

How to play “D” Blues

by Verlene Schermer

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I have a lot of fun sitting in on jam sessions with all kinds of musicians – and at some point in the evening, there’s almost always a blues tune or two... It’s fun to watch eyebrows raise and then launch into the blues right along with them – and “yes,” I say, “you can play the blues on “that thing,”” as I’m often asked, and “no, you’re not the first one to come up with “does that make it a blues harp?” But I smile and laugh anyway...

If you’ve never tried playing the blues, and would like to try your hand at it, read on! This article will take you through the steps of playing the blues from simple to complex. You can play along at any level you’re comfortable!

We’ll use the key of D major because for harps tuned in C, even with only C and F levers or harps tuned in 3 flats (and everything between) with full levers, the D major blues can be played even with all the fun lever settings at the third level.

The basic 12 bar blues progression in D major goes sum’in’ like this:

D	G	D	D	
G	G	D	D	
A	G	D	D	

But a blues player always plays more than just the triad. We’ll get to those options later, but first, here’s how to find the basic chords.

1. The first level is simple and sounds less like the blues, but you can play along with someone who is playing blues, or singing blues, and it’ll work.

Set all your C and F levers to C# and F#. Play only major triads for the D, G and A chords. You can play all chords in both hands in root position, or play left hand bass or root 5 octave, with right hand playing a first inversion or other inversions.

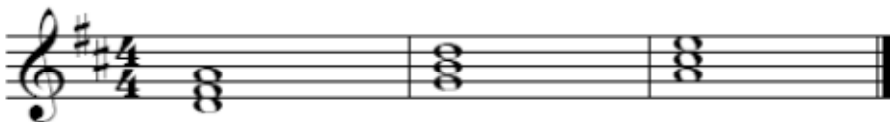
Here’s how:

The D chord is made up of the notes: D F# A.

The G chord is made up of the notes: G B D.

The A chord is made up of the notes A C# E.

If you need to see the notes on the staff, here are the three chords. You can play just the root position chords, or invert them if you know how to do inversions. You can play the same chord in both hands, or play just the bass note (which is the name of the chord) in the left hand with the chord in the right hand.



2. The second level, which is a bit more complex, adds more of the blues sound by adding chord extensions to the triads.

Set all your C and F levers to C# and F#. Play major triads but add in the 6 or the 9 for both D and G, then add either just the 7 or both the 7 and the 9 for the A.

Here's how: Play just root 5 and octave in the left hand, and then play the 3 and the extension(s) in the right. For the right hand, here's how to add the extensions:

The D chord is made up of the notes: D F# A. You can add the E (which is the 9) or the B (which is the 6) or both.

Dadd9: (E)F# A D (E)

D6: F# A B D

D6/9: (E)F# (A) B (D) (E)

The G chord is made up of the notes: G B D. You can add the A (which is the 9) or the E (which is the 6) or both.

Gadd9: (A) B D (G)(A)

G6: B D E (G)

G6/9: (A) B D E (G)(A)

The A chord is made up of the notes A C# E. You can add the G (which is the 7) alone, or also with the B (which is the 9).

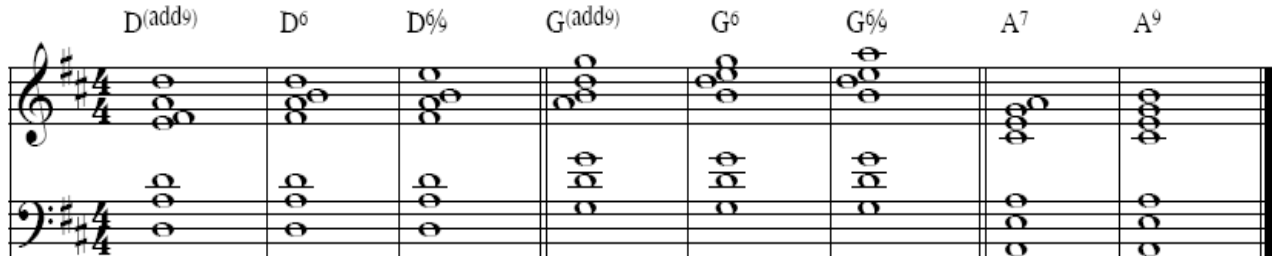
A7: C# (E) G(A)

A9: C# (E) G (B)

Hint: The 9 is the next string higher than the root of the chord. The 6 is the next one higher than the 5 of the chord, and the 7 is the next string lower than the root.

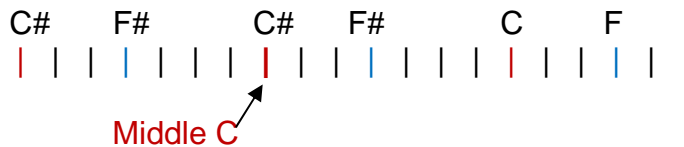
Play just root 5 and octave in the left hand, and then play the 3 and the extension(s) in the right.

For those who would like to see the music notation, here are the above chords with some of the voicings shown.



3. The third level requires that you preset your levers in a way to be able to add the flat 7 to the D and G.

Set all your C and F levers to C# and F#, except for one C and F up high. Depending on the size of your harp, you could keep the C above middle C as a C natural, and the F above that as an F natural. If your harp is smaller you might need to go up another octave.

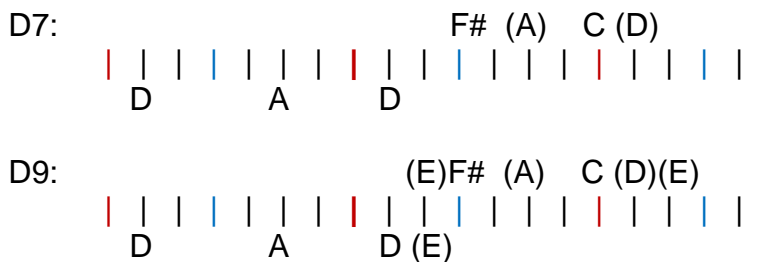


Here's how it works:

For all three chords, play Root 5 and octave or 9 in your left hand.

For the right hand follow these guidelines:

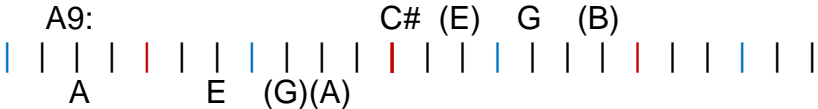
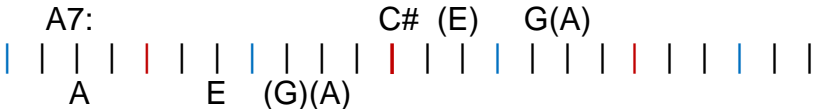
For D7, you will need to include the F# just above middle C and the C natural above middle C. You can also insert the 9 by adding the E above or below the chord. It's up to you if you want to add the A and/or the D, but it's not necessary since the left hand are covering those notes.



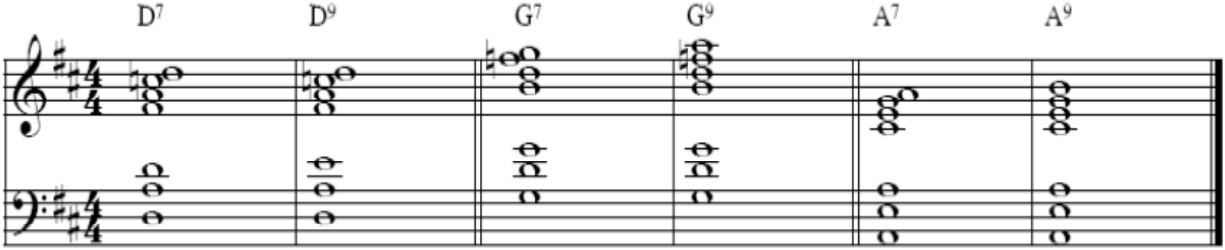
For G7, you will need to include the B above middle C and the next octave F natural. Again, you are welcome to add the 9 (the A) above or below the chord. What you should avoid is playing the F# anywhere – just use the F that is natural.



For A7, you will need to move down to include the middle C#, and then the G above that. Again, add the 9 (the B) above or below the chord. Avoid playing that upper C that is still natural.

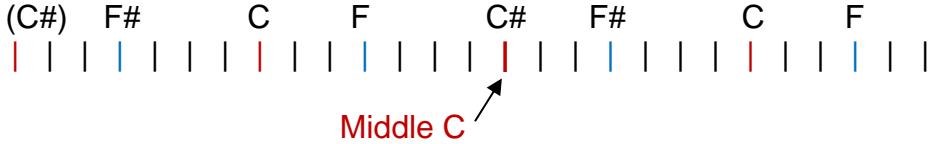


Here is the music notation for the above chords:



More complexity in the LH:

If you are ready for more variation in the LH, you can leave the F below middle C natural, since you aren't using it for any other chord, and also the C below middle C if you have at least another D below that on your harp.



This way you can sometimes play Root 5 and 7 instead of the octave or 9. The 7 for the D is the C natural, so you need to play that lowest D on the harp. The 7 for the G is F natural, so again you'll need to play the lower G bass note.

	(C#)	F#		C	F		C#	F#		C	F
D7:											
	D		A	C							
	(C#)	F#		C	F		C#	F#		C	F
G7:											
		G		D	F						
	(C#)	F#		C	F		C#	F#		C	F
A7:											
			A		E G						

Here are these three bass chords:

Rhythms and “Licks”

Mostly, blues has a 12/8 feel or a 4/4 with triplets. We’ll use the 4/4 and triplets in the examples. You play primarily on the first and third beats of the triplet.

If you play your more solid beats (one and three) with left hand it’ll give you a “kick drum” to play syncopations against. Then right hand can play either full chords or separate notes from the chord on some of those same beats and on the in between beats.

For example:

	ch	ch	s	s	s	s	ch	ch	(ch = chord, s = separate notes)
	1	& a	2	& a	3	& a	4	& a	
	B		B		B		B		(B= bass -- root or root & octave)

Another way to play the left hand is to play just the root on beat 1, just the 5 and octave on beat 2, then repeat for beats 3 and 4 – alternating the root with the combined 5 and octave (or 3 and 5 for the simple method, or 5 and 9 or 7 for the more complex method). Or if you would like, play Root on the numbered beat, 5 on the “a” of that beat, and the octave on the next numbered beat:

For example:

	1	& a	2	& a	3	& a	4	& a
	R		5&o		R		5	o

Then for a more forceful pulse, play just octaves on the numbered beats and the “a” beats of the triplet (the first and third beat in each triplet.)

The right hand can also add other notes as single notes in addition to playing chords. A lead guitarist will play “licks” both between vocal lines, and strung together to create a solo. For now, let’s just throw in a few licks to spice things up. A lick is a pattern that can consist of notes within the chord, plus extensions, and even some extensions we haven’t used yet:

D7 lick: D C A D D F D C D C A
 1 2 3 4



Yes, that's an F natural up high – you can play the full chord to include the F# in the octave below when you play the first note in the lick. The F natural is the sharp 9 of the D7 chord – but that's for another article...

G7 lick: G G G F D A G F D C D
 1 2 3 4



A7 lick: A G E G A C A G E G A
 1 2 3 4



Add the C# and E under the first chord and the C# and G under the C natural (which is the sharp) in this A7 lick and you'll really hear the blues come out!

Now the pattern of the blues in increasing complexity goes sum'in' like this (sing along – just make up the melody!):

D G D D
 First you play the one chord then the four and back to one
 G G D D
 Then you play the four chord and again go back to one
 A G D D
 The five comes on the third line, and you end up back on one.

D7 G7 D7 D7
 The 7s all are flat ones, you'll need to set your levers right
 G7 G7 D7 D9
 The 7s are all flatted now, so get your levers set all right
 A9 G9 D7 D7
 The 9s live just above the roots, so you can dig the blues all night

D7 G7 D7 D9
 If you want to add some more chords, leave the first two lines alone
 G7 G9 D7 D9
 I said if you want to add some more chords, leave the first two all alone
 A9 G9 D9 G9 D9 A9
 But after 5, you can go to 4, then turn around and go on home, yeah 4, and 1, then to 5

(from "How to Play the Blues" © 2009 by Verlene Schermer)

Okay, for you note reading folks, the page that follows is an example of D blues with all three above licks, and then some. The D7 lick is in bar 4, the G7 lick is in bar 6, and the A7 lick is in bar 9.