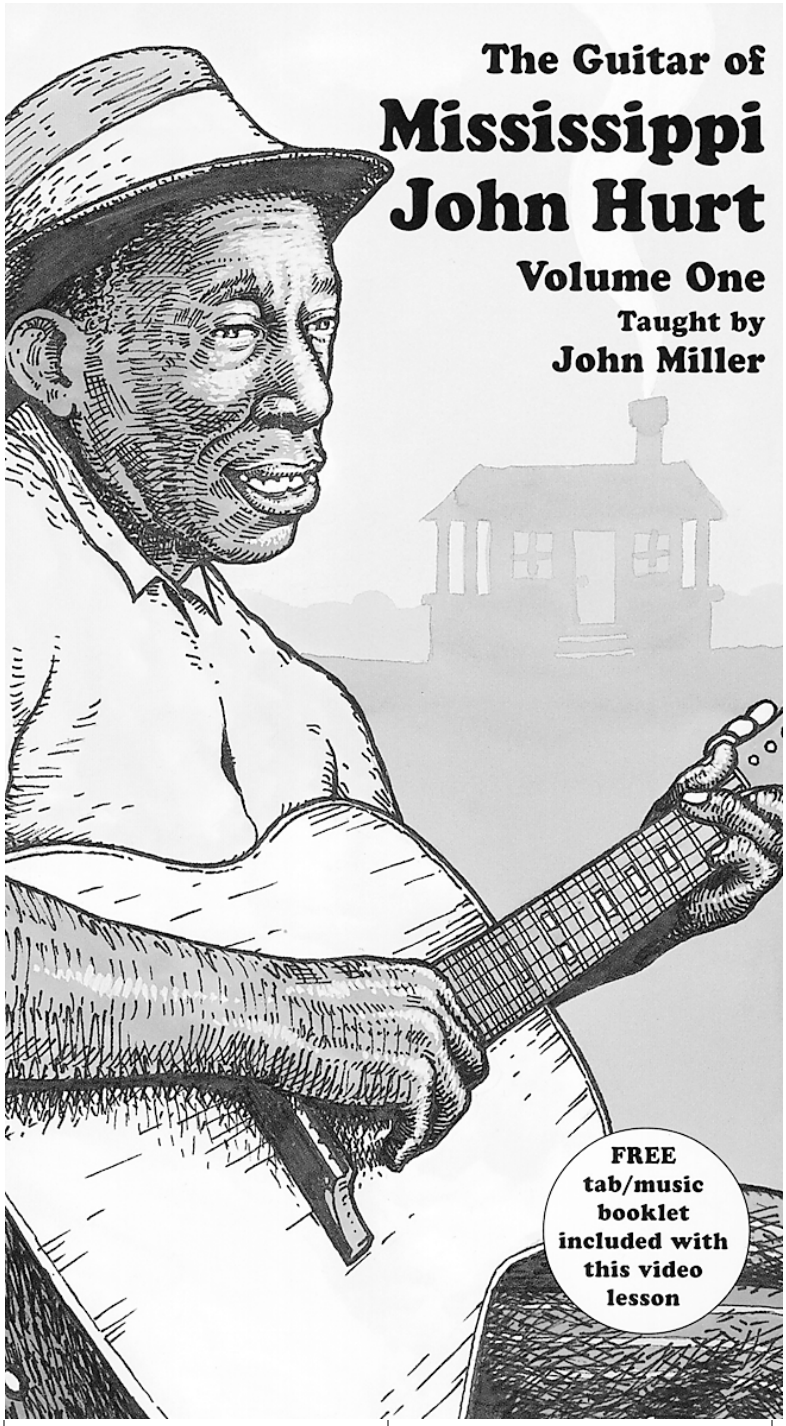
The Guitar of
Mississippi
John Hurt
Volume One
Taught by
John Miller
FREE
tab/music
booklet
included with
this video
lesson

MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT'S MUSIC

John Hurt was born in Teoc, Mississippi in 1892, but lived most of his life in Avalon, Mississippi. In 1928, after being recommended for recording by his neighbors, fiddler Willie Narmour and guitarist Shell Smith, John Hurt recorded 13 songs for Okeh Records. He returned to Avalon and nothing was heard of him outside of his home area until 1963, when Tom Hoskins, a young Country Blues enthusiast, "rediscovered" him, recorded him, and arranged for him to perform at the Newport and Philadelphia Folk Festivals. From that point onward, until his death in 1966, John Hurt traveled and performed, charming audiences wherever he went.

Such are the bare bones of John Hurt's life. What of his music? It has a quality of being simultaneously familiar and mysterious, because the more you listen to Mississippi John Hurt, the more you realize how different he was, not only from other musicians of his region, but from anyone else in the Country Blues genre. His music bore some similarities to the playing of Furry Lewis and Frank Stokes, both transplanted Mississippians who lived in Memphis, but whereas both Furry and Frank were two-finger pickers who employed a lot of brush strokes, John Hurt was a three-finger picker who seldom used brush strokes, preferring to pick single strings. John Hurt played with facility in E, A, D, G and C in standard tuning, as well as open G and open D tuning. Of recorded country bluesmen of his region and generation, only Bo Carter shows comparable versatility. John Hurt's characteristic rhythmic feel was utterly distinctive, featuring a driving alternation in the bass, varied with tricky omitted beats and connecting runs. His repertoire was huge, encompassing blues of his own composition, ballads, hymns and forgotten pop ditties of his childhood.

Playing Mississippi John Hurt's songs puts you in a position to appreciate his originality and imagination, as well as the fact that while his music was strong and clear, it certainly was not simple. Continuing to play his music will help keep it alive. Let's do that.

About the Tablature

Most guitarists who transcribe songs using tablature have their own ways of communicating what the player who wishes to play a song will have to do to get the job done. In this respect, I'm like everyone else—I have my own wrinkles on the system. If you observe the following points, I believe the tab will be clear.

- Notes with downward stems are played by the thumb of the right hand. Notes with upward stems are played by the fingers of the right hand.
- Where two notes are connected by a slur, the letters H, P and SL indicate a hammer-on, a pull-off, or a slide. An arrow curved upwards ( ) and the letter B indicates that the note is bent, and an arrow curved downwards ( ) indicates that the bend is released.
- A straight arrow up or down ( ) indicates a strum or brush stroke. The direction of the arrow indicates the direction of the stroke, relative to the strings represented by the lines in the tablature.
- The tablature employs the same methods of notating rhythm as does standard music notation. A quarter note ( ) has the same duration as two eighth notes ( ) or four sixteenth notes ( ). A single eighth note looks like ♪ and a single sixteenth note has a doubled flag ( ). Each of these note values has its own rest symbol, as well—the quarter rest ( ), the eighth rest ( ), and the sixteenth rest ( ). A dot following a note or rest adds on one half of the note or rest's rhythmic duration. An eighth note triplet ( ) divides one beat into three notes of equal duration.
- The 12/8 time signature has four beats per measure with each beat divided into three eighth notes. Thus the beat can be broken into three eighth notes ( ), a so-called broken triplet (♪), or one beat (.), the dotted quarter note.
- When a note is sustained or held across beats, the notes are connected by a tie ( ). Where two notes are tied, only the first note is plucked by the right hand—the left hand continues to hold the position for the duration of the second note. Thus ties are helpful not only for indicating how long notes should sustain, but also when the left hand should move.

Good luck and have fun!

Spike Driver's Blues

by Mississippi John Hurt © 1963 Wynwood Music Co. Inc.
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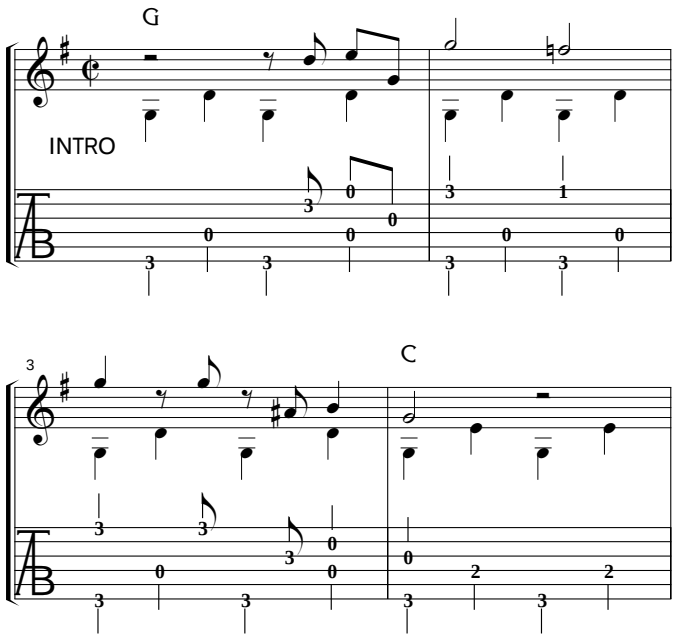
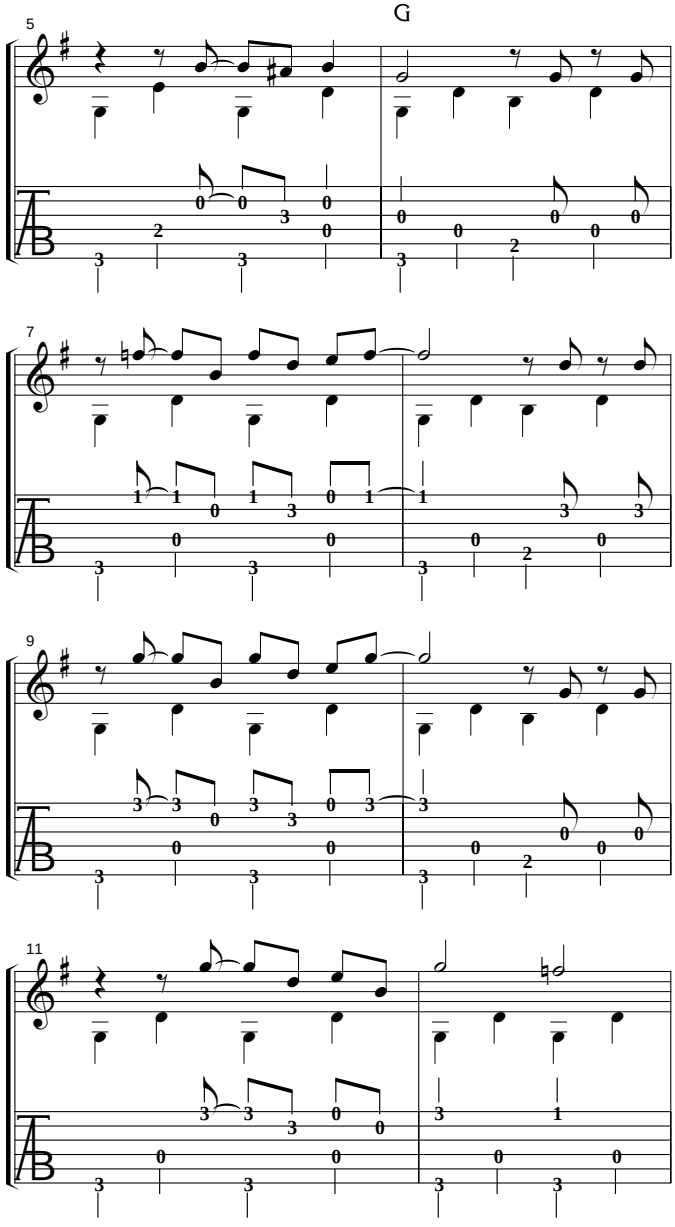
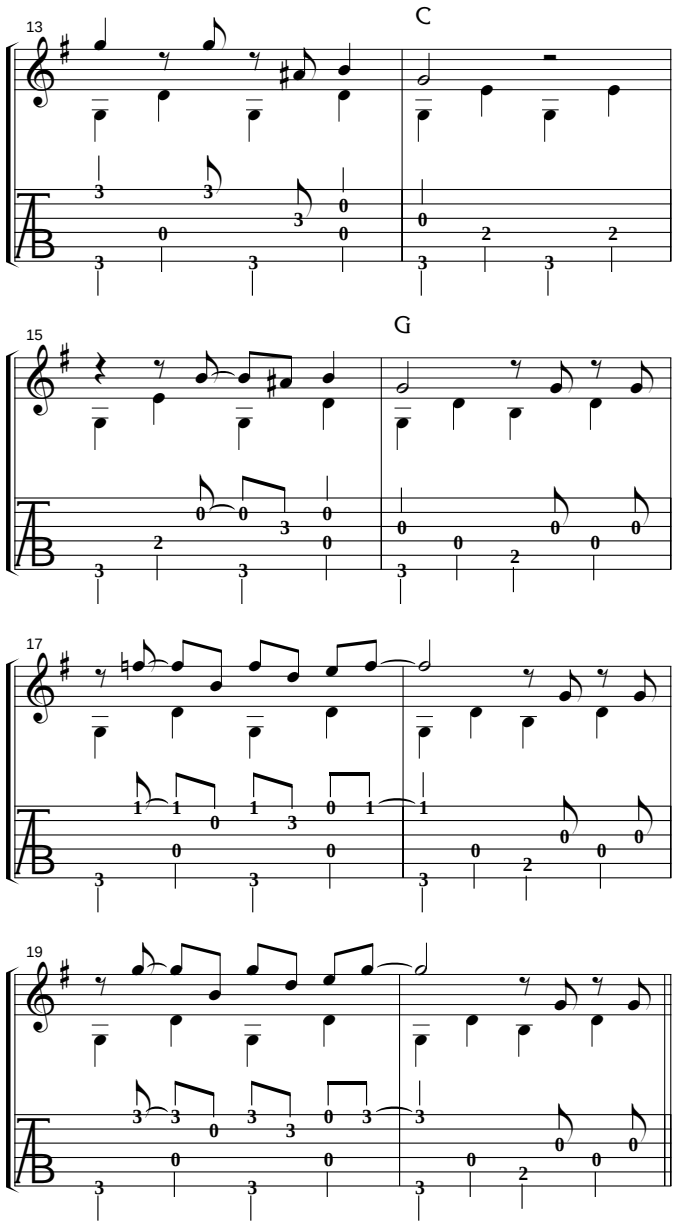
In many ways, "Spike Driver's Blues" could be considered an archetypical G, standard tuning, country blues. It is put together with a beautiful efficiency in the left hand. John Hurt varied it considerably with regard to the details of phrasing in his performances. Its structure, a 10-bar verse which is then repeated as a chorus, is unique.

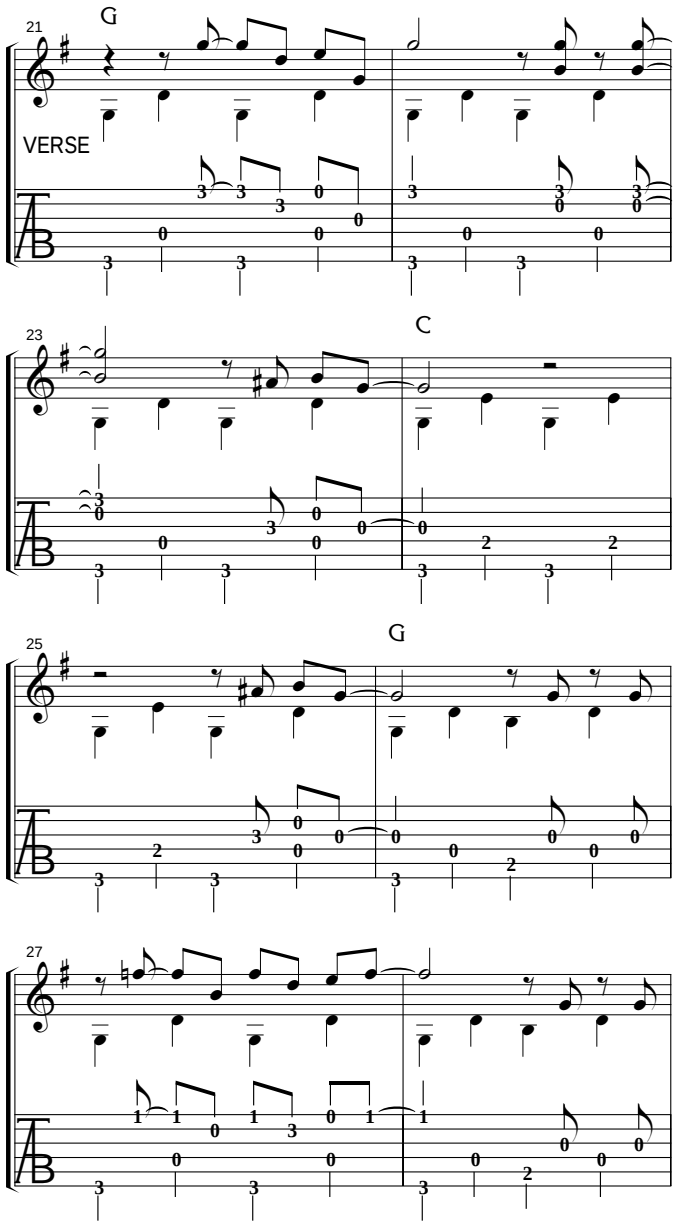
Key of G, standard tuning

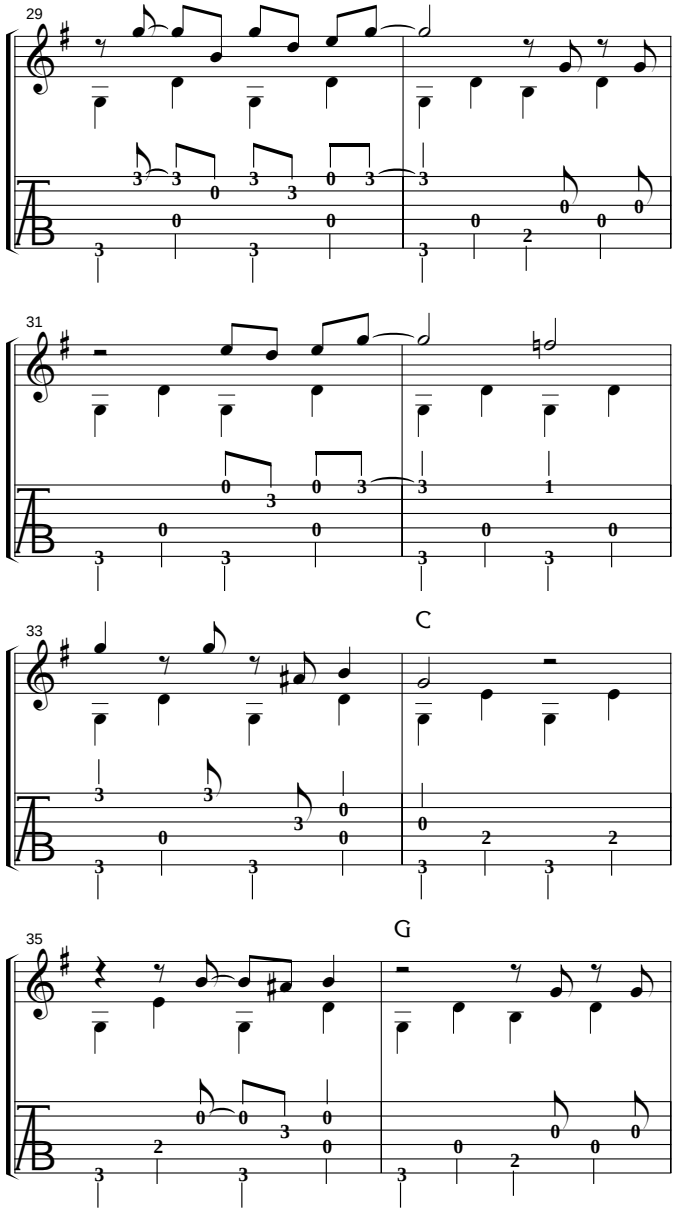


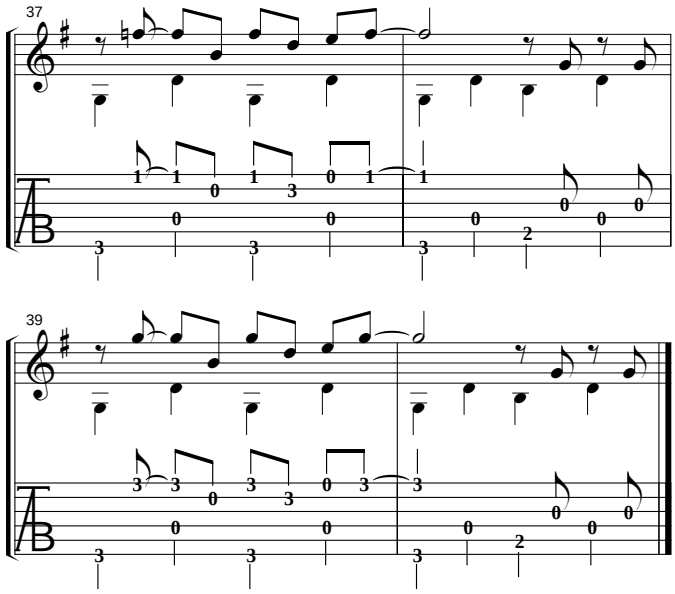
G




C
13
G
15
17
19


21
G
VERSE
23
C
25
G
27


29
31
C
33
G
35


37
39

SPIKE DRIVER'S BLUES

(Legends of Country Blues Guitar: Vestapol 13003)

John Henry was a steel-driving man
Yes, he went down
Well, he went down.

You just take this hammer and carry it to my captain
Oh, tell him I'm gone
Won't you tell him I'm gone.

John Henry, he left his hammer
Layin 'side the road
Layin 'side the road.

John Henry, he left his hammer
All painted in red
All painted in red.

You just take this hammer and carry it to my captain
Yes, tell him I'm gone
Won't you tell him I'm gone.

This is the hammer that killed John Henry
But it won't kill me
No, it won't kill me.

I walked all the way from East Colorado
Honey, that's my home
Well, that's my home
That's why I'm gone.

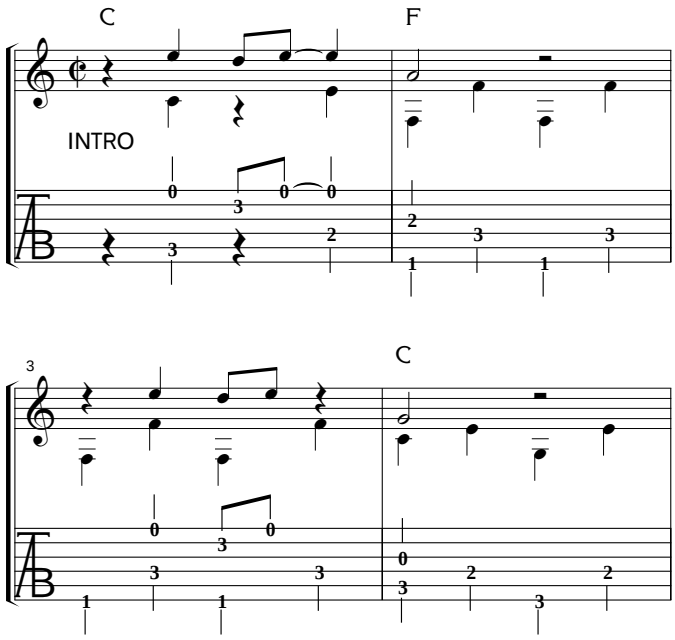
You just take this hammer and carry it to my captain
Oh, tell him I'm gone
Won't you tell him I'm gone.

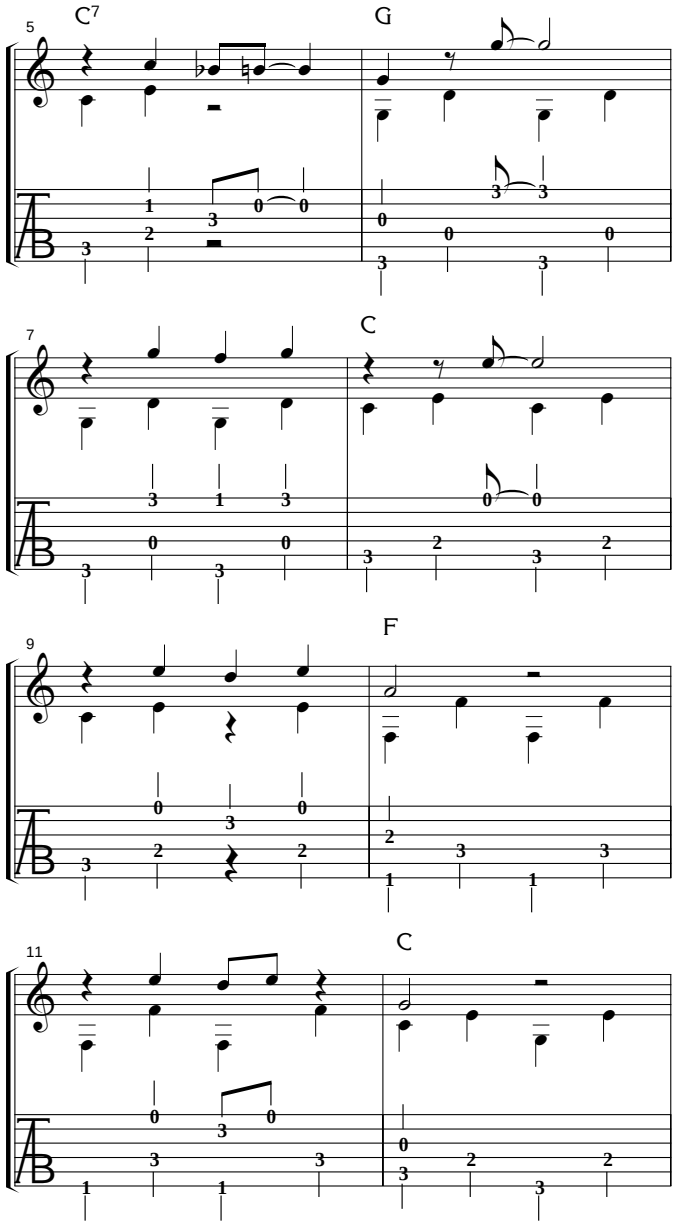
My Creole Belle

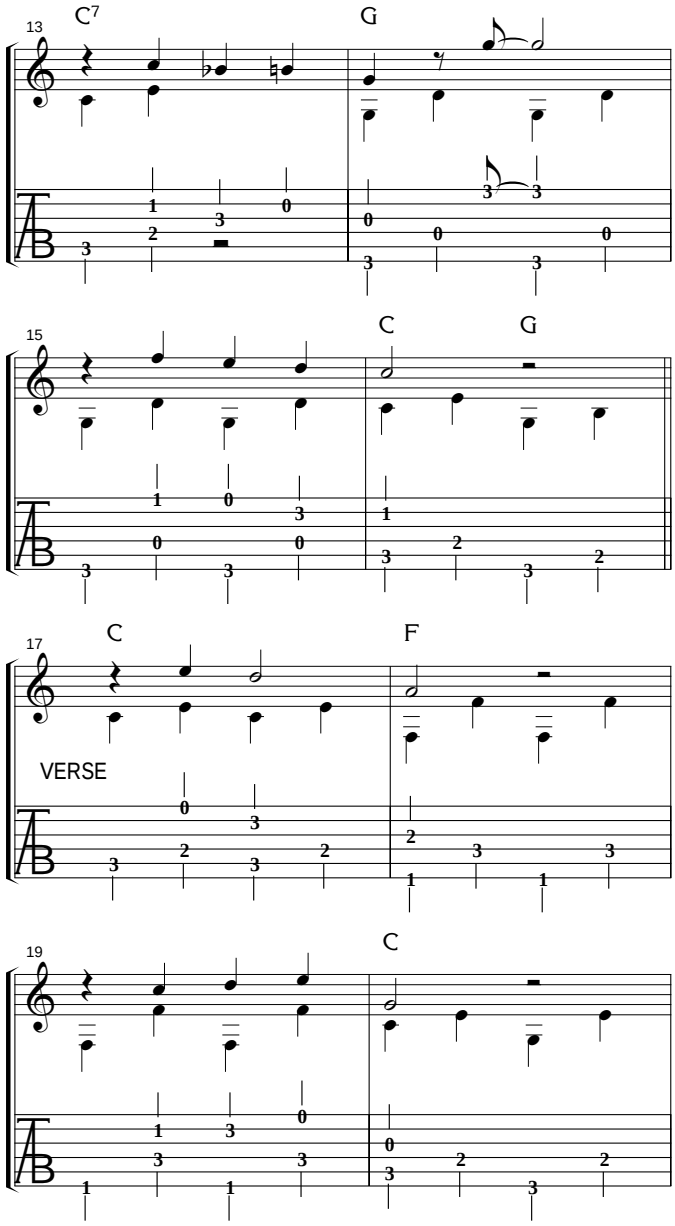
"My Creole Belle" was transcribed from John Hurt's performance on *Mississippi John Hurt Avalon Blues 1963*, Rounder CD 1081, which was recorded right after his rediscovery. Like many of the tunes recorded at that session, it abounds in omitted beats in the bass. John's performance captures the charm of the bygone era in which J. Bodewalt Lampe composed the song.

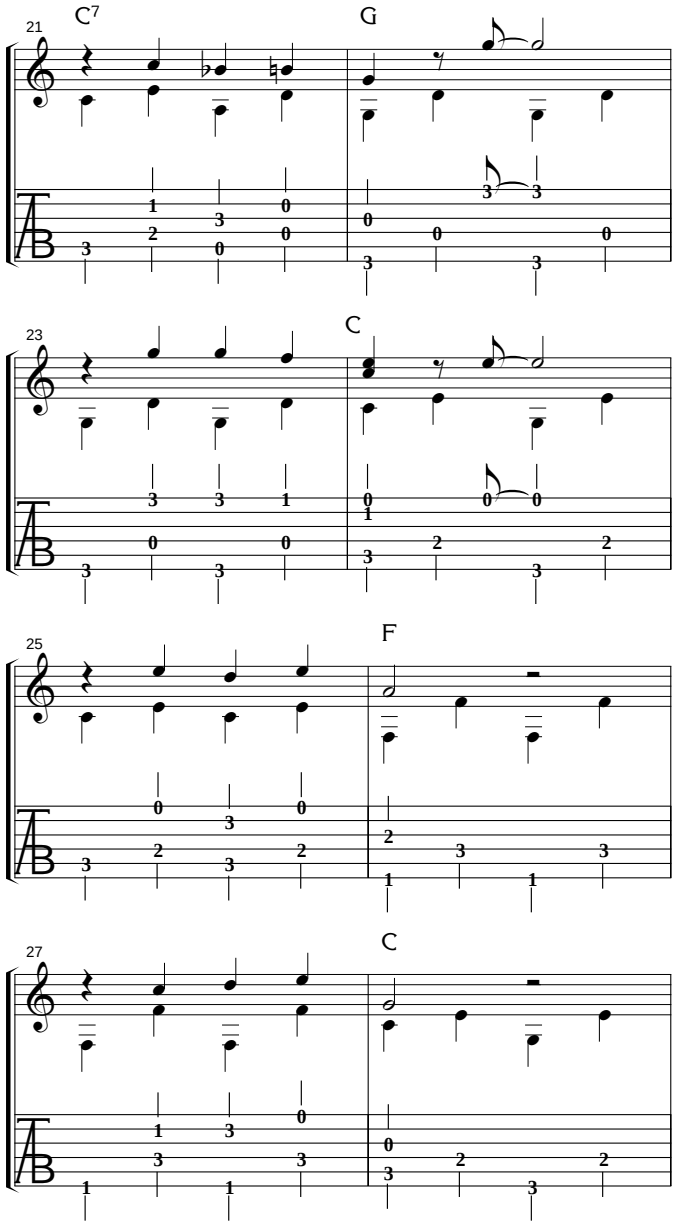
Key of C, standard tuning

arr. Mississippi John Hurt




5
C7
G
7
C
9
F
11
C


13
C7
G
15
C
G
17
C
F
VERSE
19
C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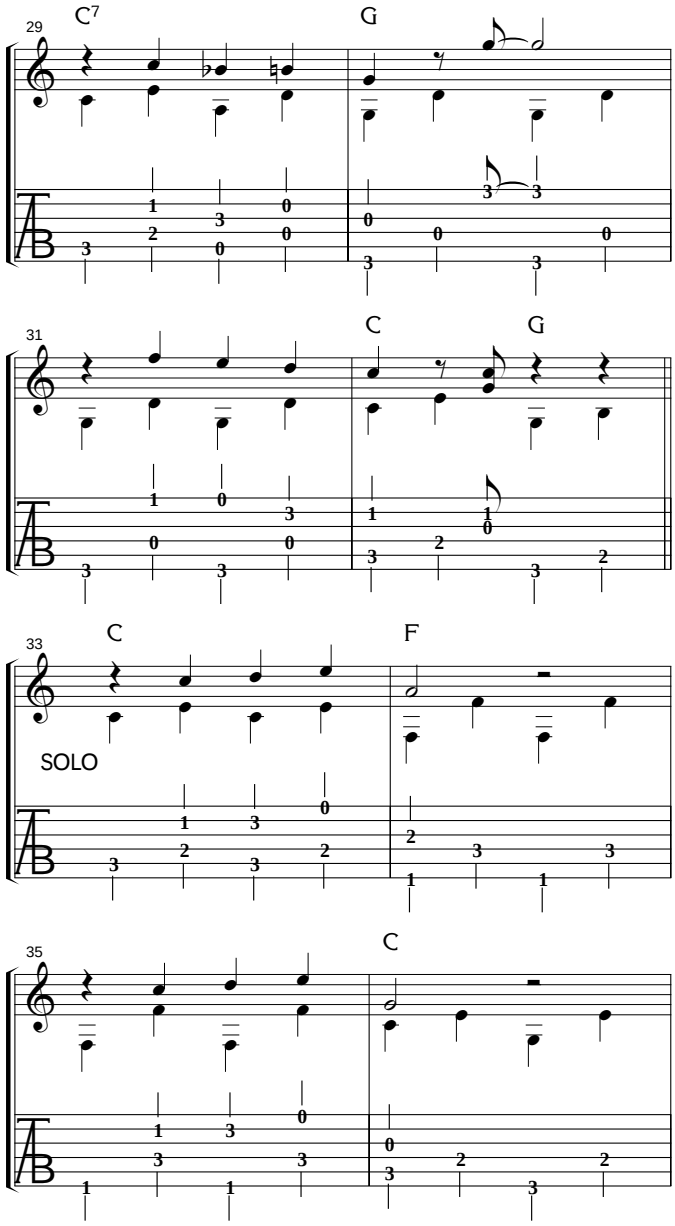
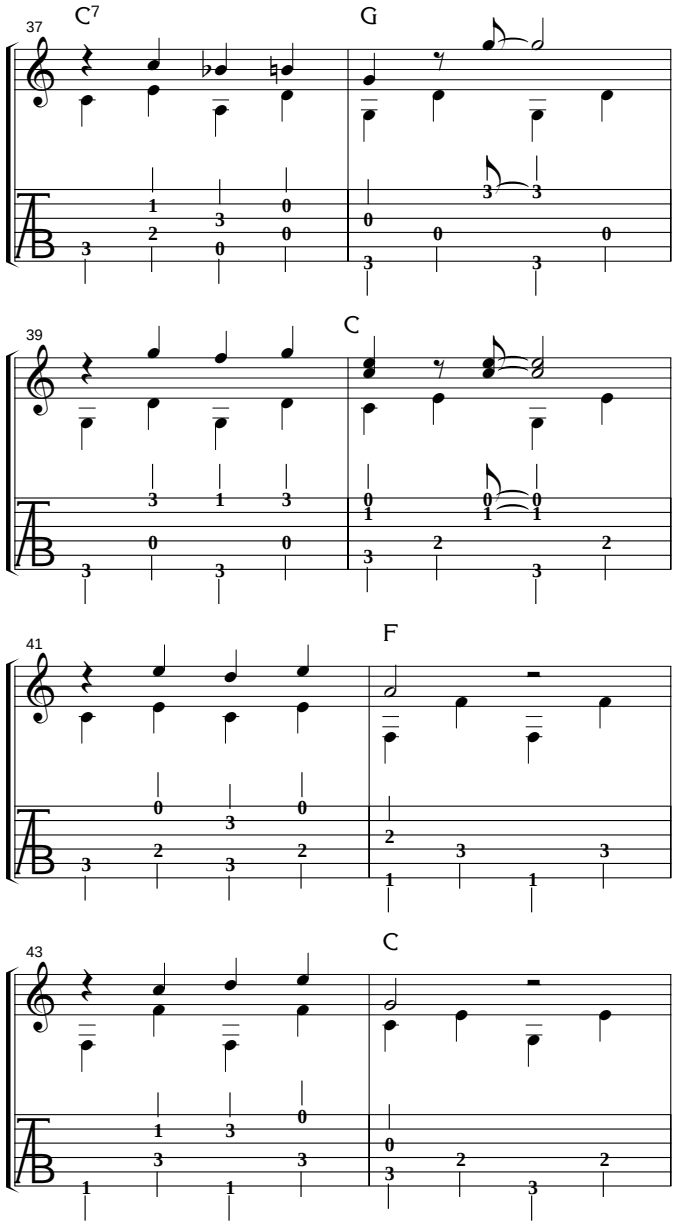
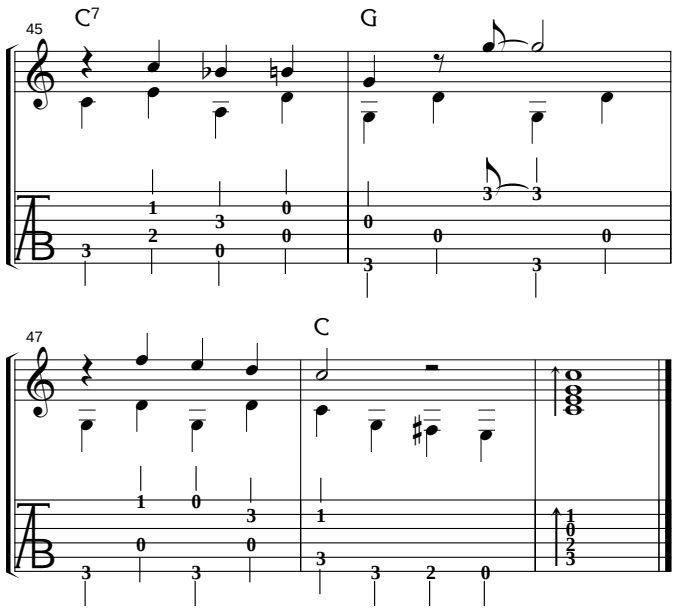
C7
G
23
C
25
F
27
C


29
C7
G
31
C
G
33
C
F
SOLO
35
C


37
C7
G
39
C
41
F
43
C



My Creole Belle

(Rounder CD 1081)

My Creole Belle, I love her well
My darling baby, my Creole Belle
My Creole Belle, I love her well
My darling baby, my Creole Belle.

When the stars shine, I'll call her mine
My darling baby, my Creole Belle
My Creole Belle, I love her well
My darling baby, my Creole Belle.

My Creole Belle, I love her well
My darling baby, my Creole Belle
When the stars shine, I'll call her mine
My darling baby, my Creole Belle.

MONDAY MORNING BLUES

by Mississippi John Hurt © 1968 Wynwood Music Co. Inc.
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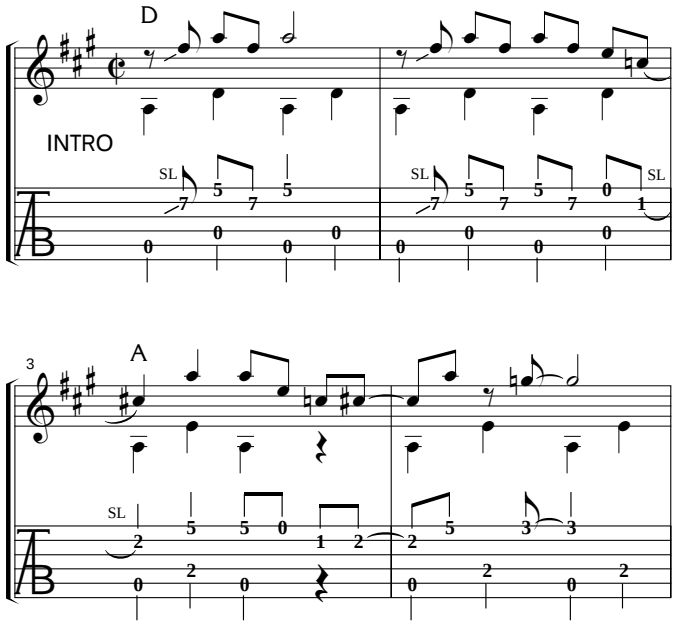
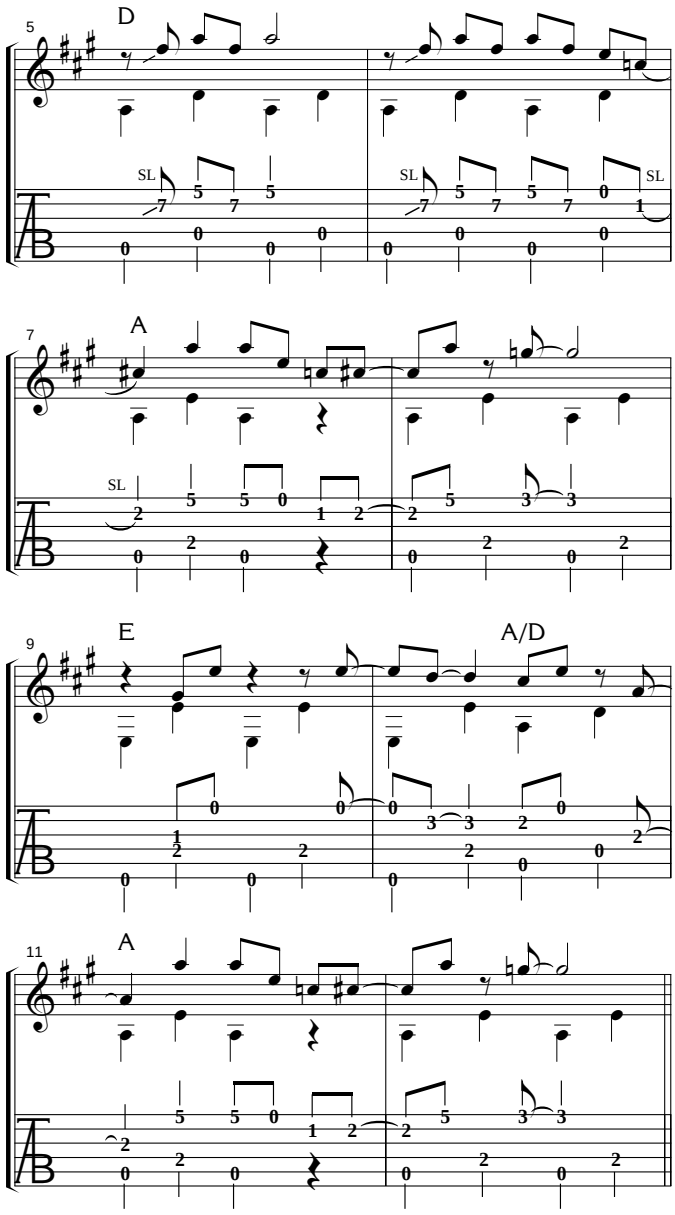
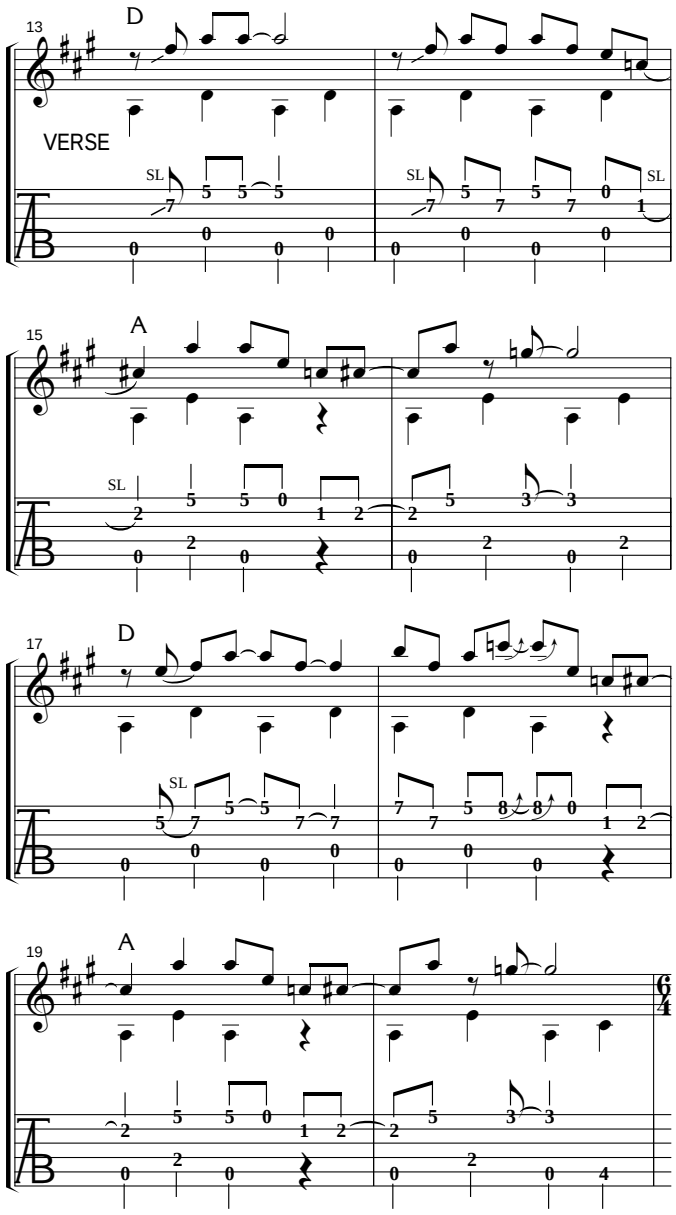
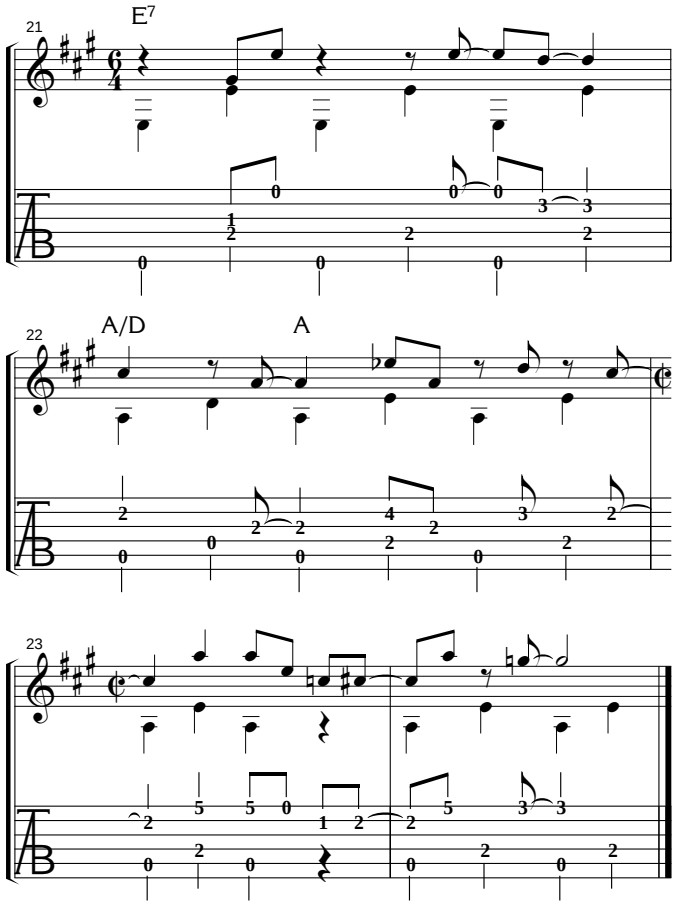
Played in the A position, standard tuning, "Monday Morning Blues" was transcribed from *Mississippi John Hurt Legend*, Rounder CD 1100. The performance showcases John Hurt's "heavy" time, for it is not remotely bouncy. The scope of the lyrics and the intensity of repetition in the guitar part build up a tremendous cumulative force as the song goes along

Key of A, standard tuning




5
D
SL
SL
SL
7
A
SL
9
E
A/D
11
A


13
D
VERSE
SL
15
A
17
D
19
A


21
E7
22
A/D
A
23

MONDAY MORNING BLUES
(Rounder CD 1100)

I woke up this morning *(2x)*
Woke up this morning with the Monday Morning Blues.

I couldn't hardly find *(2x)*
I couldn't hardly find my Monday Morning shoes.

Monday Morning Blues *(2x)*
Monday Morning Blues searched all through my bones.

Monday Morning Blues *(2x)*
Monday Morning Blues made me leave my home.

(Guitar first line)
Monday Morning Blues
Monday Morning Blues made me leave my home.

I been laying in jail *(2x)*
I've been laying in jail six long weeks today.

In the morrow morning *(2x)*
In the morrow morning gonna be my trial day.

Asked the judge *(2x)*
Asked the judge, "What might be my fine?"

"Get a pick and shovel" *(2x)*
"Get a pick and shovel, let's go down in the mine"

That's the only time *(2x)*
That's the only time I ever felt like crying

Lord, my heart struck sorrow *(2x)*
Lord, my heart struck sorrow and the tears come rolling down.

"Mister, change a dollar" *(2x)*
"Won't you change a dollar and give me a lucky dime?"

Monday Morning Blues
I woke up this morning
Woke up this morning with the Monday Morning Blues.

SLIDIN' DELTA

by Mississippi John Hurt © 1965 Wynwood Music Co. Inc.
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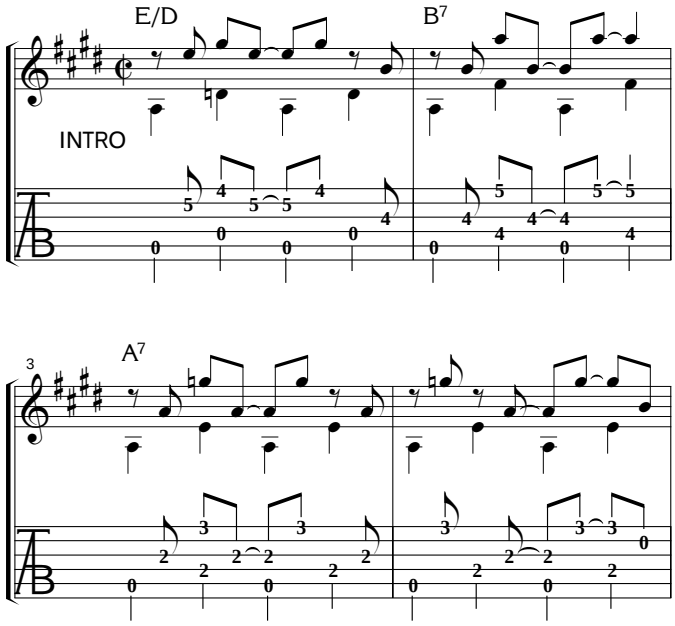
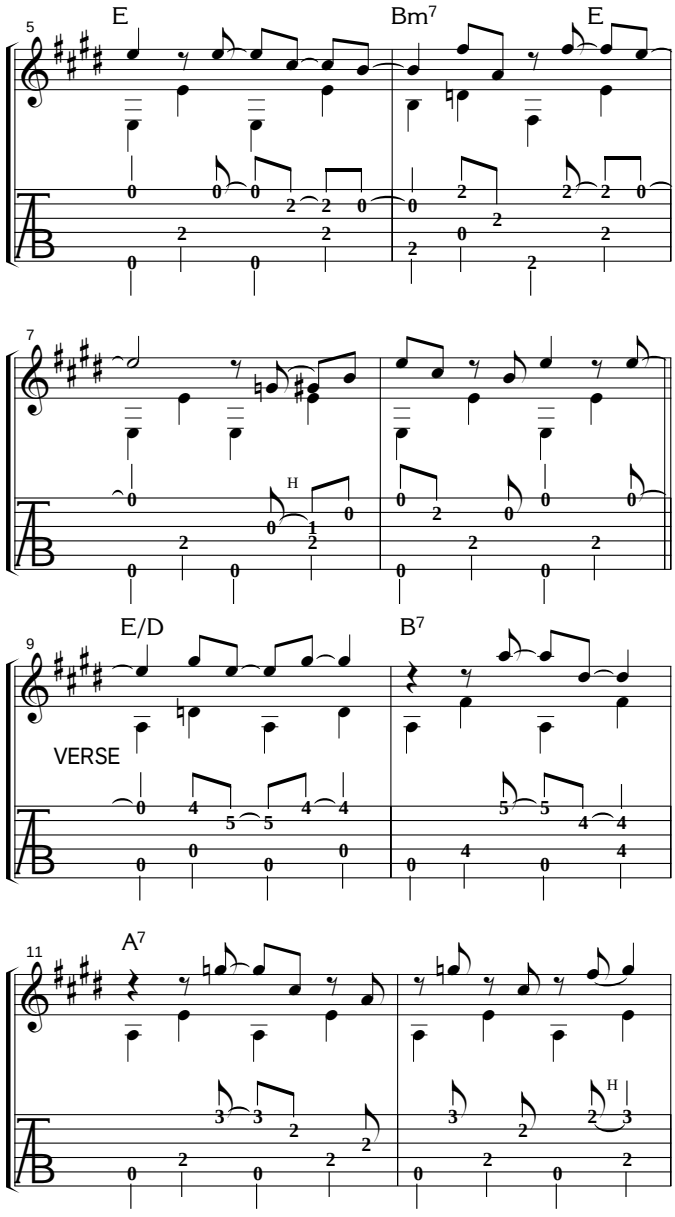
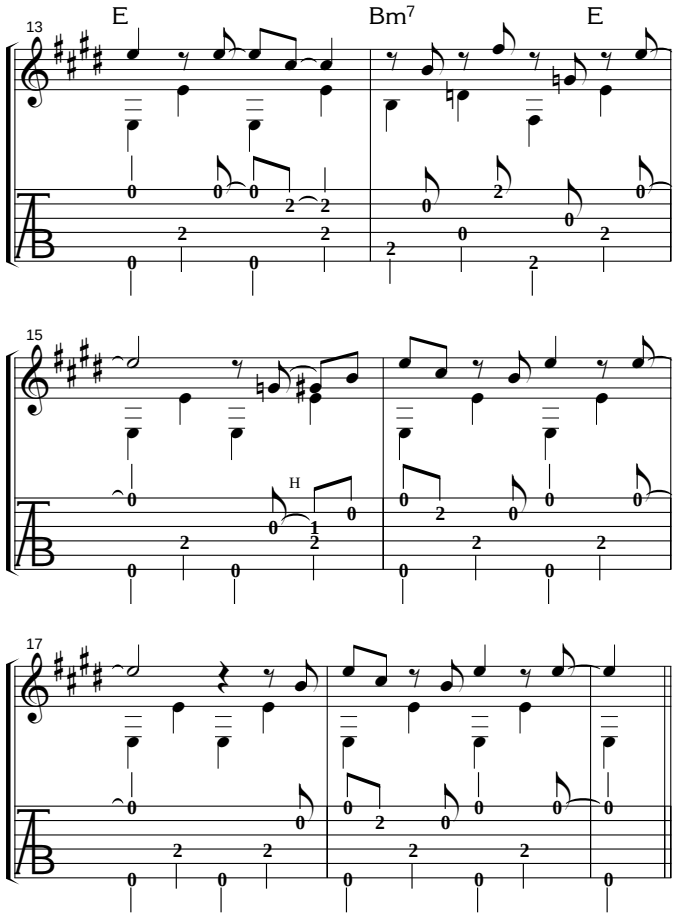
"Slidin' Delta" is sung as an 8-bar blues in E, standard tuning, with a 2-bar instrumental extension on the verses. This version came from *Mississippi John Hurt Worried Blues 1963*, Rounder CD 1082, recorded live at the Ontario Place, a coffee house in Washington, D.C. at which John often played. The recording offers a great opportunity to hear John Hurt stretch out and play tunes at length.

NOTE: After reviewing the split screen version carefully, I felt it was a little too much John Miller, so I have added an extra verse to the TAB that hews a bit closer to what John Hurt played—J.M.

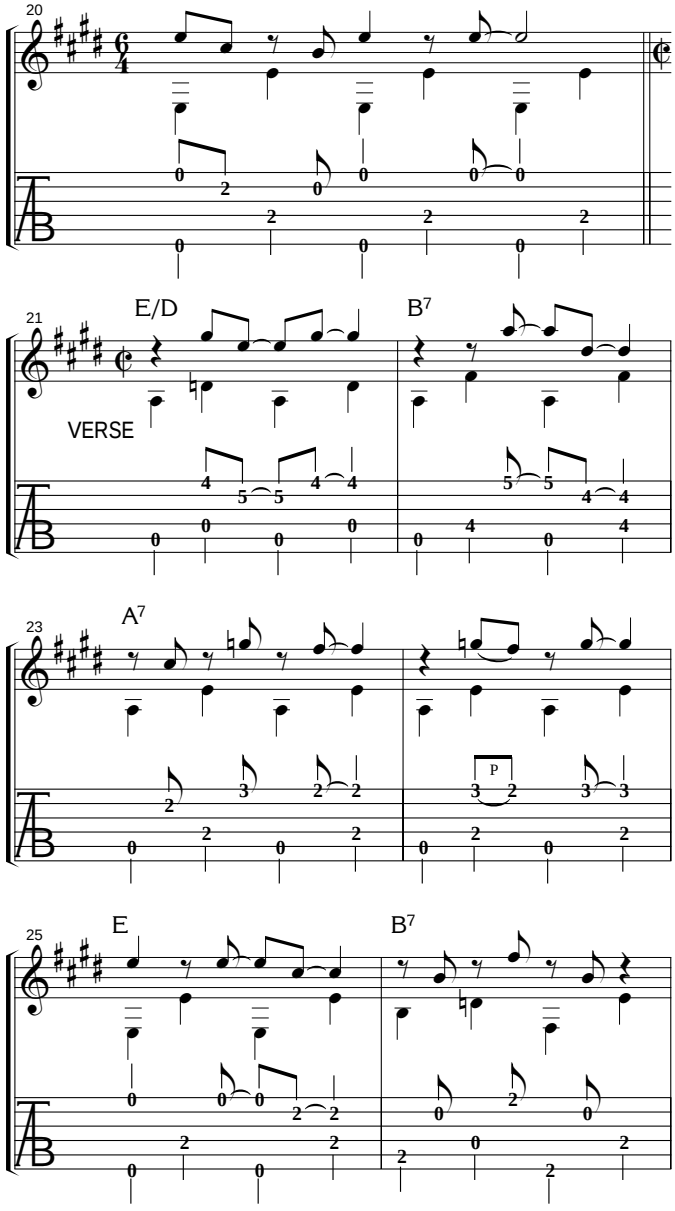
Key of E, standard tuning

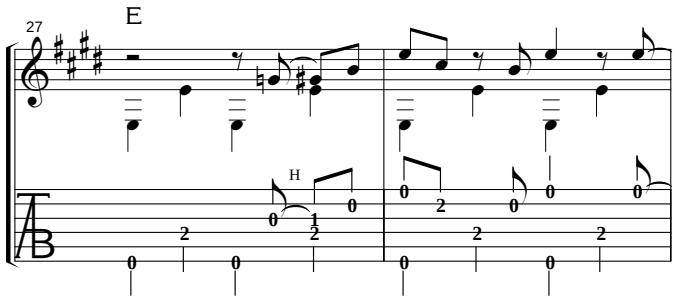


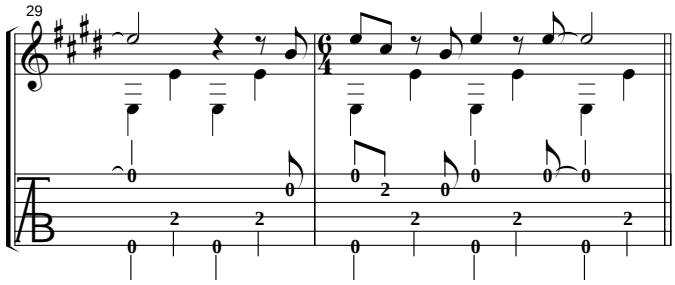

E
Bm7
E
5
7
H
E/D
B7
9
VERSE
A7
11
H


E
Bm7
E
13
15
H
17

EXTRA VERSE FROM LAST BAR OF INTRO:




E
27
H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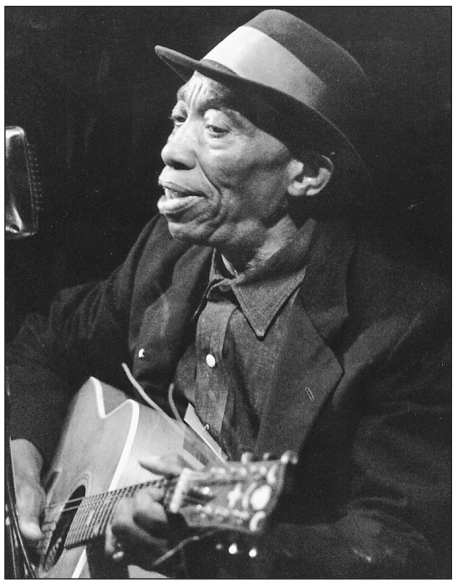

SLIDIN' DELTA
(Rounder CD 1082)

The Slidin' Delta run right by my door. *(2x)*

Repeat Verse 1

The Slidin' Delta run right by my door
Leaving here, sweet baby, honey don't you want to go?

Leaving here, sweet baby, honey don't you want to go?
I'm going up the country and I ain't coming back no more.

I'm going up the country and I ain't coming back no more
(Guitar finishes verse)

My suitcase is packed, my trunk's already gone
My suitcase is packed…

My suitcase is packed, my trunk's already gone
Oh, tell me baby, what in the world you waiting on.

The Big Kate Allen got ways just like a man
It will steal your baby every time she lands.

It'll steal your baby every time she lands
Steal your baby every time she lands.

Repeat Verse 1

Leaving here, sweet baby, honey don't you want to go? *(2x)*

My suitcase is packed and my trunk's already gone
I can't see, baby, what in the world you're waiting on.

The Slidin' Delta run right by my door
I'm leaving here, baby, honey don't you want to go?

Leaving here, sweet baby, honey don't you want to go?
I'm going up the country and I ain't coming back no more.

See See Rider

by Mississippi John Hurt © 1963 Wynwood Music Co. Inc.
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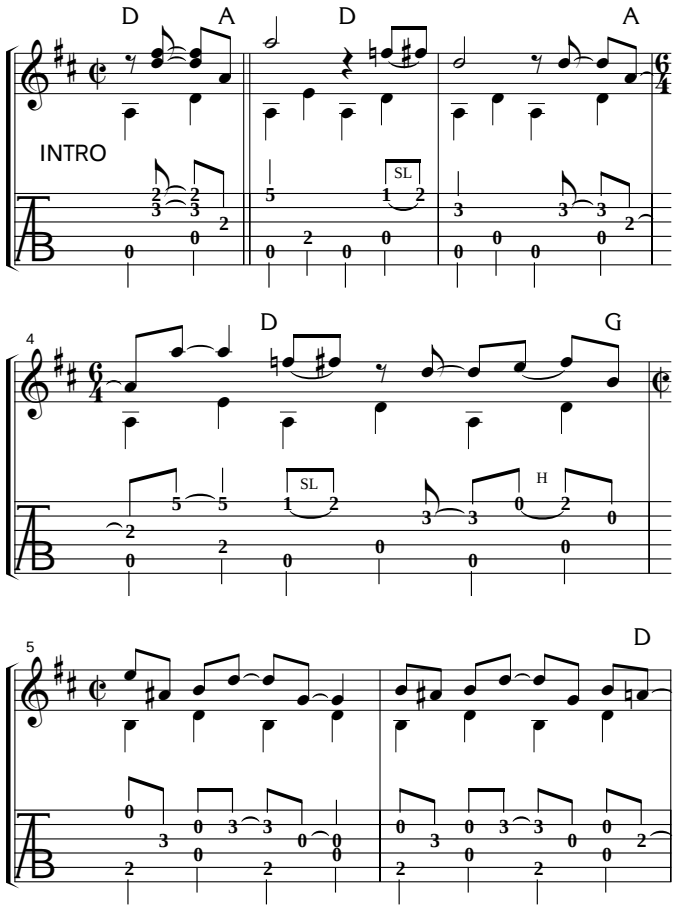
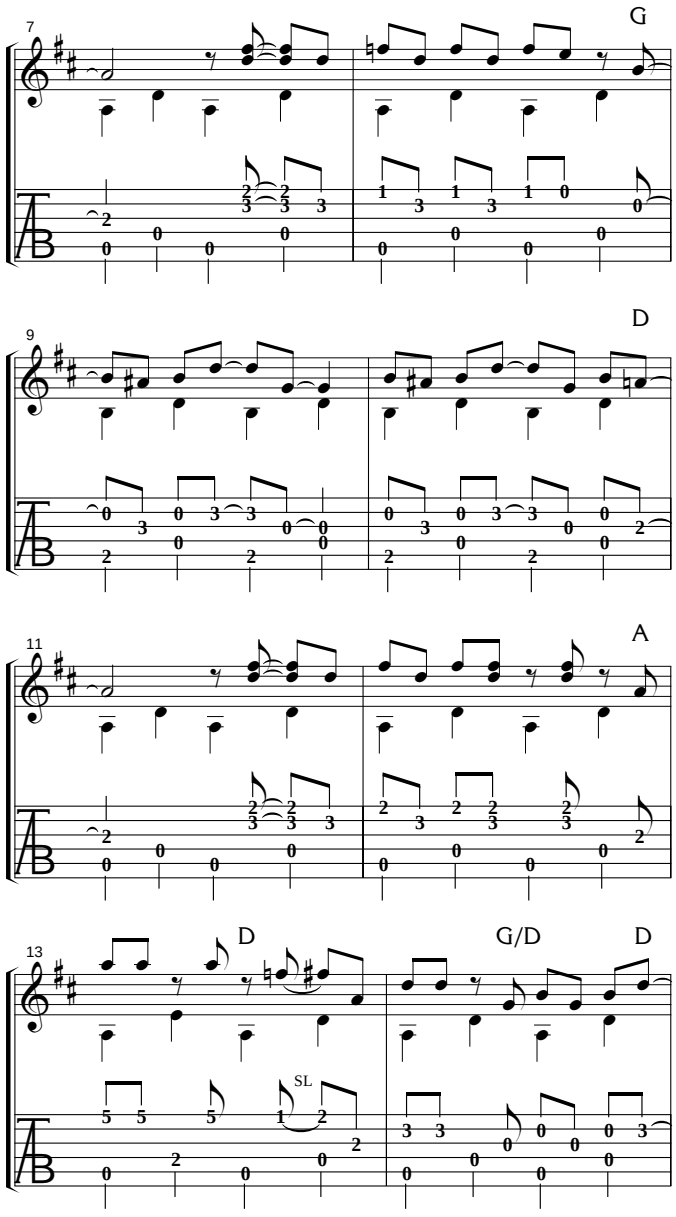
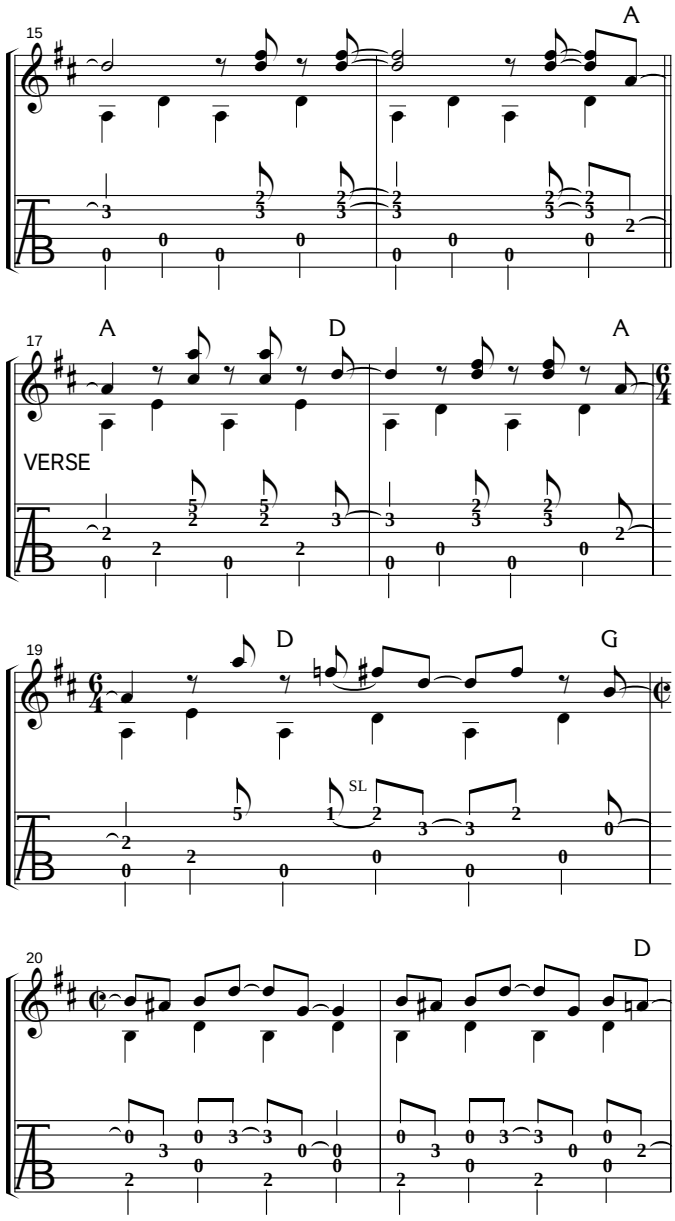
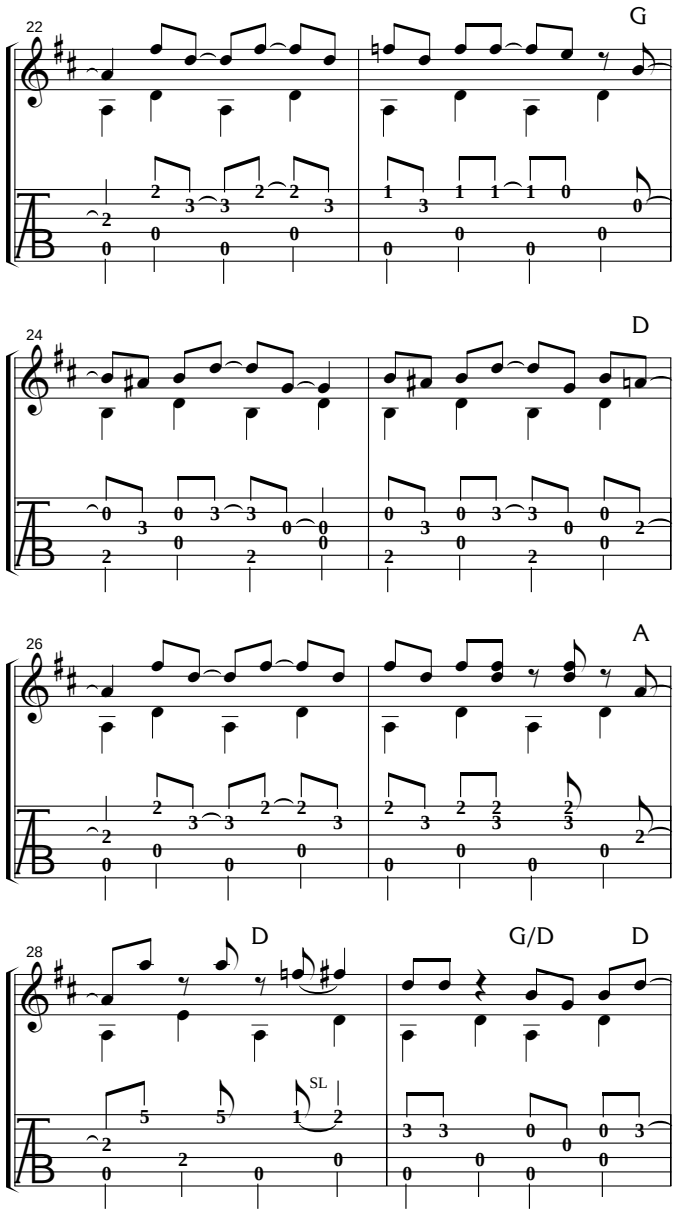
Transcribed from Rounder CD 1100, “See See Rider” is played in D, standard tuning, and its propulsive drive belies the image of John Hurt as a gentle guitarist. Everything is strong here — lyrics, vocal, and accompaniment. John employs a lot of his phrasing-in-front-of-the-beat technique here, switching chordal positions before the downbeat to get a pick-up note.

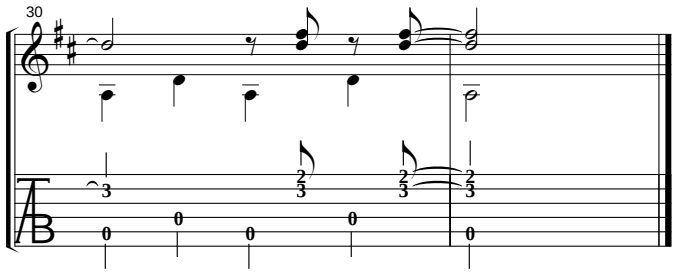
Key of D, standard tuning




7
G
9
D
11
A
13
D
G/D
D
SL


15
A
17
A
D
A
VERSE
19
D
G
SL
20
D


22
G
24
D
26
A
28
D
G/D
D
SL



See See Rider
(Rounder CD 1100)

You See See Rider, you see what you have done
You done made me love you… *(guitar finishes the line)*
Made me love you, now your man done come
You made me love you, now your man done come.

If I had a-listened to my second mind, Lord,
I wouldn't been sitting here, wringing my hands and crying
I wouldn't have been sitting here, wringing my hands and crying
I wouldn't have been sitting here, wringing my hands and crying.

Repeat Verse 1

It ain't no more potatoes, frost have killed the vine
The Blues ain't nothing, good woman on your mind
The Blues ain't nothing but a good woman on your mind
The Blues ain't nothing but a good woman on your mind.

I've told you, baby, and your mama told you too
You's three times seven and you know what you want to do
Three times seven and you know what you want to do
You's three times seven and you know what you want to do.

Repeat Verse 1

Louis Collins

by Mississippi John Hurt © 1964 Wynwood Music Co. Inc.
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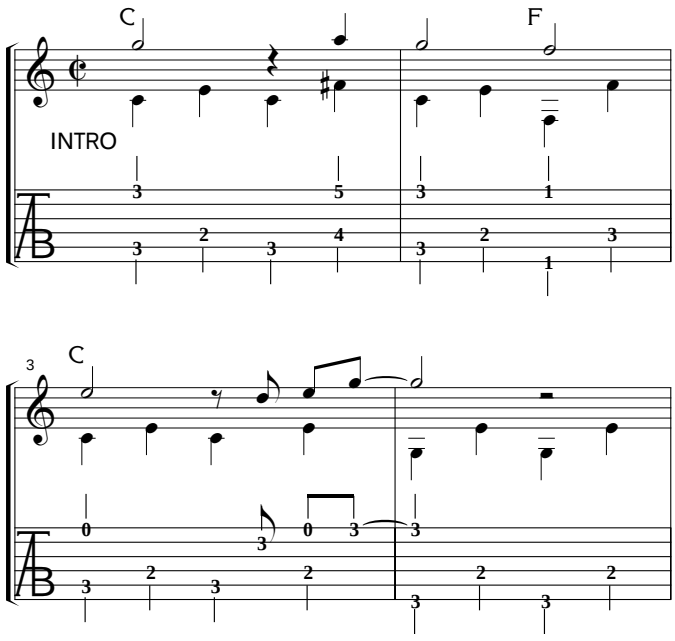
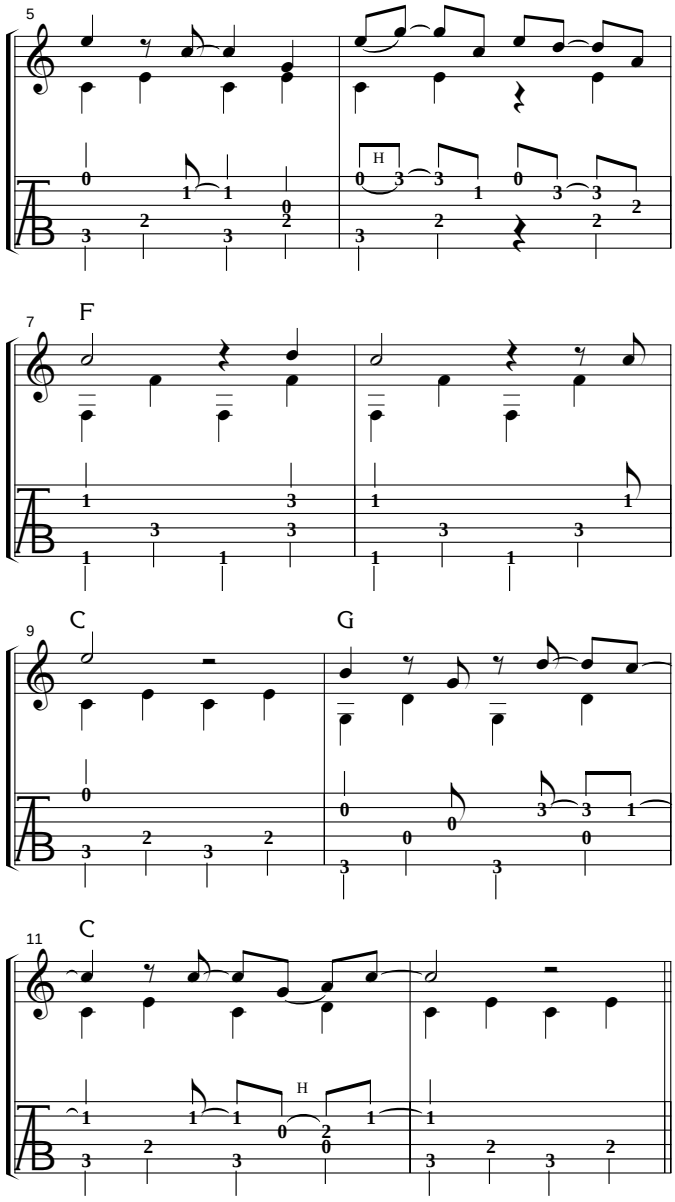
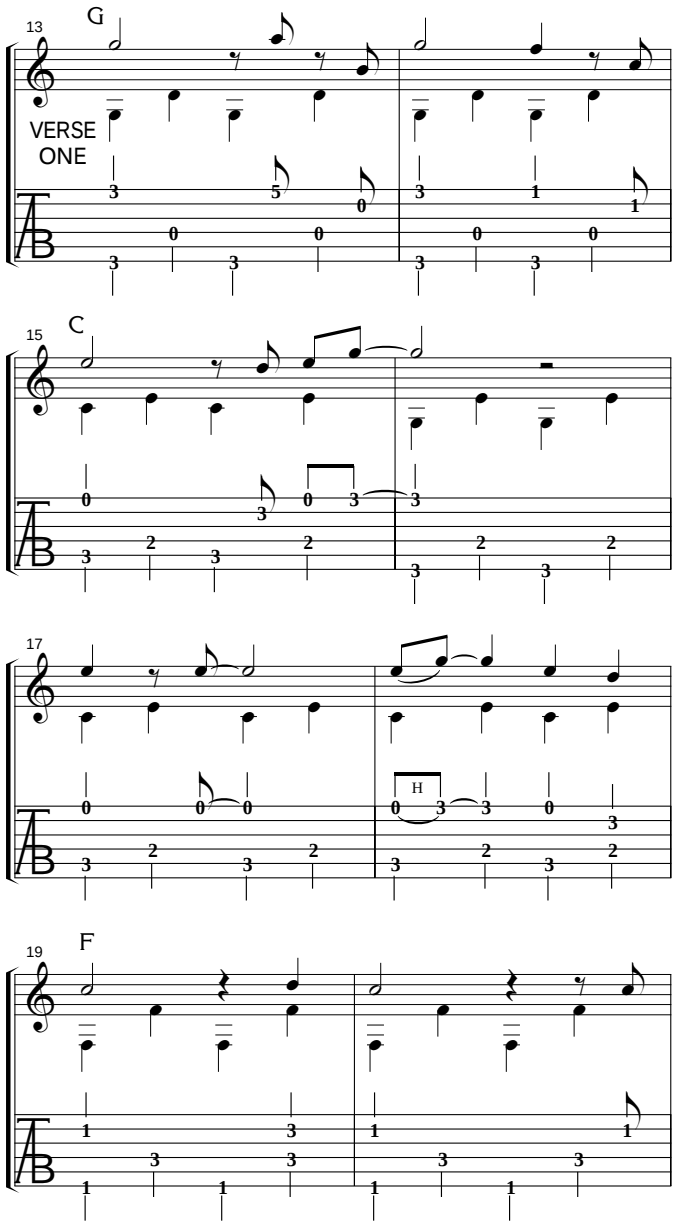
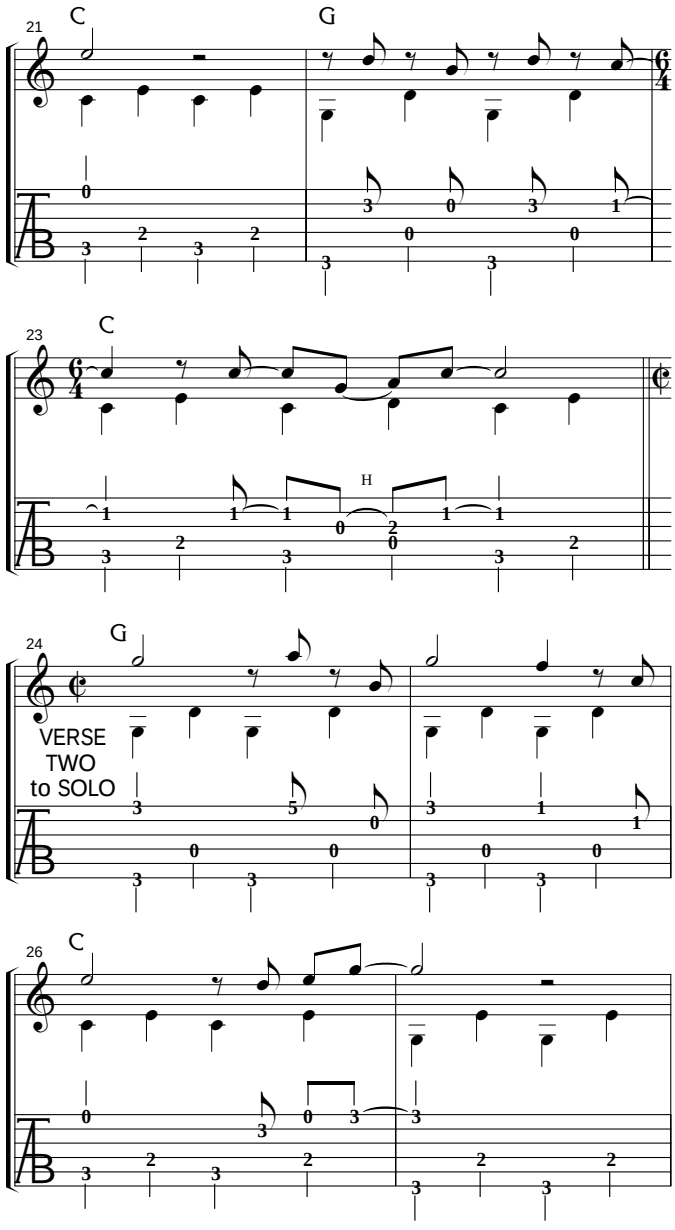
Played out of C, standard tuning, "Louis Collins" was transcribed from Rounder CD 1081. It has one of John Hurt's prettiest melodies, and he liked to capo up and sing it at the top of his range. In the split screen version, the first two times through the form give the introductory solo and verse, with the subsequent times presenting variations.

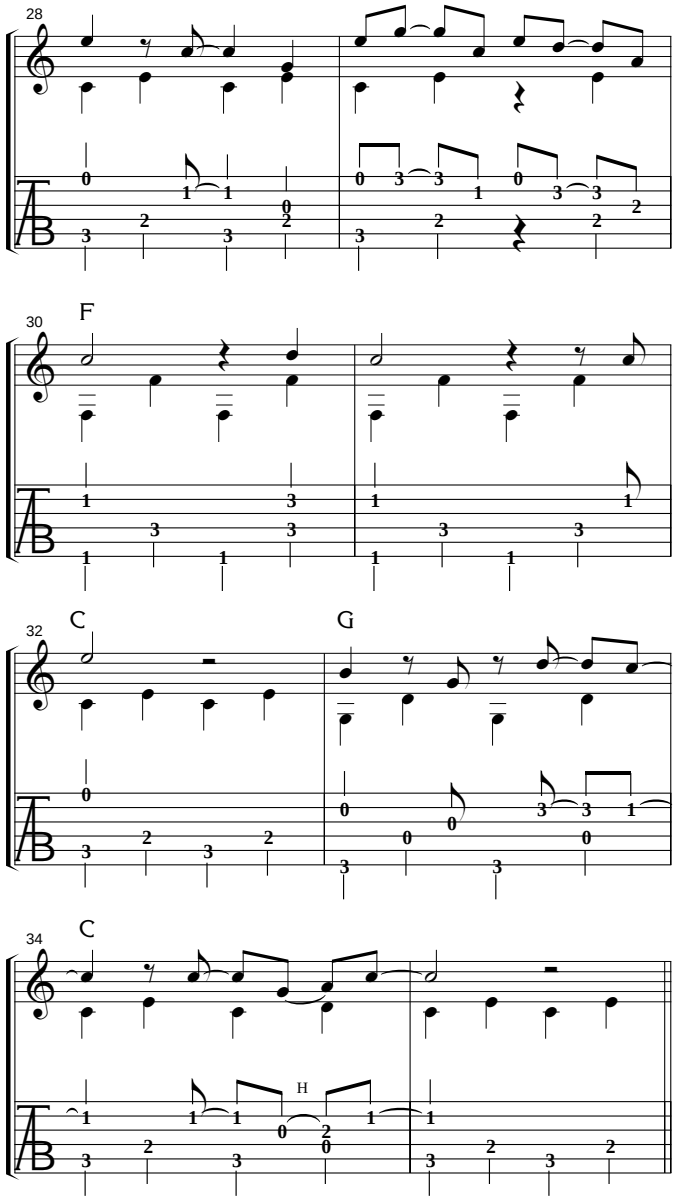
Key of C, standard tuning, Capo 3

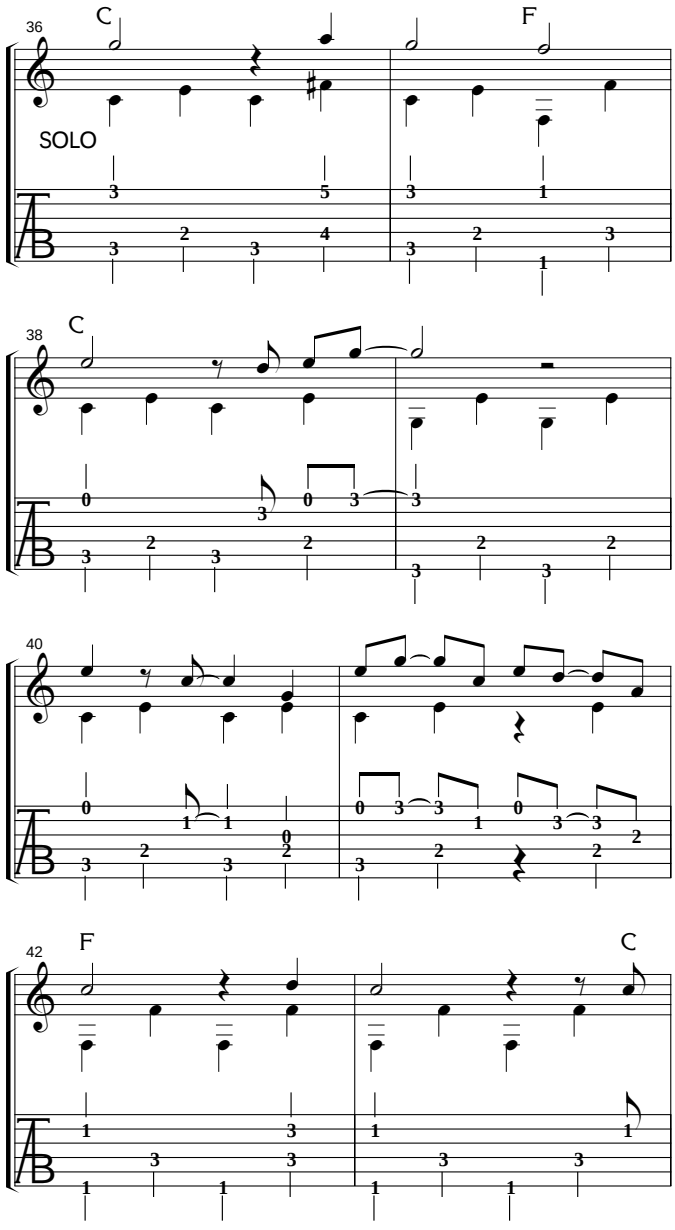


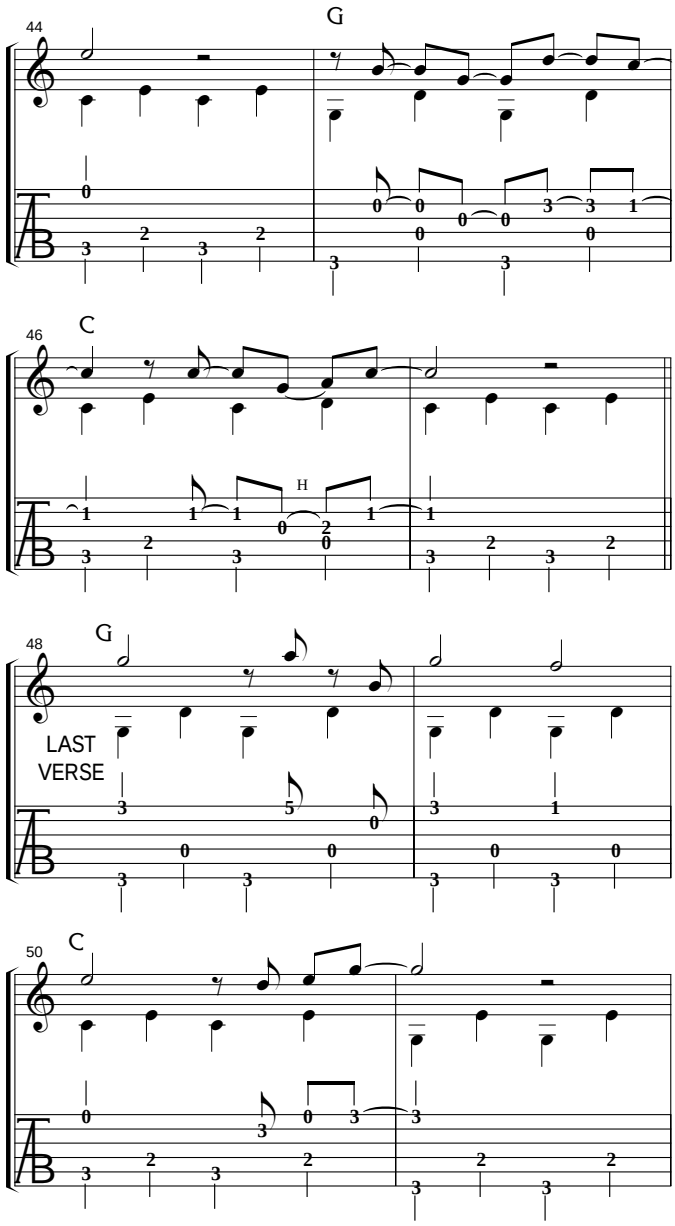

5
H
7
F
9
C
G
11
C
H

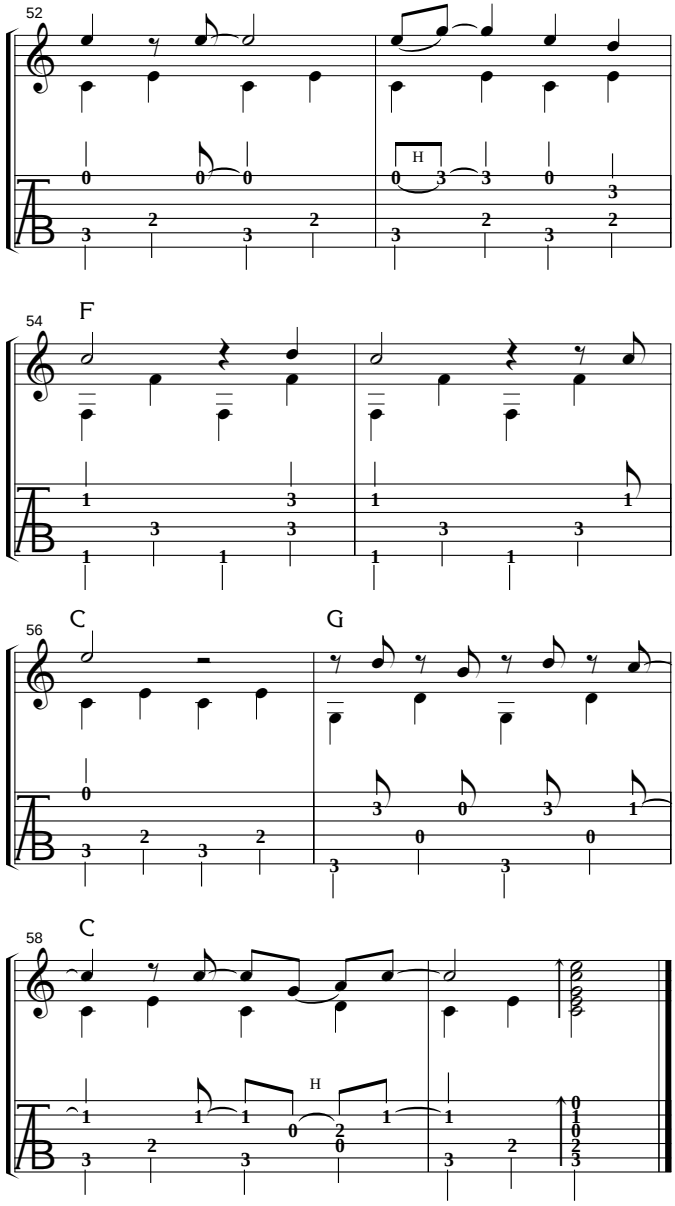

13
G
VERSE
ONE
15
C
17
H
19
F


21
C
G
23
C
H
24
G
VERSE
TWO
to SOLO
26
C


28
30
F
32
C
G
34
C
H


36
C
F
SOLO
38
C
40
42
F
C


G
44
C
46
H
G
48
LAST
VERSE
C
50


52
H
54
F
56
C
G
58
C
H

LOUIS COLLINS
(Rounder CD 1081)

Collins weeped, Miz Collins moaned
To see her son, Louis, leave her home
Angels laid him away.

Angels laid him away
They laid him six feet under the clay
The angels laid him away.

Bob shot once and Louis shot two
Shot poor Collins, shot him through and through
The angels laid him away.

Angels laid him away
They laid him six feet under the clay
The angels laid him away.

Kind friends, oh, ain't it hard
To see poor Louis in a new graveyard?
The angels laid him away.

FRANKIE

by Mississippi John Hurt © 1963 Wynwood Music Co. Inc.
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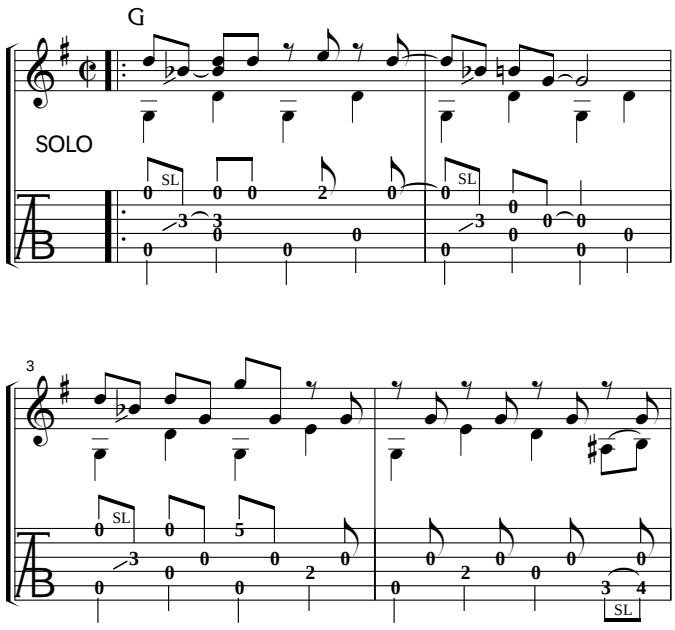
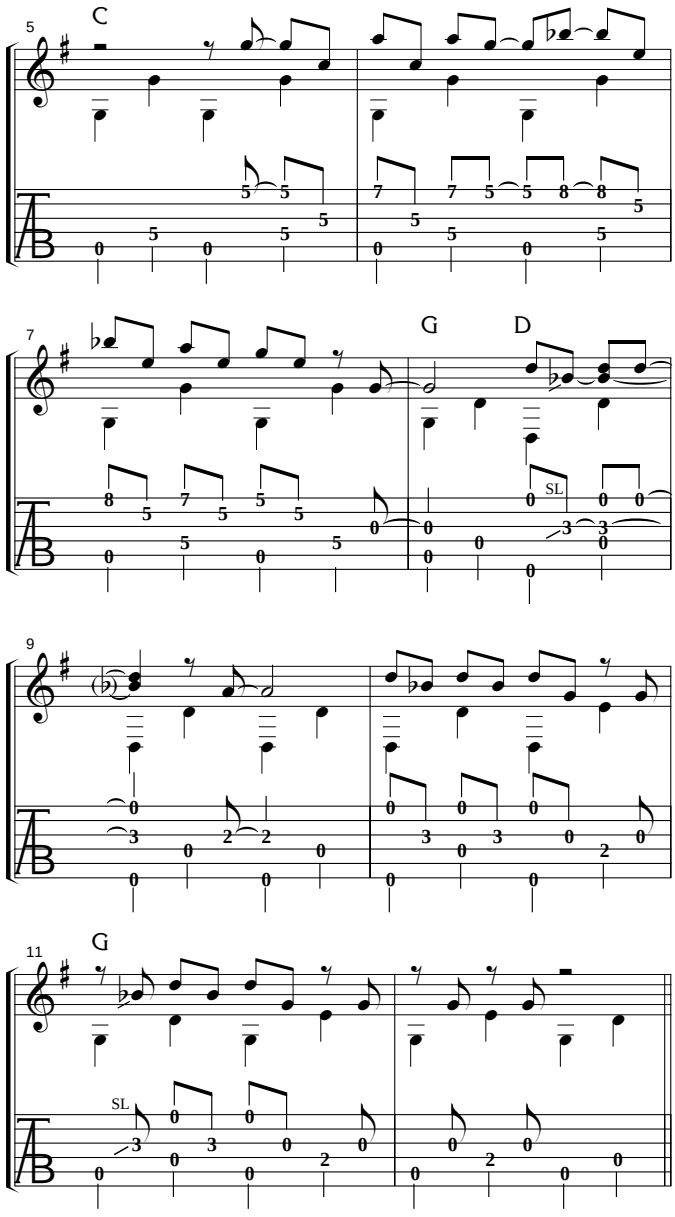
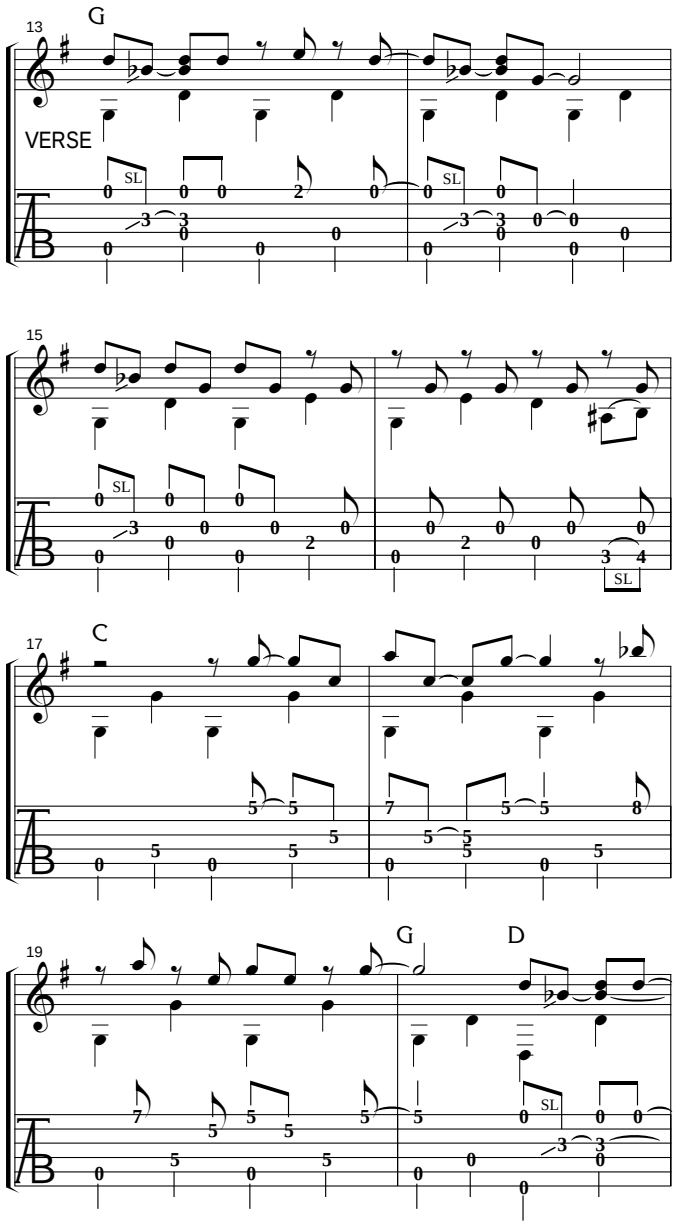
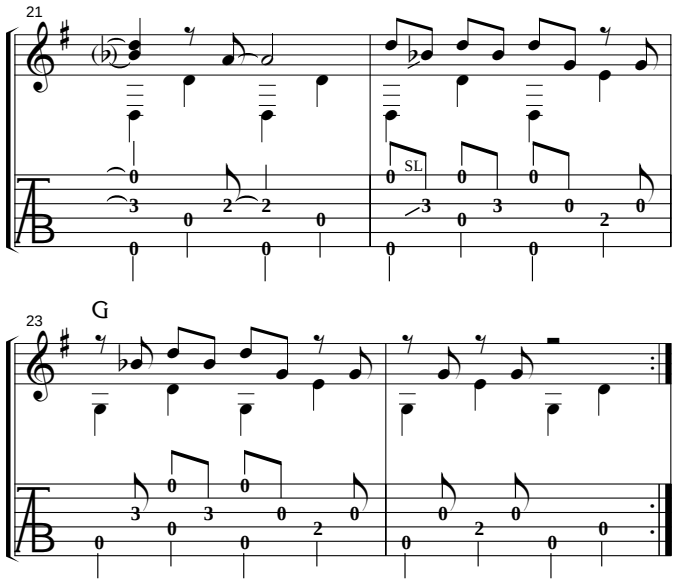
"Frankie" was transcribed from Rounder CD 1100. It is one of the greatest of country blues in open G tuning, and the richness of the way John Hurt tells its story pulls you right into the action. This type of "ballad blues," of which "Stackerlee" is another example, is unfortunately pretty much extinct in the modern blues scene.

Open G tuning: DGDGBD




5
C
7
G
D
SL
9
11
G
SL


13
G
VERSE
SL
15
SL
SL
17
C
19
G
D
SL



FRANKIE

(Rounder CD 1100)

Frankie was a good girl, everybody knows
She paid one hundred dollars, for Albert, a suit of clothes
He's her man, but he did her wrong.

Frankie went down to the corner saloon, she ordered a
glass of beer
She asked the barroom keeper, "Have my loving Albert
been here?"
"He's been here, but he's gone again."

"Ain't gonna tell you no story, Frankie, I ain't gonna tell you
no lie"
Says, "Albert passed 'bout an hour ago with a girl they call
Alice Prye
He's your man, and he's doing you wrong."

Frankie went down to the corner saloon, didn't go to be
gone long
She peeped through the keyhole in the door, spied Albert in
Alice's arms
"You's my man, and you doing me wrong."

Frankie called to Albert, Albert says "I don't hear."
"If you don't come to the woman you love gonna haul you
out of here
You's my man, and you's doing me wrong."

Frankie shot Albert, shot him three or four times
Says, "Stand back, out the smoke of my gun, let me see is
Albert dying?
He's my man, but he did me wrong."

Frankie and the judge walked out on the stand, walked out
side by side
The judge says to Frankie, "You're gonna be justified for
Killing a man, and he did you wrong."

Dark was the night, cold was the ground
The last words I heard Frankie say, "I done laid old Albert down
He's my man, and he did me wrong."

Frankie was a good girl, everybody knows
She paid one hundred dollars, for Albert, a suit of clothes
He's her man, but he did her wrong.

At the age of 12, John Miller was inspired to play the guitar after seeing Mississippi John Hurt perform at the Philadelphia Folk Festival. He bought his first guitar at the age of 16 and launched into an intensive period of study of Country Blues guitar, learning the music of John Hurt, Mance Lipscomb, Bo Carter, Blind Blake and other greats. By the time he was twenty-seven, John had released five solo albums to international critical acclaim. Those albums ranged from Country Blues and Old Time country music to the songs of George Gershwin. For the next 15 years, John focused on teaching, founding two music camps, composing and building a vocabulary in Jazz and Latin music. In the last seven years, John has released CDs with a Jazz trio, Catwalk, duos with mandolinist John Reischman, violinist Ruthie Dornfeld, singer Becky Kilgore, and French cabaret music with the ensemble, Rouge. Says Miller of his musical travels, "I've played many many different styles of music in recent years, but I've come to realize that everything I've done has been informed by my early involvement with Country Blues and the lessons I learned from that music: the primacy of rhythm and the need to communicate with clarity and strength of purpose. I strive for those qualities in the music I play, and I hope that what I do honors the memory of my heroes, like John Hurt, who have passed on."

"One of the most exciting and innovative guitarists performing today." – Pickin'
"Just brilliant." – John Fahey

Mississippi John Hurt's appeal was universal, he was very much a musician of his time and place, playing within a tradition, but mapping out his own territory with subtleties of touch, phrasing and use of the guitar that were all his own. Though famed for fingerpicking in the alternating bass style, John would often employ omitted beats or syncopated runs, rather than sticking to an unvaried alternation. Also, unlike many musicians of his region, he was comfortable playing in a variety of keys, routinely working in E, A, D, G, and C in standard tuning, as well as Open G and Open D and Open G tunings.

This video presents instruction in John Hurt's repertoire, with songs chosen to showcase his playing in different keys. The video lesson includes, at its conclusion, rare documentary silent film footage of Mississippi John Hurt playing guitar at his home in Washington, D.C.

The accompanying booklet includes TAB/standard notation transcriptions and lyrics of the songs.

Titles include: Spike Driver Blues, My Creole Belle, Monday Morning Blues, Slidin' Delta, See See Rider, Louis Collins and Frankie

Color • Running Time: 90 minutes
Duplicated in SP Mode/Real Time Duplication
Cover illustration by Fred Carlson

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