Catfish Blues

(original)

[see also "Rollin' Stone", "Still A Fool" & "Two Trains Runnin'"]

Words & Music by: Nehemiah Curtis "Skip" James

I've listened to many, many variations on this song. Skip James wrote the "official Catfish Blues". Muddy Waters has two variations on it ("Two Trains Runnin" and "Rollin' Stone"). Hendrix does a combo of the two. There are as many chord variations as there are players. It is basically a one- or two-chord song, played in major OR minor, depending upon the players' preference. Skip James seems to have played it in E. Most players let the voice lead the guitar (as it should be) rather than the other way 'round (as we usually do). I've posted below - verbatim - the chord shapes & transcription posted by resin8or on the IGS Acoustic Guitar Forum. This is, however, the perfect song to start developing your Delta Blues technique the way the masters did - by listening and playing what feels right.

E7 A7

I would rather be a little catfish; so, I could swim way down in the sea.

A7/E E7

I would have somebody, somebody settin' hooks for me, settin' outta hooks for me...

You know, I went to my baby's house, she told me to sit down on the step. "Son, you could come right on in Because my husband just now left, just now left, he just now..."

And I asked my baby to let me sit down 'side her bed. "Turn on your heater, baby, 'til it turn cherry red, cherry red..."

That's the reason I'd rather be a little catfish so, I could swim way down in the sea. I would have many-some of these women Settin' out a line for me, settin' out a line for me...

You know, I went to the church house and they called on me to pray. I got down on my knees, but I didn't have no word to say. Not a word to say, word to say

That's the reason I'd rather be a little catfish so, I could swim way down in the sea. I would have somebody, somebody settin' out a line for me. Settin' out a line for me, a line for me...

I don't wanna be no tadpole and I don't wanna be no bullfrog. And if I can't be a catfish, I won't swim at all. I won't swim at all, swim at all...

That's the reason I want to be a little catfish so, I could swim way down in the sea. I would have these good-lookin' women settin' out a hook for me.

Settin' out a hook for me, hook for me.

Resin8or's notes on the song:
"List the chord forms out from low to high like so:

003430 (Dm7) 003230 (Dm11) 000032 (Dm9) 000100 (D) x10030 (Bflat add9) x32230 (Cadd9)

We can then noodle around from the forms you're using.

Intro:

Hit open 6th string with thumb then "tickle" the 1st and 3rd strings with thumb and index at fret 12. Not a pinch, but an alternating pattern. Move this one fret at a time up to fret 16 then down to 14. Now pluck 1st string fret 12 with index finger and then 2nd string fret 13. Now back to string 1 fret 14, then 12 now 2nd string fret 13. Now slide up to fret 12 on second string (let string 1 ring), drop to fret 10 then fret 8 (string 1, fret 7) now move down to the root position for the classic Skip James hammer on at fret 1, string 3.

Main Body of Song: You can do a little bass run leading into the root chord. String 6 fret 5, then string 5 open, string 5 fret 3. Okay now main chord shape in verse sounds like string 3 fret 1 and string 2 fret 3. (000130) I guess that's a Dmaj7, not sure. I'm not the chord professor. That repeats while Skip sings "I would rather, be a little catfish" then move back up to fret 12 and do the tickle thing (for lack of a better term) on strings 1 and 3. Then the descending line runs down string 3 at frets 7.4 and 2. Let the 1st string ring here. Skippy is singing "in the sea" during this run. Back to root position briefly then up to fret 7 string 1, fret 8 string 2 for the classic delta whine thing alternate by fretting the top string at fret 9 then back to 7 all the while holding string 2 at fret 8. Skip is singin' " I would have somebody". Now move to the root position and fret strings 2 & 3 at fret two. (I just barre the two strings here with my middle finger). Skip's completing his phrase here. "Somebody". Now this next section gets tricky and is a little difficult to sing and play, but anyway in the root position you can do a little of that hammer on thing at fret 1 string 3, then string 1 fret 3, string 1 open, then root chord (000130). This almost repeats, but the end of the phrase shifts to the bass strings by fretting string 6 at fret 5 and doing a little hammer on from fret 3 to 4 on string 5 and then finally resolving back to the root chord. There's a little descending bass run here before the next verse by fretting string 6 at fret 7, then 5, and then 3, root chord and repeat.

That's pretty much the basic structure of the tune. Bear in mind this is not a notefor-note transcription by any means and is just intended to convey the basic grips of the tune. Have Fun!"