

John Henry

Traditional, arranged by Harvey Reid and Joyce Andersen



"John Henry" is probably the most widespread ballad in American folk music, and among the most important. It seems to have first been sung on work gangs throughout the South. It tells an apparently true story of a contest between man and the steam drill, probably in the 1870s, where a man named John Henry died after outperforming a steam-driven rock drill in the building of a railroad tunnel. The details of the song vary quite a bit

among the hundreds of versions, but in general the heroic theme is constant. Some of the blues versions imply that John Henry was more of a victim than a hero, but the epic nature of his struggle and death still resonates with working people everywhere.

"John Henry" is usually done either as a one-chord blues (often in open-D tuning) or as a two-chord song with a I-V change, though some add a IV chord. There are very few versions sung by women, so Joyce merged the Josh White and Bill Broonzy versions with some verses and notions from other places. On our recording, we gave it an unusual tempo that is pretty much a Memphis Minnie beat, and I play some fingerpicked open-G leads and rhythm slaps. —HARVEY REID

Chords

G 210034

D x0132

Banjo Chords

G 00000

D x0123

Mando Chords

G 0012

D 1002

Strum Pattern

Swing (♩ = ♩)

G 210034

*Strum: 3 0 3 0 3 0 3 0

* ♩ = down; V = up

- G** **D**
1. When John Henry was a little baby, he was sitting on his mama's knee
G
 He reached out his hand, picked up a little piece of steel
 Said "This is gonna be the death of me, gonna be the death of me"
- G** **D**
2. Some said he was born in Texas, some said he was born in Maine
G
 I don't give a damn where that poor boy was born
 He was a steel-drivin' man, he was a steel-drivin' man
- G** **D**
3. John Henry said to his captain, "A man ain't nothin' but a man
G
 Before I let that steam drill beat me down
 I will die with this hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord
 Die with this hammer in my hand"

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