

Railroad Bill

Traditional, arranged by Etta Baker



The folk-blues fingerpicking world lost one of its most influential figures when Etta Baker died on September 23, 2006, at the age of 93. Her influence began during the "folk boom" of the early 1960s, after her solo-guitar arrangements appeared on the 1956 LP *Instrumental Music from the Southern Appalachians* (Tradition Records). Throughout the late '60s and '70s, it was common to

hear her arrangements of "Bully of the Town," "Railroad Bill," "One Dime Blues," and other songs at hootenannies, open mics, and jam sessions.

Baker played Piedmont style, which features a steady alternating bass. To be fluent in this style, it's helpful to play a G chord with the middle, ring, and pinky fingers rather than the index, middle, and ring. It's also traditional to wrap the left-hand thumb over the neck to grab the low F note on the sixth string when playing a first-position F chord. You'll have to finger a C chord with only three fingers, since you'll need your pinky for playing melody notes. With these fingerings, your middle and ring fingers will be in a good position to easily grab the root and major third for the tonic (I), dominant (V), and subdominant (IV) chords. When you play a C chord (measure 1), rock your ring finger between the fifth and sixth strings to grab the alternating-bass line. Baker employed this same technique over the F chord (measures 7–8); rock your ring finger between

the fourth and fifth strings to get all of the bass notes in these measures.

I've notated the bass line as single notes, but Baker played with a heavy touch and would often sound out more than one note in the chord. Note how she flips the bass-note pattern in measures 16–18. She doesn't always play it this way; these types of inconsistencies are common throughout the fingerpicked-blues genre.

In this version of "Railroad Bill," which is from the CD of the same name, Baker plays the 12-measure basic arrangement with only slight variations except in three places: At measure 37, she plays a six-measure bridge that starts on the dominant (V, or G). At measure 45, she substitutes an unusual chord for the first four measures by moving a first-position E7 up one fret. Finally, at measure 58, to launch the last time through, she slides half a measure early into a very popular fingerpicking chord position by moving a first-position C7 up two frets to become a D9 (the ninth is the open E string).

There are quite a few other folk fingerpicking standards that are closely related to this tune, including Elizabeth Cotten's "Freight Train" and Mississippi John Hurt's "Louis Collins."

—DALE MILLER

The musical score is presented in a standard format with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The tempo is marked as 107. The score consists of a melody line and a bass line. The bass line is fingerpicked, with specific fingerings indicated by numbers 1-3. Chord diagrams are provided for C (x32010), F (1x3211), G (320004), and C (x32010). Measure numbers 1, 7, and 13 are indicated.

19

F 1x3211, C x32010, G 320004, C x32010, G 320004, C x32010

25

C x32010, E7 023140

31

To Coda

F 1x3211, C x32010, C x32010, C x32010, C x32010, G 320004

38

C x32010, F 1x3211, G 320004, C x32010, G 320004, 2, 4, 5. C x32010, 3. C x32010, G 320004

45

F7/C x23140, E7 023140, F 1x3211



C x32010 **G** 320004 **C** x32010 **G** 320004 **C** x32010 *D.S. al Coda (follow repeats)* **Coda C** x32010

D9 x32410 **G** 320004 **E7** 023140

F 1x3211 **C** x32010 **G** 320004 **C** x32010

Vocal Verse Chords: **C** x32010 **E7** 023140 **F** 1x3211 **G** 320004

Verse

C x32010 **E7** 023140

F 1x3211 **C** x32010 **G** 320004 **C** x32010

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|----|------------------------|------|-------------|------|-------------|
| 72 | Rail - road | Bill | Rail - road | Bill | He nev - er |
| 77 | worked and he nev - er | will | Ride | ride | ride |
-
- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| C | C | C |
| 1. Railroad Bill, Railroad Bill | 2. Railroad Bill was a mighty mean man | 2. Railroad Bill took my wife |
| E7 | F | E7 |
| He never worked and he never will | Shot the light out of the brakeman's hand | Said if I didn't like it he would take my life |
| C G C | C G C | C G C |
| Ride, ride, ride | Ride, ride, ride | Ride, ride, ride |