Introduction to Blind Willie McTell’s Music

Blind Willie McTell is most undoubtedly one of the greatest legends of early American Roots and Blues music. The famed street busker from Georgia was a highly skilled guitar player known most for his work on the 12-string guitar. McTell was versatile with all Blues styles during his time with his forte being ragtime and folk style fingerpicking. The songs illustrated in this E-Book cover his most essential works, and give the learner the keys to unlocking McTell’s distinctive playing style. This book will focus on McTell’s work in standard tuning across various keys such as ‘D’, ‘G’, ‘E’, and ‘C’.
Writing Paper Blues (1927)

Standard ‘D’ Tuning (D-G-C-F-A-D) * semitone between ‘D’ and ‘D#’

Writing Paper Blues is tuned a whole step down to standard ‘D’ tuning. Furthermore, tune the machine heads a semi tone up between ‘D’ and ‘D#’ to match the original recording. Tuning a semi tone up will appear on your tuner like on the figure shown below. McTell tended to tune this way across most of his work. It’s good to get familiar with this method moving forward in studying McTell’s music.

Once the guitar is tuned accordingly, anticipate playing the song in the key of ‘E’.

The introduction starts off with a series of strums on the ‘E’, ‘E6’ and ‘E7’ chords. This sequence will reappear throughout the song.

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E</th>
<th>E6</th>
<th>E7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[1]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

Once the guitar is tuned accordingly, anticipate playing the song in the key of ‘E’. The introduction starts off with a series of strums on the ‘E’, ‘E6’ and ‘E7’ chords. This sequence will reappear throughout the song.
McTell fingerpicks the ‘E’ major chord while signing the first verse. Flick the bottom string with the pinkie.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I wrote you a letter, mama Put it in your front yard

After the first stanza, McTell plays more combinations of the ‘E’, ‘E6’, and ‘E7’ chords featuring a mini pull-off on the 3rd string which resolves eventually into an ‘E7’ chord.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eventually McTell moves into the ‘IV’ chord portion by playing a long ‘A’ and ‘A7’ chord combination. He sings over this sequence. Playing the 6th and 5th strings open in succession kicks in the appropriate bass pairing of notes to keep the song in timing. The open 5th string should ring out as you play the chords.

I wrote you a letter put it in your front yard
Revert back to the ‘E’ chord combinations.

For the ‘V’ chord position in the song, McTell plays a classic ‘St Louis turnaround’ combination of chords. First, finger a ‘B7’ chord without playing the ‘D’ note (1st fret/4th string). Next, slide into the 4th fret while maintaining the same fingering. Then, the chord will turn into a ‘C#7’ since the fingering remains the same, and continue to fingerpick the 5th, 3rd, and 1st strings while sliding back to the ‘B7’ chord. He ends the turnaround on an ‘E’ major chord.

Then back to these chord combinations in ‘E’...
The next stanza marks a noticeable transition within the composition of the song. Begin by getting familiar with the long ‘E’ and ‘E7’ chords based around the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th frets. Start by playing the 1st fret/6th string and slide the finger from there all the way to the 12th fret/6th string before you lock in the long ‘E’ chord. The ‘E’ chord in this position will have you barre the 9th fret with your index finger from the 4th string down to the 1st string while having your pinkie free to play the individual notes on the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th frets accordingly.

McTell flickers back and forth between a long ‘E’ and ‘E7’ chord at this position when he sings out the stanza. Maintaining the barre fingering is crucial at all times.
More note combinations follow after the sung verse at this position. This will reoccur throughout the song. The pinkie is the guide to playing all the individual notes while the index finger is locked on the barre position over the 9th fret.

He moves into the ‘IV’ chord again by playing the long ‘A’ and ‘A7’ chord combinations. He will always sing the verse at this part.

Back to the chord combinations in ‘E’ which are prolonged this time.

Back to the ‘St Louis’ style turnaround...

To leave the town and don’t spread the news
Back to the sequence in ‘E’ which is extended even more. There is a key pull-off on the ‘E’ chord at the end which terminates by sliding into the 12th fret on the top string to kick into the long ‘E’ chord sequences as demonstrated already.

The third stanza features a more robust play on the long ‘E’ chord. Extract out the notes located on the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th frets accordingly.

The portion over where he sings caps off with consecutive strums on the long ‘E7’ chord.

Back to the sequence in ‘A’ and ‘A7’.

I wrote you a letter, mama sent you a telegram

I wrote you a letter, mama sent you a telegram
The combination of ‘E’ type chords follow.

```
H 0-2-0 H 0-2-0
0-1-1-1 0-1-1 1-1
2-2-2-2 2-2-2 2-2
2-2-2-2 2-2-2 2-2
```

Back to the St Louis style turnaround on the ‘V’ chord position.

```
H 0-2-0 H 3-2-0
H 4-3-2 4-3-2
2-3-4 4-3-2 2-3-4 4-3-2
```

Not to meet me in Memphis but meet me in Birmingham.

The stanza ends with this combination of ‘E’ chords before sliding to the 6th string/12th fret to kick off the play on the long ‘E’ chord combinations once more.

```
H 0-2-0 H 0-3-2-0 0-3-2-0
0-1-1-1 0-1-1 1-1 1-1 0-1
2-2-2-2 2-2-2 2-2 2-2 2-2
2-2-2-2 2-2-2 2-2 2-2 2-2
```

Followed by...

```
12 12 12
9 9 9 9 9
9 9 9 9 9
0 0 0 0 0
```
Continue with more of the same ideas based around the long ‘E’ and ‘E7’ chords. Apply the notes accordingly.

Back to the ‘IV’ position...

Followed by this sequence of chords based in ‘E’...

The turnaround.

Honey hear my pleading? Hear me grieve and groan
McTell plays a longer sequence of the chords based in ‘E’ this time around.

Before moving into the next stanza, McTell plays an instrumental figure encompassing lots of the elements demonstrated thus far. He starts off the figure first over the ‘IV’ position. Play the long ‘A’ and ‘A7’ chords at this juncture.

A quick figure over the chords based in ‘E’.

During the typical turnaround progression, McTell plays the ‘C#7’ chord longer this time around.

A quick combination of chords based in ‘E’ follows.
In this stanza, McTell plays two-strum combinations of the ‘E’, ‘E6’ and ‘E7’ chords.

Back to the familiar ‘IV’ position...

More of the two-strum combinations...

To the turnaround once more.

A more complex combination is played off of the chords based in ‘E’.
The last stanza reverts back to the long ‘E’ and ‘E7’ chords around the 9th and 12th frets.

```
\[ \begin{array}{cccccccc}
12 & 10 & 12 & 12 & 12 & 10 & 12 & 12 \\
9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 \\
9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
\end{array} \]
```

Continue with the reoccurring figures over the ‘IV’ and ‘V’ position to the end of the song after this instance below.

```
\[ \begin{array}{cccccccc}
12 & 10 & 12 & 12 & 12 & 10 & 12 & 12 \\
9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 \\
9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 & 9 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
\end{array} \]
```

I caught a freight train special my mama caught a pass'ger behind

**Lyrics**

I wrote you a letter, mama
Put it in your front yard
I wrote you a letter
Put it in your front yard
I would love to come and see you
But your good man's got me barred

Ah you wrote me a letter
To come back to Newport News
You wrote me a letter, mama
Come back to Newport News
To leave the town
And don't spread the news
I wrote you a letter, mama
Sent you a telegram
I wrote you a letter, mama
Sent you a telegram
Not to meet me in Memphis
But meet me in Birmingham

Mmm, hear me weep and moan
Mmm, hear me weep and moan
Honey hear my pleading?
Hear me grieve and groan

If I could get me one more drink of booze
If I could get me one more drink of booze
I guess it would ease these ole' writin' paper blues

I caught a freight train special
My mama caught a pass'ger behind
Caught a freight train special
My mama caught a pass'ger behind
Cause you can't quit me papa
There ain't no need in trying
**Stole Rider Blues (1927)**

*Standard ‘D’ Tuning (Drop ‘C’) (C-G-C-F-A-D) * semitone between ‘D’ and ‘D#’*

*Stole Rider Blues* sharply resembles *Statesboro Blues* in key and structure. The song is tuned one whole step down to ‘D’ standard tuning with the top string additionally being dropped down to ‘C’.
Furthermore, tune the machine heads a semi tone up between ‘D’ and ‘D#’ to match the original recording. Once the guitar is tuned accordingly, anticipate playing the song in the key of ‘D’.

---

*Other McTell songs belonging in the same family of key and structure:*

*Statesboro Blues: Drop ‘C#’ + Tuning (B-F#-E-G-C#) * tuned a semi tone between C# and D*

*Murder’s Home Blues: Standard ‘G’ (Drop F) Tuning (F-D-Fb-D-G)*

---

The introduction utilizes a fingerpicking pattern over the ‘D’ major chord. Note the chromatic run-up the first string on the 1st and 2nd frets while fingering the ‘D’ chord. McTell plays various licks and pull-offs based off of this chord alone throughout the entire song.

**The D major chord**

![D major chord diagram](image-url)
Play an alternating fingerpicking strum on the ‘D’ Major chord over the first verse.

McTell then transitions into playing a ‘G/G7’ hybrid chord which represents the ‘IV’ position in the song. This will also reappear throughout the song in the same spot across the remaining stanzas. A quick bass run on the 5th string over the 1st and 2nd frets bridges the transition from ‘D’ to ‘G/G7’. He tends to always lead with this combination over the ‘IV’ position in songs played in the key of ‘D’. 

He reverts back to the ‘D’ major chord with a key pull-off lick on the 1st string/1st fret at the end.
For the ‘V’ position in the song, McTell chords an ‘F’ major chord with the same fingering you’d have for the ‘D’ major chord illustrated over the ‘I’ chord position. Four strums kick off the stanza with the third strum being played with a unique ‘F7’ chord; where the pinkie pinches the 1st string/7th fret. A bass riff on the 5th and 6th strings follows to represent the final turnaround in the stanza sequence. This mimics the same pattern presented in Statesboro Blues. Resolve the whole sequence in either the open 4th or open 6th strings. You can even resolve it all on the ‘D’ major chord.

Nigger stole my baby  She’s in the lonesome jail

A combination on the ‘D’ major chord follows immediately afterwards.

The second stanza starts off much like the first; a steady strum pattern on the ‘D’ major chord.

He took my mama  got her to the town of Rome
Then back to ‘G/G7’.

A more pronounced combination of licks on the ‘D’ major chord follows.

The ‘V’ chord position appears again.

More licks with the ‘D’ major chord follow.
The third stanza continues with the usual steady strum pattern on the ‘D’ major chord.

Back to ‘G/G7’.

To ‘D’ major.

To the end of the stanza.

That fool got lucky, he stole her back again
More licks on the ‘D’ major chord.

For the 4th stanza, McTell shifts to playing the ‘D’ chord in a different position over the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th frets. He plays fingerpicking patterns on a long ‘D’ and ‘D7’ chord with the index finger barring the 7th fret from the 4th string down to the first string with the pinkie free to play individual notes on the 8th, 9th, and 10th frets over the first and seconds strings respectively. Barring the 7th fret with the index finger is crucial.

He speaks over the fingerpicking patterns.

Do it good Mr. so and so
In singing over this stanza, he plays a combination of long ‘D’ and ‘D7’ chords.

More combinations in the same position...

Back to ‘G/G7’.

Now the woman I love got a mouth chock full of good gold
A longer sequence over the ‘D’ major chord follows.

Back to the ‘V’ position.

Then back to the ‘D’ major chord.

McTell begins the upcoming stanza by playing an alternate ‘G’ and ‘G6’ chord over the 3rd, 4th, and 5th frets. This instance is also played in Statesboro Blues. He slides the chord into an alternate ‘A6’ chord briefly while maintaining the same fingerings before resolving into the ‘D’ major chord completely. He plays his usual licks on the ‘D’ major chord before ending the measure on an ‘Am (add11)’ chord. Again, notice the similarities with Statesboro Blues.
Back to the alternate ‘G/G6’ chord sequence again before resolving into the ‘D’ major chord.

Followed by this extended combination on the ‘D’ major chord...

To the ‘V’ position turnaround.

Followed by this combination in ‘D’ major.
A brief instrumental break appears where McTell plays a more complex melody on the alternate ‘G/G6’ chord like from the previous stanzas. The key difference is the note being played on the 2nd string/6th fret which essentially ties in the ‘G7’ chord into the mix.

Followed by this extended combination on the ‘D’ major chord.

Here he reverts back to the alternate ‘G/G6’ combination which resolves into the ‘Am (add11)’ chord. He sings over this stanza.

Back to the alternate ‘G/G6’ chord.
Licks on the ‘D’ major chord…

Back to the ‘V’ position.

That's why I've got these old stole rider blues

Followed by…

The ending portion moves back into the long ‘D’ and ‘D7’ chords over the 7\textsuperscript{th}, 8\textsuperscript{th}, 9\textsuperscript{th} and 10\textsuperscript{th} frets. He does not sing over the last few measures.

He reverts back to the alternate ‘G/G6/G7’ sequence instrumental break again.
Followed by a quick combination on the ‘D’ major chord.

And finally to the ‘V’ position; this is coupled with an alternate bass riff for the ending turnaround. The song finishes on the ‘D’ major chord.

*Lyrics*

I’m gonna grab me a train
Ride the lonesome rail
Gonna grab me a train
Ride the lonesome rail
Nigger stole my baby
She’s in the lonesome jail

He took my mama
Got her to the town of Rome
He took my mama
Got her to the town of Rome
Now she’s screaming and crying
Papa let your mama come
Back home
I stole my good gal
From my boozin’ friend
I stole my good gal
From my boozin’ friend
That fool got lucky
He stole her back again

(Spoken)
Do it good Mr. so and so
Do it with a feelin’
Do it good now

Now the woman I love
Got a mouth chock full of good gold
Now the woman I love
Got a mouth chock full of good gold
Every time she hug and kiss me
It make my blood run cold

When you see two women
Runnin’ hand in hand
When you see two women
Runnin’ hand in hand
Bet you my last dollar
One done stole the other (one’s) man

I’m leaving town
Please don’t spread the news
I’m leaving town
Please don’t spread the news
That’s why I’ve got these old stole rider blues
**Dark Night Blues (1928)**

*Standard ‘D’ Tuning (D-G-C-F-A-D) * semi tone between ‘D’ and ‘D#’*

*Dark Night Blues* is tuned one whole step down to standard ‘D’ tuning. Furthermore, tune the machine heads a semi tone up between ‘D’ and ‘D#’ to match the original recording. Once the guitar is tuned accordingly, anticipate playing the song in the key of ‘C’.

---

*Other McTell songs that belong in the same family of key and structure are:*

*Lay Some Flowers On My Grave*: Standard ‘F’ Tuning (F-Bb-D#-C-F) * an octave down

*Teasing Brown*: Standard ‘Bb’ Tuning (Bb-D#-G#-C#-F-Bb)

---

*The introduction represents a chromatic run/combination on the first string starting at the third fret. This is then followed by the signature riff based on the ‘C’ major scale. First, finger a ‘C’ major chord, and gradually move back to the first fret with the appropriate pull-off combinations. The following riff emphasizes pronounced bends over the 2nd string/ 3rd fret. The combinations and licks in the introduction will also reappear throughout the song as an opening to most of the stanzas.*
McTell utilizes a steady fingerpicking strum of the ‘C7’, ‘F’ and ‘F6’ chords across the stanzas. This is all followed up by the chromatic sequence on the ‘C’ chord stated in the introduction.

McTell fingerpicks strum patterns over an ‘F’ and ‘F6’ chord in the ‘IV’ position of the song. This eventually resolves into a ‘C7’ chord followed by the signature licks from the introduction again.
Afterwards, McTell plays a figure over the ‘G7’ chord for the ‘V’ position in the song. Pay attention to the repeated notes over the first string on the 3rd, 2nd and 1st frets. This is followed by the riff based on the ‘C’ major scale learned in the introduction. The measure ends on a ‘C’ major chord before beginning the next stanza.

The next stanza follows the same structure as the first. McTell sticks with this method throughout the song.
Continuing with the ‘IV’ position of the song...

To the ‘V’ position and the riff combinations in ‘C’...

Followed by this figure and then back to coda.

Repeat the concepts demonstrated thus far against the remaining stanzas.

I followed my fair brown From the depot to the train

And the blues came down like dark night showers o’rain
Lyrics

I got the dark night blues
I'm feeling awful bad
I got the dark night blues
Mama, I'm feeling awful bad
That's the worst ole' feeling
That a good man have ever had

I followed my brown
From the depot to the train
I followed my fair brown
From the depot to the train
And the blues came down
Like dark night showers o' rain

I drink so much whiskey
I stagger when I'm sleep
Drink so much whiskey
I stagger when I'm sleep
My brains are dark and cloudy
My mind's gone to my feet

I got the blues so bad
I can feel them in the dark
I got the blues so bad
I can feel them in the dark
And one dark and dreary morning
Baby, when you broke my heart
I got a fair brown in Atlanta
Got one in Macon too
I got a fair brown in Atlanta
Got one in Macon too
I got one in Statesboro
Give me them old dark night blues

Everything I told you
Went and told your outside man
Everything I told you
Mama, you went and told your outside man
But I want to tell you something
Your good man can’t stand

Riding the PNP Special
Mama, and I’m leaving this town
Riding the PNP Special
Baby, and I’m leaving this town
Say you didn’t want me
I’m a quit hanging around
**Drive Away Blues (1929)**

*Standard ‘C#’ Tuning (C#-F#-B-E-G#-C#) * semi tone between ‘C#’ and ‘D’*

**Drive Away Blues** is tuned a whole step and a half down to standard ‘C#’ tuning. Furthermore, tune the machine heads a semi tone up between ‘C#’ and ‘D’ to match the original recording. Once the guitar is tuned accordingly, anticipate playing the song in the key of ‘E’.

The ‘E’ blues scale in the first position represents much of the riff structure behind Blind Willie McTell’s compositions in the key of ‘E’. Although he often tuned his guitar lower in pitch, he still would continue to play patterns and holdings familiar to ‘E’. The learner will need to reference this scale repeatedly when studying McTell’s work.

**The ‘E’ Blues scale in the first position**

```
      3 2 1 0
C#  -0-1-2-0-3-0-3-0-3-2-0-2-1-0-2-1-0
```

For the introduction, finger an ‘E’ chord and ensure the pinkie will be available to play the corresponding notes of the ‘E’ blues scale as the song evolves. This is the best way to integrate the harmony and the melody together. Many of the measures to follow will represent combinations of the two.

In the introduction, McTell strums an ‘E’ major chord before quickly playing a melody rooted in the ‘E’ blues scale. He tends to come back to playing the ‘E’ chord after these repeated solo runs.
While he sings in the first verse, he tends to play strum patterns with heavy emphasis on the third string. Pay attention to the minor 2nd interval of the ‘E’ and ‘F’ note on the third string while holding the ‘E’ chord. Resolve this sequence into an ‘E7’ chord.

The ‘IV’ position features more of the typical chord combinations of the long ‘A’ and ‘A7’ chord. He sings during this portion. Playing the 6th and 5th string open in succession kicks in the appropriate bass pairing of notes to keep the song in timing. The open 5th string should ring out as you play the chords.

What follows is a mini minor 2nd interval combination followed by the ascending ‘E’ blues scale. Then back to the fingerpicking strums of the ‘E’ major chord.
For the ‘V’ chord position in the song, McTell plays a classic ‘St Louis turnaround’ combination of chords. First, finger a ‘B7’ chord without playing the ‘D’ note (1\textsuperscript{st} fret/4\textsuperscript{th} string). Next, slide into the 4\textsuperscript{th} fret while maintaining the same fingering. Then, the chord will turn into a ‘C#7’ since the fingering remains the same, and continue to fingerpick the 5\textsuperscript{th}, 3\textsuperscript{rd}, and 1\textsuperscript{st} strings while sliding back to the ‘B7’ chord. He ends the turnaround on an ‘E’ major chord.

Followed by this extensive run on the ‘E’ blues scale; resolve into strums on the ‘E’ major chord.

The second stanza features more fingerpicking strums on the ‘E’ major chord which eventually terminates into an ‘E7’ chord over the part where he sings, “hardly talks”. Let the ‘E7’ chord ring out at this juncture.

He comes back to the ‘E’ major chord to sing out the rest of the verse followed by a quick run on the ‘E’ blues scale. Resolve the sequence over an ‘E7’ chord.
Back to the ‘IV’ position. Play the long ‘A’ and ‘A7’ chords.

More combinations over the ‘E’ blues scale.

To the ‘V’ position turnaround.

Followed by more combinations featuring the minor 2nd interval from the ‘E’ blues scale...
The next stanza moves into a long ‘E’ and ‘E7’ chord based around the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th frets. Begin by playing the 1st fret/6th string and from there slide the finger all the way to the 12th fret/6th string before you lock in the long ‘E’ chord. The ‘E’ chord in this position will have you barre the 9th fret with your index finger from the 4th string down to the 1st string while having your pinkie free to play the individual notes on the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th frets accordingly.

McTell flickers back and forth between a long ‘E’ and ‘E7’ chord at this position when he sings over the stanza. Maintaining the barre fingering is crucial at all times.

Followed by...
He then continues with more of the same over the 'IV' position. The sequence in 'A' is then followed by a mini riff on the 'E' blues scale. End the sequence with strums of the 'E' major chord.

How my poor heart weeped and worried baby when you drove me away

Then to the 'V' position.

It was crying for poor boy McTell, some old rainy day

A series of licks using the 'E' blues scale follow.

Slide into the 12th fret area by playing this sequence below.
The next stanza begins over the long ‘E’ chords over the 12th fret once more.

Followed by...

Back to the ‘IV’ position again; play the long ‘A’ and ‘A7’ chords.

Follow this by playing more combinations featuring the minor 2nd interval from the ‘E’ blues scale.
To the ‘V’ position turnaround.

More combinations on the ‘E’ blues scale followed by fingerpicking strums on the ‘E’ major chord.

Continuing licks on the ‘E’ blues scale.

In the next stanza, McTell continues with the long ‘E’ and ‘E7’ combinations by the 12th fret. This stanza closely resembles the previous one in structure and composition. Follow and apply the corresponding figures over the ‘IV’ and ‘V’ position in this stanza accordingly.

Don’t grieve and worry, and don’t fret after me
There is a brief instrumental break before the final stanza in which McTell plays a more robust rendering of the ‘IV’ position laid out like below. It’s in the portion of the song where he is speaking words and not singing.

The next stanza continues with more of the same already demonstrated. Continue to apply the matching licks and chords over the long ‘E’ and ‘E7’ chords by the 12th fret.

Continue applying what was demonstrated thus far against the final portions of the song.

**Lyrics**

*I believe that if I had my sweet woman's heart, in my hand, in my hand*

*I drink so much whiskey mama*

*I can’t hardly talk, hardly talk, sweet mama hardly talk*

*I drink so much whiskey, I can’t hardly talk, hardly talk*

*Well it’s done addled on my brain, people I can’t hardly walk*
How my poor heart wept and worried
Baby when you drove me away, drove me away, sweet mama, you drove me away
How my poor heart wepted and worried, baby when you drove me away
You will cry for poor boy McTell, some old rainy day

Climbing on Lookout Mountain
Looked down to Niagara Falls, Niagara Falls, sweet mama Niagara Falls
Gonna go to Lookout Mountain, looked down to Niagara Falls, Niagara Falls
Seem like to me, I can hear my Atlanta mama call, a hear her call

Don’t fret and worry, and don’t grieve after me, sweet mama after me
Don’t grieve and worry, and don’t fret after me, after me
Don’t you scream and cry, because I’m going back to Tennessee

(Spoken)
Oh boy, play the drill away blues for me
That’s all I know

Can’t read and write, can’t even spell my name, spell my name, I know, spell my name
Can’t read and write, can’t even spell my name
You drove me away, and drove my heart insane

(Spoken)
I won’t be back no more mama
Love Talking Blues (1928)

Standard ‘D’ Tuning (D-G-C-F-A-D) * semi tone between ‘D’ and ‘D#’

Love Talking Blues is tuned one whole step down to standard ‘D’ tuning. Furthermore, tune the machine heads a semi tone up between ‘D’ and ‘D#’ to match the original recording. Once the guitar is tuned accordingly, anticipate playing the song in the key of ‘G’.

The ‘G’ blues scale in the first position represents much of the riff structure behind Blind Willie McTell’s compositions in the key of ‘G’. Although he often tuned his guitar lower in pitch, he still would continue to play patterns and holding familiar to ‘G’. The learner will need to reference this scale repeatedly when studying McTell’s work.

The ‘G’ Blues scale in the first position

The introduction features a chromatic turnaround on the second string starting at the 3rd fret while moving back up the neck to the first fret. Finger a ‘G7’ chord while navigating the turnaround with your pinkie. After the turnaround, McTell plays a signature riff based off the ‘G’ blues scale with double stop combinations being played simultaneously on the 4th string to harmonize the melody. The measure resolves into a series of strums on the ‘G’ and ‘G7’ major chords.
The beginning verse features fingerpicking chord combinations on the ‘G7’ and ‘G’ major chords. He starts singing at this point.

Another crafty lick is extracted from the ‘G’ blues scale and is integrated within strums of the ‘G7’ chord. Apply the correct fingerpicking application at this juncture. Resolve the measure on a ‘G7’ chord.
Next, McTell plays the ‘IV’ position in the song featuring the expected ‘C’ major chord. He plays an alternating fingerpicking pattern which eventually terminates with two strums on the ‘C#’ major chord. You will simply slide and shift your fingering of the ‘C’ chord to the adjacent frets to play the ‘C#’ chord. This technique is a signature stable of McTell’s playing. By playing the ‘C#’ chord, he produces a suspenseful effect before transitioning into the next verse. It ties the two stanzas perfectly.

A lick extracted from the ‘G’ blues scale is integrated while playing the ‘G’ or ‘G7’ chord.

For the ‘V’ position, McTell slides into a ‘D/F#' major chord with great emphasis; the combination has a pronounced effect. Let the chord ring after it’s played.
The other half of the ‘V’ position moves into a turnaround using mini chords based in ‘G’ major. Finger the ‘G’ chord over the 3rd/4th frets and move back up the next to the first fret before terminating into the open ‘G’ and ‘B’ string chord combination. This is followed by the combination featured in the introduction; the lick on the ‘G’ blues scale.

Begin the next stanza with the same progressions in ‘G’ and ‘G7’.

I’m going downtown, bought me a brand new rocking chair

Followed by...
Then to the familiar sequence over the ‘IV’ position.

I'm going downtown, bought me a brand new rocking chair

Followed by...

Back to the ‘D/F#’ major chord followed by an extending rendition of the half chords based in ‘G’. This part is distinctly different than the first stanza. End with strums of the ‘G’ major chord.

And if the blues overtake me I'm gonna rock away from here

The next three stanzas carry on similarly to the first two stanzas. He injects a long ‘A’ and ‘A7’ chord combination in the fold of those three stanzas as well. For the final two stanzas, McTell begins them by playing the half chords in ‘G’ rather than the usual ‘G’ and ‘G7’ strums. Align them strategically with the song lyrics. Resolve the entire sequence with quick strums of the ‘G’ and ‘G7’ chords.

Mmmmm, Mary she's grieving and crying
For the ‘IV’ position, McTell plays a more defined fingerpicking pattern on a ‘C/G’ chord. Finger the ‘C’ major chord, and with the pinkie hold down the 1st string/3rd fret. Move into the ‘C#’ chord then finally to the ‘G’ chord. This is all followed by another run of half chords based in ‘G’. Then, finish with strums of the ‘G’ chord.

```
1 1 1 1 1 1 2 2 3 2 1 0 0 0
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 2 3 3 2 2 2
3 3 3 3 3 3 4 4 2 3 3 3
```

Mmmmm, Mary she’s grieving and crying

Lead into the ‘D/F#’ major chord.

```
0 1 2
2 3 3 3 3
1 2 2 2 2
0 0 0 0 0
```

I told she had a home

This is then followed by the same sequence stated in the first stanza; more half chords and the ending lick over the ‘G7’ chord.

```
3 3 3 2 1 0
4 4 4 3 2 0
3 3 3 3 2 2
```

long as I got mine

The next stanza begins with the same alternate method using the half chords. Apply the correct pairing of music to the remaining stanzas.

```
2 3 3 3 2 3 3 2 1 0
3 4 4 4 3 4 4 3 2 0
```

Mmmmm, Lordy, Lordy, Lord
The final ending is based on the ‘G’ blues scale in the first position.

Lyrics

Don’t get mad with me mama, cause I talk in my sleep
Don’t get mad with me mama, cause I talk in my sleep
Something may break your heart, baby it may cause you to weep.

I’m going downtown, bought me a brand new rocking chair
I’m going downtown, bought me a brand new rocking chair
And if the blues overtake me, I’m gonna rock away from here

I love you mama, you know that I’m talking to you
I love you mama, you know that I’m talking to you
Honey you know bout’ that I, got them love talking blues

I went home last night, and tried to take my rest
I went home last night, and tried to take my rest
Thought about little Mary, And I ain’t quit worrying yet.

(Spoken)
Oh play it Mr. McTell low and lonesome
Don’t want no sleeper, don’t want no Pullman car
Don’t want no sleeper, don’t even want a Pullman car
I’m gonna find little Mary, Have her ride the boxcar carriage

Mmmmm, Mary she’s grieving and crying
Mmmmm, Mary she’s grieving and crying
I told she had a home, long as I got mine

Mmmmm, Lordy, Lordy, Lord
I told she had a home, long as I got mine
B & O Blues Take No. 2 (1933)

Standard ‘C#’ Tuning (C#-F#-B-E-G#-C#) * semitone between ‘C#’ and ‘D’

B & O Blues Take No. 2 is tuned one whole step and half down to standard ‘C#’ tuning for teaching purposes. Furthermore, tune the machine heads a semi tone up between ‘C#’ and ‘D’ to match the original recording. Once the guitar is tuned accordingly, anticipate playing the song in the key of ‘G’. The original recording is tuned in standard ‘Bb’ tuning (Bb-D#-G#-C#-F-Bb). Tuning it to this pitch is too low; the strings almost fall off the guitar neck at this point. This is why I suggest playing it with ‘C#’ tuning instead.

Other McTell songs that belong in the same family of key and structure are:

Death Cell Blues: Standard ‘D’ Tuning (D-G-C-F-A-D) * semi tone between D and D#

My Baby’s Gone: Standard ‘C’ Tuning (C-F-Bb-Db-G-C)

The ‘G’ blues scale in the first position represents much of the riff structure behind Blind Willie McTell’s compositions in the key of ‘G’. Although he often tuned his guitar lower in pitch, he still would continue to play patterns and holdings familiar to ‘G’. The learner will need to reference this scale repeatedly when studying McTell’s work.

The ‘G’ Blues scale in the first position
The introduction features one of McTell's most typical licks in 'G'. He plays a series of mini half chords that move up and back the fretboard chromatically on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd frets. Finger the chords over the 2nd and 3rd strings as shown in the tablature. This is all followed by a lick from the 'G' blues scale on the 2nd and 3rd frets over the 4th and 3rd strings.

Next, McTell caps off the introduction with a run on the 'G' blues scale ascending. Note the series of consecutive pull-offs happening on the 2nd and 3rd strings.

McTell starts the first stanza off with two pairs of strums of the 'G' major and 'G7' chord. Next, McTell briefly incorporates the 'IV' position by fingerpicking strums of the 'C' major chord. The 'C' chord eventually transitions to the adjacent 'C#' major chord while holding down the same fingering. This technique is a signature stable of McTell's playing. He ends the measure back on a 'G' major chord to wrap up the first stanza.

I'm gon' grab me a train  I'm goin' back to  Baltimore
This lick from the ‘G’ blues scale follows after the first stanza.

McTell, in this instance, stays longer on the ‘IV’ position by playing the ‘C’ major chord which eventually moves into the adjacent ‘C#’ major chord. Resolve the measure into a ‘G’ major chord or ‘G’ bass note on the top string.

This combination lick follows from the ‘G’ blues scale.

For the ‘V’ position, McTell slides into a ‘D/F#’ major chord with great emphasis; the combination has a pronounced effect.
The other half of this 'V' position moves into a turnaround using mini chords based off of 'G' major. Finger the 'G' chord over the 3rd/4th frets, and move back up the fretboard to the first fret before terminating into the open 'G' and 'D' string chord combination. This is followed by the combination featuring from the introduction; the lick on the 'G' blues scale.

The next stanza continues with more of the same.

McTell plays an instrumental break in the middle of the song situated on the 1st and 2nd strings around the 10th, 11th, and 12th frets.

Afterwards, a descending solo run on the 'G' blues scale occurs. This is then followed up by more strums of the 'G' and 'G7' chords.
McTell explores some different combinations over this installation of the ‘IV’ position.

He eventually comes back to the ‘V’ chord; resolve on a ‘D’ major chord.

Then back to the turnaround combination in ‘G’ followed by the ending riff. Then back to coda.

**Lyrics**

I’m gon’ grab me a train, I’m goin’ back to Baltimore
Well I’m gon’ grab me a train, goin’ back to Baltimore
I’m gonna find my baby, ’cause she rode that B & O

I’m goin’ to act like a rambler, and I can’t stay home no more
I’m goin’ to act like a rambler, and I can’t stay home no more
’Cause the gal I love she rode that B & O
She said, "Daddy, I'm leavin', and I can't come back no more"
She said, "Daddy, I'm leavin', and I can't come back no more"
And if she don't come back, I'm goin' down in Ohio

(Ah play it now, you'd feel bad when she should leave you too, trouble, boy, trouble...)

I never would have thought that my baby would treat me so
Well, I never would have thought that my baby would treat me so
Ah she broke my heart, when she grabbed that B & O

Now she wants to come back, and I can't use that child no more (not at all)
Now she wants to come back, and I can't use that child no more
'Cause I got another hot mama, and she lives in Baltimore

(Play it a little bit now boy, stand by you gonna hear it again, next year...)
Southern Can Mama (1931)

Standard ‘C’ Tuning (C-F-Bb-D#-G-C)

Southern Can Mama is tuned two whole steps down to standard ‘C’ tuning. Once the guitar is tuned accordingly, anticipate playing the song in the key of ‘C’.

Other McTell songs that belong in the same family of key and structure are:

This Is Not the Stove to Brown Your Bread: Standard ‘A’ Tuning (A-D-G-C-E-A)

Come On Around To My House Mama: Standard ‘A’ Tuning (A-D-G-C-E-A)

Razor Ball: Standard ‘A’ Tuning (A-D-G-C-E-A) * Tuned a semi tone between A and A#

Southern Can Mama features many chord changes rooted in the key of ‘C’. Familiarize yourself with the following chords below.
The introduction begins with sharp strokes of the chords demonstrated above. This song has a ‘ragtime’ feel to it, and should be played relatively fast.

After the introduction, McTell plays a transition bridging the verse. This is done with a combination of swift strokes of the ‘C’ major chord followed by quick bass runs on the ‘C’ major scale.

McTell starts with this chord progression in the first verse: C – E – A – A7. He plays the ‘A’ chords longer in the first verse.
Then back again to C – E – A and A7.

Again, back to C – E – A and A7.

In the following sequence, rather than returning back to the ‘C’ major chord, McTell finishes the verse off by playing the ‘D7’ and ‘G7’ chords before finally coming back to the ‘C’ major chord. McTell produces a mini lick on the ‘G7’ chord as it is being played.

A bass riff on the ‘C’ major scale kicks in the chorus. The chorus features all of these chords in succession:

C – E – A – A7 – D7 – G7 – C
The next stanza opens with the same chord progression: C – E – A – A7. He doesn’t extend the ‘A’ chords out like he did in the first stanza this time around.

Continuing with the same progression until the ending sequence of chord strums: D7 – G7 and C.

Bass riff on the ‘C’ major scale then the chorus.

McTell extends the chorus at this juncture by quickly playing the ‘E’ and ‘A’ major chord in sharp succession before resolving in the ending sequence of chords: D7 – G7 – C.

(In the morning) Your southern can belongs to me.
He extends the chorus yet again before finally ending it.

Bass runs on the ‘C’ major scale and chord progressions of the ‘C’ major chord follow afterwards. This piece bridges the two stanzas together.

A pre-verse succession of four chords marks another dominant feature of the song. It’s characterized by single strums of the ‘C’, ‘C7’, ‘F’ and an alternate variation of a ‘G#’ chord. These are all followed by whole step rests in between. Practice playing these chords against the original recording to get the timing and pauses just right.

Ah ashes to ashes mama, and sin to sin
Followed by strums of an ‘F’ major chord and the variation of the ‘G#’ chord…

He repeats the same succession of four chords again.

The ‘F’ and ‘G#’ chords…

Every time I hit you you'll think I've got a dozen hands

Give you a punch through that barb-wire fence

Every time I hit you you'll say I've got no sense
After the procession of the four chords, McTell rapidly plays a bass run combination on the 5th and 4th strings based in ‘C’. Resolve the run into a combination of ‘A’ and ‘A7’ chord strums.

Back to the extended chorus. The chord sequence will be A – D7 – G7 – C then E – A – D7 – G7 – C.

Repeat the concepts demonstrated thus far against the remaining stanzas of the song.

Lyrics

Now looka here mama let me tell you this
If you wants to get crooked I’m gonna give you my fist
You might read from Revelations back to Genesee
But if you get crooked, your southern can belongs to me

Ain’t no need you bringin no jive to me
‘Cause your southern can is mine
Might go uptown have me arrested and have me put in jail
Some hotshot got money come and throw my bail
Soon as I get out, hit the ground
Your southern can worth two dollar, half a pound

 Ain't no need of bringing no stuff to me
 'Cause your southern can is mine

You might take it from the south you might carry it up north
But understand you can't rule or either be my boss
Take it from the east, hide it in the west
When I get it mama, your can won't see no rest

 Ain't no need of bringing no stuff to me
 'Cause your southern can is mine
(In the morning)
Your southern can belongs to me
(I'm not dreamin')
Your southern can belongs to me

Ah ashes to ashes mama, and sin to sin
Every time I hit you you'll think I've got a dozen hands
Give you a punch through that barb-wire fence
Every time I hit you you'll say I've got no sense

 Ain't no need of bringing no stuff to me
 'Cause your southern can is mine
(Every bit of it)
Southern can belongs to me
Get me a brick out of my backyard
Give you the devil if you get kinda hard

Ain't no need of bringing no jive here honey
'Cause your southern can is mine
(You hear me cryin')
Southern can belongs to me

(Spoken)
Spank it a little bit, boy

Ah, your southern can is mine

Now if I catch ya mama down in the heart of town
Take me a bran-new brick and tear your can on down

Ain't no need you bringin no stuff to me
Because your southern can belongs to me
(I'm talkin to ya)
Your southern can belongs to me

You may be deathbed sick and mama and graveyard bound
I'll make your can moan like a hound

Ain't no need you bringin no stuff to me
Because your southern can is mine
(You hear me talkin’)
Southern can belongs to me

(Spoken)
Oh spank it like that
The way Ruthie Mae likes it
’Cause your southern can is mine

Sit there unsteady with your eyes all red
What I said get your grandma dead

Ain’t no need of bringing no jive to me
’Cause your southern can is mine

You got to stop your barkin and raising the deuce
I’ll grab you mama and turn every way but loose

Ain’t no need of bringing no jive here honey
’Cause your southern can belongs to me

(Every bit of it)
Southern can belongs to me

(Spoken)
Aww, whup it boy, that’s the way the people like that thing
Ain’t no need of bringing no jive here honey
’Cause your southern can is mine

(you hear me talkin)
Your southern can belongs to me
Might twiddle like a tadpole
Let it jump like a frog
Every time I hit it you'll holler
God oh God

Ain't no need of bringing no jive here honey
'Cause your southern can is mine
(You hear me talkin')
Southern can belongs to me

(Spoken)
Now play it a little bit, just whup it
Aww shucks. Play that thing boy

Southern can belo-ongs to me
Kind Mama Blues (1929)

Standard ‘C#’ Tuning (C#-F#-B-E-G#-C#) * semitone between ‘C#’ and ‘D’

Kind Mama Blues is tuned one whole step and half down to standard ‘C#’ tuning. Furthermore, tune the machine heads a semi tone up between ‘C#’ and ‘D’ in order to match the original recording. Once the guitar is tuned accordingly, anticipate playing the song in the key of ‘C’. The song features a combination of boogie woogie rhythms paired with pronounced ragtime rhythms.

The introduction consists of simple strums of the ‘C’ and ‘C6’ chord in a rhythm similar to Writing Paper Blues. The strums are then broken up by a quick melody run extracted from the ‘C’ major scale. Resolve the sequence on a ‘C’ major chord to transition into the verse.

Next, play the ‘C’ chord using alternating bass notes in the fingerpicking pattern.
While strumming using this pattern, McTell starts to sing. Note the quick lick on the 1st and 2nd strings over the portion where he sings “Looking for another man”. This is a typical combination used in the key of ‘C’; it serves almost like a turnaround.

Revert back to playing the steady alternating picking pattern on the ‘C’ major chord. Resolve the sequence on a ‘G’ major chord. He moves into the ‘V’ position at this juncture.

While holding a ‘G7’ chord, play and fingerpick with the notes over the treble strings accordingly. This should be played relatively fast.
A pre-verse procession of four chords marks another dominant feature of the song. It’s characterized by single strums of the ‘C’, ‘C7’, ‘F’ and a variation of the ‘G#’ chord. This is all followed by whole step rests in between. Practice playing these chords against the original recording to get the timing and pauses just right.

Repeat once more...

Way down yonder on Cripple Creek Hemp don’t grow but sixteen feet

Would go to bed but it ain’t no use They pile up on the bed like chickens on a roost
Then back to the alternating picking pattern on the ‘C’ major chord followed by the lick in ‘C’.

More progressions over the ‘C’ major chord.

Back to the figure on the ‘G7’ chord.

Revert back to the four chord pre-verse sequence. This will reappear throughout the song.
Apply the concepts demonstrated thus far across the remaining stanzas. The ending features a melodic riff on the ‘C’ major chord. End the song on a ‘C7’ chord.

Lyrics

She’s a real kind mama looking for another man
She ain’t got nobody to hold her hand

Way down yonder on Cripple Creek
Hemp don’t grow but sixteen feet
Would go to bed but it ain’t no use
They pile up on the bed like chickens on a roost

She’s a real kind mama looking for another man
And she ain’t got nobody to hold her hand

The rooster chew tobacco and the hen dip snuff
Said he can’t shimmy but he struts his stuff
She's a real kind mama looking for another man
And she ain't got nobody to hold her hand

See that fella with that derby on
Look good to me just as sure as you're born
I'll tell you the truth and it's a natural fact
Coulda been a rule about being that black

She's a real kind mama looking for another man

(Spoken)
Play it Boy

See that fellow that's standing right there
He don't live here but he's somewhere
Little patch of hair right around his mouth
Like he swallowed a mule and left his tail hanging out

Real kind mama looking for another man
She ain't got nobody to hold her hand

Wake up in the morning at a half past three
Thanks pretty mama done put out what I need

She's a real kind mama looking for another man

Soon in the morning at half past four
Hot shot rider rappin' at her door
She’s a real kind mama looking for another man
She ain’t got nobody in town to hold her hand

Went to the door and the door was locked
Think that baby tryin’ to eagle rock

She’s a real kind mama looking for another man
Real kind mama looking for another man
And she ain’t got nobody here to hold her hand
Kind mama looking for another man
Searching the Desert for the Blues (1932)

Standard ‘C’ Tuning (C-F-Bb-D#-G-C) * semi tone between ‘C’ and ‘C#’

Searching the Desert for the Blues is tuned two whole steps down to standard ‘C’ tuning. Furthermore, tune the machine heads a semi tone up between ‘C’ and ‘C#’ in order to match the original recording. Once the guitar is tuned accordingly, anticipate playing the song in the key of ‘E’.

Other McTell songs that belong in the same family of key and structure are:

Talking to Myself Blues: Standard ‘C#’ Tuning (C#-F#-B-E-G#-C#)

Lord Send Me and Angel: Standard ‘A’ Tuning (A-D-G-C-E-A)

The introduction features a collection of chords that feature predominantly throughout the song. Some of the chords like ‘E’, ‘B’ and ‘B7’ use alternate variations apart from their familiar fingering. The chords showcased in the song are demonstrated as followed: E – B – B7 – A – A7 – E – C#7 – B7
The introduction begins with loose strums on the ‘D’ shaped ‘E’ chord. Next, transition into the long versions of the ‘B/B7’ and ‘A/A7’ chords. They must be played using these alternate variations.

After the ‘A’ chord is played, briefly play a turnaround bass run starting on the 5th string/4th fret, and move and play your way back on the same string going to the 5th string/2nd fret. Resolve the bass run into a regular ‘E’ major chord. Next, finger a ‘C#7’ chord by playing the bass note of the triad first followed by the strum of the entire chord. Do the same for the ‘B7’ chord next. Resolve the remainder of the measure on an ‘E’ major chord.
After the ‘E’ major chord, McTell always follows with this classic riff based out of the ‘E’ blues scale. This is identical to what was learned in Drive Away Blues. Return to strums on the ‘E’ major chord to finish the introduction.

Start the next stanza and verse on the alternate variation of the ‘E’ chord and repeat the musical structures stated in the introduction. Sing according to the chord changes.

Continue in ‘A’.

The turnaround...

But mama, you’ll never find another hot shot like me
Back to the riff and ending on the ‘E’ major chord.

Repeat and apply the concepts demonstrated thus far against the remaining stanzas. The ending features a melody extracted out of the ‘E’ blues scale which resolves on the long ‘E’ chord over by the 12th fret.

Lyrics

You may search the ocean, you might go 'cross the deep blue sea
But mama, you'll never find another hot shot like me

I followed my baby from the station to the train
And the blues came down like night showers of rain

I left her at the station wringing her hands and crying
I told her, she had a home just as long as I got mine

I've got two women and you can't tell them apart
I've got one in my bosom, the other one in my heart

The one in my bosom, she's in Tennessee
And the one in my heart, don't even give a darn for me
I used to say a married woman was the sweetest thing that ever been born
But I've changed that thing, you better leave married women alone

Take my advice, let these married women be
'Cause their husbands'll grab you, beat you ragged as a cedar tree

When a woman say, she love you 'bout good as she do herself
I don't pay her no attention, tell that same line to somebody else

I really don't believe no woman in the whole round world do right
Act like an angel in the daytime, mess by the ditch at night

I'm going, pretty mama, please don't break this rule
That's why I'm searching these deserts for the blues

I'm going, pretty mama, searching these deserts now
That's why I'm walking my baby home anyhow

Lord, oh Lord
Lordy, Lordy, Lord
Oh Lordy Lord
Lord, Lord, Lord

When a woman say, she love you 'bout good as she do herself
I don't pay her no attention, tell that same line to somebody else

Lord, Lord,
Lord, Lord, Lord
Conclusion

The songs presented in this E-book will most undoubtedly solidify your foundation in understanding and playing Early Roots & Blues Music. Mastery of the songs will prove dividends when you move on to study other artists from the genre. Thank you for your purchase of this book, and I hope you continue to love and play the blues forever.

Best wishes,

-Delta Lou

www.deltaloumusic.com