

"Cross Road Blues" Robert Johnson



By Douglas Baldwin

If one blues musician is remembered three centuries from now, it'll be Robert Johnson, with his "Cross Road Blues" (commonly referred to as "Crossroads"). The lyrics express the fears of a black man traveling across the rural South: Johnson is praying to God that he can get a ride before sundown; if he does not, his life will be in jeopardy. Years later, Cream's legendary rendition of "Crossroads" (Wheels of Fire, Polydor), with Eric Clapton on

guitar, proved that the song's sentiment could span generations, technologies, and cultures.

TUNING AND SLIDE TECHNIQUE

Deciphering Robert Johnson's tunings has proved to be problematic. While today we often use dropped tunings (where strings are lowered in pitch), it's probable that Johnson actually raised his strings, to accommodate open tunings and to get the most volume from his guitar. This transcription splits the dif-

ference by employing an open-A tuning, dropped a half step and capoed at the 2nd fret. To get into this tuning, drop your 1st and 6th strings to E \flat and your 5th string to A \flat ; then, raise your 2nd string to C, your 3rd string to A \flat , and your 4th string to E \flat . To play along with the original recording, which sounds in the key of B major, either capo at the 3rd fret or tune to open-A (E-A-E-A-C \sharp -E) and capo the 2nd fret.

"Cross Road Blues" opens with a slide-guitar lick that would become a trademark for both Elmore James and Chuck Berry. (Berry, of course, played it without a slide.) Johnson is probably using a glass, as opposed to metal, slide, and he rapidly alternates between slide parts and standard technique. If you're new to slide playing, be sure that your slide touches the strings firmly enough so that notes sound clearly, but not so hard as to press the strings into the frets, thereby distorting the pitch. In addition, align the slide directly above the fret—not behind it, as you would if you were playing with conventional fret-hand technique.

Most of Johnson's slide work takes place 12 frets above the capo, putting you at either the 14th or the 15th fret, depending on which tuning you use. If you're playing a non-cutaway acoustic guitar, your fret hand will be hard against the body of

the guitar, your thumb below the neck (not behind it). At the third measure, switch to standard fingering; the descending chromatic phrase that is played on the 4th string is a classic blues turnaround, and can be played with just one or two fret-hand fingers. Follow the transcription carefully, as changes from slide work to finger work occur throughout.

PICKING AND RHYTHMS

Johnson was a fingerpicker, not a strummer, and you'll do well to mimic his firm yet precise pick-hand attack. In "Cross Road Blues," most of the picking consists of a bass note played with the thumb on beat 1, followed by a few beats' worth of higher notes played by the other fingers. The result is much like the sound of a woodchopper's cadence, or of a chain-gang work song. In terms of rhythm alone, Johnson's playing can be totally inscrutable to those of us raised on "the tyranny of 4/4 time," as jazz guitarist Pat Metheny aptly puts it. Not only are there occasional measures of 3/4 and 5/4 throughout this primarily 4/4 setting, but Johnson, along

with several other prewar acoustic blues players, would often alternate between swing (triplet-based) and straight (even) feels. Fig. 1 shows two basic rhythms, played with a swing feel on beats 1 and 2 and with a straight feel on beats 3 and 4. As shown, a note is struck on each italicized syllable. To see how the alternation of these two feels informs "Cross Road Blues," compare the opening measure with the first verse's 13th measure. Then consider a metaphysical trade with Old Scratch to learn how to sing in such a heartbreakingly lonesome tone, and in rhythmic strides impossibly different from what you're playing on the guitar. β



Fig. 1

Open-A tuning, down 1/2 step:
(low to high) E \flat -A \flat -E \flat -A \flat -C \sharp -E \flat

12 12 12 12 12 12 12 12 12 12

One - uh - let, two - uh - let, three - ee - and - uh, four - and

T A B

w/o slide

D7

A7

1/4

w/o slide

E7

1/2

w/ slide

w/o slide

A7

A

3. Hmm,

1/4

1/4

1:22

Verse 3

A7

the sun goin' down, boy...

w/ slide

D7

w/o slide

1/4

A7

1/4

1/4

w/ slide

w/o slide

1/2

E7

A7

1/4

w/ slide

w/o slide

1:54

Verse 4

A7

4. You can run, you can run...

1/2

1/4

w/ slide

w/o slide

1/2

[illegible]