ACOUSTIC GUITAR GUIDES
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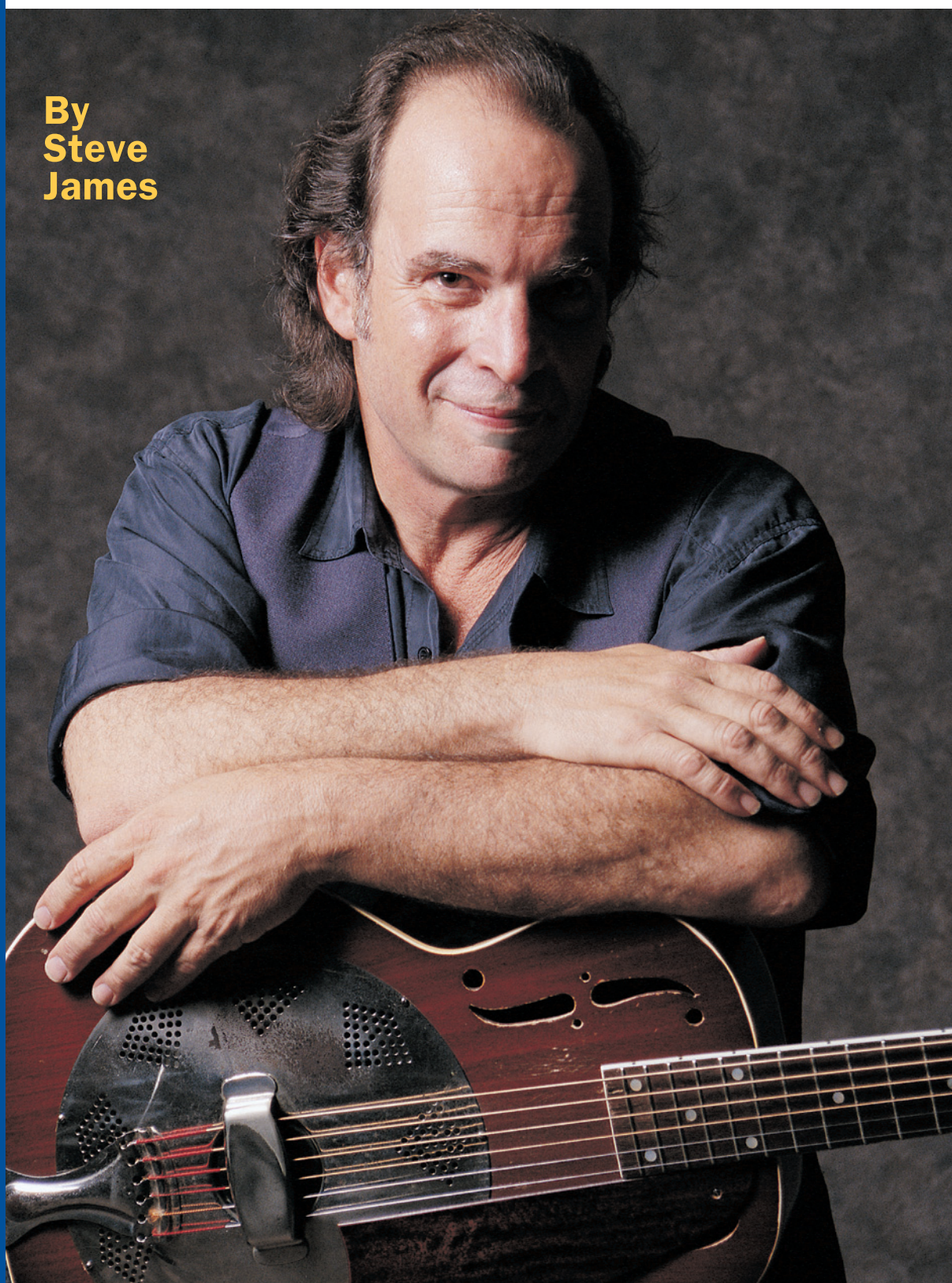
Roots and Blues Fingerstyle Guitar

THE COMPLETE EDITION

LEARN TO FINGERPICK THE 12 BLUES SONGS INCLUDING

Take Me Back, Milwaukee Blues, Railroad Bill, Things About Comin' My Way, Way Out on the Desert, Spanish Fandango, and more

166 minutes of video instruction and detailed notation and tab



By Steve James

Take Me Back

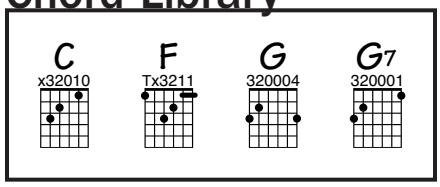
Traditional, arranged by Steve James

When learning to fingerpick American folk songs, blues, and other forms of roots music, it's both instructive and diverting to listen to themes that were popular a century or more ago when the guitar was gaining greater currency in American rural music. Many of these songs practically play themselves when they are arranged fingerstyle, and since some exist in numerous recorded versions, players intent on adding to their bag of tricks can gain a lot by comparing the various approaches employed by charter members of the Big Thumb Society.

The venerable "Take Me Back," a favorite of the ragtime era, is such a piece. It's been recorded by Texas greats Mance Lipscomb and Lemon Jefferson (who called it "Beggin' Back") and Memphis master Frank Stokes. Primal songster and one-man band Henry Thomas used its circular melody in his "Bob McKinney," and it bears a strong resemblance to other 19th-century standards—notably "Creole Belles."

Each of these guitarists had a unique version, and while some used a capo to raise the actual pitch, they all played "Take Me Back" in the key of C. We're going to do the same, starting by playing the melody against a simple alternating bass line and then adding "color notes" and rhythmic variations to give the arrangement depth and variety.

Chord Library



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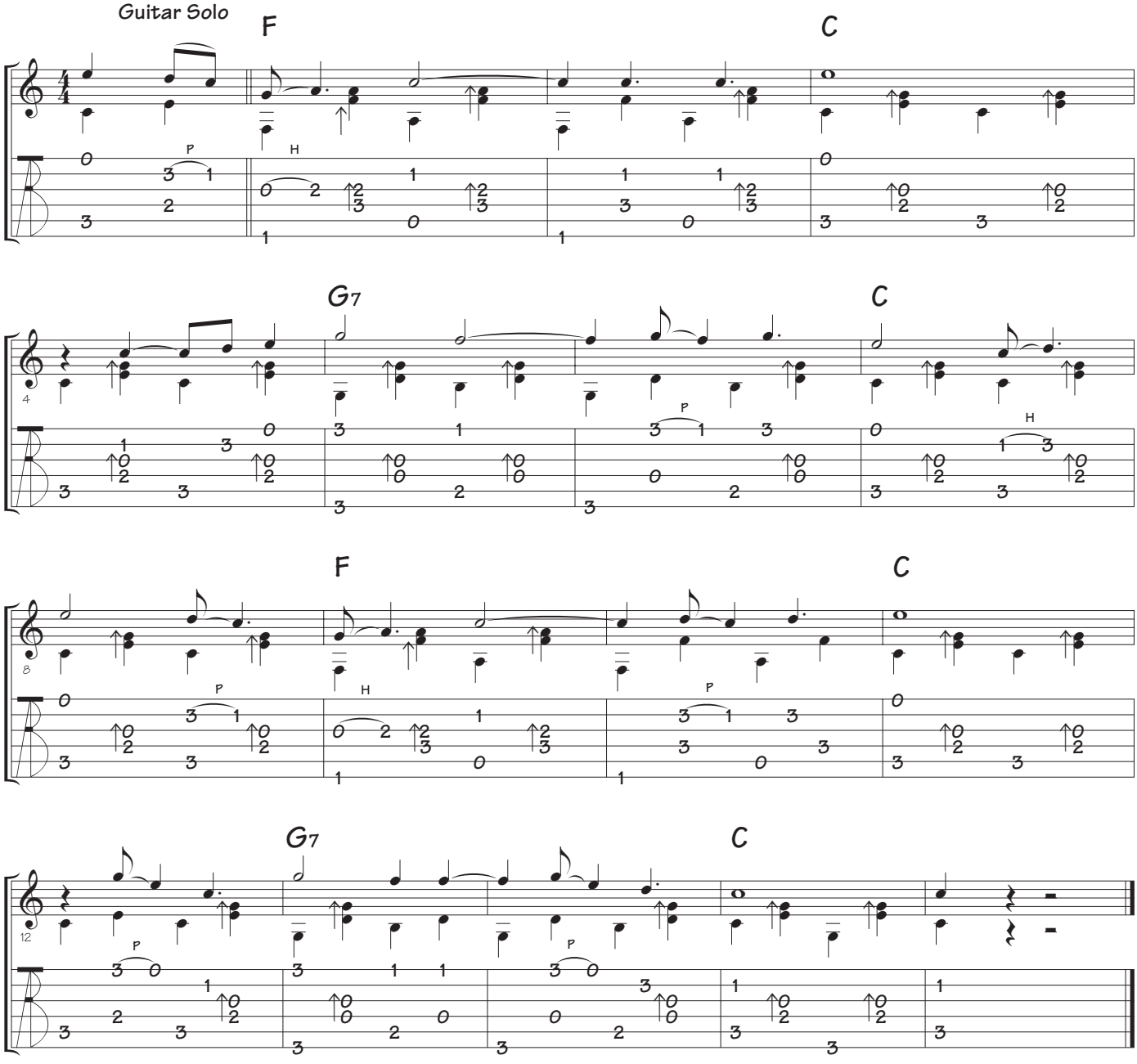
Take Me Back

Traditional, arranged by Steve James



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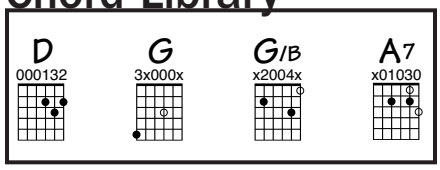
Milwaukee Blues

Traditional, adapted from Charlie Poole by Steve James

One of the best and most prolific of the early recording string bands was Charlie Poole's North Carolina Ramblers. Unified by Poole's unmistakable vocal style and idiosyncratic banjo playing, the band's floating membership included the bluesy, melodic fiddler Posey Rorer and guitarist Roy Harvey, who was one of old-time music's great fingerstylists. It's from the Ramblers' repertoire that I adapted this song.

In devising this arrangement, I tried to incorporate elements of Rorer's fiddle lead, Poole's banjo filigree, and Harvey's distinctive guitar fills. I recorded it on my *Two Track Mind* album, and it's often requested at clinics. It employs an alternating bass line and some easily played first-position chord shapes. First notice the altered tuning—the low E string dropped a whole step to D. (Note: when I recorded this arrangement on *Two Track Mind*, I capoed at the fourth fret—raising the actual key to F♯.) This tuning makes it easier to play a strong octave bass line under the D chord, but requires altered fingerings of the G and A7 chords to sound the right bass notes on the low string.

Chord Library



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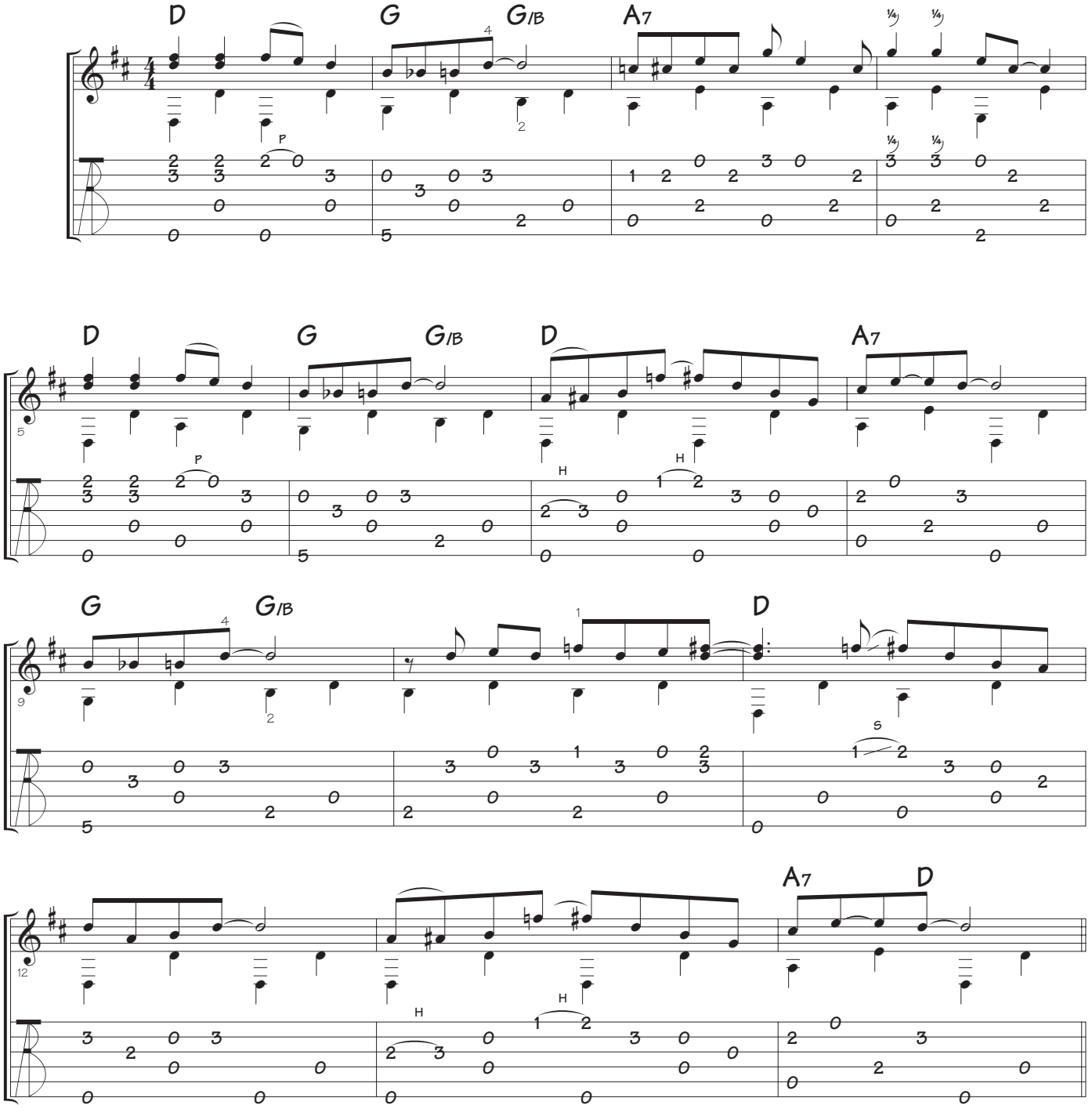
Milwaukee Blues

Traditional, adapted from Charlie Poole by Steve James

Tuning: D A D G B E



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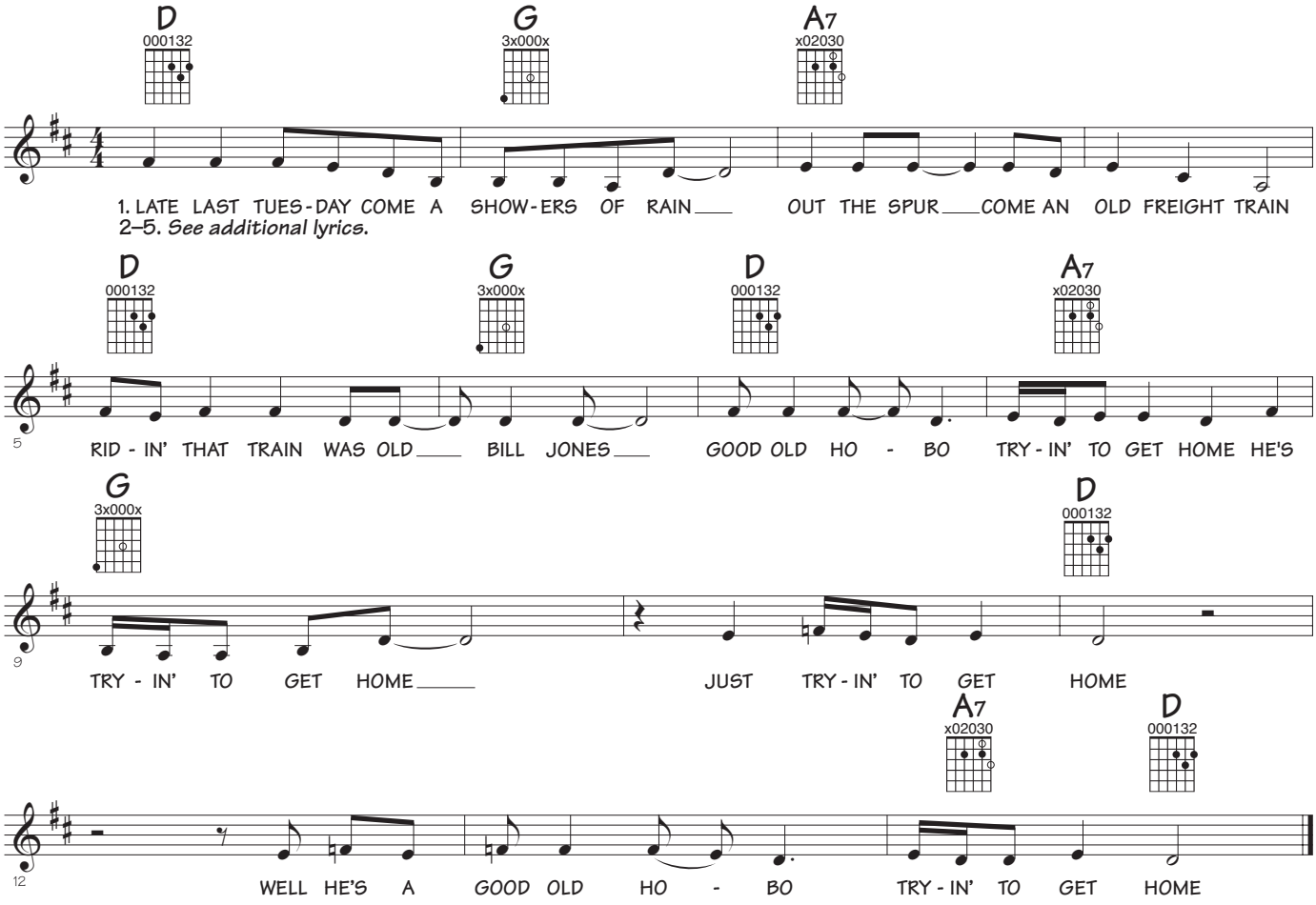
Milwaukee Blues



1. LATE LAST TUESDAY COME A SHOWERS OF RAIN
OUT THE SPUR COME AN OLD FREIGHT TRAIN
RIDIN' THAT TRAIN WAS OLD BILL JONES
A GOOD OLD HOBO TRYIN' TO GET HOME
HE'S TRYIN' TO GET HOME, JUST TRYIN' TO GET HOME
WELL, HE'S A GOOD OLD HOBO TRYIN' TO GET HOME

2. WAY DOWN IN GEORGIA ON A TRAMP
ROAD GETTIN' MUDDY AND THE LEAVES GETTIN' DAMP
GOTTA CATCH A FREIGHT TRAIN LEAVIN' THIS TOWN
THEY DON'T LIKE THE HOBOS HANGIN' AROUND
HANGIN' AROUND, JUST HANGIN' AROUND
THEY DON'T LIKE THE HOBOS HANGIN' AROUND

3. I LEFT ATLANTA ONE MORNIN' 'FORE DAY
BRAKEMAN SAID, "YOU'LL HAVE TO PAY"
I HAD NO MONEY BUT I PAWNED MY SHOES
I WANT TO GO WEST, I GOT THE MILWAUKEE BLUES

4. OLD BILL JONES SAID BEFORE HE DIED
"FIX THE ROAD SO THE BUMS CAN RIDE
WHEN THEY RIDE THEY'RE GONNA RIDE THE RODS
THEY'LL PUT ALL THEIR TRUST IN THE HANDS OF GOD"

5. OLD BILL JONES SAID BEFORE HE DIED
THERE'S TWO MORE ROADS HE'D LIKE TO RIDE
FIREMAN SAID, "WHAT ROADS CAN IT BE?"
SOUTHERN PACIFIC AND THE SANTA FE

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Railroad Bill

Traditional, arranged by Steve James

While the steel-drivin' John Henry was a legendary character brought to life in song, Morris Slater (aka Railroad Bill) was flesh and blood—a black Alabaman who killed a sheriff in 1895 and, for the next year until he was killed by bounty hunters, eluded capture and was credited with a number of daring train robberies.

A standard for five-string banjo, "Railroad Bill" also works well for slide guitar in G tuning. Starting with a slurred third played with the slide against open bass strings, this melodic arrangement includes a bottleneck barre of five strings (bars 7 and 8). Practice moving your slide laterally to open up the fifth string for a beat while maintaining the thumb pattern. In bar 10 play the sixth and fourth strings open while using the end of your slide to play the phrase on the top two strings. Note how the melody resolves on the root (first string at the fifth fret) in the last bar.

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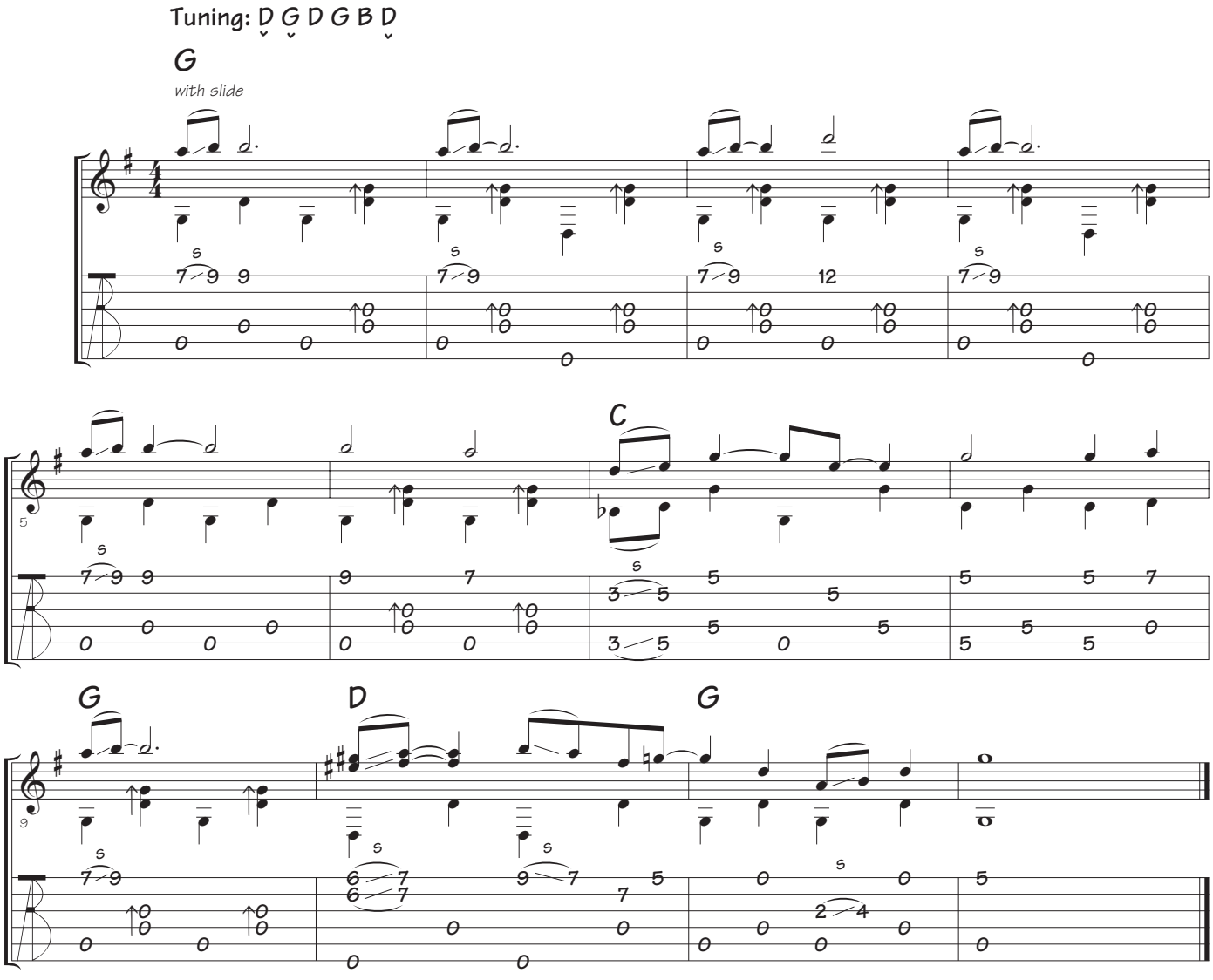
Railroad Bill

Traditional, arranged by Steve James



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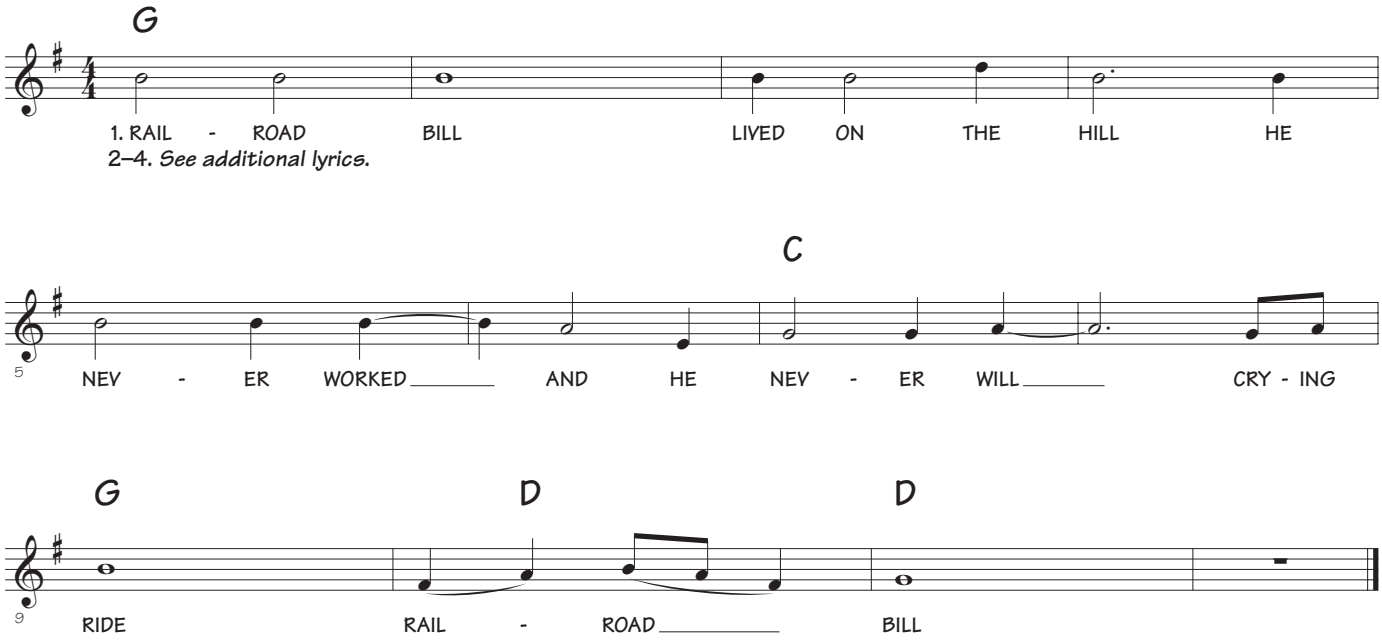
Railroad Bill



1. RAILROAD BILL LIVED ON THE HILL
   HE NEVER WORKED AND HE NEVER WILL
   CRYING RIDE
   RAILROAD BILL

2. BUY ME A PISTOL AS LONG AS MY ARM
   KILL EVERYBODY THAT DONE ME WRONG
   GONNA RIDE
   RAILROAD BILL

3. THIRTY-EIGHT SPECIAL ON A FORTY-FOUR FRAME
   HOW CAN I MISS WHEN I GOT DEAD AIM
   GONNA RIDE
   RAILROAD BILL

4. RAILROAD BILL STANDING IN THE RAIN
   GONNA PULL OUT HIS PISTOL AND ROB SOME
   PASSENGER TRAIN
   GONNA RIDE
   RAILROAD BILL

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Things About Comin' My Way

Music by Tampa Red

The single most influential slide guitarist in the history of the blues is certainly Tampa Red (né Hudson Whitaker 1904–81). His playing with pianist Thomas A. Dorsey on their 1928 smash "Tight Like That" revived the credibility of slide guitar in popular music. Subsequently, Red's liquid tone, wide vibrato, laconic phrasing, and perfect pitch control directly influenced the playing of Robert Nighthawk, Muddy Waters, Earl Hooker, and Elmore James, plus a host to follow.

This transcription is based on ten bars of his 1934 recording of "Things About Comin' My Way" (aka "Sittin' on Top of the World"). Tampa tuned in Vastopol for this one—with the root note an F! Check the way he slides in and out of the third, fourth, and fifth degrees of the scale and uses the tritone (see measures 3 and 4). We're don't stick to alternating-bass picking here; the interpolated chords, especially in the fifth bar, are pure Tampa Red. Be sure to listen to what happens when you resolve to the root by sliding into the fifth fret on the second string (see measure 8 and 9).

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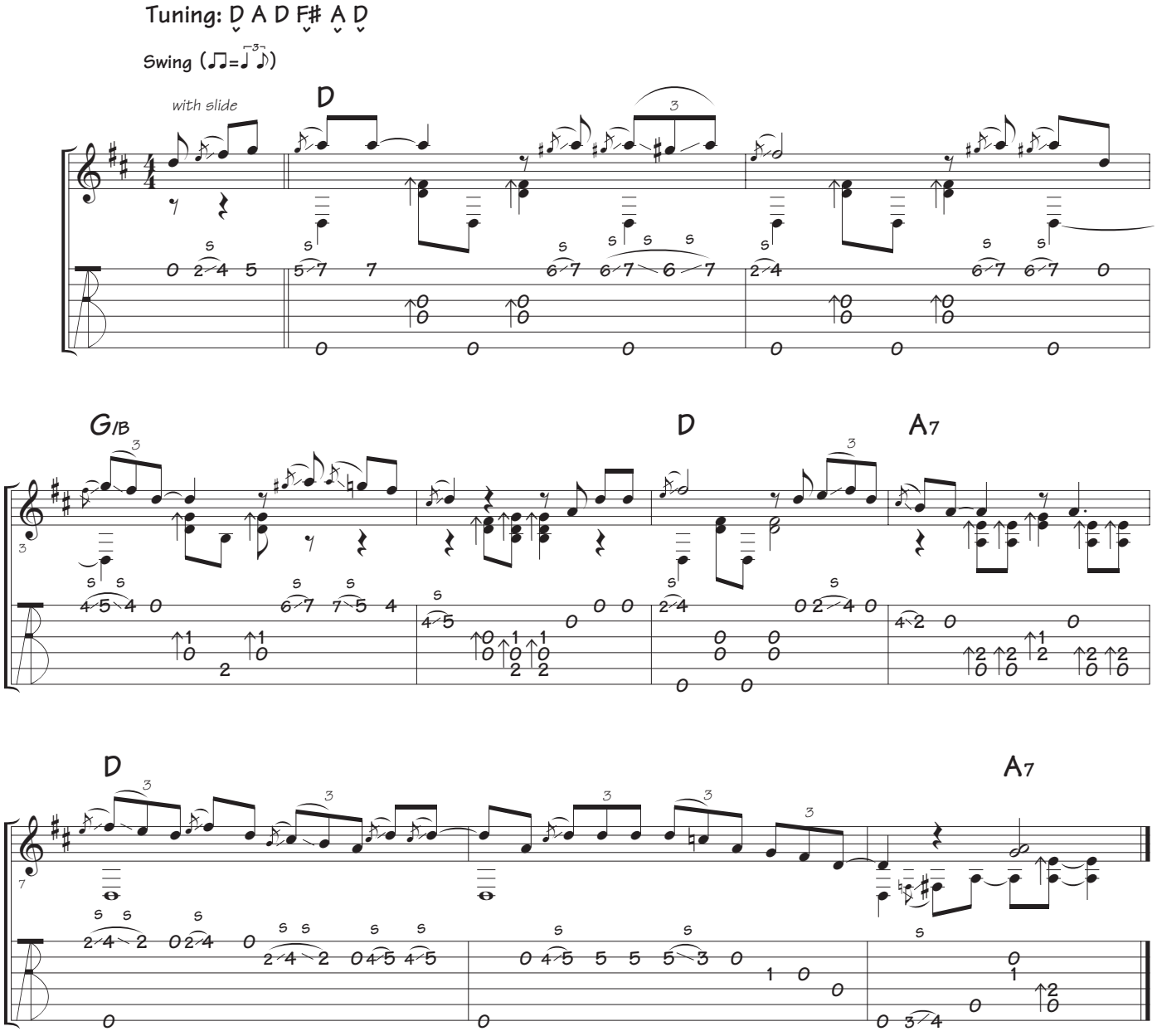
Things About Comin' My Way

Music by Tampa Red



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Jack O' Diamonds

Traditional, arranged by Steve James

One of the centerpieces of Mance Lipscomb's show was when he'd pull out his big buck knife to play this nodal, modal gambler's blues. Fret everything with your slider except the suspended G note on the third string, first fret (measures 3, 4, 7, etc.). Play your thirds way flat—closer to F than F♯—to give this a hollow sound. I can't play guitar in this style without thinking of Blind Willie Johnson, and I put a couple of his simpler devices in here. The "ghost notes" in bars 7–11 (the notes in parentheses) are played by covering two strings with the slide but only striking the upper one. The eight-bar guitar solo that follows the vocal accompaniment is another Johnson-ism; drop the melody you played on the first and second strings down an octave by playing the same pattern on the fourth and fifth strings. In addition to muting with your fretting hand, try chocking the bass strings with the heel of your picking hand to give the tune a little more "chunk." Do this by rocking your palm inward so the heel of your hand mutes the bass strings; this is especially effective after the thumb strokes that fall on the second and fourth beats of each measure.

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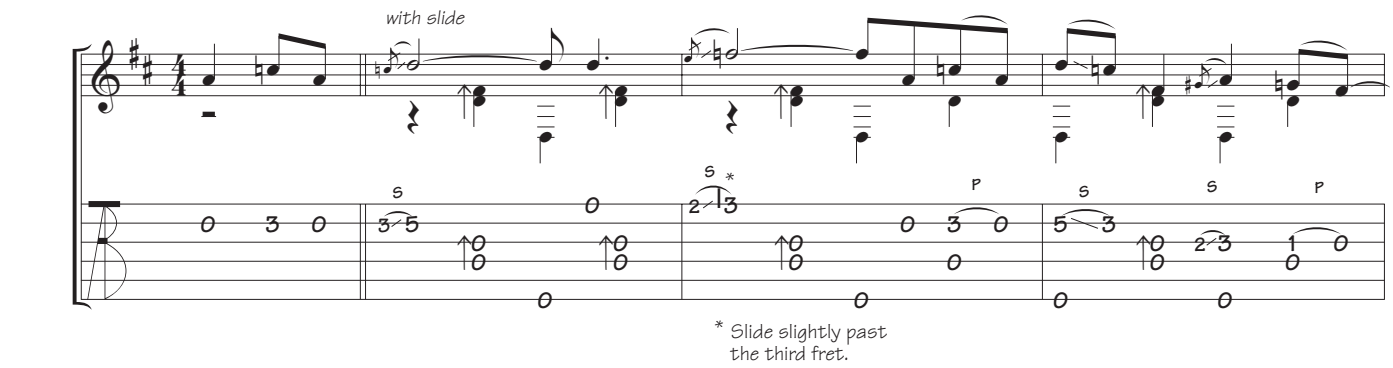
Jack O' Diamonds

Traditional, arranged by Steve James

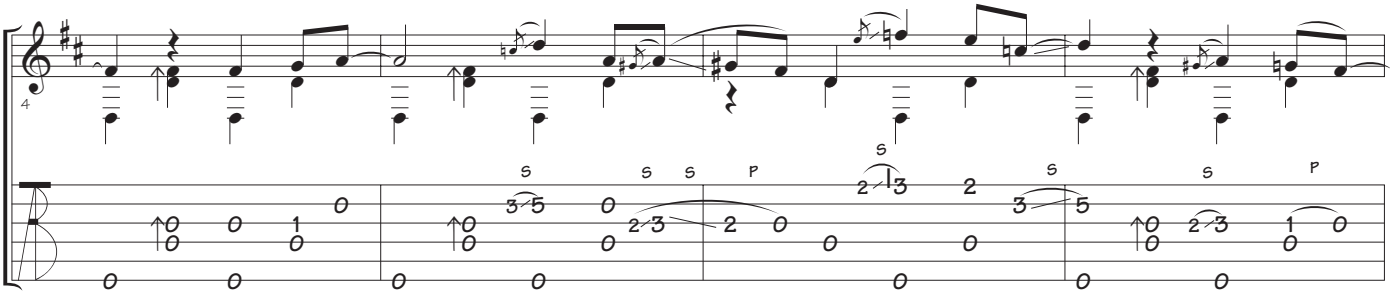
Tuning: D A D F# A D

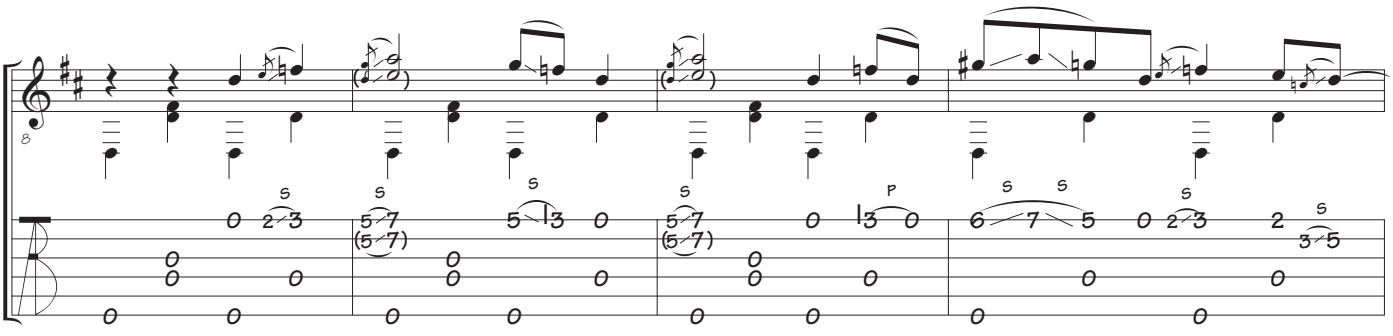
D

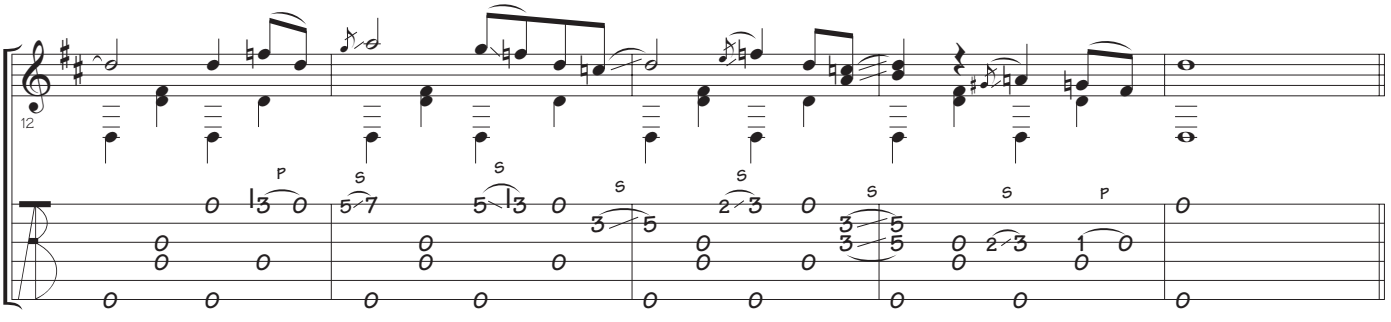
with slide



* Slide slightly past the third fret.







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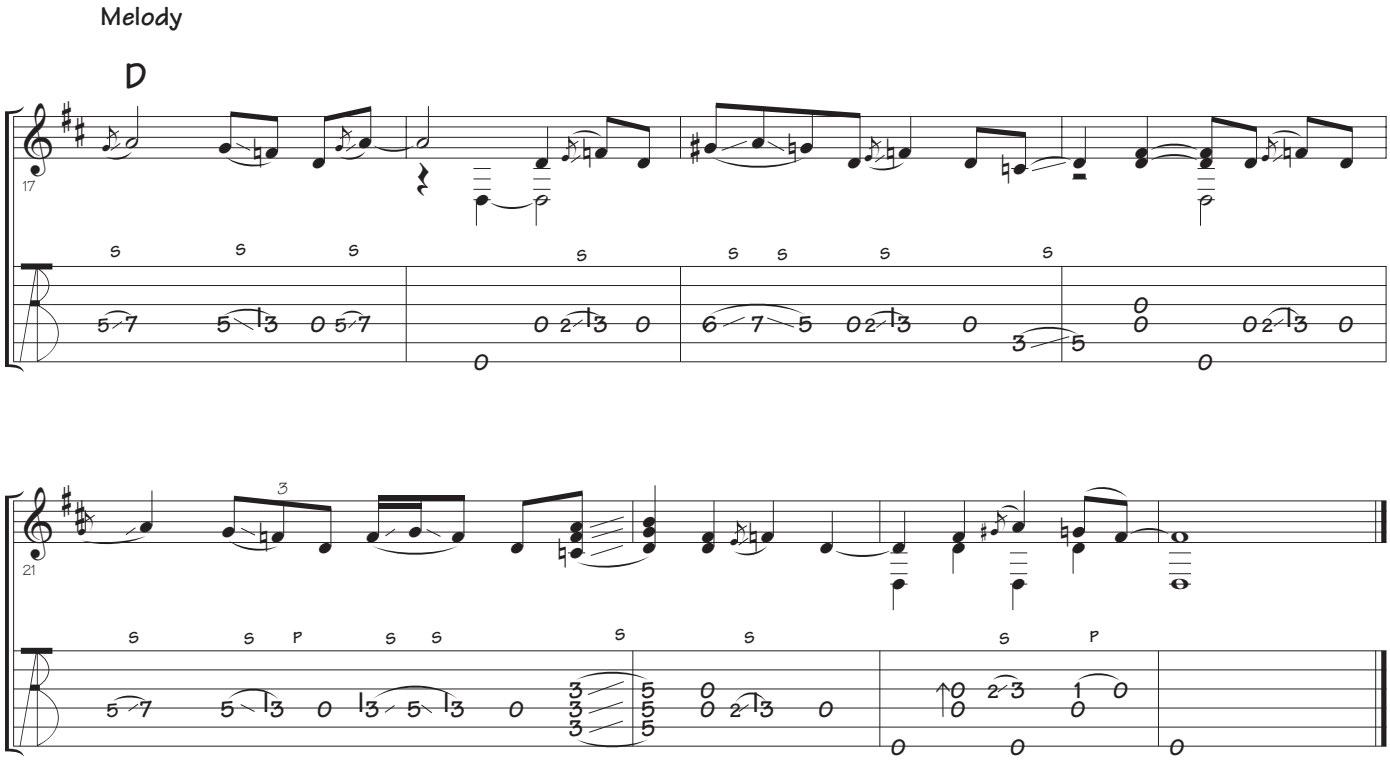
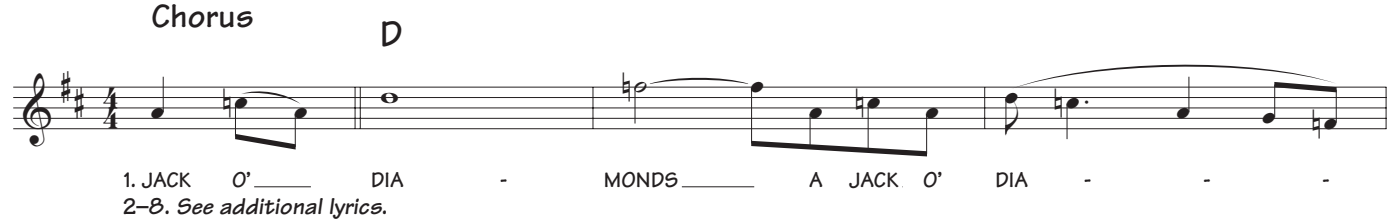
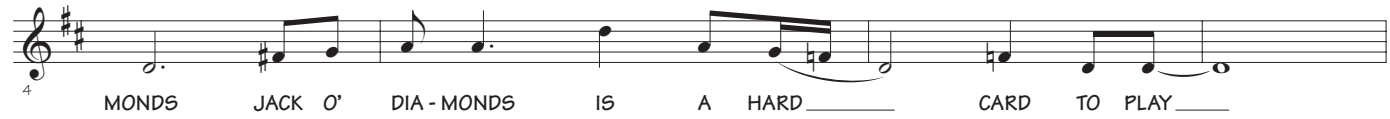
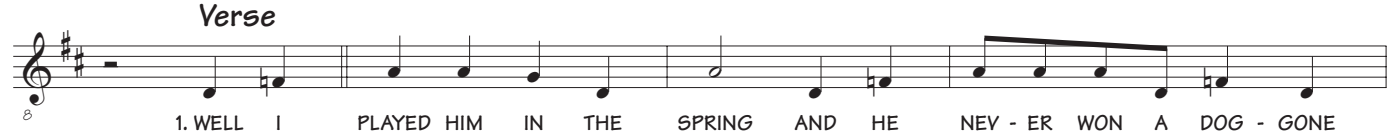
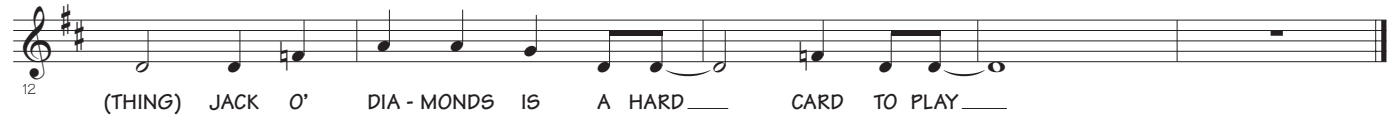
Jack O'Diamonds











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Jack O'Diamonds

JACK O' DIAMONDS, JACK O' DIAMONDS
JACK O' DIAMONDS IS A HARD CARD TO PLAY

1. WELL, I PLAYED HIM IN THE SPRING
AND HE NEVER WON A DOGGONE THING
JACK O' DIAMONDS IS A HARD CARD TO PLAY

2. WELL, I PLAYED HIM IN THE FALL
AND HE NEVER WON AT ALL
JACK O' DIAMONDS IS A HARD CARD TO PLAY

3. WELL, I PLAYED HIM AGAINST THE ACE
STARVATION IN MY FACE
JACK O' DIAMONDS IS A HARD CARD TO PLAY

4. I PLAYED HIM AGAINST THE DEUCE
PUT THE JACK WHERE IT WASN'T NO USE
JACK O' DIAMONDS IS A HARD CARD TO PLAY

5. I PLAYED THE JACK AGAINST THE SIX
IT LEFT ME IN A TERRIBLE FIX
JACK O' DIAMONDS IS A HARD CARD TO PLAY

6. I PLAYED HIM AGAINST THE KING
AND IT MADE THE DEALER SING
JACK O' DIAMONDS IS A HARD CARD TO PLAY

7. I PLAYED HIM AGAINST THE QUEEN
AND IT TURNED MY MONEY GREEN
JACK O' DIAMONDS IS A HARD CARD TO PLAY

8. I TOLD YOU LAST WEEK
ABOUT AS PLAIN AS A MAN COULD SPEAK
GONNA SEND YOU TO YOUR PAPA PAYDAY

CHORUS

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Way Out on the Desert

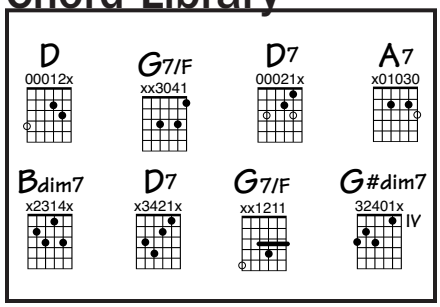
Music by Roosevelt T. Williams, arranged by Steve James

For years before his death at age 92, in July of 1996, Roosevelt T. Williams (aka Grey Ghost) led a loose aggregation of musicians in Austin known as the Grey Ghost Orchestra, and of which I was an occasional member. Even at an advanced age, Mr. Williams had formidable piano skills and could occupy the bandstand for hours spinning out blues, boogie, and jazz standards.

Grey Ghost generally didn't like to play in guitar-friendly keys like C or G (he called them "child chords") and would even transpose songs usually played in those keys to B♭ or F. One exception was his rocking stomp "Way Out on the Desert," which he played in D.

Arranging piano blues for guitar presents some challenges. It's hard to attain the wide tonal range of the keyboard without sacrificing drive, so it's often expedient to pitch the higher and lower voices an octave closer together. "Way Out on the Desert" includes a series of bluesy phrases and seventh chords. The chords are struck against a striding alternating bass with ascending and descending figures in the lower voice. The song also employs thumb rolls and diminished chord inversions, especially in the turnaround that concludes the 12-bar structure.

Chord Library



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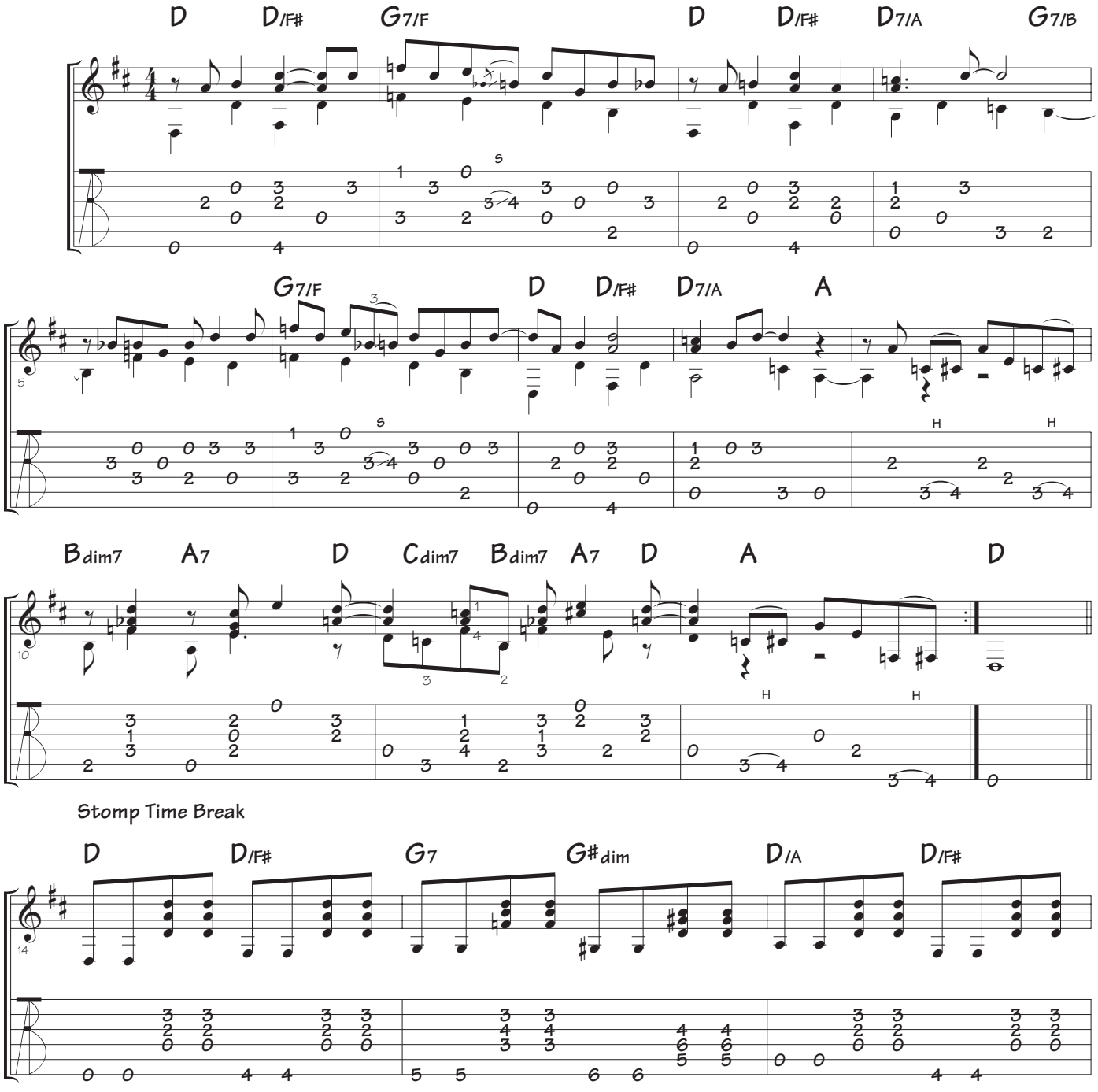
Way Out on the Desert

Music by Roosevelt T. Williams, arranged by Steve James

Tuning: D A D G B E

Swing (♫=♩³♪)



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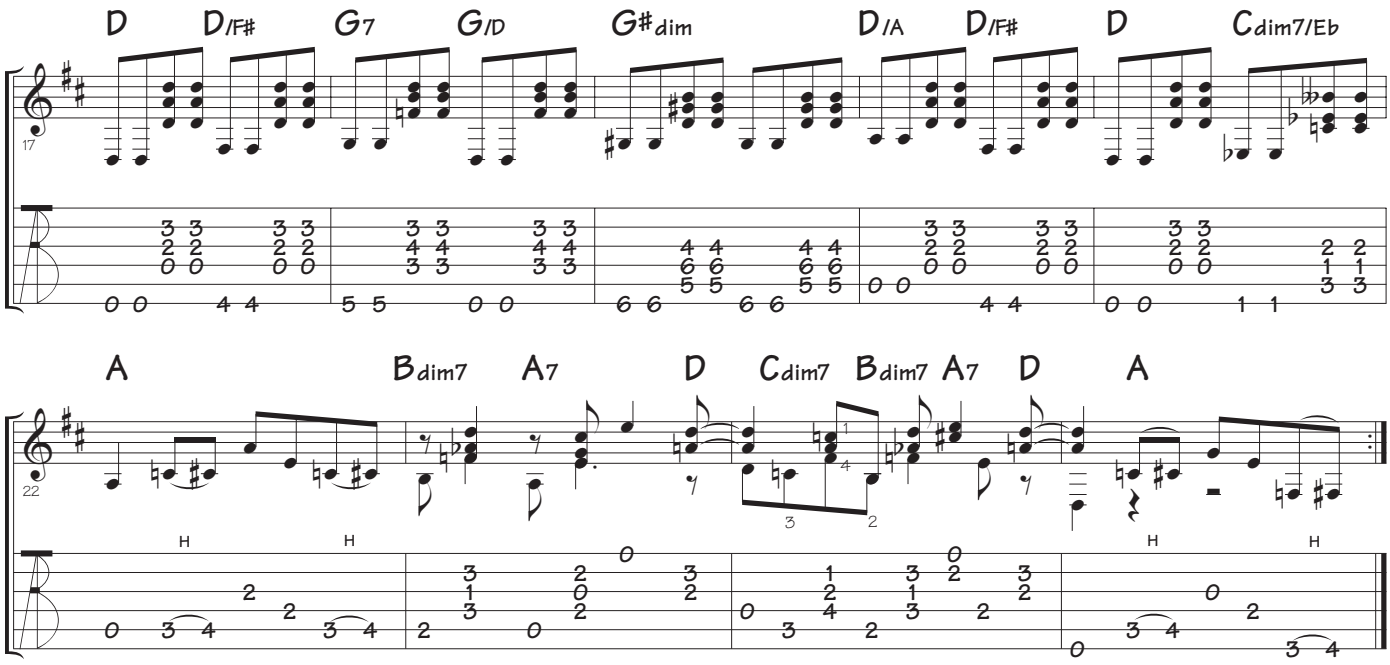
Way Out on the Desert



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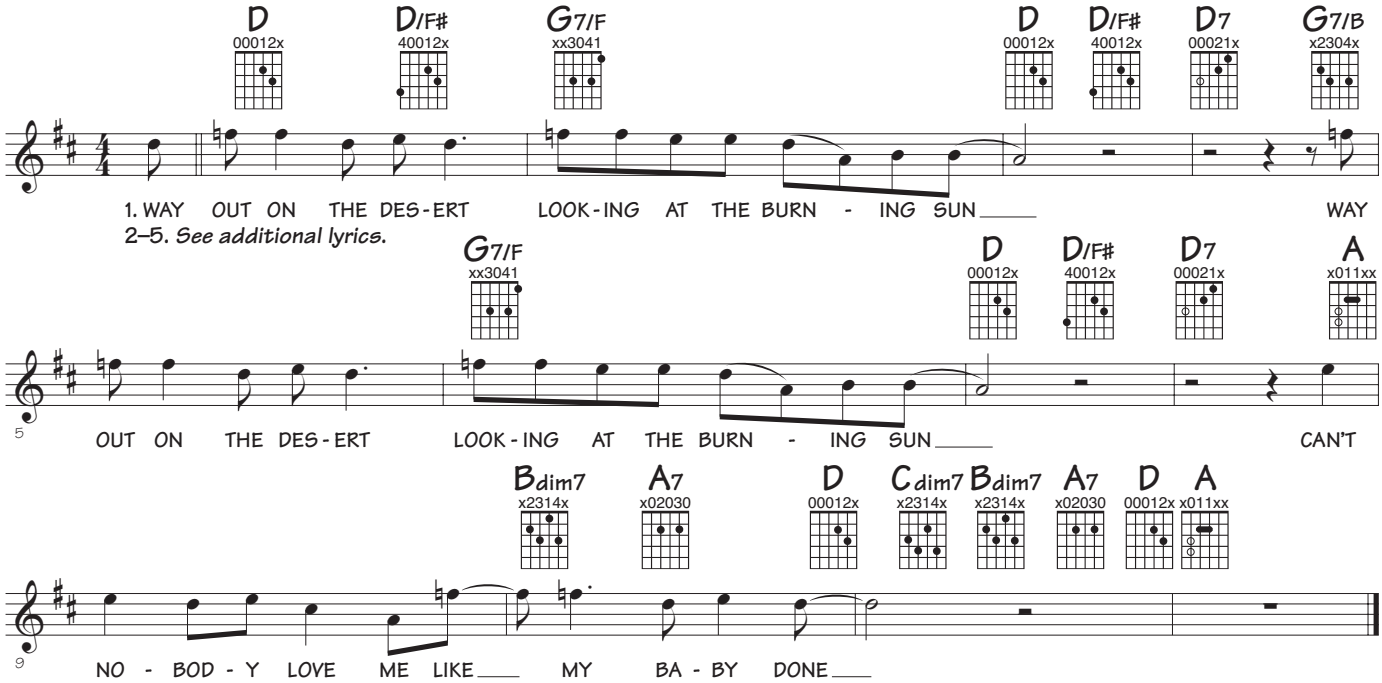
Way Out on the Desert



1. WAY OUT ON THE DESERT
LOOKING AT THE BURNIN' SUN
WAY OUT ON THE DESERT
LOOKING AT THE BURNIN' SUN
CAN'T NOBODY LOVE ME
LIKE MY BABY DONE

2. HEY, HEY
OUT ON THE WESTERN PLAINS
WAY OUT ON THE DESERT
OUT ON THE WESTERN PLAINS
CAN'T FIND NOBODY
KNOWS MY BABY'S NAME

3. IT'S A LOWDOWN
LOWDOWN DIRTY SHAME
IT'S A LOWDOWN
LOWDOWN DIRTY SHAME
CRAZY 'BOUT THAT WOMAN
SCARED TO CALL HER NAME

4. GONNA LEAVE
GONNA LEAVE YOUR NO GOOD TOWN
GONNA LEAVE,
GONNA LEAVE YOUR NO GOOD TOWN
EVERYBODY GONNA MISS ME
WHEN THEY DON'T SEE ME HANGIN' AROUND

5. I'M GONNA SING THIS VERSE
SWEAR I WON'T SING NOTHIN' ELSE
I'M GONNA SING THIS VERSE
SWEAR I WON'T SING NOTHIN' ELSE
IF YOU WANT ANYMORE
YOU SURE GOTTA SING IT YOURSELF

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Spanish Fandango

Traditional, arranged by Steve James

This four-part slide guitar arrangement was derived from a 1927 recording entitled "Logan County Blues" by the remarkable West Virginia singer/instrumentalist Frank Hutchison. His version of "Fandango" is unique among the many extant—at once quirky and close to the 19th-century version (right down to the inclusion of the B chord in the fourth part). The one liberty I've taken is to substitute a three-note arpeggio in the bass for Hutchison's looser, strummed approach to waltz time. All the notes on the first string, save the pull-off in the third measure of part three, are played with the slide. Everything else, including the barre chords, is fretted. Like the original Spanish dance and later derivations, Hutchison's version is played at a fair clip (allegro). Although it may be less conducive to dancers' "indecent positions," I prefer a slower tempo.

I like this song so much I've recorded it twice—once solo and once as a duet with dobro, Hawaiian, and steel guitarist Cindy Cashdollar.

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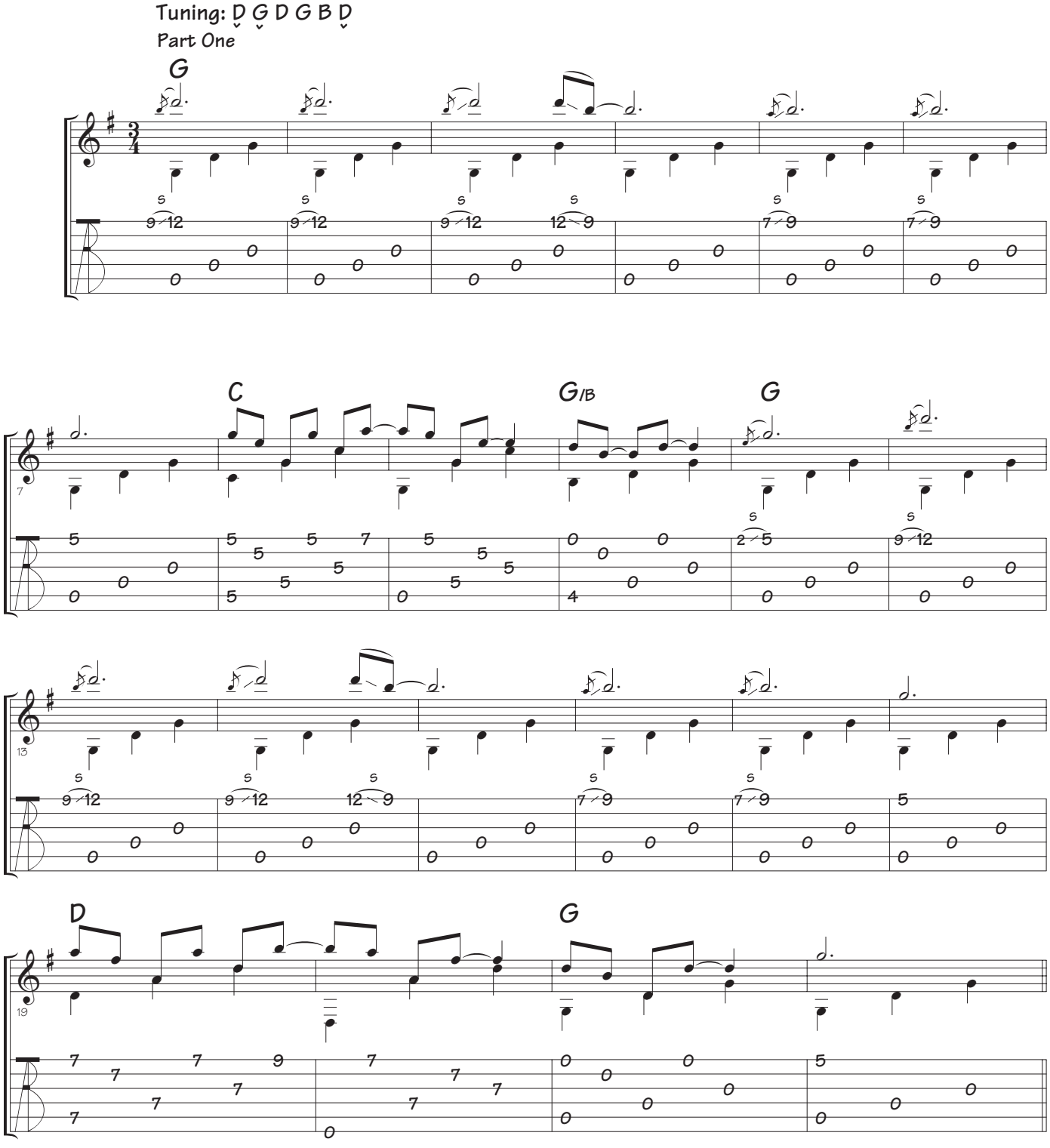
Spanish Fandango

Traditional, arranged by Steve James



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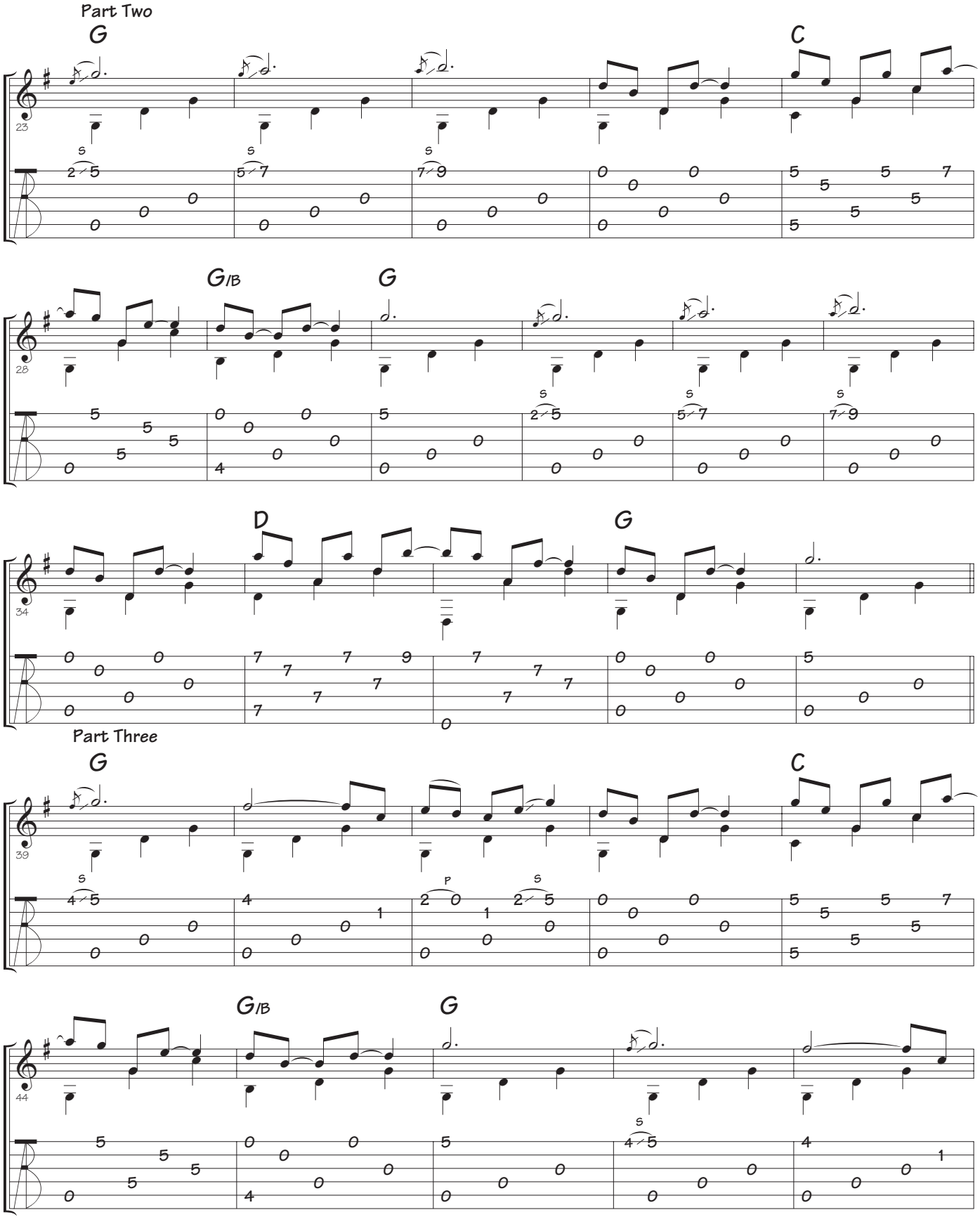
Spanish Fandango



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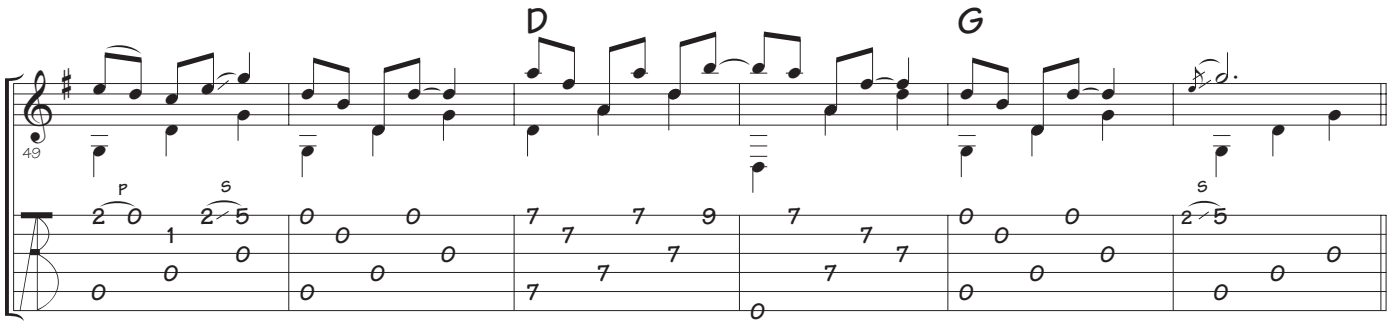
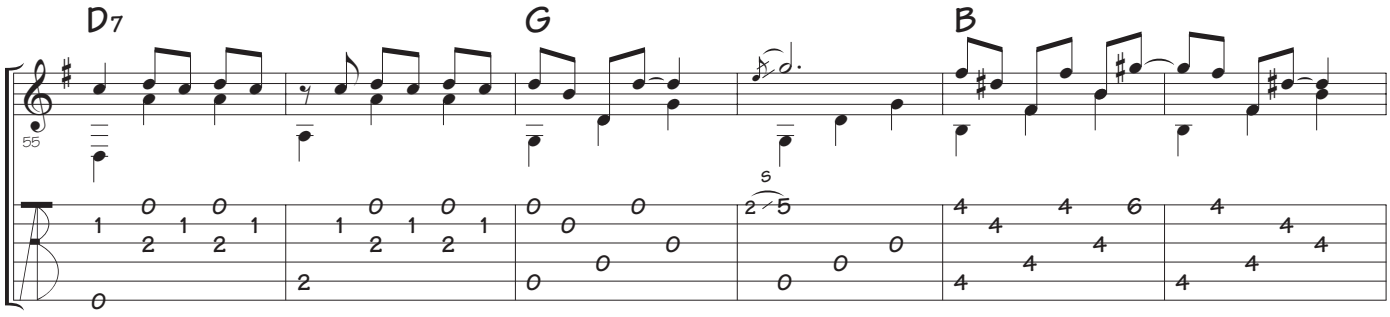
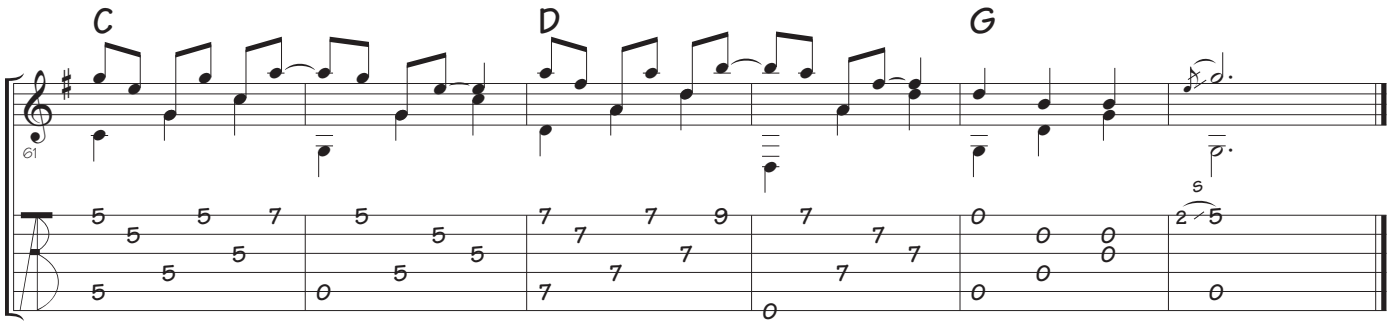
Spanish Fandango



Part Four





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Liberty

Traditional, arranged by Steve James

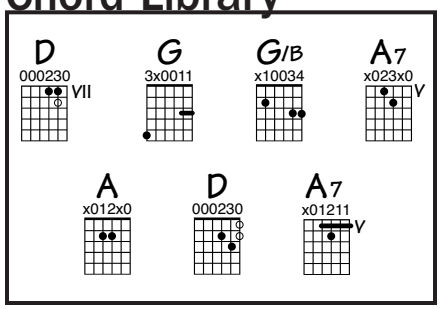
If you had to explain what a fiddle tune was to somebody who'd never heard one before, this reel would be a good place to start. Unlike a lot of fiddle repertoire, "Liberty" also works well for fingerstyle guitar; its tempo (fast, but not too fast) and simple, symmetrical melody lend themselves to the technique.

Tune your low string down to D and let an alternating bass line ring. The partial D chord stopped at the seventh fret with the middle and ring fingers facilitates the pull-off on the second string and the use of the open first string (E) in the melody. Two fingerings of the G chord allow an ascending and descending bass figure to be played inside the alternating line.

The hammer-on to the F♯ melody note on the fourth string in the second part (bars 17, 21, and 29) is played with the thumb, and falls handily on the fourth beat of the measure.

I've recorded this tune as a guitar duet with string wizard Danny Barnes on my *Art and Grit* album.

Chord Library



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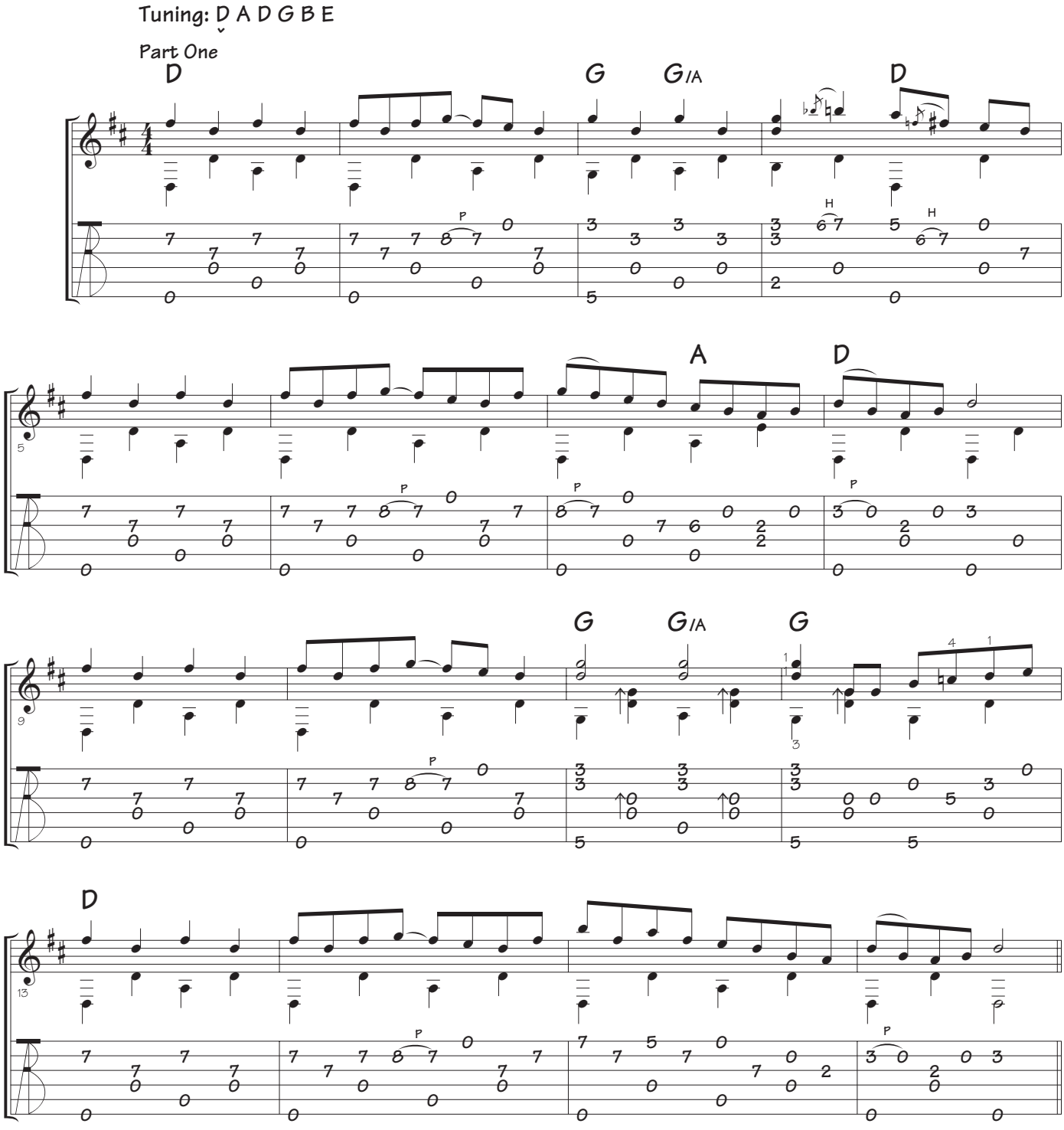
Liberty

Traditional, arranged by Steve James



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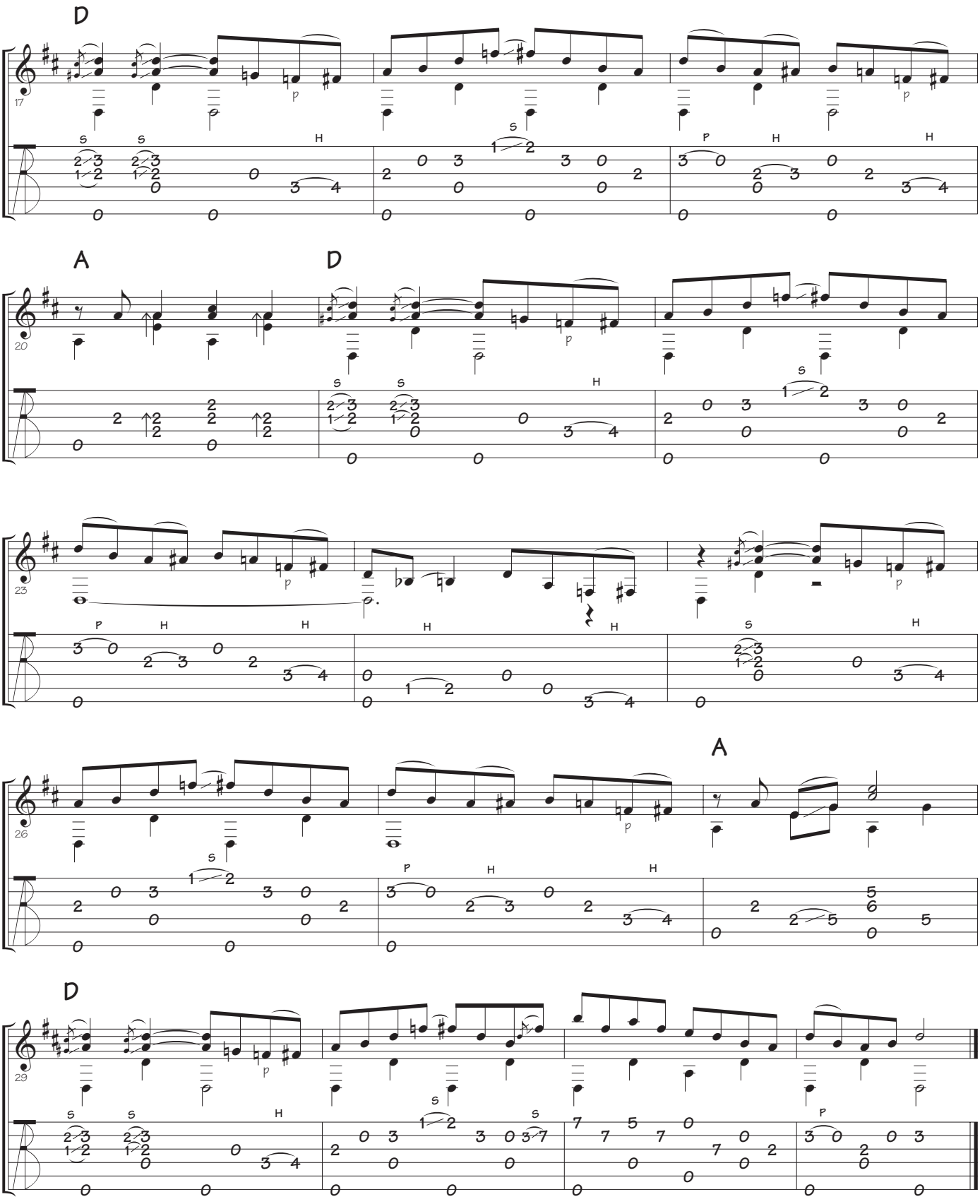
Liberty

Part Two



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Bear Creek Hop

Traditional, arranged by Steve James

I first heard this Texas variant of "Buffalo Gals" played by San Antonio fiddler Bobby Rogers. He liked to break it out at Saturday night country functions where delighted crowd members would launch into a set dance of the same name. On the third part, Rogers would play a series of two-bar plucked and bowed figures and everybody would . . . well, they'd hop!

What inspired me to adapt this tune to fingerstyle and bottleneck guitar playing is something I could die happy without knowing. To play the hopping part, I strum down with my thumb while touching the strings lightly with the heel of my picking hand at the 12th fret—a palm harmonic. The same effect works when you fret the D7 if you slant your palm to touch the harmonic around the 13th and 14th frets. Alternate these with strummed open chords, and you're getting the feel. Full of octave slides and banjoistic hammers and pulls, this arrangement works with or without a slide on your finger. I recorded a version for my *American Primitive* album.

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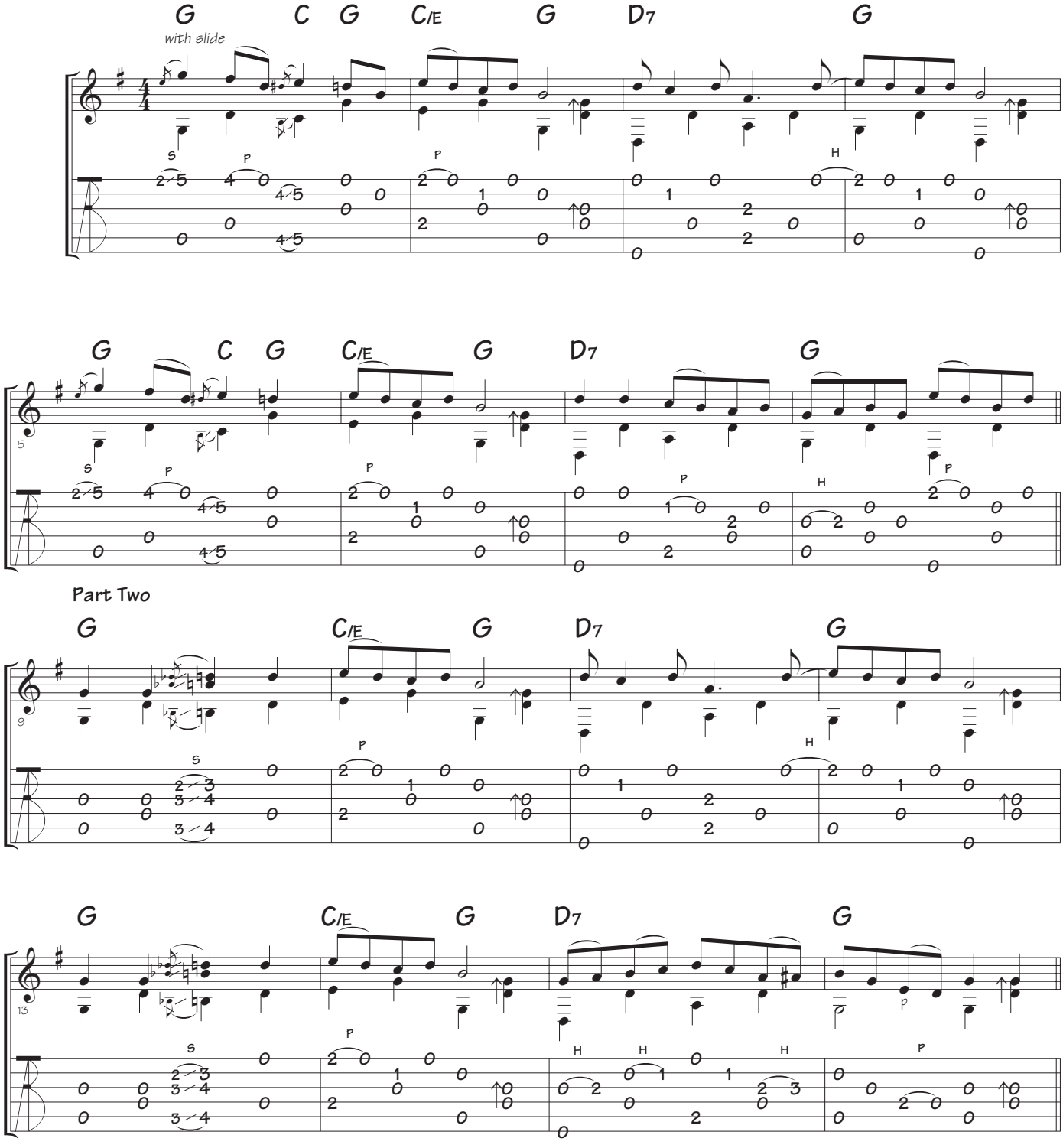
Bear Creek Hop

Traditional, arranged by Steve James

Tuning: D G D G B D

Part One



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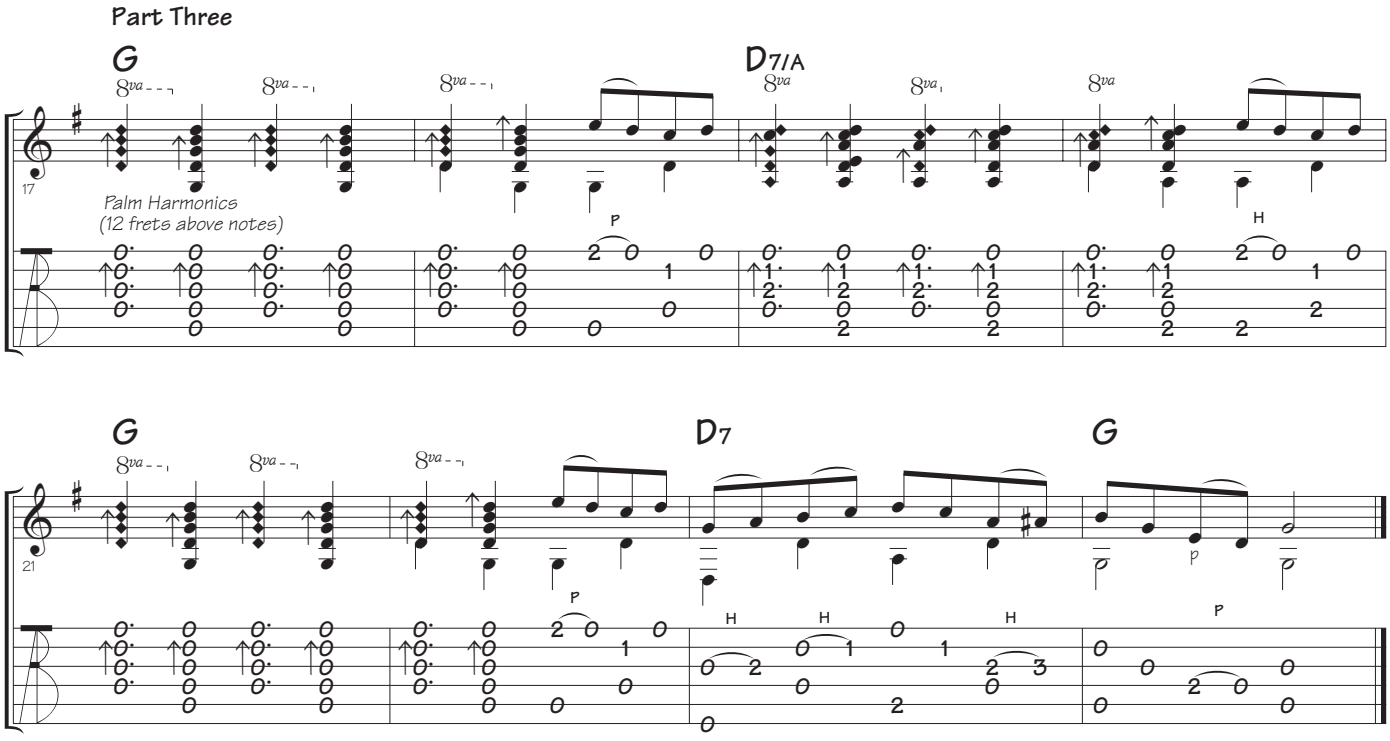
Bear Creek Hop



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Amos Johnson Rag

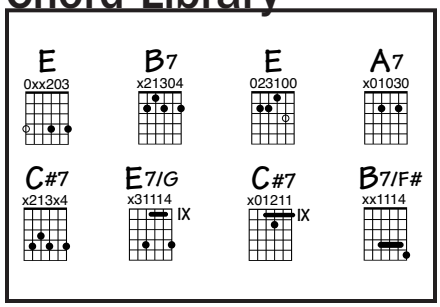
Traditional, arranged by Steve James

The introduction of ragtime into the country music vocabulary was concurrent with the more common use of the guitar. Here is a rag that originated with the guitar, rather than being adapted from piano or band music. Sam McGee recorded a version of the "Amos Johnson Rag" on guitar-banjo for an album he made with his brother Kirk and Fiddlin' Arthur Smith in the '60s (*Milk 'Em in the Evenin' Blues*). When I met Sam, I asked him to show it to me. I didn't have a guitar-banjo at the time, so I slowed the song down a little, added some bass notes and diminished chord passages to "guitarize" the number.

Later, I learned that Amos Johnson was a well known African-American guitarist from western Kentucky. He died in 1952 and never recorded, but even Merle Travis cited him as an influence.

"Amos Johnson Rag" starts with a familiar E chord shape. Fret the bass notes on the low string with your thumb. The first eight bars of part two involve ascending and descending voices (contrary motion) played off an E chord inversion played around frets 9–12. The last eight bars of part two are the same as those in part one.

Chord Library



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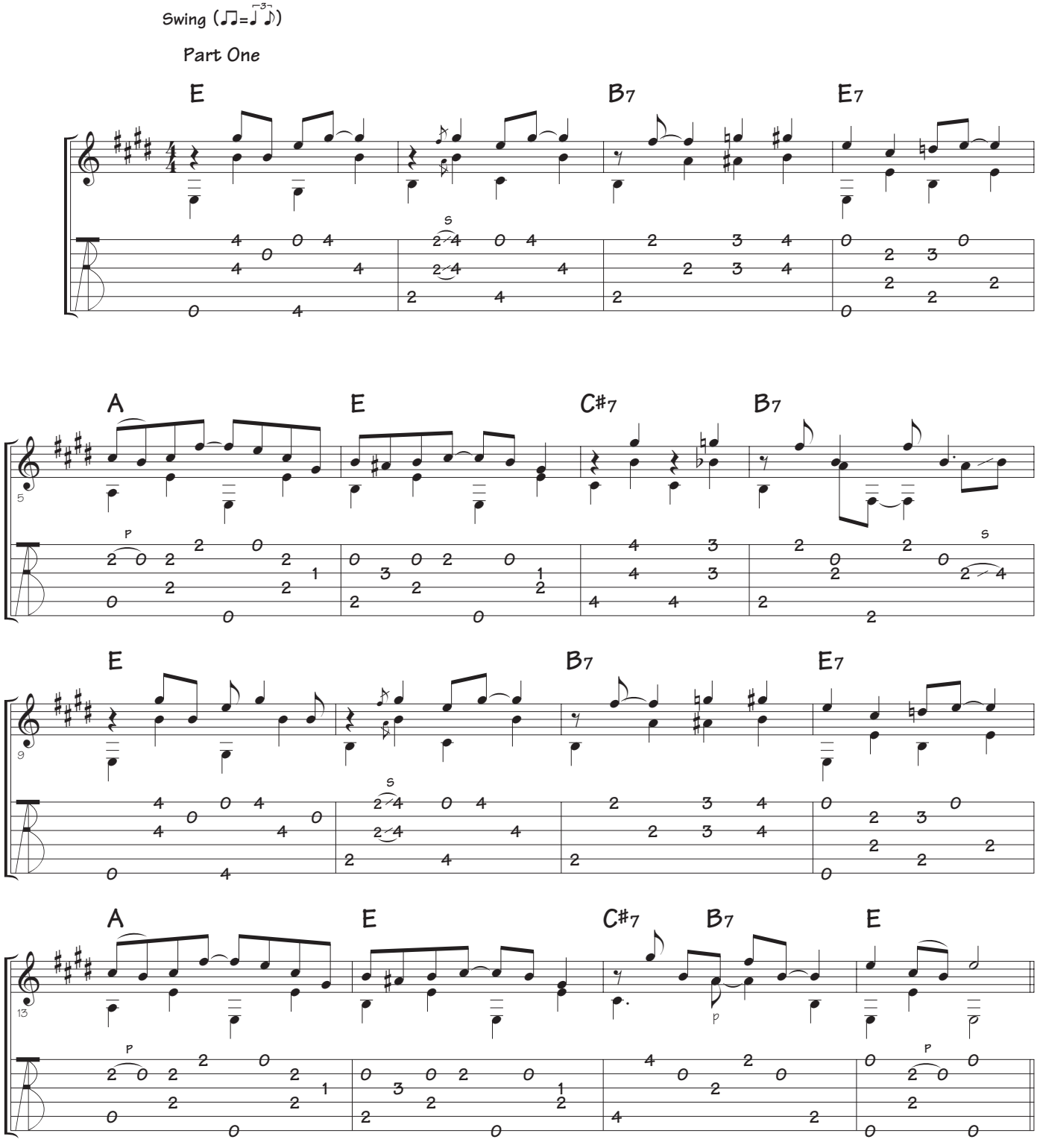
Amos Johnson Rag

Traditional, arranged by Steve James



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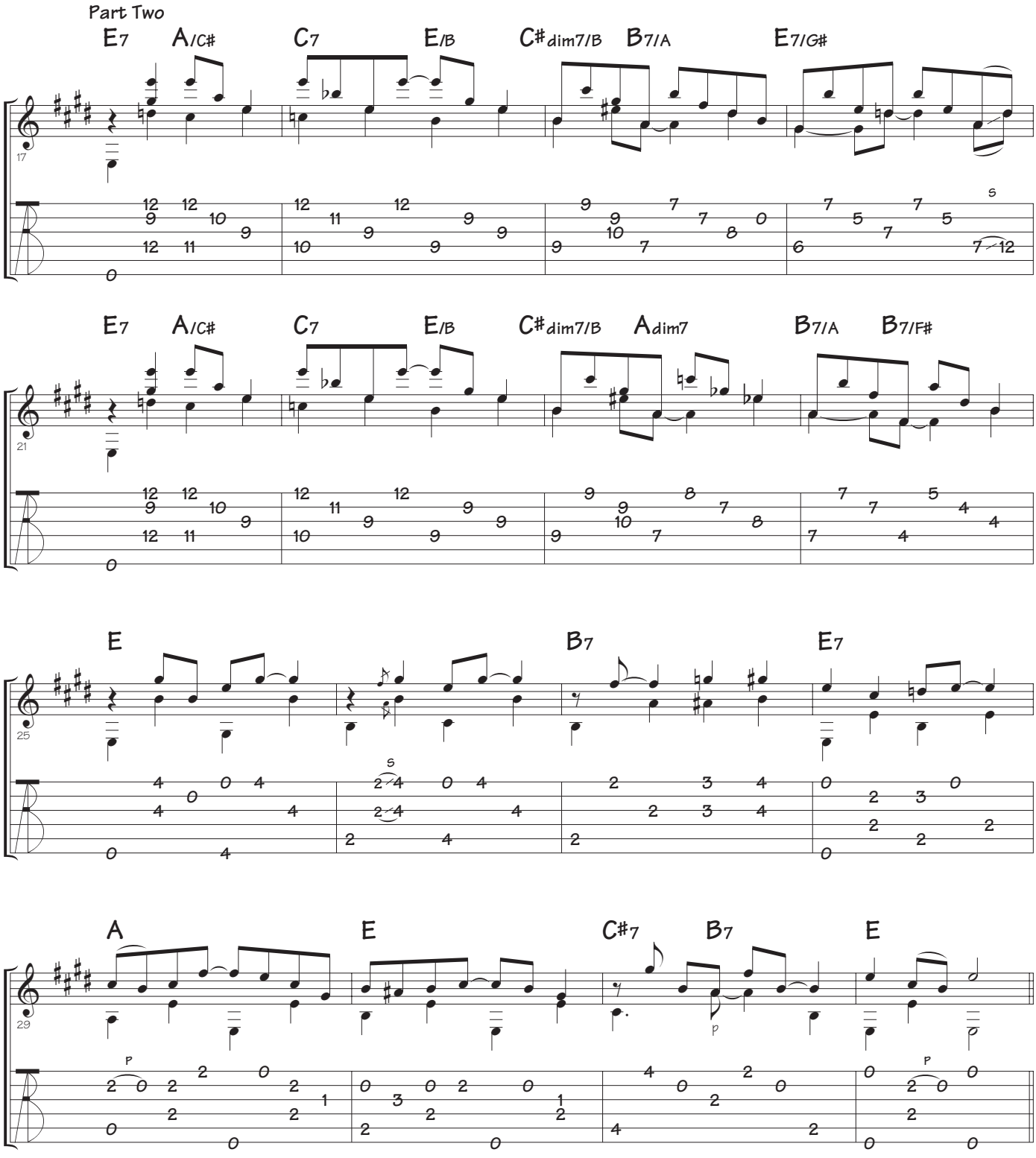
Amos Johnson Rag



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Guitar Rag

Traditional, arranged by Steve James

Sylvester Weaver (1896–1960) is often credited as the first recording blues guitarist because of his 1923 sessions with singer Sara Martin. From then until 1928, when he retired from professional music, Weaver recorded several guitar instrumentals, one of which was very influential on country music. "Guitar Rag," which he waxed in 1923 and again in 1927 with partner Walter Beasley, was a theme often covered or adapted (as in Bob Wills' 1936 "Steel Guitar Rag").

Okeh Records' publicity from 1924 claims that Weaver played by "sliding a knife up and down the strings." Here is "Guitar Rag" as a bottleneck-style solo in open-D tuning. Use a combination of slide and fretted notes and chords. The barres in part two are done with the slide; the hammer-on at frets eight and nine on the second string (measures 19 and 26) is fingered. This allows the shift back down to open position.

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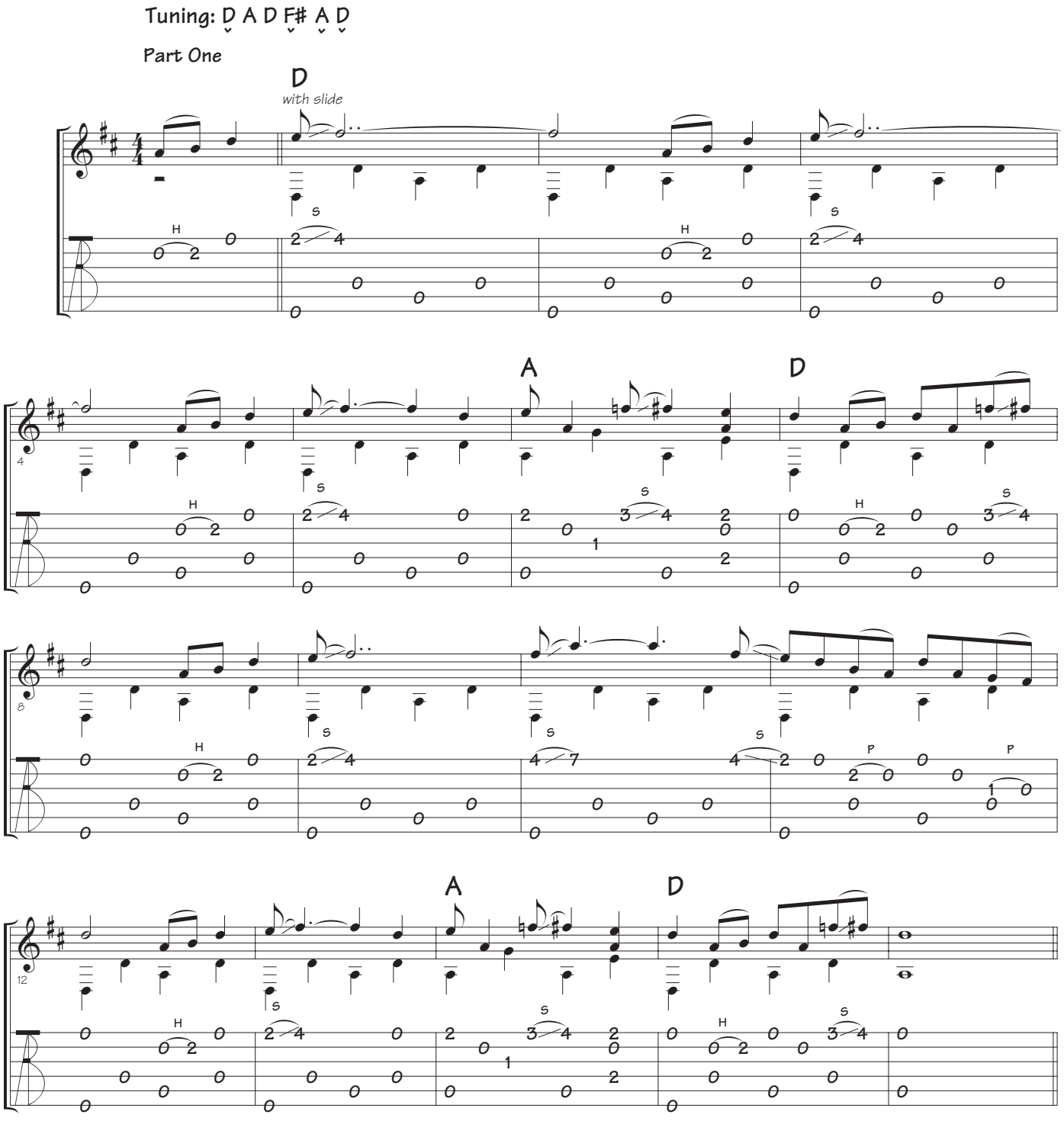
Guitar Rag

Traditional, arranged by Steve James



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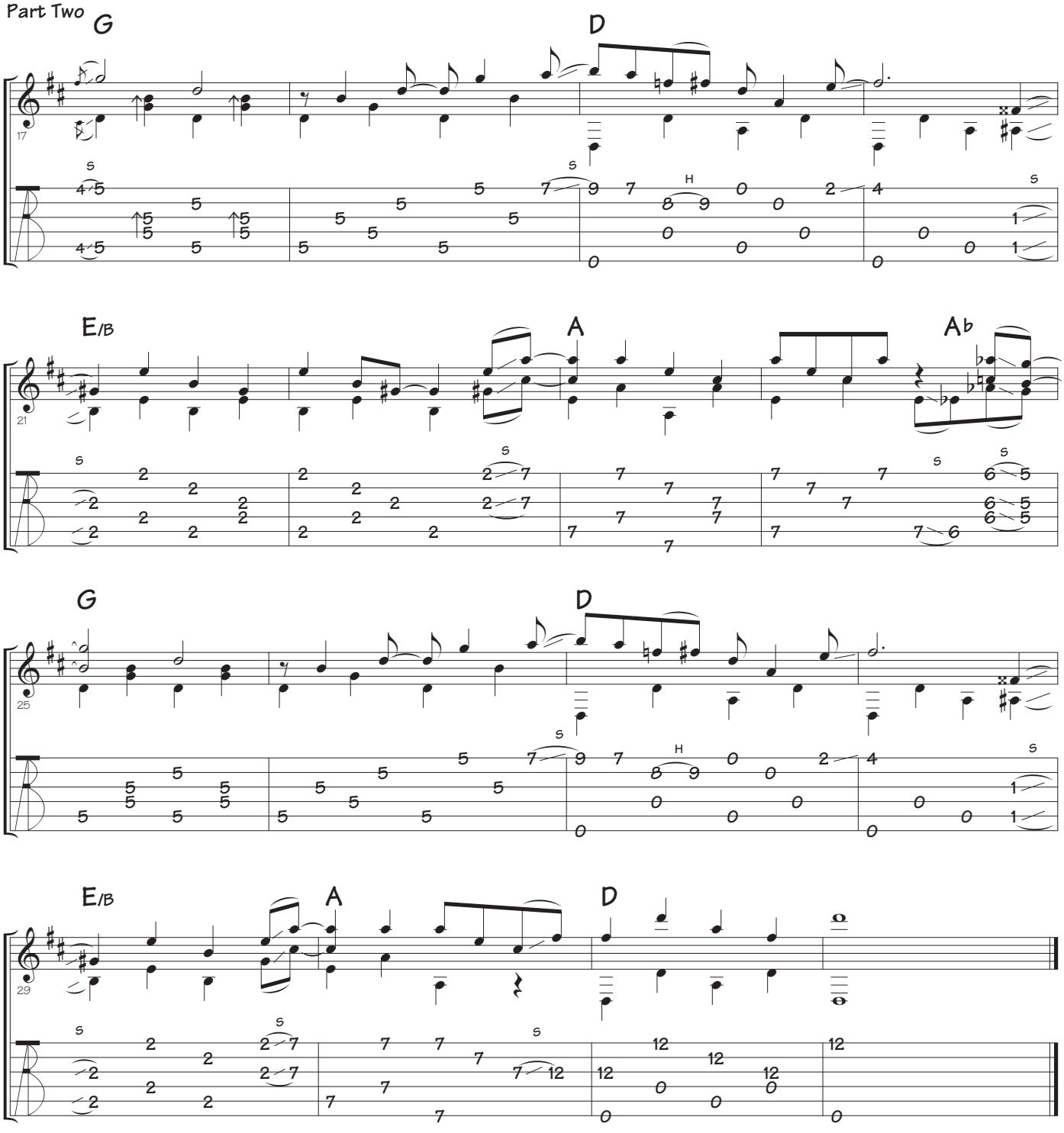
Guitar Rag



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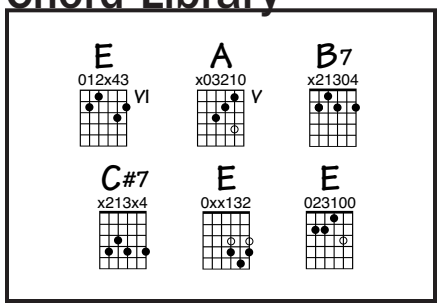
Railroad Blues

Music by Sam McGee

Sam McGee (1894–1975) drew his prodigious guitar style from early influences: his father's fiddling, a man on a neighboring farm who showed him some chords, a doctor in town who played "parlor" style. He often recalled the black musicians who frequented the nearby community of Perry where his father once managed a store. From them, notably a guitarist named Jim Sapp, he learned the rudiments of country blues.

In the first part of his masterpiece, Railroad Blues," notice the variant on alternating-bass picking used to simulate the sound of a train; it's the use of one low bass note followed by three higher chord partials to mark the four-beat measure. Finger the E chord at the beginning of part two with your index, middle, and pinky fingers, leaving the pinky stationary on the root note while the other two fingers slide into fret four on the third and first strings (you're playing the tritone and slurred third). He leaves breathing space after the double bent notes in part two (measures 23 and 24) as well as in the single-note solo—high-level musicianship throughout.

Chord Library



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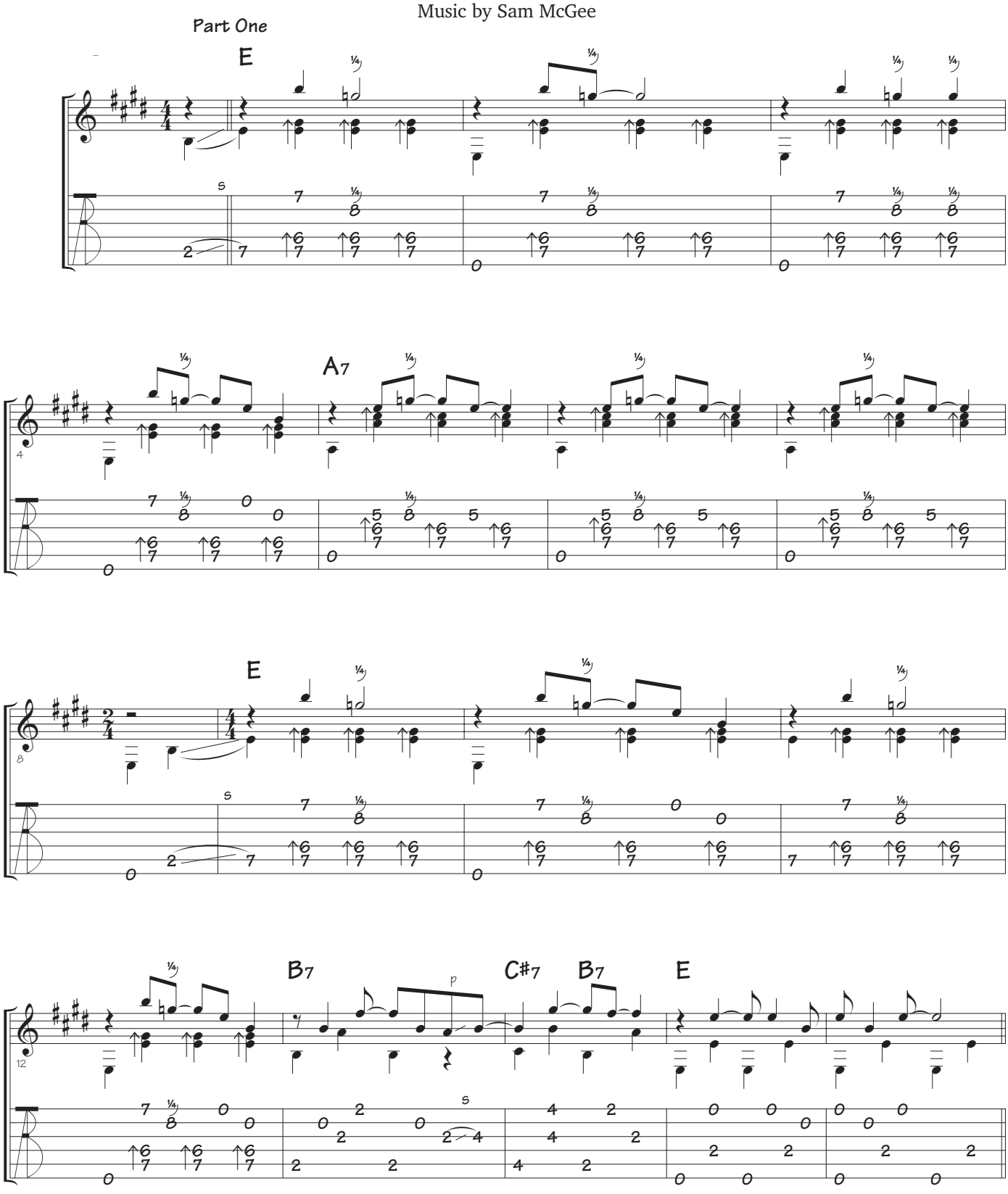
Railroad Blues

Music by Sam McGee



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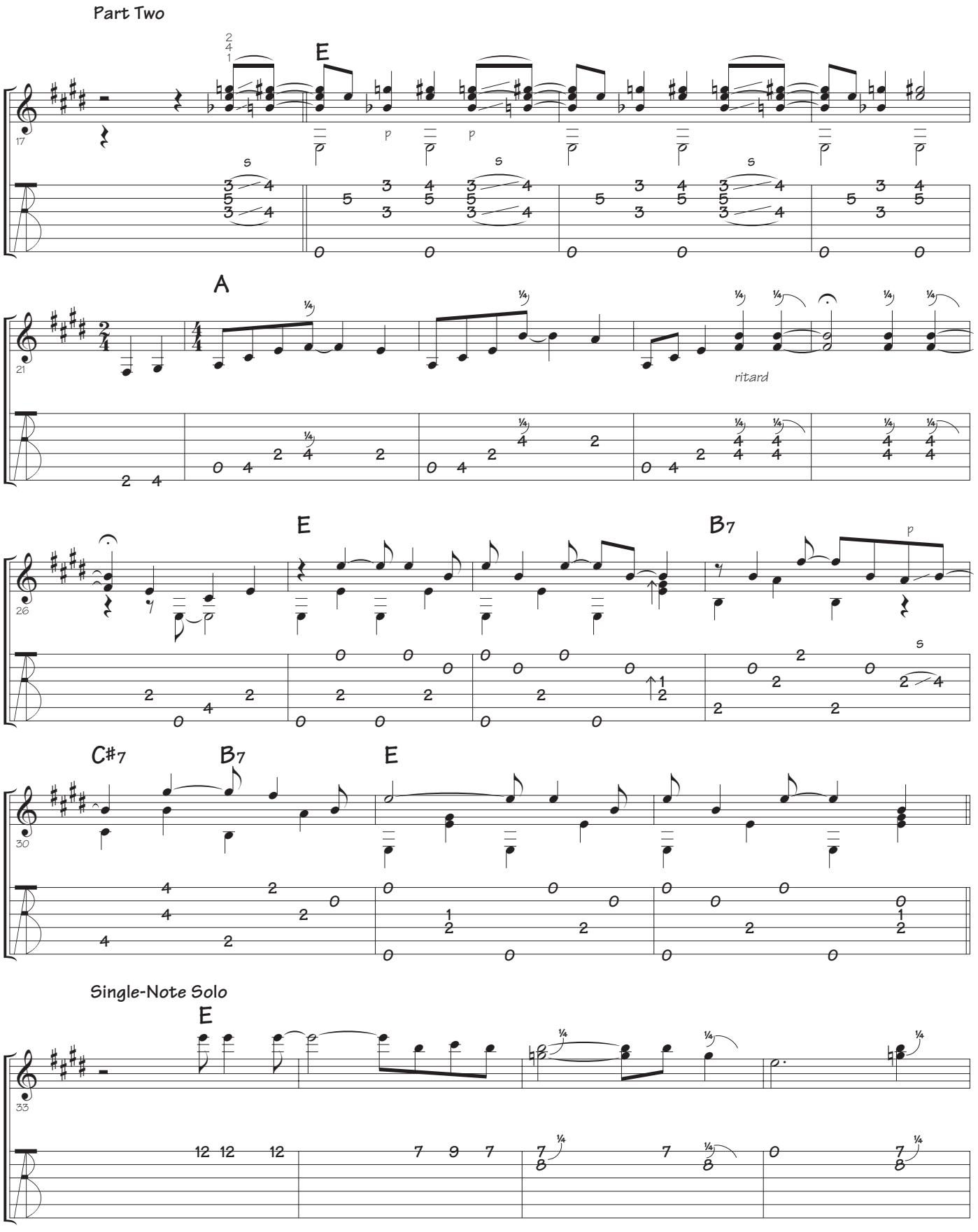
Railroad Blues



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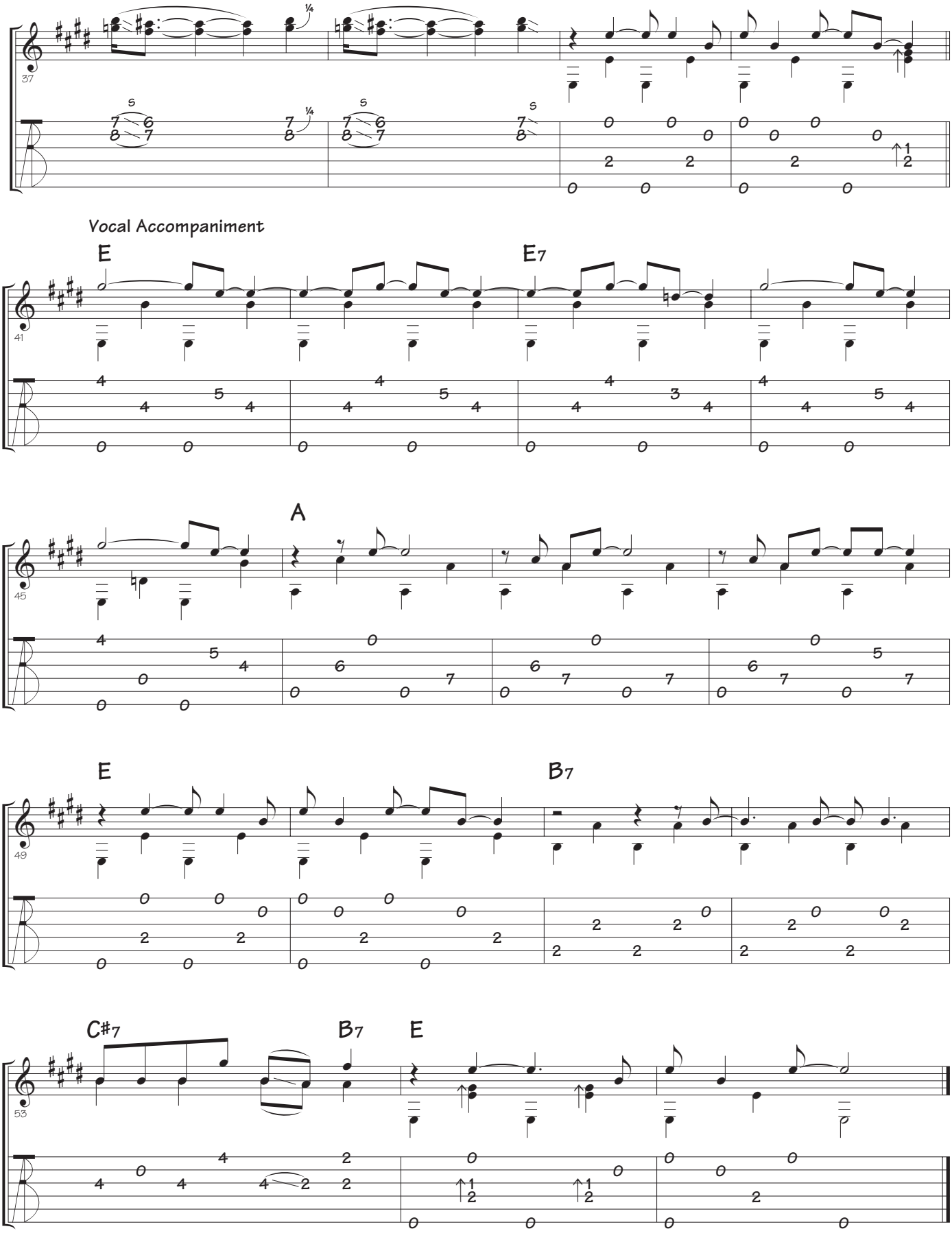
Railroad Blues



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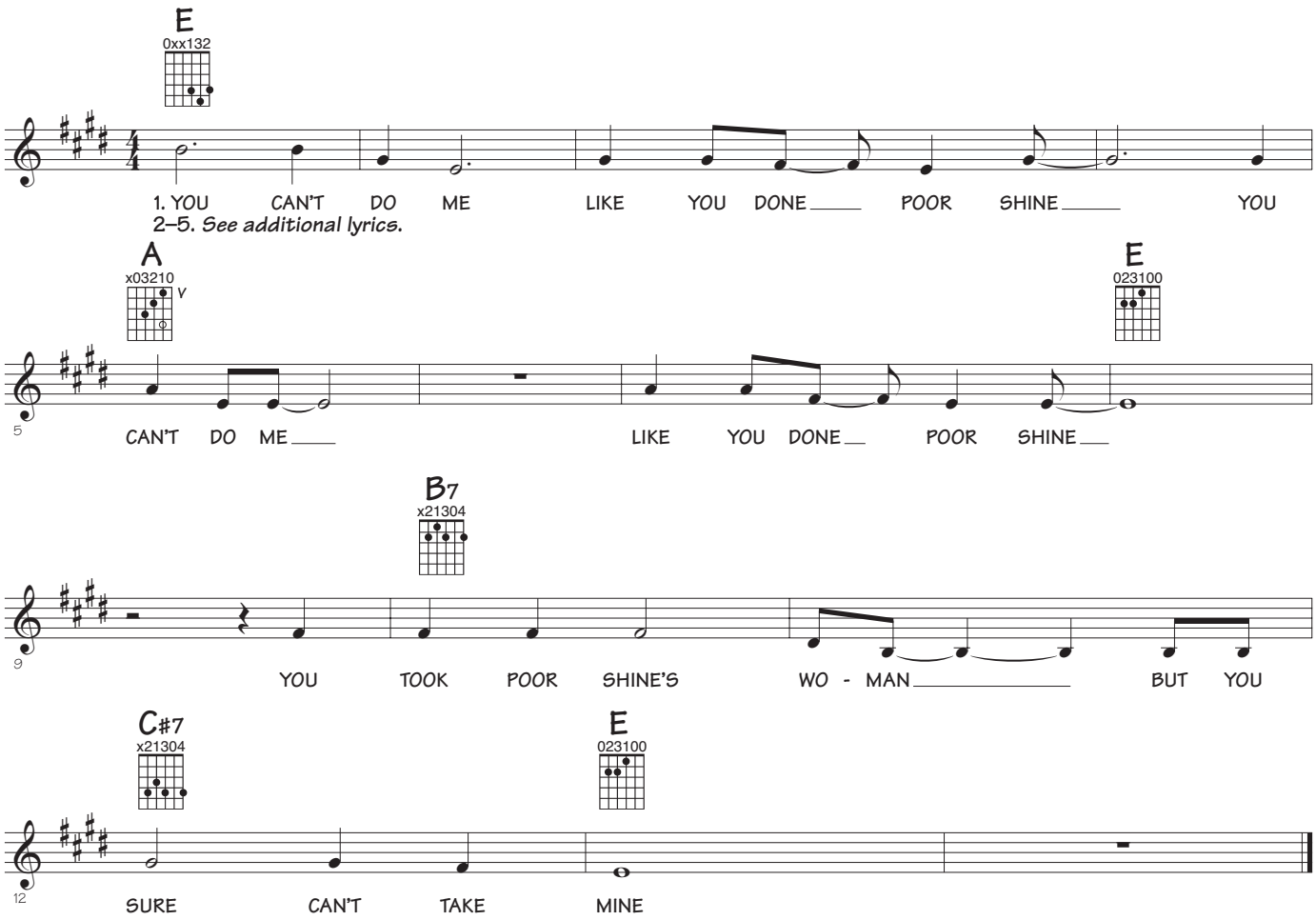
Railroad Blues



1. YOU CAN'T DO ME LIKE YOU DONE POOR SHINE
   YOU CAN'T DO ME LIKE YOU DONE POOR SHINE
   YOU TOOK POOR SHINE'S WOMAN
   BUT YOU SURE CAN'T TAKE MINE

2. WENT TO THE DEPOT, LOOKED UP ON THE BOARD
   WENT TO THE DEPOT, LOOKED UP ON THE BOARD
   IT READ GOOD TIMES HERE, BROTHER,
   BETTER DOWN THE ROAD

3. WHERE WAS YOU, MAMA, WHEN THE TRAIN LEFT THE SHED
   WHERE WAS YOU, MAMA, WHEN THE TRAIN LEFT THE SHED
   STANDIN' IN MY BACK DOOR
   WISHIN' I WAS DEAD

4. TWO LITTLE MONKEYS PLAYIN' UP IN A TREE
   TWO LITTLE MONKEYS PLAYIN' UP IN A TREE
   SAID ONE TO THE OTHER
   "C'MON, LET'S MAKE WHOOPEE"

5. I MET A LITTLE GYPSY IN A FORTUNE TELLIN' PLACE
   I MET A LITTLE GYPSY IN A FORTUNE TELLIN' PLACE
   SHE READ MY MIND
   THEN SHE SLAPPED MY FACE

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