

Pony Blues

Words & Music:
Charley Patton

The original version of this song was called "Pony Blues". Patton's second version of this song was entitled "Stoney Pony Blues". Covers have included Willie Brown's "M. & O. Blues" and "Tommy Johnson's "Bye, Bye, Blues". Son House's famous 1942 "Pony Blues" recording is at a much more laid-back tempo than Patton's original uptempo "house party" version. There is great discussion of the proper tuning/chords for this song that follows. I've just put the basic I, IV, V blues changes in. Choose your tuning, your chords & your key. Then, in the best Delta Blues tradition, make it your own!

I
Baby, saddle my pony, saddle up my black mare.
IV I
Baby, saddle my pony, saddle up my black mare.
V I
I'm gonna find a rider, baby, in the world somewhere.

"Hello central, the matter with your line?"
"Hello central, matter, Lord, with your line?"
"Come a storm last night an' tore the wire down."

Got a brand new Shetland, man, already trained.
Brand new Shetland, baby, already trained.
Just get in the saddle, tighten up on your reins.

And a brown-skin woman like somethin' fit to eat.
Brown-skin woman like somethin' fit to eat.
But a jet-black woman, don't put your hands on me.

Took my baby to meet the mornin' train.
Took baby, meet that mornin' train.
An' the blues come down, baby, like showers of rain.

I got somethin' to tell you when I gets a chance.
Somethin' to tell you when I get a chance.
I don't wanna marry, just wanna be your man.

"Pony Boy" Tuning Discussion

*These posts are from an extensive discussion of the proper tuning for this song in the Acoustic Guitar Forum.
A great resource for such things.*

Rick H

I have been working on Patton's "Pony Blues" off of a CD. I have found the tune much easier to play in open D capoed up 3 frets to match Patton's pitch, but others I've communicated with insist that Patton used standard tuning. I have a transcription of "Stoney Pony" from Stefan Grossman's "Delta Blues" book that is in E standard tuning, but I see that Bob Brozman includes "Pony Blues" in his 3rd video on Bottleneck Blues Guitar, which leads me to think he is likely playing it in an open tuning. In addition to the recommendation that I get the video, I'd like to get the opinions of forum participants.

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Hambone

E standard. Bob's version (the video of which I haven't seen or heard) would be his own arrangement/interpretation. Alvin Youngblood Hart has recorded the tune in E standard, and he remains very faithful to the original. The way I dealt with this tune many years ago was to use Grossman's tab of Stoney Pony, recorded in 1934 and a clearer, easier-to-decipher recording, and then go back and play along with the earlier-recorded Pony Blues to get the incredible groove.

While it's difficult to be 100% certain about these things, I am 99% certain that Pony Blues is in E standard. Any argument to the contrary would have to be OVERWHELMINGLY persuasive, IMHO. At the same time, if you've come up with a cool arrangement in open D, then I take my hat off to you.

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Bob Brozman

Pony Blues is definitely in standard, Key of E, which is how I teach it and play it. There is no A or A7 chord.

Times were tough in 1907, bluesmen could not afford 3 chords per song.

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Rick H

Sorry to be kind of obsessing on this, but I can hear that the Alvin Youngblood Hart version (as well as Stefan Grossman's "New Pony Blues") has to be in standard by the G to G# hammer-on on the E chord...something that can't be achieved in open E or D without some awkward fingering up the neck. Is there something similar in Patton's version that is unique to standard tuning as opposed to an open tuning?

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Baltimore Bluesman

I have a question for those of you who play a version of Pony Blues that tries to stay as close as possible to Patton's version:

What do you all play during the first line of the second, third and fifth verses (the ones that begin with the lyrics "Hello central", "Got a brand new Shetland" and "Took my baby", respectively)?

It seems to include a single note at the twelfth fret (assuming you're not capoed), but it sounds much fuller and more percussive. Is he doing some sort of tapping? Or string popping?

I have the Stefan Grossman tab, which defers discussing this part of the song in detail: it refers the reader to the tab for "34 Blues".

I currently play that E at the twelfth fret, and it's octave below (the 9th fret of the G string), eighth notes. But I don't like it much (partly because it's the same thing George Harrison played in the Beatles' "It's Getting Better", which tends to destroy any bluesiness for me -- I love the Beatles, but they ain't Delta!)

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BluesMcGoo

I base my version of the song on AYH's inspired version.

At those places in the song, I play the high E string at the 12th fret, and the B string on the 11th fret giving that note a little bend approaching the pitch at the 12th, but not quite there.

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Ramblin

Sounds to me like CP is playing the 1st string at the 12th fret by grabbing it between his thumb and forefinger, pulling it up and then releasing it, allowing it to slap against the fretboard. Then, the 12th fret E is run down to the 9th fret, then 7th.

The tapping that you hear is, imho, CP tapping his foot. Also (and again, imho) CP uses the exact same approach for the I chord in Down the Dirt Road Blues, but in the key of C (tuned high). He also uses a similar RH approach in Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues, over the V chord.

The main thing in getting it to sound good is to do it with authority and not be afraid to leave the bass out of the picture for a few beats. It'll sound that much cooler when your thumb comes back to the bass strings - woof!

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Rick H.

I started the post in 2004...thanks for the bump. I am still puzzled by the tuning question for Pony Blues. Back in 2004 I transcribed the tab to Stoney Pony from Stefan Grossmans "Delta Blues" (Oak Anthology) into a PowerTab program. The first couple of measure of Stefan's tab seemed unusual...2nd string/8th fret(bend), 1st string open, 3rd string/6th fret, 5th string/2nd fret, 6th string/open. This is a lot of "jumping around" (my expression) on the fretboard, especially between the 3rd string/6th fret and the 5th string/2nd fret. I then used the transcribe function on PowerTab to change the tab to open E tuning and was amazed to see the whole tab looked much easier to play. Instead of jumping around the fretboard, all the notes were near the nut and the bass notes were on open strings. I was also thinking that if Son House plays the tune in open D, maybe he learned the tune, in open D, from C.P.. There are a lot of versions of Pony Blues, like AYH's, that are clearly in key of E standard tuning, but I still don't hear anything in Patton's version (such as a G to G# hammer on on the E chord) that suggest his version is in standard tuning. As much as I respect the opinions of Bob Brozman and Stefan, I'm still curious about the specifics that lead to their conclusion that the tune is in E standard rather than open E.

As to your other question, I hope you noticed Hambone's post on the board. I'm going to be in Chicago this summer for the Chicago Blues Festival. They usually have a number of great acoustic blues artists. It would be fun to bump into some of the Forum members there. Last year my buddy and I opened our guitar cases and played in the Metra train station while waiting for our train back to Michigan City, until the Chicago heat came through and told us to shut it down. We took some perverse pride in this...not our playing, just being shut down in a train station by Chicago's finest

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Cheapfeet

I think it's definately in E standard . . . but capoed at the first fret to get the pitch of the recording. To my ears all of the licks sound right in this tuning although some of those licks are difficult to decipher . . . especially that quick triplet or something played under the V chord . . . a mystery . . .

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Tom Austin

Sorry to be kind of obsessing on this, but I can hear that the Alvin Youngblood Hart version (as well as Stefan Grossman's "New Pony Blues")has to be in standard by the G to G# hammer-on on the E chord...something that can't be achieved in open E or D without some awkward fingering up the neck.

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great thread and I agree with the forming consensus that Pony Blues was in standard (not that my opinion counts much, never having even tried to play the song), but...

you can get that hammer-on effect of minor-third-to-major-third in open D minor (and capo 2 if you were playing a song in E). That's pretty much exactly why Skip James played in open Dm: to get that bluesy hammer thing going.

I'm sure you could get it in open Gm too.

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Ulysses K. Davenport

I think Son House did most of his stuff in open G (DGDGBD low to high). I do Preachin' Blues in open D (D A D Fsharp A D) and Pony in E in standard tuning. Now, I don't know how much help I've been, but welcome anyway.