and electrics satisfy different objectives, and you really need to have both types of guitars to be a complete blues player. Although that advice may signal financial pressure, you'll find that having any excuse to acquire and buy more guitars is worth its weight in gold. So you can say to your spouse or significant other, "But dear, I *have* to have this other guitar. It's in the book. Look it up!"

Aside from getting a good axe, the best way to look like a blues player is to play like one. But you can take some external steps to help the illusion along:

1. Move your body in time to the music.

Getting down not only makes you look cool, but also it reinforces the rhythms of the music and your instrument with the parts of your body. That's essential for internalizing the music and making it your own,

instead of a mechanical execution of technique. If you feel self-conscious about writhing around like a contortionist in public, try at first just moving your head along in time to the playing.

2. Close your eyes, open them, and squint occasionally.

3. Make little facial expressions when you play a soulful bend.

Watch the greats when they play, especially B.B. King. One of B.B. King's wives once described the look he sometimes gets on his face when playing as if he was eating a lemon.



As far as wardrobe goes, what you wear onstage should be different than what you wear normally. You can dress up or dress down to play the blues, but it's a good idea to find your stage garb and keep it unique from the clothes you go to work in or grocery shopping. You might just don an extra ring, but you should make yourself look — and feel — a little special when stepping onto a stage. Even a flannel shirt, torn jeans, and cowboy boots can be a stage uniform — especially if you're a stockbroker in your day job!

Blues Trivia For Dummies

How much do you know about blues guitar? Take this simple test to find out. The following 5 questions test your knowledge of the genre. If you don't know the right answers, don't worry — read this book and you'll end up a soulful, jiving, blues-playing machine (not that you aren't in some way already).

The questions

1. By what name does B.B. King refer to his six-string soul mate (that is, his guitar)?

- A. Bessie
- B. Maybelline
- C. Lucille
- D. Lola

2. The famed Mississippi Delta, birthplace of the blues, is where, exactly?

- A. At the mouth of the Mississippi River, in southern Louisiana
- B. In northwest Mississippi and southwest Arkansas
- C. In central Mississippi, in and around the capital, Jackson
- D. In southern Mississippi and western Louisiana, along the Gulf Coast

3. The legend of the “Crossroads” in blues lore describes what?
- A. The place where the blues was born
 - B. A decision blues performers make when they decide to play the blues
 - C. Where Robert Johnson met the devil and traded his soul for talent
 - D. An intersection in Memphis, famous in blues history because many performers crossed paths there
4. What are “blue” notes?
- A. Notes that singers intone that are in between “real” notes
 - B. Sad notes that make major sounds into minor ones
 - C. The interval of the flatted 3rd, the flatted 7th, and the flatted 5th
 - D. All of the above
5. What is “mojo”?
- A. A skill that enables you to make lucrative investments in the stock market
 - B. A quality that the opposite sex finds irresistible in you
 - C. A play on the French phrase “mot juste” for “apt word choice”
 - D. A type of illicit liquor or “moonshine”

The answers

- 1. C
- 2. B
- 3. C
- 4. D
- 5. B