

guitar

★ ROBERT JOHNSON ★ KING OF THE DELTA BLUES

GUITAR TRANSCRIPTIONS & DETAILED LESSONS FOR 28 SONGS

By
Dave Rubin



HAL LEONARD

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Kind Hearted Woman Blues

Recorded Monday, November 23, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA 2580-1)

The first song at the first session contains the only solo that Johnson recorded. This may seem surprising in light of his vaunted instrumental expertise, however, his entire repertoire is overflowing with classic Delta blues licks, riffs, and fills.

“Kind Hearted Woman” is an excellent introduction to the essential techniques of Robert Johnson’s standard-tuning style: descending turnarounds, diminished chord forms, and a steady “ground rhythm” provided by his thumping thumb. (Note: chord names and notes will refer to the chords in parentheses. In addition, except where noted, use your thumb for the bass notes [down stems] and a combination of the middle and ring fingers to strum [upstroke] or pluck the notes on the treble strings.)

FIGURE 1

Study

The intro uses a combination of dominant 7th, diminished, and minor 6th chords derived from one basic chord shape blended with a descending pedal tone sequence to form a “double turnaround.” Note how they tastefully imply I–IV–I–V chord changes. These seamless patterns occur throughout Johnson’s repertoire and have become a part of virtually every blues guitarist’s lexicon.

Performance

Place your fingers thusly for the A7 chord in measure 1 (from low to high): index, ring, middle, and pinky. When you get to the A°7 chord on beat 3, tighten up your formation by sliding your ring, middle, and pinky fingers down one fret. When you get to the Dm6/A chord on beat 5 (actually begun on the upbeat of beat 4), slide the same three fingers down one more fret, all the while maintaining your index finger on fret 7 (A, the root note). This may require a bit of shifting, but it definitely is possible. If you have problems, you can always grab this chord with your middle, ring, index, and pinky fingers on strings 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively.

In measure 2, move your pinky down to fret 5 on string 1 and leave it there as a pedal tone while you descend on string 4 with your ring and middle fingers through beat 3. Beat 4 requires some fancy footwork (*finger* work!) to access that Dm/F form. Barre across fret 2 with your index finger and place your middle finger on the F note at fret 3. You will now have your barring finger in place for the snappy hammer and pull-off (via your middle finger, which must make a quick jump from string 4 on the upbeat of beat 4).

In measure 3, play the E7 chord with your index and ring fingers on the G# and D notes, respectively, leaving your middle finger for the B note on fret 2. It has to be done this way in order to allow the high notes to sustain over top of the E5 (“blues” power chord) underneath. This may be a stretch for us mortals—take a look at the length of Johnson’s fingers in the photo booth shot. Did someone say a giant spider is crawling across the fingerboard?

Fig. 1

Capo II
Intro Moderately Slow ♩ = 82 (♩ = ♩³)

B7 B°7 Em6/B B B7/A E/G# Em/G B/F# F#7
*(A7) (A°7) (Dm6/A) (A) (A7/G) (D/F#) (Dm/F) (A/E) (E7)

1. I got a kind -

mf
w/ fingers

TAB

*Symbols in parentheses represent chord names (implied tonality) respective to capoed guitar.
Symbols above reflect harmony implied by vocals. Capoed fret is "0" in TAB.

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FIGURE 2

Study

Measures 3 and 4 of verse 1 contain a signature lick involving the hip $\flat 5$ th note from the blues scale, thereby implying a diminished chord based on the tonic. The wonderful dissonance of the fretted $E\flat$ ($\flat 5$ th) against the open 5th never fails to ignite one's musical imagination.

Performance

Form the A7 chord on beat 1 of measure 1 by using your index, ring, and middle fingers, from low to high. Dig how the formation looks like an open D major chord. On beat 4 ($A^\circ 7$), move your hand down one fret while maintaining the chord shape. Note that Johnson does not pick string 3 when he makes this move.

Fig. 2

B7 B7 B7
(A7) (A°7) (A7)

I got a kind -

TAB

FIGURE 3

Study

Another signature lick (that Muddy Waters appropriated and passed on to the blues world) begins verse 2. Once again, Johnson implies movement from the I7 to the I° chord.

Performance

Make the same shape for the A7 chord in measure 1 as you used for the intro turnaround. Slide it down one fret for the diminished and back up again for the 7th chord.

Fig. 3

Verse

The musical score for Figure 3, Verse, is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 1-2) features a guitar melody in the top staff with lyrics "2. I love my ba - by. My ba - by don't love me." and a bass line in the bottom staff. The second system (measures 3-4) continues the melody and bass line, with lyrics "I love my". The third system (measures 5-6) shows the final part of the verse. Chord symbols are provided above the guitar staff: B7 (A7) for measures 1-2, B°7 (A°7) for measure 3, B7 (A7) for measure 4, B°7 (A°7) for measure 5, and B7 (A7) for measure 6. The guitar staff includes triplets and slides, while the bass staff shows fret numbers and slide markings.

FIGURE 4

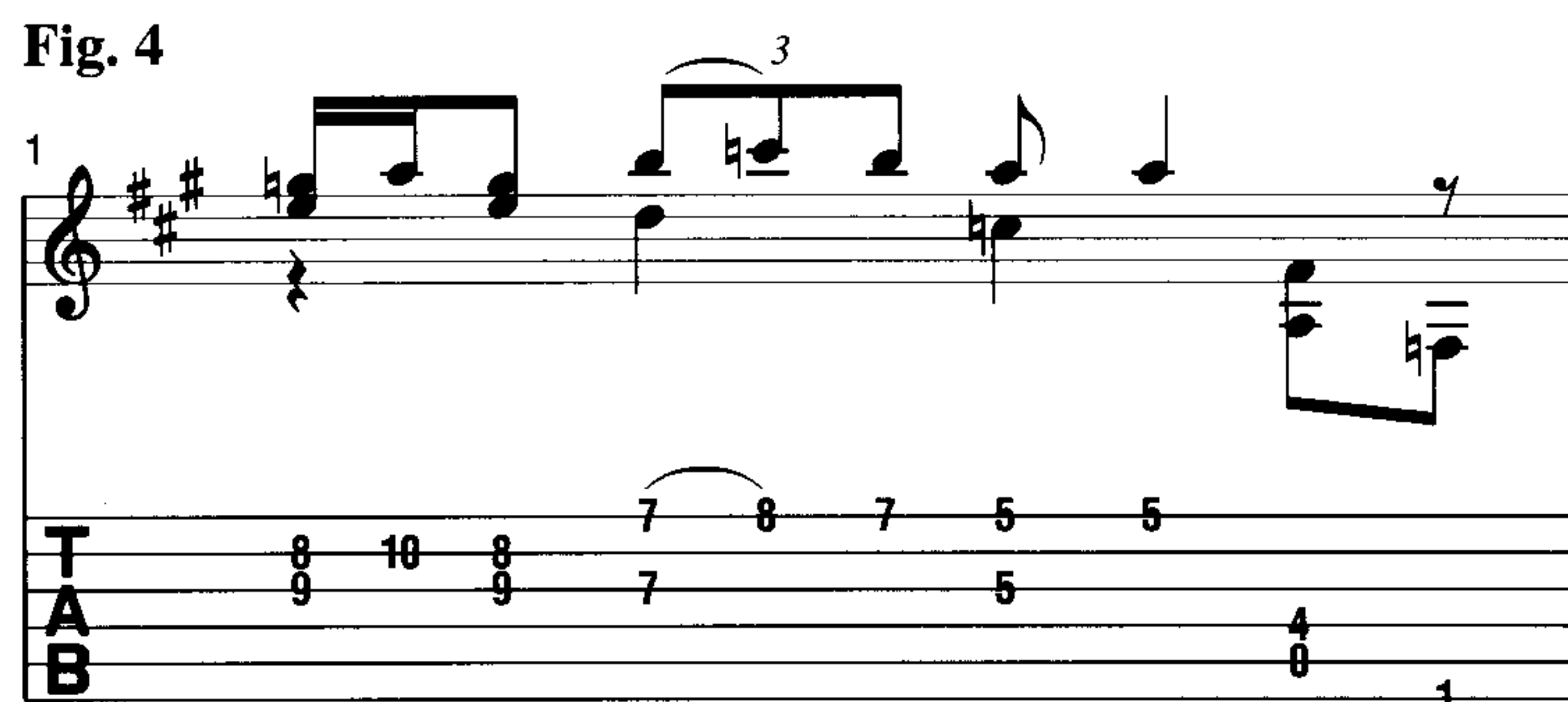
Study

In measure 4 (I chord) of the solo, Johnson plays a sophisticated series of double stops and single notes. He combines diatonic notes (E, A, B, D, and F \sharp ; the 5th, root, 9th, 4th, and 6th) with blues scale notes (G and C; the \flat 7th and \flat 3rd) to imply the A7 chord change.

Performance

If you use your middle and index fingers to access the G/E dyad on beat 1, your hand will be in position to add the A note at fret 10 with your ring finger. Then, by barring strings 3 and 1 with your index finger, you can easily pluck the double-stops (with the thumb and index fingers of your right hand) at frets 7 and 5. Hammer the C (\flat 3rd) at fret 8 with your middle finger.

You should know that the bulk of the solo consists of chord shapes that appear with regularity in Johnson's work. In other words, it is rather conservative in nature, perhaps reflecting his desire to get a good, clean performance down to begin his first recording session.



I Believe I'll Dust My Broom

Recorded Monday, November 23, 1936
(SA-2581-1)

“I Believe I'll Dust My Broom” has gone on to become one of Johnson's most famous songs and a bonafide blues classic. A perfect blending of lead and rhythm parts—a skill Johnson excelled at—the cut boogie back-up grooves and swings as effortlessly as if a fat back rhythm section was supporting it.

For a song that has been covered and imitated so widely, most notably by electric slide guitarist Elmore James in his 1951 ensemble version, the exact tuning that Johnson employed was publicly unknown until October of 1998. It was at that time that the results of over two years of research by the author, Jim Schustedt, Jeff Schroedl, and Edward Komara were published in *Guitar One* magazine. Revealed in the article was a “mystery tuning” that Johnson only used on “I Believe I'll Dust My Broom” and “Phonograph Blues” take 2. Dubbed the “Aadd9 tuning” (E–B–E–A–C♯–E), it is only one step away (B instead of A on string 5) from open A tuning (Johnson's favorite). The change is significant, however, as it places the root on string 6 rather than string 5. Right off the bat this allows boogie lines to be played in relationship to the I chord on the two bottom strings, and melodic blues licks to be easily played on the top three strings. As you will see, Johnson takes advantage of both of these attributes along with several others. Most open tunings (A, G, D, etc.) usually make chord forms and bass accompaniment easier to play, especially in conjunction with slide guitar, and Aadd9 is no different in that respect. That said, though, much skill is necessary to replicate *all* of the subtleties contained in this Delta blues masterpiece.

FIGURE 1

Study

The two-measure intro/turnaround immediately displays the enhanced harmony available via the Aadd9 tuning. On beat 3 in measure 1, a hip $\flat 5$ th (B \flat) from the blues scale is inserted in the cadence taking place on string 4. But the real payoff is in measure 2 with the resolution to the V (B) chord. A cool B9 arpeggio lays right across the strings around fret 7. In one form or another, Johnson inserts this sophisticated voicing in measure 12 of each verse. Though this chord can be executed in open E tuning, the resulting form is no where near as smooth, harmonious, or as convenient to reach.

Performance

This intro contains one of the classic Robert Johnson turnarounds. If you master it now, it will help you once you reach the other songs that incorporate it. Note the fingerings added next to the notes. Pay particular attention to measure 2, where a change is made from the index finger at fret 7 on string 4 to the middle finger barring at fret 7 on strings 6 and 5. This may feel awkward and unorthodox (which it is!) at first, but with practice you will soon see the logic. If you look at Johnson's hand position in the “dime store photo,” you will note the unusual length of his fingers and the ease with which he could barre with his middle finger on the bass strings.

Aadd9 Tuning; Tune Down 1/2 Step:

Intro

Moderately ♩ = 98 (♩ = ♩³)

*Chord symbols reflect implied tonality.

****Sung as even eighth notes.**

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Study

Performance

The real genius of Johnson's unique tuning reveals itself in the fingering for this lick. Due to the interval of a $\flat 3^{\text{rd}}$ (C \sharp to E at concert pitch) between strings 2 and 1, you can play D/B with just your index finger rather than with your index and ring fingers as would be required in open E tuning. To grab the B \flat ($\flat 5^{\text{th}}$) and E notes on beat 3, slide your index finger down to fret 9 and reach up to fret 12 with your ring finger. Though this type of index-finger barring may seem awkward, it is absolutely necessary for accurately performing Johnson's music.

E7

The musical score for "I Believe" by The Beatles is presented in three staves. The top staff is for the guitar, the middle for the bass, and the bottom for the tablature. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The guitar part features a melodic line with triplets and a final phrase. The bass part provides a rhythmic foundation with triplets and a final phrase. The tablature shows the fret numbers for each string, including a double bar line and a 7/7 measure.

FIGURE 3

Study

Measure 10 (IV chord) of verse 2 again demonstrates the advantage of the Aadd9 tuning and was one of the conclusive sections of the song that confirmed this tuning for my team of researchers. While playing the cut boogie pattern (5ths and 6ths) on the two bottom strings, Johnson embellishes on the top two strings with a sweet C#/A (root and 3rd) that would be extremely difficult to add in any other tuning.

Performance

Barre all six strings with your index finger and add the 6th (F#) on string 5 with your middle finger rather than the more customary ring finger. Use the ring finger to hold down the A at fret 8 on string 2 and your pinky to reach the C# at fret 9 on string 1. Yes, it is a stretch—even in this tuning—but if you want to “be like Bob,” go for it!

Fig. 3

must be in East Mon-roee, I know. _____

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
T	9	9	8	8	8	8	7		
A	5	5	7	5	5	5	7		
B	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	0	

FIGURE 4

Study

Measure 11 (I and IV chords) of verse 5 find Johnson dropping to a lower position on the neck for the only time in the song. Once there, he plays a slick triple-stop E7 along with an open-string A7. Again, the tuning shows the way to a finely articulated passage.

Performance

Set your hand on the top three strings, low to high: index, middle, and ring fingers. To play the low G ($\flat 7$ th of A) at fret 3, use your thumb. Johnson used his index finger to barre all the strings—including the bass strings—most of the time. This is one of those rare occurrences where he did use his thumb like many other Delta blues guitarists.

Fig. 4

The figure shows a musical score for a guitar solo. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The bottom staff is a bass clef. The solo starts with a measure of E7 (I chord) and then moves to A7 (IV chord). The notation includes triplets and a 'y' (yank) symbol. The bottom staff shows the fretting for the top three strings (T, A, B) with fret numbers 0, 2, 3, 0, 2.

Sweet Home Chicago

Recorded Monday, November 23, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA-2582-1)

For his third number, Robert Johnson cut what would become one of the all-time classic blues songs and a model for virtually every boogie shuffle that followed. Like “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom,” it was not considered to be especially commercial by the American Record Company. After the Monday session in San Antonio, Johnson would not record another boogie-based composition. Little did anyone know at the time that with the development of electric Chicago blues after World War II, boogie-powered shuffles would become one of the cornerstones of modern blues.

Being in standard tuning and the “bluesman’s key of E,” this piece is particularly instructive in the art of the shuffle.

FIGURE 1

Study

The intro contains the prototypical Robert Johnson turnaround pattern implying movement through the I–IV–I–V chord changes common to a two-measure phrase. Note that in the pickup measure, if it had the $\flat 7$ th (D) on string 4 at fret 12 as in other Johnson turnarounds (and the end turnaround of “Sweet Home Chicago”), the implied tonality would be E7 (I).

The B7/F \sharp (V chord with 5th in the bass) in measure 2 is a characteristic V chord voicing in country blues that adds more bottom to a chord that has its root (B) on string 5.

Performance

Anchor your pinky at fret 12 on string 1 and descend on string 4 with your middle (fret 11) and index fingers (fret 10 and 9). On beat 4 of measure 1 (E7/B), play the D note (fret 10, string 1) with your middle finger. Form the B7/F \sharp by placing your fingers on the three lowest strings as if you were making an open position E chord. That will leave your pinky free to add the A note (fret 2, string 3).

Fig. 1
Capo II
Intro

Moderately ♩ = 94 (♩ = 3♩)

B/D#
1*(A/C#)

Bm/D
(Am/C)

F#7/C#
(E7/B)

C#7/G#
(B7/F#)

1. Oh, —

mf
w/ fingers

P.M. throughout

12 12 12 12 12 12 12 12 12 10 10 0

T
A
B

11 10 10 9 9 0 1 2 2 1 2

2 2 2

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Symbols above reflect harmony implied by vocals. Capoed fret is "0" in TAB.

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FIGURE 2

Study

Measures 10, 11, and 12 of verse 1 contain a string-bending lick and an open-position turnaround pattern that have become indispensable elements in the blues guitar vocabulary. The bend of the G 1/4 step in measure 10 to the “true blue note” halfway between the ♭3rd and major 3rd (G#) blended with the 5th (B) creates a musical tension that wants to resolve to the root note (E) or tonic chord (I). Johnson complies with the open high E string on beat 4, sustaining it over the bar line to function as the beginning of his turnaround.

The turnaround pattern again implies harmonic movement involving the I, IV, I and V chords. Dig that the implied E°7 chord on beat 3 of the second measure could be seen as a substitute for the IV chord (implied A7♭9), moving “stepwise” to the implied A minor chord. The resolution to the I7 (E7) chord on beat 4 is accomplished with yet another classic country blues lick: the hammering of the ♭3rd (G) to the major 3rd (G#).

Performance

Place your index finger on string 1 at fret 7 and bend the G note at fret 8 on string 2 with your middle finger. In the second measure, use your middle and index fingers (low to high) on frets 4 and 3 and slide your hand down the neck as the pattern descends. Shift your hand position slightly so you can hammer the open G string with your index finger. In this way, you will be poised to add the B and E notes from the remainder of the E chord in the next measure with your middle and ring fingers, respectively.

1

F# (E) B (A) F# (E) F#7 (E7) F#°7 (E°7) Bm (Am) F#7 (E7) C#7/G# (B7/F#)

sweet home, _ Chi - ca - go? _ 2. Oh, _

1/4 1/4 1/4 1/4 1/4

TAB

Study

Performance

Simply extend your pinky in a small barre across the top two strings and grab the E on beat 3 with your index finger. Use your ring finger for the D \sharp and your middle finger to walk down through C \sharp and C \flat .

1

F#7/E
(E7/D)

B/D#
(A/C#)

3

Bm/D
(Am/C)

TAB

12 12 12 12 12 12 12 12

12 12 11 9 10 10

Ramblin' On My Mind

Recorded Monday, November 23, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA-2583-1)

“Ramblin’ On My Mind” is the only slide song with a boogie accompaniment that Robert Johnson recorded. Likewise, along with “Preachin’ Blues,” it is the only other tune in open E tuning. There are several new technical elements showcased for the first time in this piece, including the deft handling of slide parts with conventional fretting and open strings. Like “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” and “Sweet Home Chicago” before it, this number is a superb example of how to make a boogie shuffle swing sans bass and drums.

FIGURE 1

Study

The intro is a quick tutorial in the special characteristics particular to open E tuning. Due to the first-inversion triad (G#–B–E) on the top three strings and the accessibility of the boogie pattern on the bottom strings, a full accompaniment with embellishments can be accomplished.

In measure 4, Johnson plays another variation on his “patented” descending turnaround sequence. In measure 5, he indicates the change to the V chord with a minimal number of notes (B fretted and open). *Note: Open E is like open D with strings 5, 4, and 3 tuned up rather than down.*

Performance

You *must* wear the slide on your pinky to play Delta blues like Robert Johnson or nearly any other country blues guitarist. According to Johnny Shines, Johnson made his sliders from bottle-necks, but steel or brass will work just as well. It should fit tight enough that it does not slop around when you are fretting with your remaining fingers. Besides the absolute necessity of accurate slide intonation, it is also important to dampen unwanted string noise with the fingers on both hands. This is especially true when moving from slide licks to the boogie pattern.

One of the tricks in this section (and others like it) is to play the slide parts cleanly on the top strings while plucking the bottom open strings. The only way to do this is to pull the slide back away from the bass strings while maintaining sufficient pressure for a clean, clear tone with the slide. Placement of the left-hand thumb directly under the index finger on the back of the neck should help stabilize your hand.


Of course, the most important factor in playing these parts is to maintain quarter notes on the bottom strings while whipping triplets on the top. Alas, easier said than done! The only answer is much practice with the thumb thumping down on the bass strings while the index plucks up independently. Yeow!

Open E Tuning; Capo II:

① = E ④ = E

② = B ⑤ = B

③ = G# ⑥ = E

()

*Symbols in parentheses represent chord names (implied tonality) respective to capoed guitars.

Symbols above reflect harmony implied by vocals. Capoeira fret is "0" in TAB.

**downstemmed notes only, except during the turnarounds.

F#7/E B/D# Bm/D F#/C# C#7
(E7/D) (A/C#) (Am/C) (E/B)(B7)

1. I got

Harm.
w/o slide

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FIGURE 2

Study

Measures 5 and 6 again demonstrate the attention to detail that makes a seemingly basic guitar part come alive. Moving to fret 5 for the IV (A) chord position, Johnson instinctively throws in open strings to fill out the cut boogie harmony. The B note provided by string 5, played open, suggests a dominant harmony extending to the 9th. The open E notes fatten up the interval of a 5th.

Performance

The natural tendency when playing barre chord boogie patterns may be to barre completely across all six strings. However, Johnson only anchored his index finger at fret 5 on string 6, adding his ring finger to string 5 at fret 7 when needed. In this manner he could insert the open B (5), E (4), and G# (3) strings for additional harmony at his whim.

Fig. 2

The musical score for Figure 2 consists of three staves. The top staff is the melody line, written in 4/4 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). It begins with a measure of rest, followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The second staff is the harmony line, showing chords played in the lower register. The third staff is the tablature line, with fret numbers for each string (T, A, B). The tablature shows a sequence of fret numbers: 0, 5, 7, 7, 0, 0, 7, 5, 0, 0, 7, 0, 0, 0, 0.

Lyrics: ram - blin', _____ I got ram-blin' all ____ on ____ my ____ mind. ____

When You Got A Good Friend

Recorded Monday, November 23, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA-2584-1)

Similar to “Sweet Home Chicago,” “When You Got A Good Friend” is another boogie-based number with a deep groove. It is tempting to theorize that this kind of material was much in demand at Robert Johnson’s gigs. Alas, even though it was the beginning of the age of piano boogie woogie promulgated by titans like Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, and Meade Lux Lewis, it had yet to strike a chord with the record-buying public when performed on guitar. Not until Muddy Waters opened the door for amplified country blues in 1948 would the opportunity be presented for Elmore James, Jimmy Reed, and others to boogie down on their guitars.

FIGURE 1

Study

The intro displays the first example of Johnson’s “double turnaround.” This term is a useful description, if slightly inaccurate, as there is only one resolution to the V (B) chord in measure 4.

Performance

As in related descending turnaround patterns, start with your pinky on the root (E) note at fret 12 in the pick up. In measure 1, place your ring finger on string 4 at fret 12 and descend with your middle finger at frets 11 and 10. Just before beat 3, make sure your index finger is planted at fret 9 as a barre. As you can see, in measure 2 you will need to have your index finger already positioned at fret 9 as Johnson adds in the E note on string 3 from the beginning of this sequence. Also, notice that you will need to make a small barre with your pinky at fret 12 to include the B note on string 2. When combined with the index finger barre at fret 9 and the descending cadence on string 4, you have a lot to contend with!

Inasmuch as Johnson used barres in all shapes and sizes, it is not unreasonable to believe that he is barring with his index finger on fret 2 to form the A7 chord. The inclusion of the open A, D, and G strings on beat 2 allows the opportunity to reset the fingers for the B7/F# chord on beat 3. Be sure to notice the extra beat in this measure—making it in 5/4 time instead of 4/4. This adding and subtracting of beats and measures within the 12-bar format was common to all solo country blues guitarists who had no one to answer to but themselves.

Fig. 1

Capo II

 F#7/E
 *(E7/D)
 B/D#
 (A/C#)
 Bm/D
 (Am/C)
 F#/C#
 (E/B)
 F#7
 (E7)

mf
w/ fingers

TAB

12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	X	12	12	12	12	12
							12								12	12	12	12
12		12	12	11			11	11			9	10		10	9	9	9	12

*Symbols in parentheses represent chord names (implied tonality) respective to capoed guitar. Symbols above reflect harmony implied by vocals. Capoed fret is "0" in TAB.

3

B/D# (A/C#) Bm/D (Am/C) B7 (A7) C#7/G# (B7/F#)

1. When you

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Come On In My Kitchen

Recorded Monday, November 23, 1936

in San Antonio, Texas

(SA 2585–1)

As tender and heartbreaking a song as you will find in the history of the blues, “Come On In My Kitchen” has Robert Johnson coaxing notes as gentle as raindrops out of his guitar with the bottleneck. Johnny Shines once told this story concerning a live performance of this masterpiece: “His guitar seemed to talk—repeat and say words with him like no one else in the world could. This sound affected most women in a way I could never understand. One time in St. Louis we were playing one of the songs that Robert would like to play with someone once in a great while, ‘Come On In My Kitchen.’ He was playing very slow and passionately, and when we quit, I noticed no one was saying anything. Then I realized they were crying—both men and women.”

This unusual 10-bar blues uses the same melody as Mississippi Sheiks “Sitting On Top Of The World,” and was the first song recorded in open A, Johnson’s favorite open tuning. The verses are constructed entirely around the I (A) chord.

FIGURE 1

Study

The three-measure intro with pickup is the only part of the song that has a turnaround, descending or otherwise. Compared to the ones in the previous numbers, it is a streamlined version that moves quickly through I (A)–IV (D/F#)–ivm (Dm/F)–V (A/E) changes.

Performance

One of the most important skills required for “Come On In My Kitchen” is the ability to switch smoothly between fretted and slide notes. By wearing the slide on the pinky finger you have the greatest flexibility in fingering for the fretted notes.

Play the pickup by hammering from your index to middle fingers (By the way, that half-step move from the \flat 5th [E \flat] to the 5th [E] is definitely blues-approved!). Measure 1 is pretty basic Delta slide, but needs a light touch with the pick so as to suggest a swelling of the notes with little perceptible attack. Like “Ramblin’ On My Mind,” notice how Johnson combines open strings between slide phrases to imply a supporting rhythm part. These should be muted with the palm of your right (picking) hand.

For the turnaround in measure 2, play string 5, fret 3 with your middle finger. Then place your middle finger on string 6 at fret 2 and your ring finger on string 4 at fret 2. With your hand in this formation, you can now descend to fret 1 on beat 4 on the way to the open strings in measure 3.

You have a choice of fingers in accessing the E note at fret 7. The index or middle would be best, as it would facilitate keeping the slide up and out of the way of the other strings.

Fig. 1
 Open A Tuning; Tune Down 1/2 Step; Capo II:
 ① = A♭ ④ = E♭
 ② = C ⑤ = A♭
 ③ = A♭ ⑥ = E♭

Chord symbols: B♭, Eb/G (D/F#), Ebm/Gb (Dm/F), B♭/F (A/E)
 Performance notes: *mf* w/ fingers, w/ slide, P.M., w/o slide, P.M. throughout, w/ slide
 Tablature: T, A, B staves with fret numbers and bar lines.

*Symbols in parentheses represent chord names (implied tonality) respective to capoed guitar.
 Symbols above reflect harmony implied by vocals. Capoed fret is "0" in TAB.

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FIGURE 2

Study

The bridge following verse 3 contains the famous “howling wind” sound effect. Johnson accomplishes this extraordinary feat with quarter tones hovering between fret positions. These occur most strikingly in measure 2 around fret 14 (between F#/D and G/D#) and in measure 3 around fret 11 (between D/B♭ and D#/B). Harmonically, the tones relate to the key of A as 6ths/4ths and 4ths/♭9ths, respectively, creating musical tension that Johnson does eventually resolve in the following measure (not shown).

Performance

Look carefully at Fig. 2 and you will see that Johnson is combining slide tones and fretted notes within the same measure. To accomplish this technique accurately and cleanly you must pull the slide back so that it only covers the strings played at that precise moment. Pay particular attention to measures 1 and 3 where long vibrato is required as an open string(s) is picked and sustained simultaneously. This is a technique that must be constantly employed throughout the song.

Bridge (Musical notation)
 Chord symbols: B♭, (A)
 Performance notes: w/o slide, w/slide, *p*
 Spoken: Oh, can't you hear the wind howl 'n' all? Oh-y' can't you hear that wind would howl?
 Tablature: T, A, B staves with fret numbers and bar lines.

Terraplane Blues

Recorded Monday, November 23, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA-2586-1)

Robert Johnson's "big hit" sold in the neighborhood of 5,000 copies and became his most requested piece. Compared to the boogie-based numbers, this type of slide blues (like "Cross Road Blues") looks back to an earlier time and may have been, along with the sexual innuendo of the lyrics, one of the reasons for its popularity. At any rate, it was one of the first in what has become a never-ending list of blues about cars.

The form is a standard 12-bar blues. Johnson navigates the I-IV-V changes with a compact set of fret positions and repeats almost the same licks in every verse.

FIGURE 1

Study

The three-measure intro contains some of the basic harmonies available in open A tuning. Included is the tonic triad at fret 12, a $\flat 7$ th/5th (G/E) double stop at fret 3, a simple descending turnaround pattern, and easily accessed tonic major and 7th chords.

Performance

One finger (index or middle) can be used to play the abbreviated turnaround in measure 2. In measure 3, use your ring finger to play the A (root) note at fret 5 and your index finger to play the G ($\flat 7$ th) note at fret 3.

Fig. 1

Open A Tuning; Capo II:

- | | |
|--------|-------|
| ① = E | ④ = E |
| ② = C# | ⑤ = A |
| ③ = A | ⑥ = E |

Moderately ♩ = 101 (♩ = ♩)

B
*(A)

B7
(A7)

1. And I

mf
w/ slide
w/ fingers

w/ o slide

TAB

*Symbols in parentheses represent chord names (implied tonality) respective to capoed guitar.
Symbols above reflect harmony implied in vocals. Capoed fret is "0" in TAB.

FIGURE 2

Study and Performance

Johnson uses a one-measure riff for the I (A7) chord that he repeats according to the number of measures required along the 12-bar route. The chord form itself is an A7 (E–G–A). Low to high, use your ring, middle, and index fingers.

Fig. 2
Verse

1

B7
(A7)

feel _____ so lone - some. _____

T
A
B

FIGURE 3

Study

The IV (D7) chord riff in measures 5 and 6 is also constructed around a one-measure chordal riff. Part of the beauty of open A tuning is the ease with which these forms can be played, even with a bottle-neck on the pinky. Dig that the actual chord is a D (A–D–F#), with another A available on string 1 at fret 5. The addition of the $\flat 7^{\text{th}}$ (C), by way of the bend, transforms the triad into a dominant 7th (D7) chord.

Performance

Barre across the strings at fret 5 with your index finger and make the “blue note” bend with your ring finger. This can be quite a stretch when the A note at fret 5 (string 4) is played simultaneously (beat 3 in both measures). This is a good time to reiterate that, in order to play like Robert, you need to be able to hold a barre with your index finger across all six strings while fretting additional notes.

Fig. 3

1

E7
(D7)

feel so lone - some, you hear me when I moan.

1/4

1/4

1/4

TAB

Phonograph Blues

Recorded Monday, November 23, 1936

in San Antonio, Texas

(SA-2587)

“Phonograph Blues” (take 1) is quite similar to “Kind Hearted Woman Blues,” though it is taken at a brisker tempo and lacks a solo. After surveying Robert Johnson’s complete repertoire, it becomes evident that he had, with exceptions, a group of accompaniments that he adapted to various sets of lyrics. Steve LaVere, the agent for the estate and the number one authority on Robert Johnson, has suggested that he might alter tempos and switch accompaniments to suit his audience (or his record producer, Don Law).

Perhaps because of its close relationship to “Kind Hearted Woman Blues” and the popularity of that song then and now, “Phonograph Blues” has not received a like amount of attention. Nonetheless, it is a fine performance and a part of the mystery involving “Phonograph Blues” take 2.

FIGURE 1

Study

Robert Johnson seems to have had an infinite number of intros and turnarounds. This one is similar to “Kind Hearted Woman” in its final two measures, but is unique in its first two measures. In measure 1, he starts with an A major triad, moving to an A[°]7 arpeggio and an E9 (root–5th–^b7th–9th) chord in measure 2. Measures 3 and 4 are similar to the “Kind Hearted Woman” intro, where the changes from I–IV–I–V are repeated in a “double turnaround.”

Performance

Form the A triad as if you were playing an open position D major chord. For the A[°]7, reverse your fingers so that the shape looks like an open position D7 chord. Bend the C (^b3rd) to C[#] (3rd) with your middle finger while holding down the A note on string 1 with your ring finger. As you can see, your ring finger is already in place from playing the A[°]7 chord. Reset your hand position after plucking the open E string by putting your index finger on the B note, your ring finger on the D note, and adding the F[#] on top with your middle finger.

In measure 3, anchor your pinky to fret 5 on the high E and B strings, while placing your index finger at fret 2. You can lift it off to play the G note at fret 5 with your ring finger. On beat 3, put your index finger back at fret 2 as your ring finger plays the F[#] note on fret 4. On beat 4, play the F note at fret 3 with your middle finger.

Maintaining the barre at fret 2 with your index finger, hammer from the F[#] to the G note on string 1 with your middle finger. To play the E7 chord for beats 2, 3, and 4, form a first position E7 chord on beat 2, and then pluck the appropriate strings as you advance through the measure.

Fig. 1

Capo II

($\text{♩} = \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩}$)

B
*(A)

B $^{\circ}$ 7
(A $^{\circ}$ 7)

F#9
(E9)

B
(A)

B7/A E/G#
(A7/G) (D/F#)

Em/G
(Dm/F)

B/F#
(A/E)

F#7
(E7)

1. Be-a-trice,

mf
w/ fingers

1/2

P.M. throughout

TAB

*Symbols in parentheses represent chord names (implied tonality) respective to capoed guitar.
Symbols above reflect harmony implied by vocals. Capoed fret is "0" in TAB.

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Phonograph Blues (Take 2)

Recorded Monday, November 23, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA-2587-2)

Mystery and legend swirl around Robert Johnson like leaves in a whirlwind. Most of these issues have to do with the details of his rambling life and death by a murderous husband. For musicians, however, the real questions involve his guitar technique. Even after subjecting his work to the closest scrutiny possible, uncertainty remains about certain aspects. One of these is the fact that “Phonograph Blues” (Take 2) has the “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” accompaniment. Except for “Come On In My Kitchen”, where take 2 has an accompaniment closer to “Cross Road Blues,” this is the only instance where the takes of a particular piece are not the same.

So what happened here? It was the last song in a long day of recording. Did either Johnson or producer Don Law want to use the same accompaniment from a previous song recorded earlier that day because it appealed to them? Did they think it would be more popular performed in a driving, uptempo manner? Of course, it is impossible to ever know for sure, but one theory worth considering is that Johnson wanted another shot at trying out his revolutionary Aadd9 tuning. Then, when “Kind Hearted Woman Blues” and “Terraplane Blues” became the most popular tracks from this first session, he didn’t return to the tuning or boogie-based songs in the following June, 1937 Dallas session.

Whatever the reasons for the existence of this recording, and they are tantalizing, the music represents a technical and artistic achievement. While virtually the same accompaniment as “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom,” it is taken at a far faster tempo, presenting a great challenge to those intrepid souls brave enough to try it. In addition, it offers further proof to the validity of the Aadd9 tuning.

FIGURE 1

Study

Measures 1 and 2 of verse 3 contain a bass figure that does not appear in “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” or any of the other compositions. Instead of playing his typical 5th and 6th boogie pattern, Johnson inserts a chromatic series of 5ths (C#/F#, D/G, and D#/G#). He does this in both measures, but nowhere else in the song. He also “comps” along to his bass pattern with first E/B (5th and root) in measure 1 and then B/G# (3rd and 5th) in measure 2. Amazingly, these chordal “stabs” appear exactly where they would if the standard, cut boogie bass pattern was being played!

Performance

In measure 1, barre across strings 2 and 1 at fret 10 (being sure not to mute the open 5th and 4th strings) with your index finger and then play the 5ths on the bass strings with the same finger. In measure 2, do the same thing.

32-20 Blues

**Recorded Thursday, November 26, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA-2616-2)**

More mysteries abound in “32-20 Blues.” Why did Robert Johnson take a layoff of two days between sessions, and why did he only record one song on Thursday? We know from Don Law’s account of the first San Antonio session that Johnson was beat up by the police and his guitar smashed. It appears that he is talking about the night before the session on Monday, November 23, 1936. Steve LaVere, however, believes that the incident took place between Monday night and Wednesday night. If true, it helps to account for the fact that Johnson only recorded one song on Thursday, November 26. Though it is a masterpiece, there are parts that betray Johnson’s nervousness or, perhaps, discomfort from his run-in with the “man.”

“32-20 Blues” was inspired by Skip James’s piano rendition of “22-20 Blues.” It is a powerful, driving, swinging 12-bar blues with an underlying “ground rhythm” that is so independent from the chordal embellishment that it sounds like it is being played by a second guitarist.

FIGURE 1

Study

The four-measure intro showcases another variation on the descending turnaround pattern. Starting with his “pet” 7th triple-stop form (A7), Johnson moves it down the neck in a parallel fashion to A°7 and Dm6 before resolving to the tonic (A). This especially versatile pattern went on to achieve great popularity with blues guitarists of all stripes. For the second section of the double turnaround in measures 3 and 4, he plays one of his typical, standard-tuned sequences based around a second position A major chord.

Performance

The A7 form is fingered like an open-position D7 chord. It is then moved down the neck while maintaining the shape. The challenging part is to keep those quarter notes on string 5 (A) pumping along underneath. Starting in measure 2, thump down with your thumb while grabbing up on the treble strings with your index and middle fingers together. This grabbing motion is essential in playing Delta blues with a steady quarter-note pulse on the bass strings.

The two-measure “second turnaround” in measures 3 and 4 requires the pinky to be anchored at fret 5 on strings 1 and 2, while the index barres across the top four strings at fret 2. The remaining middle and ring fingers are then free to play the G, F#, and F# notes that descend on string 4.

Fig. 1
Capo I

Chord symbols above staff: $B\flat 7$ $^*(A7)$, $B\flat ^\circ 7$ $(A^\circ 7)$, $E\flat m6$ $(Dm6)$, $B\flat$ (A) , $B\flat 7/A\flat$ $(A7/G)$, $E\flat/G$ $(D/F\sharp)$, $E\flat m/G\flat$ (Dm/F) , $B\flat/F$ (A/E) , $F7$ $(E7)$

Lyrics: 1. 'F I send _

Performance markings: *mf* w/ fingers, **P.M. throughout

TAB: Treble (T), Alto (A), Bass (B) staves with fret numbers (0-9) and bar lines.

*Symbols in parentheses represent chord names (implied tonality) respective to capoed guitar.
Symbols above reflect harmony implied by vocals. Capoed fret is "0" in TAB.
**downstemmed notes only

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FIGURE 2

Study

Measures 1–4 of verse 1 contain the “hook” of the song and show Johnson’s approach to the first four measures (I chord) of a 12-bar blues. By altering a few notes, he indicates changes from I7 to I°7. This is a great example of “less is more” as he implies A7 with A (root), G (♭7th), and E (5th) in measure 1; and A°7 with A and G♭ (♭♭7th) in measure 2. In measure 4, he includes the C (♭3rd) to flesh out the A°7 chord. If the bass note were D (IV) in the diminished measures, the implied tonality would be D7. This is something that Chicago blues musicians after Muddy Waters would frequently substitute when playing in electric combos.

Please note that measure 4 is in 2/4 time, seemingly making this verse 13 measures long, though in actuality, it still feels like a 12-bar blues verse.

Performance

In measure 1, play the E note on string 2 with your ring finger and the G note on string 4 with your middle finger. In measure 2, play the A note on string 1 with your ring finger and the G♭ note on string 4 with your index finger.

Fig. 2
Verse

Chord symbols above staff: $B\flat 7$ $(A7)$, $B\flat ^\circ 7$ $(A^\circ 7)$, $B\flat 7$ $(A7)$, $B\flat ^\circ 7$ $(A^\circ 7)$, $B\flat 7$ $(A7)$

Lyrics: _ for my ba - by _ and she don't _ come, _ 'F I send _

TAB: Treble (T), Alto (A), Bass (B) staves with fret numbers (0-9) and bar lines.

FIGURE 3

Study and Performance

In verse 2, Johnson plays a second variation on the I7–I°7–I7 move. This time he moves the A7 triple stop from the intro down one fret to accomplish the change in harmony. Muddy Waters appropriated this idea and used it on “Long Distance Call” and “Blow Wind Blow” (where it indicates I7–IV7–I), among others. Finger the A7 chord shape as you did in the intro.

Fig. 3

Verse

Bb7 (A7) Bb°7 (A°7) Bb7 A7

1 gets un - rul - y, ——— thinks she don't — wan' do,

TAB

FIGURE 4

Study

In verse 5 Johnson uses one more variation that he introduced in verse 1, but it is easier to see here. Though he does not pick all of the notes all the time, he forms an A7 chord at fret 5 (like the one in “Kind Hearted Woman Blues”) that he then moves down to fret 4 to indicate the A°7. Measure 3 does show the entire chord voicing, including string 5 (A) and string 1 (E) open.

Performance

For the A7 chord, use your index, ring, and middle fingers (low to high). For the A°7, add your pinky to string 1 at fret 5.

Fig. 4

Verse

Bb7 (A7) Bb°7 (A°7) Bb7 (A7)

1 shoot my pis - tol, gon - na shoot my Gat - ling gun.

TAB

They're Red Hot

Recorded Friday, November 27, 1936

in San Antonio, Texas

(SA-2627-1)

The first tune recorded on the last day of the San Antonio sessions was Robert Johnson's homage to "hokum" blues perpetuated by artists like Tampa Red and the aptly-named Hokum Boys and Famous Hokum Boys with guitarist Big Bill Broonzy. Humorous, upbeat ditties full of double entendres, they were popular in the years before the Depression.

It is well known that Johnson was conversant in all styles of music including the ethnic variety. "They're Red Hot" shows his sly take on the hokum genre with its foundation of diatonic chord changes and eccentric 9-bar structure.

FIGURE 1

Study

The form of the song could be seen as an 8-bar verse with a one-measure ending tacked on. Within the 8-bar section are four two-measure increments that move from C (I) to C, C to G (V), C to Fm (IVm), and C to C. When broken down further, the progressions are seen to be loosely based around I-VI-II-V-I. Sometimes referred to as "rhythm changes" (from the Gershwin tune "I've Got Rhythm") by jazz musicians, it is second only to "blues changes" (I-IV-V) as the most used chord changes in American popular music.

Performance

Johnson uses the same barre chord form (for C, the index finger across strings 4, 3, and 2 at fret 5 and the pinky on string 1 at fret 8) that he does for his standard-tuned blues like "Kind Hearted Woman Blues." For the D7, G7, and C open chords, he plays abbreviated voicings that begin on string 4. As you can see, the entire piece is built around these chord forms.

Fig. 1

Capo I

Verse

The musical score for the verse of "They're Red Hot" is presented in three staves. The top staff is the vocal line in 4/4 time, with lyrics: "1. Hot ta - mal - es and they red hot. Yes, she got 'em for sale." Above the vocal line, chord symbols are provided for each measure: *D \flat (C), C (B), B \flat (A), B \flat 7 (A7), E \flat 7 (D7), A \flat 7 (G7), and D \flat (C). The middle staff shows the guitar accompaniment with chords and a "sim." (simulacrum) marking. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature (TAB) showing fret numbers for each string.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Chord	*D \flat (C)	C (B)	B \flat (A)	B \flat 7 (A7)	E \flat 7 (D7)	A \flat 7 (G7)	D \flat (C)		
Lyrics	1. Hot	ta - mal - es	and they	red	hot.	Yes,	she got 'em	for	sale.

*Symbols in parentheses represent chord names (implied tonality) respective to capoed guitar.
Symbols above reflect harmony implied by vocals. Capoed fret is "0" in TAB.

Dead Shrimp Blues

Recorded Friday, November 27, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA-2628-2)

“Dead Shrimp Blues” is another medium shuffle in the “Kind Hearted Woman” mode. This musical theme was probably one of Robert Johnson’s earliest and its popularity with his audience must have encouraged him to use it repeatedly. Lyrically, like “Phonograph Blues,” the subject of “Dead Shrimp Blues” concerns temporary impotence.

FIGURE 1

Study

In measures 5 and 6 (IV) of verse 2, Johnson plays a single-note lead fill that is positively startling. At the 5th fret (the root position A blues box), he rips off a repeating lick involving the (C) bent up a quarter step to the “blue note,” followed by a quick hammer/pull from A (5th) to B (6th) to A, and ending on F# (3rd). It is no exaggeration to say that licks this “modern” did not appear with any regularity until after WWII in electric Chicago blues. “Walking Blues” is the only other song of Johnson’s that has something similar.

Note how Johnson maintains a quarter note bass accompaniment on the low E and A strings while independently playing the syncopated lick on top.

Performance

Bend the C with your pinky, use your index and ring fingers for the hammer/pull, and end up on the F# with your ring finger. You will notice that the speed at which Johnson executes the lick can be a challenge and that playing a steady, quarter-note pulse underneath can be absolutely daunting! Further examination of this sequence reveals that the lick falls on a different beat each of the three times it is played! There is no secret to the successful performance of this section other than developing independence on the bass strings to the point where you can freely play embellishments on the top strings.

Fig. 1

Capo II

*E7/G#
(D7/F#)

1

shrimps he' - ooh.

1/4

8

5 7 5 7 8 5 7 7 8 5 7 7

TAB

2 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

*Symbols in parentheses represent chord names (implied tonality) respective to capoed guitar.
Symbols above reflect harmony implied by vocals. Capoed fret is “0” in TAB.

Cross Road Blues (Crossroads)

Recorded Friday, November 27, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA-2629-2)

Blues and rock musicians have frequently covered many of Robert Johnson's songs over the years, but none have achieved the notoriety of Eric Clapton's 1967 version of "Crossroads." Ironically, his rendering of this country blues classic bears little resemblance to the original. Taking the instrumental hook from "Terraplane Blues" and adapting it to standard tuning, he cranked the volume on his Marshall amplifier, gassed the tempo, played two spectacular solos, and created his own classic in the blues/rock genre.

Somewhat left behind in the public's consciousness has been Johnson's song, which is a slide guitar masterpiece. Though similar to "Terraplane Blues" in its tuning and use of fretted notes with slide notes, it is more dynamic, dramatic, and syncopated. In one way, however, it looks back to an earlier form of Delta blues as it contains uneven verses of 15 and 14 measures as opposed to the 12-bar regularity of "Terraplane Blues." And, for better or worse, it is the song that would inspire the myth about Johnson selling his soul to the devil in exchange for musical immortality.

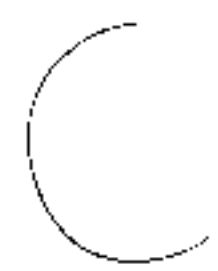
FIGURE 1

Study

Measures 7 and 8 (IV chord) of verse 1 show a portion of Johnson's creativity in open A tuning. Working around fret 5 where the IV (D) chord is centered, he expands beyond the triadic harmony (D-F#-A) with C/A (5th and \flat 7th) at fret 8 for a dominant tonality. He also applies a subtle nuance with the quarter-step bend of the \flat 7th (C) up to the blue note.

Performance

With the slider on your pinky (like Johnson), you do not have a lot of finger choices. Try your index finger at fret 5 for the small barres and single notes and your ring finger at fret 8 for the appropriate notes.



Open A Tuning; Capo II:

*E7
(D7)

*Symbols in parentheses represent chord names (implied tonality) respective to capoed guitar. Symbols above reflect harmony implied by vocals. Capoed fret is "0" in TAB.

FIGURE 2

In measures 9 and 10 (I chord) of verse 1, Johnson demonstrates his consummate skill in moving effortlessly between slide parts and fretted licks. First he establishes the tonic tonality (A) at fret 12 with the bottleneck and the open strings, followed by the open strings with the root (A) added on string 1 at fret 5 and the $\flat 7^{\text{th}}$ (G) at fret 3. The coup de grace, however, is the C ($\flat 3^{\text{rd}}$) note bent a quarter step at fret 3 on string 3. Buried as an “inner voice” and going by so quickly, it is easy to miss—but the effect is still felt.

Play the A note with your ring finger, the G with your index finger, and access the bend with your ring finger. Be careful not to mute the surrounding strings (easier said than done!).

**Recorded Friday, November 27, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA-2630-1)**

As opposed to most of Robert Johnson's other songs that combine slide and fretted parts, "Walkin' Blues" reserves the slide for lower register riffs—except for the intro and ending. Basically, all the guitar licks and riffs are focused on the powerful, driving rhythm of the piece.

Study

Performance

To keep yourself from muting the open strings while vibratoing the high A, angle your slide up and over the lower strings. Conversely, strum down with your thumb on the indicated open strings only.

Open A Tuning: Capo II:

-

****downstemmed note only**

Fig. 1

Aadd9 Tuning:

- ① = E ④ = E
- ② = C# ⑤ = B
- ③ = A ⑥ = E

Verse ()

1



played it on the so - fa, and we played it 'side the wall.



T

A

B

10

10

0

2

2

2

(0)

3

0

4

4

4

0

0

0

7

7

2

3

3

3

4

4

4

0

0

0

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FIGURE 2

Study

In measures 5 and 6 of verse 3, Johnson peels off a little lick similar to the killer phrase in Fig. 1 of “Dead Shrimp Blues.” But here, instead of keeping time on the open bass strings, he does it with his index finger barred across fret 5. The resulting harmony proffers the 5th (A), root (D), and 3rd (F#) note of D with the filigree of the b7th (C), 6th (B), and 9th (E) notes.

Performance

While maintaining the barre at fret 5, stretch your ring finger up to fret 8 and pull off from fret 7 to fret 5 with your middle finger. This may feel awkward at first, but there is no other choice with the slide on your pinky. Note that the same basic approach should be used for the V (E) chord (measure 9) in verses 3 and 5.

Fig. 2

Fig. 2 is a musical score for a guitar solo in E7 (D7) harmony. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of three staves: a vocal line, a guitar line, and a tablature line. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "don't mind _ dy'n'. _ Leav-in' this morn', _ ah, _ I _ have to ride a blind. _". The guitar line features a slide from fret 7 to fret 5 on the pinky finger, labeled "w/o slide" and "w/ slide". The tablature line shows the fret numbers for the guitar solo, including a slide from fret 7 to fret 5 on the pinky finger, labeled "w/o slide" and "w/ slide".

Last Fair Deal Gone Down

Recorded Friday, November 27, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas
(SA-2631-1)

A rousing, rollicking flag-waver, “Last Fair Deal Gone Down” can be seen as a warmup for Robert Johnson’s most virtuosic recording, “Preaching Blues,” that followed. The swinging rhythm is so deft and deep that one is tempted to paraphrase Beethoven, who described the guitar as a “little orchestra.” In Johnson’s case, he makes it sound like nothing less than a Kansas City big band in the manner of Count Basie.

As in some of the previous numbers, Johnson is particularly adept at mixing slide and fretted licks together, often within the same measure of this eccentric 8-bar blues. Note that each verse consists of seven measures of the I (A) chord with a one-measure turnaround that resolves to the I.

FIGURE 1

Study

Fig. 1 is the first two measures of verse 1. It shows how the lyric and guitar accompaniment is synced up in two-measure increments. Though Johnson varies the rhythmic placement of the slide licks and bass string riffs throughout, he roughly follows this format: the slide comes in on beats 1 and (sometimes) 3, while the chordal “answer” is on beats 2 and (sometimes) 4. The slide licks are played almost exclusively at fret 12 using the A (root), C# (3rd), and E (5th) triadic tones, while the bass string chords usually consist of the open sixth (E), fifth (A), and fourth (E) strings. Due to the lack of harmonic movement in this piece, Johnson keeps the music interesting by using dynamics of rhythm, register, and space.

Performance

In the Robert Johnson canon, this is a relatively “simple” song. What helps make it work is the “organic” slide (or “gliss”) into the slide licks contrasted with the steady rhythmic thump of the bass strings.

Fig. 1

Open A Tuning:

① = E ④ = E

② = C# ⑤ = A

③ = A ⑥ = E

Verse

1 A

last fair deal go - in' down.

w/ slide P.M. throughout w/o slide w/ slide w/o slide w/ slide

TAB

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FIGURE 2

Study

Verse 5 has an extremely hip “comp” pattern not readily found in other country blues of any era. Forming an A7 voicing at fret 5, Johnson “vamps” with sophisticated syncopation around beats 1, 2, 3, and 4 with sixteenth-note hits! What is most incredible, however, are the steady eighth notes that he maintains on the bass strings throughout most of this verse. When combined, the two parts create a sensational swinging accompaniment. This one verse probably tells the story of Johnson’s instrumental genius better than any other does.

Performance

Your thumb has to keep time like a bass drum with metronomic downstrokes. At the same time, but independently, your index finger (or index and middle in unison) must grab the treble strings with a snap.

Fig. 2

Verse

1 A7

count, they pick and sing.

TAB

Preachin' Blues (Up Jumped The Devil)

Recorded Friday, November 27, 1936
in San Antonio, Texas

(SA-2632-1)

Robert Johnson's "head cutting" song, "Preachin' Blues," is an adrenaline-pumping tour de force. If any pre-War blues can be said to prefigure rock 'n' roll, this is the baby! Though it begins with another of his descending turnaround patterns, it quickly mutates into a raw, intensely driving monochord stomp with verses that vary from 17 to 20 measures, depending on the changing time signatures.

"Preachin' Blues" is the only song besides "Ramblin' On My Mind" to be in open E tuning. Exactly like open D tuning (with strings 5, 4, and 3 tuned up instead of down), it affords the player a first-inversion triad (3rd-5th-root) on the top three strings.

FIGURE 1

Study

Measure 1 of the intro contains a phrase unique to the Johnson catalog. After two pairs of triplets at the octave (not unlike the hook of Elmore James's later version of "Dust My Broom!") that establish the E tonality, he plays the open B, E, and G# strings (a second-inversion E major chord) with the D/G (♭3rd and ♭7th) inserted via the slide. The double stop is a distinctly modern sound that would find great favor among post-War Chicago blues guitarists.

Performance

This is one of the easier sections of the piece as it just involves the slide and open strings. It is all uphill from here!

Fig. 1

Open E Tuning:

① = E ④ = E

② = B ⑤ = B

③ = G# ⑥ = E

Intro

Moderately ♩ = 122

E

3

mf

w/ slide

w/ fingers

w/o slide

1

T

A

B

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FIGURE 2

Study

Measures 8–11 of verse 3 show Johnson’s virtuosity regarding the seamless interplay of fretted and slide notes. The little bending lick (G bent one quarter step in conjunction with B on top) in measures 1 and 2 is from “Sweet Home Chicago.” Dig how he articulates the same bend (sans the B) in measures 3 and 4. Also, notice how he freely adds the \flat 3rd (G, in measure 1) and major 3rd (G#, in measure 2) as he sees fit. Along with the quarter-step bend to the “blue note” in between G and G#, these subtle touches are the mark of a master blues guitarist.

Performance

Use your middle and index fingers for the first bend and your index finger for the second one.
(Note: Be aware throughout “Preachin’ Blues” that you must only cover strings 1 and 2 with the slide during some passages so that open strings can ring out underneath unimpeded.)

Fig. 2

The figure displays a musical score for guitar, consisting of two systems of notation. Each system includes a standard musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and a corresponding guitar tablature (TAB) below it. The TAB is written on six lines representing the guitar strings, with fret numbers (0-12) and other symbols (like 'x' for muted strings or '3' for triplets) indicating fingerings and techniques.

System 1 (Measures 1-2): The musical staff shows a melodic line starting with a quarter note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a quarter note B4. The TAB shows the corresponding fretting: 7 on the 4th string, 12 on the 5th string, and 8 on the 6th string. The notation includes a '1/4' bend symbol over the G4 note. The lyrics 'is a' are written below the staff.

System 2 (Measures 3-4): The musical staff shows a melodic line starting with a quarter note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a quarter note B4. The TAB shows the corresponding fretting: 7 on the 4th string, 12 on the 5th string, and 8 on the 6th string. The notation includes a '1/4' bend symbol over the G4 note. The lyrics 'low - down shak - in' chill,' are written below the staff.

The score is divided into two systems, each with a measure number (1, 2, 3, 4) at the beginning of the staff. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals, as well as specific guitar techniques like bends and slides indicated by arrows and text labels like 'w/o slide' and 'w/ slide'.

If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day

Recorded Friday, November 27, 1936

in San Antonio, Texas

(SA-2633-1)

Robert Johnson's take on the "Rollin' and Tumblin'" theme, "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day," continues with much of the slide guitar virtuosity evident in "Preachin' Blues." The ease with which he sings an independent rhythm over the smartly marching accompaniment is exemplary. On top of that, the variety of rhythms displayed in the guitar parts is nothing short of awesome.

The verse is 17 measures long, though it feels like 16 due to the two measures in 2/4 time.

FIGURE 1

Study and Performance

Measures 3–5 of verse 2 give a clear example of the classic Delta phrase associated with "Rollin' and Tumblin'." Chord tones on the open strings from the open A tuning (root, 3rd, and 5th) are dynamically contrasted with fretted (G#=major 7) and slide notes (G# and the triple-stop C–E–G at fret 3). The C and G notes create a particularly bluesy musical tension that is regularly resolved to the tonic chord (A). Play the fretted G# with your middle finger.

Fig. 1

Open A Tuning:

- ① = E ④ = E
- ② = C# ⑤ = A
- ③ = A ⑥ = E

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system shows a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. The second system shows a guitar line in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature. The guitar line includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and is marked with 'w/o slide' and 'w/ slide' to indicate slide guitar techniques. The third system shows the guitar's fretboard in a standard six-string layout, with fret numbers (0, 4, 3, 3, 0, 4, 0, 0, 4, 0) and a key signature of two sharps. The fretboard is marked with 'T' for treble and 'B' for bass.

FIGURE 2

Study

Measures 6 and 7 of the last verse contain slide pitches off the fingerboard. They are F/D, E/C#, E♭/C and D/B at the “imaginary” frets of 25, 24, 23, and 22. This is mainly done for the dynamic effect of having extremely high pitches to contrast with the surrounding tones rather than harmonic content.

Performance

Plain old practice is the only way to develop a feel and the “ear” for exactly where the pitches lie on your particular guitar. As opposed to what many slide guitarists do when they want to “show off” with a phrase like this, Johnson is quite accurate in his intonation.

Fig. 2

The figure displays a musical score for guitar, consisting of three staves. The top staff is a standard musical notation in 4/4 time, featuring a melody line with lyrics: "run here, ba - by, set down on my, on my". The middle staff is a fretboard diagram, showing the fret numbers for each note. The bottom staff is a tablature (TAB) line, showing the fret numbers for each note. The fret numbers are: 25, 24, 24, 24, 24, 24, 24, 24, 24, 23, 23, 22, 20, 17, 14, 10. A dashed line labeled "steady gliss." spans the last four fret numbers (20, 17, 14, 10). A note at fret 25 is marked with an asterisk (*).

run here, ba - by, set down on my, on my

8va

steady gliss.

* 25 24 24 24 24 24 24 24 24 23 23 22 20 17 14 10

TAB

*Fret numbers correspond to where notes would sound if the fretboard continued.
Notes are played past the end of the last fret.

Stones In My Passway

Recorded Saturday, June 19, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 377-2)

At his second session in 1937, Robert Johnson began with “Stones In My Passway,” a slide piece that virtually repeats the accompaniment to “Terraplane Blues.” As that was the “hit” from his first session in San Antonio in 1936, it is likely that he (and the record company) would want to try to duplicate the previous success.

FIGURE 1

Study

The bridge in both “Terraplane Blues” and “Stones In My Passway” contain a chord/bass run lick that would also find its way into post-War Chicago blues. Consisting of the I (A7) chord followed by the root (A), \flat 3rd (C), and 3rd (C \sharp) notes as an embellishment, it is the type of one-measure increment that can be adapted to the IV (D) and V (E) chords in the key of A as well.

Performance

Use your ring, middle, and index fingers (from low to high) for the A7 chord at fret 5. As the slide is on your pinky finger, use your index and middle fingers to play the C and C \sharp notes on string 5.

Fig. 1

Open A Tuning:

① = E ④ = E

② = C \sharp ⑤ = A

③ = A ⑥ = E

Bridge

($\text{A7} = \text{A} - \text{C} - \text{C}\sharp$)

1
A7 3
take my life ____

T
A
B

0 7 7 5 6 7
0 7 7 5 6 7
0 0 3 4

I'm A Steady Rollin' Man (Steady Rollin' Man)

Recorded Saturday, June 19, 1936 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 378-1)

Robert Johnson's second recording on Saturday also looked back towards earlier songs, in this case the 12-bar, standard-tuned boogie shuffles like "Dead Shrimp Blues." The title is indicative of the distinct nature of the rhythm; it is steady but also has a lilting swing to it throughout. It would not be an overstatement to say that the ground rhythm of "I'm A Steady Rollin' Man" anticipates the electric combo blues with bass and drums that would develop with Muddy Waters and Jimmy Reed in Chicago after the War.

FIGURE 1

Study

Measures 1-4 of the I (A7) chord are a terrific example of how the root (A) and $\flat 7$ th (G) notes on string 1 imply movement from the major to the dominant chord. With the boogie pattern hitting all four beats underneath, a complete and full harmony is provided. A brilliant guitarist when it comes to adding telling detail, Johnson inserts a cool $\flat 3$ rd to 3rd bass string embellishment on beat 4 of measure 1.

Performance

Since the A note is sustained over the bass accompaniment, play it with your pinky and the G note with your middle finger. Use your index finger for the E note at fret 2 and your ring finger for the F# note at fret 4. Having your index finger on the E note allows your middle and ring fingers to play the C and C# notes on string 5.

Fig. 1
Verse

($\text{♩} = \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩}$)

stead - y roll - in' man; I roll ___ both night and day. ___

5 5

T A B

0 4 0 0 2 4 2 4 4 2 0 2 2

3 A7

I'm a steady

FIGURE 2

Study and Performance

The IV (D7) chord in measure 5 of verse 1 shows Johnson's creativity with standard chord voicings. What may look unusual is really just an open C chord moved up to fret 5 to become a D. To maintain continuity with the I chord pattern in measures 1–4, he adds the A (5th) on string 1. Low to high, use your ring, middle, index, and pinky fingers.

Fig. 2

1 D7

roll-in' man; ___ hmm,

TAB

5 5 3 5 5

4 5 4 0 4 0 4 0 3

FIGURE 3

Study and Performance

The V (E7) chord in measure 10 of verse 2 is a hip blues inversion with the 5th (B) of E on the bottom string. Low to high, use your middle, ring, index, and pinky fingers.

Fig. 3

1 E7

now you hear me howl-in', ba-by, hmm,

T
A
B

7 7 7 7

6 6 6 4

7 7 7 7

From Four Until Late

Recorded Saturday, June 19, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 379-1)

The last song on Saturday was outside of the normal realm of Robert Johnson's recordings but hints at the breadth of the material reportedly performed live. Closer to the ragtime blues of people like Lonnie Johnson and Big Bill Broonzy, "From Four Until Late" has Johnson literally crooning over I-VI-II-V changes and is his only number in the key of C.

FIGURE 1

Study

The intro illustrates the way Johnson could smoothly adapt his descending blues turnaround to "ice cream" changes.

Performance

For measures 1 and 2, anchor your pinky on the root (C) note at fret 8 on string 1. In measure 1, cover string 2 at fret 8 as well. On beat 3, barre across fret 5 with your index finger and use your ring finger for the A note at fret 7. In measure 2, use your middle finger for the A \flat note at fret 6 and remove your pinky from string 2 so the E note at fret 5 is covered by your index finger. Shift to an open-position C7 chord in measure 3, but leave off the fifth string root note, which was played on beat 4 of measure 2. Play the F and Fm chords with partial barres. How cool is it that Johnson moves to a simple G7 chord on beat 4 by lifting off his index finger from the Fm chord and leaving just the F (\flat 7th) note on string 4?

Fig. 1

Intro
Moderately $\text{♩} = 108$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩}$)

1 *C7 F/A Fm/A \flat C C7 F Fm G7

mf w/ fingers

1. From four _

P.M. _ _ _

T
A
B

*Chord symbols reflect implied tonality.

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system shows the guitar part in 4/4 time, starting with a 4-measure introduction. Chord symbols are placed above the staff: *C7, F/A, Fm/A \flat , C, C7, F, Fm, and G7. The second system shows the guitar part with a melodic line, including a triplet of eighth notes. The third system shows the bass part with a rhythmic line, including a triplet of eighth notes. The score is marked 'mf w/ fingers' and 'P.M. _ _ _'.

FIGURE 2

Study

Throughout the song, Johnson plays a fill with 3rds derived from the C harmonized scale. Usually it resolves to C7, but it also moves to A7 (along with a similar sequence).

Performance

Place your ring finger on string 2 and your index finger on string 1 and slide your hand down the neck to each appropriate fret position.

Fig. 2

Figure 2 displays musical notation for a guitar fill. The notation is written on three staves. The top staff shows a single note on the first string, first fret, labeled 'C'. The middle staff shows a triplet of eighth notes on the first string, first fret, followed by a triplet of eighth notes on the second string, first fret, and then a triplet of eighth notes on the first string, first fret. The bottom staff shows the fret positions for strings T, A, and B. The fret positions are: T (1), 5, 3, 3, 2, 2, 1, 1; A 0; B 3. The notation is in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

1 C

3

P.M.

T (1) 5 3 3 2 2 1 1

A 0

B 3

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 394-2)

FIGURE 1

Set your middle finger on the C# note at fret 2 and simultaneously hammer your ring finger to fret 3 and your index finger to fret 1 on string 3 after plucking all five strings.

Fig. 1
Open Em Tuning:
① = E ④ = E
② = B ⑤ = B
③ = G ⑥ = E
($\text{♩} = \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩} \text{ } \text{♩}$)
E7

1. I

FIGURE 2

Study and Performance

Measure 7 of verse 2 contains one of the few places in the song where the open G string rings out clearly. Simply pluck the open G string along with the C note on string 5.

Fig. 2

and to-mor-row was Christ-mas Day.

FIGURE 3

Study and Performance

Measure 2 of verse 1 has a classic Robert Johnson bending lick in an unusual location. Over the V (B7) chord, he bends the F (♭5th) a quarter step while holding down the ♭7th (A). This particular move is one he usually makes involving the ♭3rd and 5th (low to high) of the I chord (see “Sweet Home Chicago” Fig. 2). Put your index finger on string 1 and bend with your middle finger.

Fig. 3

keep mov - in',

Little Queen Of Spades

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 395-1)

“Little Queen Of Spades” is a brilliant summing up of Johnson’s standard-tuned, medium tempo songs in the key of A—the ones he played at his first session in San Antonio in 1936. The effect that these technical developments would have on Muddy Waters, and the other Chicago blues guitarists who followed in his wake, is inestimable.

Similar to “Kind Hearted Woman Blues” in several aspects, “Little Queen of Spades” is yet another effort to recapture the audience for the former tune. In the process, however, Johnson actually advanced and expanded on the previous accompaniment.

FIGURE 1

Study

Measures 1–4 of the verse show how Johnson uses “his” (A) 7th chord form on the top strings to imply an A°7 and a Dm6 by just shifting it up and down the fingerboard. When applied in conjunction with a first-inversion A major triad (measure 4), a logically composed section of the I chord is created that suggests more harmonic movement than usual in this situation. Notice how measures 3 and 4 are closely related to his descending turnaround patterns.

Performance

Low to high, use your middle, index, and ring fingers for the A7 shape. For the A major triad in measure 4, barre across fret 5 with your index finger and add the C# on string 3 with your middle finger.

Fig. 1
Verse

1 A7 3 A°7

is a lit - tle queen of spades _____ and the men will not let her be.

TAB

3 A7 A°7 Dm6 A Dm6 A°7

Mmm,

FIGURE 2

Study

Measures 7 and 8 (I chord) in verse 1 again demonstrate how Johnson was refining and developing his stock phrases. The first measure of this figure is similar to the “Kind Hearted Woman Blues” family of A7 (I) licks at fret 5, but in the second measure he drops to the second position A major chord form and inverts the harmony by placing the 3rd (C#) on string 5. In the same measure he creates a melodic line on string 1 that moves from A (root) to G (b7th) to E (5th) for a “sweet” resolution.

Performance

Low to high, form the A7 chord with your index, middle, ring, and pinky (for the A note on string 1) fingers and move it down the neck one fret on beat 4 of the first measure. In the second measure, barre across fret 2 with your index finger and play the high A with your pinky and the C# with your ring finger while maintaining the A barre. Lift off the barre to pull off the G with your ring finger and then slap it back down for the A chord on beat 4.

Fig. 2

1 A7

Ev - 'ry -

TAB

Malted Milk

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 396–1)

Both “Malted Milk” and “Drunken Hearted Man” are virtual tributes to Lonnie Johnson (no relation), one of Robert Johnson’s heroes. One of the most advanced guitarists of the day, Lonnie Johnson achieved a certain amount of commercial success with his own recordings and as a sideman in blues and jazz. His pioneering single-line solos and chord work in the twenties were hugely influential to other players. Robert was so enamored that he went around for a while referring to himself as Robert “Lonnie” Johnson.

FIGURE 1

Study

Within the drop-D tuning and key of D, Johnson introduces a new set of licks to indicate the change from I (D) to IV (G). In measures 1 and 2 of verse 1, he plays 3rds around fret 5 that include the 5th (A), 3rd (F#), root (D), and b7th (C) from the D Mixolydian mode and a first-inversion G triad (B–D–G) at fret 3.

Performance

Use your ring and index fingers to play the double-stops in measure 1. In measure 2, barre across the top three strings at fret 3 and add the B note on string 3 with your middle finger. Lift the barre off the strings to play the A (9th) note at fret 2 and then put it back down to complete the measure.

Fig. 1

Drop D Tuning:

- ① = E ④ = D
② = B ⑤ = A
③ = G ⑥ = D

Verse

1 D7 G

keep drink - in' malt - ed milk try-in' to drive my blues a - way.

sim.

T 5 7 3 3 3 2 3 4 4 2 4 3 3

A

B

FIGURE 2

Study

Measures 3 and 4 of verse 1 contain a string of double stops in 3rds and a three-note D7 form with the $\flat 7^{\text{th}}$ (C) on the bottom. The 3rds imply chromatic movement from the D major (A/F#) down to what would be the D dominant 7th (via the chord in the second measure), thereby setting up the change to the IV (G) in measure 5. Similar fills occur throughout “Malted Milk” at this juncture.

Performance

Like the 3rds in Fig. 1, use your ring and index fingers to fret these double stops. You will need to shift your index finger to string 2 for the root (D) note in measure 2 and to complete the D7 voicing efficiently (middle finger on string 3 and ring finger on string 1).

Fig. 2

1 D7

I keep -

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 397-1)

FIGURE 1

Performance

59

FIGURE 2

Study and Performance

The turnaround for verse 3 has a variation that implies diminished chords resolving to the A7 voicing. After marking the tonic with the open D (6) and A (5) strings, Johnson uses his favorite three-note voicing on the top strings (see Fig. 1, “Little Queen of Spades”) for A° and G#°. As previously noted, use your middle, index, and ring fingers (low to high) for the diminished voicings.

Fig. 2

The musical score for Figure 2 is presented in three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in 4/4 time, starting with a measure rest, followed by a triplet of eighth notes. The lyrics "4. Now, I'm the drunk _" are written below the notes. The middle staff is a guitar line in standard notation, featuring a series of chords and a melodic line. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature (TAB) corresponding to the guitar line. The TAB shows fret numbers for each string, with a 5 on the 5th string and 4 on the 4th string for the first measure, and a 3 on the 3rd string for the second measure. The TAB also includes a 5 on the 5th string and a 4 on the 4th string for the third measure, and a 3 on the 3rd string for the fourth measure. The TAB ends with a 0 on the 6th string. The score is labeled with "A°", "G#°", and "A7" above the first three measures. The word "P.M." appears below the guitar line in two locations. A large, curved line is drawn across the bottom of the page, starting from the right side and curving towards the left.

Me And The Devil Blues

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 398-1)

Once again, Robert Johnson returned to his tried-and-true standard tuning musical accompaniment in the key of A. Similar to “Little Queen Of Spades” (recorded earlier in the day) and all its antecedents, it nevertheless is filled with telling details that constantly reveal his commitment to his instrument.

Whether he was running out of ideas or merely trying to satisfy his contractual obligations by providing proven commercial material is open to debate. What is not debatable, however, is the effect the subject matter would have on the “legend” and the consummate skill and expressiveness on display in the musical presentation.

FIGURE 1

Study

Measures 5 and 6 (IV) of verse 2 have a classic single-string fill involving the $\flat 7$ th (C) bent repeatedly a quarter step to the “blue note” on string 1 in the root position of the A blues scale at fret 5. This resolves to the root (D at fret 7) on beat 4 in the second measure via the 5th (A) on string 1. Notice the unison “Es” on the upbeat of beat 4 that sustain over the barline to the I (A) chord in the next measure (not shown) to ease the transition.

Performance

Bend the C note with your pinky backed up by your ring, middle, and index fingers. If you play the D note with your ring finger, your index will be in a fine position to play the E note on string 2 at fret 5. Be sure not to mute the open high E string.

Fig. 1

Fig. 1 shows the musical score for measures 5 and 6 of the song "Me And The Devil Blues". The score is written for guitar and bass. The guitar part features a classic single-string fill involving the 7th fret (C) bent repeatedly a quarter step to the "blue note" (D) on beat 4 in the second measure via the 5th (A) on string 1. The bass part shows the root position of the A blues scale at fret 5. The score is labeled "Fig. 1" and includes a copyright notice at the bottom.

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Stop Breakin' Down Blues

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 399-1)

One of the standouts of Robert Johnson's last session was "Stop Breakin' Down Blues." Along with "Steady Rollin' Man," "Preachin' Blues," and others, this track would exert a tremendous influence on electric Chicago blues (and by extension, rock 'n' roll—see Rolling Stones) due to its drive and energy. Likewise, the recurring theme for the I chord certainly opened the door for future riff-driven blues and rock.

It is not hard to imagine Johnson rocking a juke joint to its foundation with the power of this piece.

FIGURE 1

Study

As seen in the intro, the turnarounds in this song only briefly (if at all) acknowledge the V (E) chord, instead holding their course on the I (A) to maintain forward momentum. Measures 11 and 12 of verse 1 show one of the hipper variations Johnson performed throughout the piece. Starting on beat 3 of the first measure, he picks E, C#, and A (a reverse A major arpeggio) that, through the force of musical gravity, ends with a satisfying "thunk" on the open A and E strings. The dynamics engendered by the cadence to the bass strings sets up the return of the "motif" based on the A note on string 1.

Performance

Johnson takes advantage of the open A tuning everywhere in "Stop Breakin' Down Blues" to express his musical thoughts. Using your index finger to pick the A note while thumping the bass strings with your thumb, pluck down across the open first, second, and third strings and end on the open A and E strings in the second measure with your thumb.

Fig. 1

Open A Tuning:

- ① = E ④ = E
② = C# ⑤ = A
③ = A ⑥ = E

1 A

T 5 5 5 5 0 0 0 5 5 5 5

A 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

B 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 4

FIGURE 2

Study

At the end of verse 3, Johnson tacks on two extra measures of the I (A7). In this “second turnaround,” he plays some cool altered tones with the B \flat (#9) in the first measure and the G \sharp (major 7) in the second measure. This effect adds variety to a song that could (unlikely!) become repetitious in its regularity by extending the dominant tonality.

Performance

Play the B \flat note on string 1 with your ring finger. This will then make it possible to pull off to your middle finger for the A note and then easily play the G with your index.

Fig. 2

1

A

4. Now, I give

The figure displays a musical score for guitar, consisting of three staves. The top staff is the guitar melody, written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a measure of rest, followed by a measure with a whole note A. The melody continues with a series of eighth and quarter notes, including a triplet of eighth notes. The middle staff is the guitar accompaniment, written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps and a 4/4 time signature. It features a series of chords and single notes, including a triplet of eighth notes. The bottom staff is a tablature for the guitar strings, labeled T, A, and B. It shows the fret numbers for each string, including a triplet of eighth notes on the T string.

Traveling Riverside Blues (Take 1)

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 400-1)

Amazingly, a long lost take 1 of “Traveling Riverside Blues” surfaced in 1998 to the delight of fans, musicians, and blues scholars alike. Although quite similar to take 2, it does differ in some of the slide filigree and most notably in what would be the V–IV change before the turnaround. Although it is conjecture, it is intriguing to theorize that Robert Johnson was experimenting with ways to break out of the strict I–IV–V chord format that the blues was starting to embrace.

FIGURE 1

Study

In every verse (usually 16 measures) except verses 1 and 3, Johnson goes to the IV (D) chord in measure 11 where one would expect the V (E), and repeats it in measure 12. In those first two verses, he actually reverses the order and follows the IV with the V as he did in take 1. Fig. 1 shows measures 11 and 12 from verse 2. Clearly, he is indicating the IV chord by repeating the root (D) and 5th (A) notes on string 6 in the first measure, with the E note functioning as the 9th. In the second measure, he plays the D and C notes (implying the root and $\flat 7$ th of D), but then moves up to fret 7 on beat 3 where he plays the E again before quickly inserting the open A (4th) string as anticipation for the next measure (I).

It is possible that Johnson was implying a fast V (E) chord in these measures like he did in take 1, but the notes on either side of the E seem to indicate that he was employing it as a dominant extension.

Performance

Johnson appears to be lightly damping the bass strings with the heel of his right hand as he slides into each note.

Fig. 1

Open A Tuning:

- ① = E ④ = E
② = C# ⑤ = A
③ = A ⑥ = E

The figure shows musical notation for measures 11 and 12 of 'Traveling Riverside Blues'. The notation is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The melody is written on a treble clef staff. The lyrics are: 'Point rider, now, hops all over me.' The bass line is written on a bass clef staff. The fretboard diagram shows the following fret numbers for the strings (from 1st to 6th): 5, 5, 5, 6, 7, 0, 0, 0 for measure 11, and 5, 5, 3, 0, 7, 0, 5, 0 for measure 12.

Traveling Riverside Blues

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 400-2)

Dipping back into his older repertoire for inspiration drawn from the roots of Delta blues, Johnson lifted the accompaniment of "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day" (from his last session in San Antonio in 1936) for "Traveling Riverside Blues." For this round, he slowed the tempo down to a sensuous groove that heightened the explicit sexual content of verse 5, allowing for more subtle inflections.

FIGURE 1

Study

Measures 3 and 4 (I) of verse 3 contain a fill (or "answer") with remarkable syncopation. Johnson alternates between strummed open strings and slide notes that, when combined with the running bass line, make him sound like three guitarists! Along with the triadic notes (A-C#-E) found on the open strings, he adds E/C (♭3rd and 5th) and G# (major 7) for musical tension. Notice the low G# that he frets on beat three of measure 4 for dynamic effect.

Performance

Be sure to damp the strings with the palm of your right hand in between the open strings and slide notes. In addition, play the low G# at fret 4 on string 6 with your thumb.

Fig. 1

Open A Tuning:

- ① = E ④ = E
② = C# ⑤ = A
③ = A ⑥ = E

1

w/o slide w/ slide w/o slide w/ slide w/o slide w/ slide w/o slide

T
A
B

0 3 0 0 0 4 0 0 0 4 0 0 4 0

X X 4 X

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL-401-1)

FIGURE 1

Love In Vain Blues

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL-402-1)

Though popularized by the Rolling Stones, Robert Johnson's version of "Love In Vain Blues" is a strikingly original composition fully capable of standing on its own merits. Though a 12-bar blues, it has several elements new to his music, and it was his only recording in open G tuning (contrary to contemporary belief!). A common country blues tuning, it appears to have been a recent addition to Johnson's catalog of open tunings, leading one to believe that he was prepared to expand his musical horizons at this point in his career.

FIGURE 1

Study

Due to the open G tuning, Johnson was afforded fresh harmonies unique to his music in the intro and turnarounds. Fig. 1 shows the four-measure intro with 3rds in measures 1 and 2 and a big, fat, ringing D7 chord in measure 4. In measure 3 he was still able to execute his classic descending turnaround figure.

Performance

Like the hook in "Dust My Broom" and "Phonograph Blues" (take 2), barring across the top two strings with your index finger easily accesses 3rds. The D7 chord in measure 4 is a little trickier. After hammering to the A note at fret 2 with your middle finger, place it on string 5 at fret 2, followed by your index finger on string 2 and your pinky on string 1.

Fig. 1

Open G Tuning, Tune Up 1/2 Step:

① = D# ④ = D#

② = B# ⑤ = G#

③ = G# ⑥ = D#

Intro

Moderately ♩ = 89 (♩ = ♩³)

1. And I

mf w/ fingers

P.M. throughout

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
T	12	12	12	12	11	11	11	11	11	10	10	10
A	12	12	12	12	11	11	11	11	11	10	10	10
B												

FIGURE 2

Study

Measure 6 of verse 1 has an unusual IV (C) chord voicing with the 3rd (E) on the bottom that would be virtually impossible in standard tuning. It complements the five-string voicing for the I (G) chord featured throughout.

Performance

Barre your index finger at fret 2 and play strings 5, 3, and 1 at fret 5 with your middle, ring, and pinky fingers. Yes, that is quite a stretch. Good luck!

Fig. 2

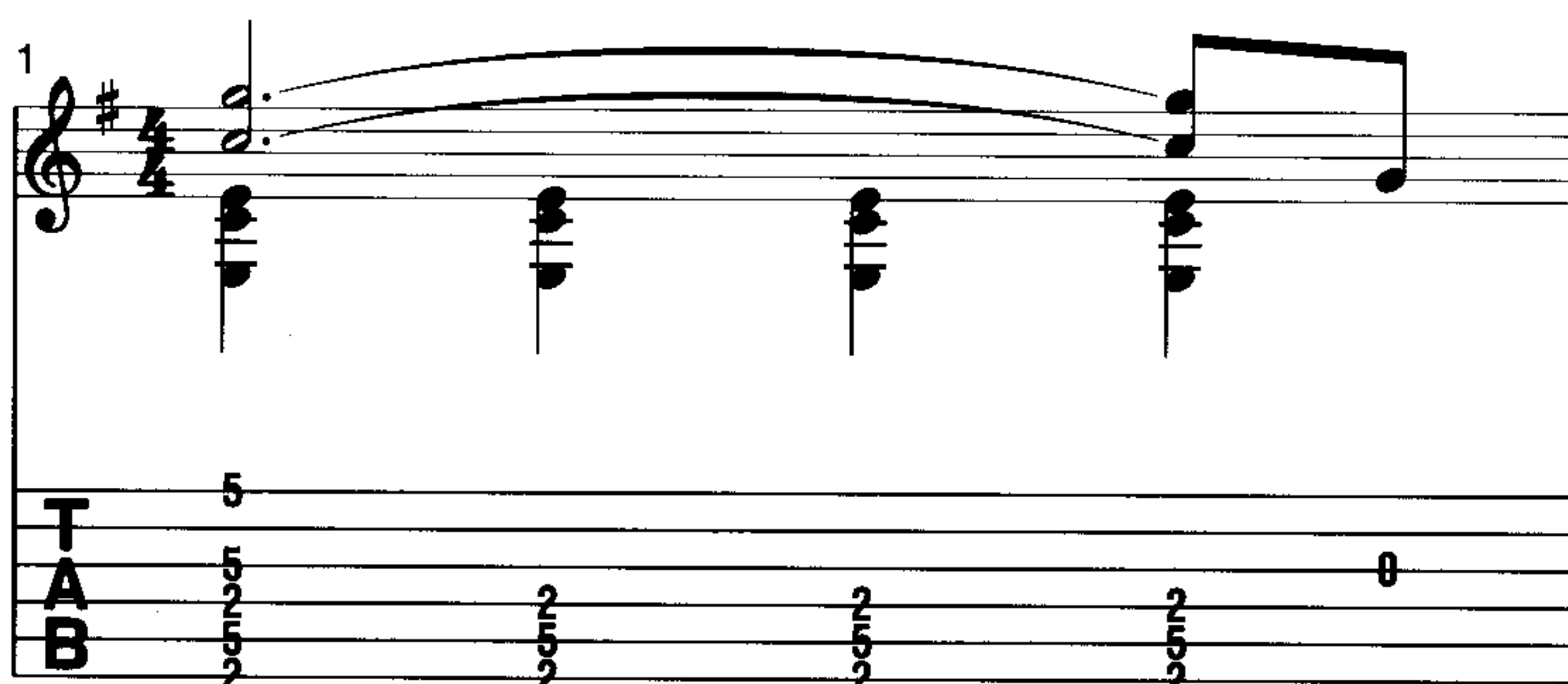


FIGURE 3

Study

Particular to this recording only, Johnson plays a II (A)–V (D) chord move in measures 9 and 10 where he (and most other country bluesmen) would normally play V (D)–IV (C). Again, the simplicity of the conception is a thing of beauty with A (root) and E (5th) notes declaiming the II (A) chord and D (root), A (5th), C (♭7th), and F# (3rd) notes neatly outlining the D7 (V) chord.

Performance

Barre across the lower strings at fret 2 with your index finger and your pinky at fret 5 for the A7 chord. Use the same fingering for the D7 chord here that you used for the same chord in Fig. 1.

Fig. 3

FIGURE 4

Study

The last measure of the song contains a big, six-string G chord which supports the conclusion that “Love In Vain Blues” is in open G tuning. As can be seen, the low D (open string 6) on beat 2 precedes the chord on beat 3 that contains G notes on strings 6 and 1.

Performance

Use your thumb for string 6 and your index finger for string 1. If you hook your thumb far enough over the edge of the neck you should be able to mute string 5 as you strum down the strings with your right hand thumb (or thumb pick).

Fig. 4

1 Eb G/D D7 G

vain.

3

7

G

T

A

B

0 2 1 1 0 0 0 0

Milkcow's Calf Blues

Recorded Sunday, June 20, 1937 in Dallas, Texas
(DAL 403-3)

The last known recording that Robert Johnson made looked back for the last time to his hit "Terraplane Blues" and the other variations in open A tuning that followed. Though he was treading old ground at a time when he may have wanted to branch out, he still played with intensity, conviction, and creativity within the parameters of the piece.

FIGURE 1

Study

The intro contains numerous single notes along with 3rds, unusual for Johnson. Perhaps he liked the sound of the descending 3rds in "Love in Vain Blues." Whatever the reason, the result is an intro that starts with the V (E) via G# (3rd), B/G# (3rd and 5th), E (root) and A (sus4); followed by the IV (D), indicated by C/A (5th and b7th), E (9th), A (5th), and C# (major 7th).

Notice the octave notes on string 6 and 4 in the descending turnaround pattern in measure 3.

Performance

Use your index and middle fingers (while holding the slide on your pinky up and out of the way) for the notes on strings 6 and 4 in measure 3.

Fig. 1

Open A Tuning; Tune Up 1/2 Step:

- ① = E# ④ = E#
② = D ⑤ = A#
③ = A# ⑥ = E#

Intro

Moderately Slow ♩ = 87 (♩ = ♩³)

1. Te -

*Chord symbols reflect implied tonality.