

# Lick Analysis and the Lick Legend

Licks are the musical sentences of the blues language. Part of learning, understanding, and mastering a language involves studying the "basic parts of speech." The following terms and their abbreviations are used to define these specific elements at work in the licks—they are used to diagram the blues sentences, so to speak. The abbreviations are used throughout in lieu of text blurbs to provide a streamlined but thorough approach to lick analysis.

## The Lick Legend

Single melody tones are cited and circled in the music notation. These are:

**LT**=Leading Tone. A leading tone pushes toward an important melodic tone from a half step below. In blues, leading tones typically move to the third, fifth, or tonic note.

**LN**=Lower Neighbor note. A note either a half step or whole step below a principal tone.

**NH**=Non-Harmonic tone. These would include the 2nd or 9th, 4th or 11th, and 6th or 13th degrees of the scale.

**BN**=Blue Note. In blues, these include the flatted 5th/augmented 4th, the minor 3rd in a major or dominant context, and the minor 7th.

Larger structural devices such as specific figures of three notes or greater and turnarounds are cited and bracketed in the notation. These include:

**ARP**=Arpeggio (preceded by a chord name, such as C ARP)

**CA**=Chromatic Ascent. Three or more chromatic notes in a row moving higher in pitch.

**CD**=Chromatic Descent. Three or more chromatic notes in a row moving lower in pitch.

**RM**=Reverse Mordent. An ornament commonly found in blues. It involves the alternation of a main note with its upper neighbor.

**RF**=Repeated Figure. These are the basis for the riff concept in blues playing.

**IMIT**=Imitative procedure at work.

**Q: and A:**=Question and Answer phrases. The "call and response" procedure is an important aspect of larger blues melody structure.

Every lick is defined by an overall context—either a Basic Scale or a Basic Tonality, depending on its melodic (single notes) or chordal nature. Furthermore, the harmonic situation of each lick is described via the chord symbols I, IV, or V below the TAB staff. These will aid you in using the phrases purposefully against specific chord progression areas in the 12-bar blues form. A suggested tempo feel is provided for each lick: Fast Swing, Moderato, Slow, etc., to further guide you in applying these phrases in your music.

Finally, once you have grasped the essentials of lick analysis, begin your own investigations. Pick your favorite blues improvisations and listen for these devices at work in the music of the greats. Be on the lookout for imitative contours in melodies and riffs, question-and-answer phrases, and other thematic development strategies. This sort of listening and thinking opens the door to a deeper understanding and assimilation of the blues language.