

Hard Time Killing Floor Blues

Words & Music:

Nehemiah Curtis "Skip" James

Personally, I play it in E-ish (neither major, nor minor) in standard tuning, which is much easier. I can tab it if anyone is interested. Below, I've pasted tabs for the Chris Thomas King "O Brother Where Are Thou?" version and a great discussion by DADFAD on how to play the Skip James version. Enjoy!

Hard time here and everywhere you go
Times is harder than ever been before

And the people are driftin' from door to door
Can't find no heaven, I don't care where they go

Hear me tell you people, just before I go
These hard times will kill you just dry long so

Well, you hear me singin' my lonesome song
These hard times can last us so very long

If I ever get off this killin' floor
I'll never get down this low no more
No-no, no-no, I'll never get down this low no more

And you say you had money, you better be sure
'Cause these hard times will drive you from door to door

Sing this song and I ain't gonna sing no more
Sing this song and I ain't gonna sing no more
These hard times will drive you from door to door

Note 1: "Hard time Killing Floor Blues" is the title of the original Paramount recording of James's topical Depression piece, which he called by the more serviceable title "Hard Times".

Hard Time Killing Floor -by Nehemiah "Skip" James, 1930

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If you're looking for a note-for-note tab from the movie "O Brother Where Art Thou", this isn't it. This is in the style it was played originally by Skip James. Very similar to the movie, but not exactly. That's how these styles of tunes were done back in the '20s and '30s as traditional country blues tunes. It's difficult to really explain how to play a tune like this from tab, but there have been so many requests that I'll try my best. Skip James' style in open D-Minor is largely composed of several "signature licks" that when added to the general progression of the tune make it very recognizable as a Skip James piece. I think the best way to start is by first tabbing his most distinguishable lick with both tab and describing how it is played, and then in the body of the main tab I can just say "add sig lick here". I learned to play Skip's tunes in his style many years ago from Bowling Green John Cephas, probably the foremost living expert on Skip James-Bentonia Style D-min blues) who knew him personally and learned from Skip himself. This will be a simplified version at best. The only way to play it properly is to become familiar with the tuning and finger-style playing in this style and add and improvise as you go, which is how both Skip and Bowling Green played it. I guess the best way to start is by giving the open D-minor tuning (Open E-minor can also be used but is harder on your strings and guitar neck). Tab would be identical for either open D-minor (DADFAD) or open E-minor (EBEGBE). Put down your pick. This must be played with your fingers.

Skip's main signature lick is as follows:

D	_____		_____
A	_____		_____
F	3>4 4<2 1		4 2 1
D	_____0		_____0
A	_____		_____
D	_____		_____

This is the actual lick, and these are the finish notes only.

This lick is done by sliding from the 3rd to the 4th fret and then back up to the 2nd fret. It can be done as two separate picks or as only one pick with a smooth up and back down the neck motion. Then finger and play the first fret, then the open four string. All of this should be done as a very flowing, smooth lick. The note on the 3rd string first fret can also be a pull-off from the 2nd fret note. Above I also showed the finish notes. These are just the notes themselves without the slides, so you can see which ones you're aiming for within the lick. There are several variations on this lick, both with timing or with additional notes, but this is the basic figure as used in this, and several other of Skip's D-minor tunes (ei. Cherry Ball Blues, Devil Got My Woman, etc). Skip and John both frequently used a John Lee Hooker-ish multiple hammer-on on that 3rd string/first fret note repeated after the open 4th string that ends the lick above, and then adding one of the "rhythmic figures" shown down below after the tab for the first verse.

Now I'll start on the first verse. This verse, with or without improvised changes, can also be used as an intro to the piece.

D	_____0_____0_____0_____
A	_____0_____0_____0_____
F	_____0_____0_____0_____
D	_____0 3 3 2 0 3 3 0_____
A	0h3_____
D	_____

You know that hard times 'r here and everywhere you go

```

D _____
A _____ 0 _____
F _____ 0 _____ 0 _____ 0 _____ 0 _____
D _____ 0 _____ 0 _____ 0 _____ 0 _____ (insert sig lick now)
A _____ 3 _____ 0 _____ 0 _____ 0 _____
D _____ 0 _____ 3 _____ 3 _____ 0 _____
Times is harder than they been before

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D _____
A _____
F _____ 1 _____ (sig lick) _____ 1 _____ (sig lick) _____
D _____ 0 _____ 0 _____
A _____ 0 _____ 0 _____
D _____ 0 _____ 0 _____
Whoa-o-o..... oh-o.....

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D _____ 0 _____
A _____ 0 _____ 0 _____
F _____ 1 _____ (sig lick) _____ 2 _____
D _____ 0 _____ 2 _____
A _____ 0 _____ 0 _____
D _____ 0 _____ 0 _____
Whoa-o-o oh-o oh

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D _____ 3 _____ 2 _____ 1 _____ 0 _____
A _____ 4 _____ 4 _____ 3 _____ 3 _____ 2 _____ 2 _____ 0 _____
F _____ 0h1 _____
D _____
A _____
D _____ 0 _____
(turnaround line to next verse or ending)

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This is it, in it's most basic form. Note the 0h1 (0 to 1 fret hammer-ons. These are pretty important to the style). These and other phrases often are followed by arpeggiated downward slow strums. I improv around these basic lines with changes in each verse, different turnarounds, changes to the sig lick, etc. That's how Skip did it, that's how John Cephas did it and he taught me. If you familiarize yourself with how the tuning works and its intricacies, you will be able to do them soon also. I'll show a couple of variations, a different turnaround and a guitar solo verse to start off with. A tip. While it's played in D minor, it's actually probably in the key of D major. It's the inter-play between the minor and major that give this tune (and others of Skip's Bentonia Open Minor Blues) their distinctive feel. The third-string fingered on the first fret changes it from minor to major. Hammering into the major was a frequent addition in these tunes. It sometimes helps to play a line while the first finger is kept on the third-string/first fret or ready to quickly go back to it. Skip's signature lick, and variations of it, were frequently injected into the tune wherever they fit appropriately.

```

D _____ 4p0 _____ 3p0 _____ 2p0 _____ 0 _____
A _____ 3 _____ 3 _____ 2 _____ 2 _____ 1 _____ 1 _____ 0 _____
F _____ 4 _____ 4 _____ 3 _____ 3 _____ 2 _____ 2 _____ 0h1 _____
D _____
A _____
D _____ 0 _____
(this is another variation turnaround to next verse or an ending)

```

The above is done using a pull-off to the open note from the picked note. Other notes in the open strings can be added as well if desired.

```

D 0 3 3 3 0 2 0 3 3 3 0 0
A 0h3 3 0
F 4 4 4 0 2 0 4 4 4 0 2p0
D 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
A 0 0
D 0 0 0

```

(This is a semi-melody line guitar instrumental for between two verses)

The sequence above is a series of thumb and first-finger pinches with a few rolling slow arpeggiations added. Follow it with the "signature lick" (with or without one of the rhythmic figures that are shown in the example below). Slides, especially to the 3/4 pairs, can be added for more expression. Again, this can be improvised as seen fit.

```

D 0 0 0
A 0h2 0h1
F 0h1 0h1
D 0 0 0 or 0 0 0
A 0h2 0 0
D 0 0 0

```

(Here are "rhythmic figures" that can be used with or in place of the signature lick shown at the beginning. Skip frequently added one of these. He sometimes would vamp between these and his sig lick several times before the next verse and used them frequently as fills when they might fit in a given time-space. Again, he frequently used multiple hammers on the 0-hammer-1 note above.)

The final ending chord to one of his D-minor tunes would frequently be 000130 which is a D7 chord, or a single note on the open second string followed by this d7 chord.

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Hard Time Killing Floor Blues Tab by Skip James, www.Ultimate-Guitar.Com

This song was originally written by Skip James, but the version posted here is the version played by Chris Thomas King, from the O Brother Where Art Thou soundtrack.

Note 1: There are small variations in this song while it is played to give the song life and keep it interesting.

Note 2: At the end of the song, as it fades out, you can hear Chris start back with Riff 6, but you can make up your own ending.

Tuning: Drop D (DADGBE)

Riff 1

```

|-----|
|-----1--3p1--1-----|
|-2--2-2--2-2--2-2--2-2-----2-----|
|-3--0-2--0-----0-----|
|-----3--0-2-----0-----|
|-----|

```

Riff 2

```

|-----|
|-----|
|-2-----2--2-2--2-2--2-2-----2--2-2--2-2--|
|-----0-3--0-----3--0-----|
|-0h3-----3--0-----0-3--0-----0-----|
|-----3h5-----5-----3-----|

```

Riff 3

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-----
-----
-----1--3p1---1--
-----2-----2-----2-----
-5\4-----5/7\5---5--5\4-----5\4-----0-----
-----5-0-----5-----5-0-----5-0--0h3-----0--
-----0-----

```

Riff 4

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-----
-----
-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----
-----0-3--0-----3--0-----3-----
-0h3-----3--0-----0-----0h2-0-----0h2-0-----
-----3h5-----5-----3--

```

Riff 5

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-----
-----
-----5\4-----5/7\5---5--5\4-----5/7\5---5--5\4-----
-----5-0-----5-----5-0-----5-----5-0--
-----0-----

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-----
-----5/7\5---5--5\4-----5/7\5---5--5\4-----
-----5-----5-0-----5-----5-0--
-----

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Riff 6

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-----
-----1--3p1---1--
-----2-----2-----2-----
---0---0---0---0-----
-3---2---1---0--0h3-----0--
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Riff 7

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-----
-----
-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----2-----
-----0-3-----0-2-----0-3-2---0-----
-0h3-----0h3-----0h3-----3-----0-3--0h2-0-----0h2-0-----
-----0--3h5-----5-----3--

```

Song Order:

- Riff 1
- Riff 2
- Riff 3
- Riff 4
- Riff 5
- Riff 6
- Riff 7
- Riff 5
- Riff 4
- Riff 5

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Hard Time Killing Floor Blues - Skip James (performed by: Chris Carter King)

Tuning: DADFAD

Tab 1: Intro

```

D |-----0-----|
A |-0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--3---3---3-----|
F |-0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--4---4---4-----|
D |-3--0--2--0-----0-----|
A |-----3--0--2-----0-----|
D |-----0-----|

```

Tab 2: Verse and Chorus (pretty much the whole song)

```

D |-----0-----|
A |-0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0-----|
F |-0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0-----|
D |-----0--3---3--0-----0--3--0--0-----|
A |-0--3-----0--3-----|
D |-----|

```

Hard times here everywhere you go

```

D |-----0-----|
A |-0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0-----|
F |-0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0-----|
D |-----|
A |-----0--3---3--0-----0-----|
D |-0--3-----0--3-----|

```

time are harder much harder than

```

D |-----0-----0-----|
A |-----0-----0-----|
F |-----0-----0-----|
D |-5--4--0-----5--7--5--5--4--0-----|
A |-----|
D |-----0-----0-----|

```

The 5-4-0-is a slide from 5 to 4, then a pull off from 4 to 0
The 5-7-5-5-4-0-is a quick slide from 5-7-5, then a slide from 5 to 4 with a pull off to 0---This repeats 2 to 4 times depending.

before

Note 1: there are many variations to the finger picking to give the song life throughout the tune. add soul, pain and heartache.