

CHORDS UP THE NECK

Strumming the "Boll Weevil Blues"

I'VE READ OF CERTAIN GUITARISTS—Robert Johnson, for example—who played with their backs to the audience to hide their left-hand fingering secrets from any would-be usurpers. First-position chords were of course always common knowledge among guitarists, but a command of chord fingerings up the neck was—and still is—one of the factors that separated the fledglings from the adepts.

I'd like to show you some up-the-neck chords you can use with a version of the "Boll Weevil Blues." Because the song is arranged in the key of A, you'll be able to play these high-position

chords and still have the open sixth, fifth, and fourth strings available to support the E, A, and D chords, respectively. As you'll hear, the combination of open bass strings and up-the-neck chords can produce some beautiful sonorities.

"Boll Weevil Blues" is one of many songs written about the infamous insect that came from Mexico to Texas 100 years ago. Laying its eggs in the cotton buds, the boll weevil caused such destruction to the crop there that the Texas legislature put up a reward of \$50,000 to anyone who could figure out how to eradicate the pest. All efforts to stop it, however, were in vain. A quarantine was attempted at the Mississippi River to contain the bugs, but they spread through the rest of the South at

the rate of 40 miles a year. In time the regicide of King Cotton was complete.

Within five years of the pest's appearance, folklore collectors were coming across versions of "The Boll Weevil." John and Alan Lomax, for example, found new verses in every one of the cotton-growing states. Versions of this song have been recorded by Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, and others. The melody and lyrics given here are based on the version sung by Baby Face Leroy Foster, who recorded the song in Chicago in 1950 on the Parkway label under the title "Boll Weevil Blues," with Muddy Waters on guitar and Little Walter on harmonica. It was later reissued on the Delmark LP *The Blues World of Little Walter* (DL 648) and contains some great harp work by Little Walter.

By Glenn Weiser

"Boll Weevil Blues" is a slow 12-bar blues. I've arranged it so that an eighth-note strumming pattern (in 12/8) is used most of the time. Here's how you should play this pattern:

12/8

1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a

This strum is slightly modified during the 11th measure and the first half of the 12th measure, when you play this pattern:

12/8

1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a

In the last half of measure 12 (endings 1 and 2), the eighth-note strum resumes.

The arrangement begins with what is essentially a first-position D7 chord slid up to the seventh fret, where it becomes an A7. In the second measure, change to the Adim7 by leaving the first finger in place and sliding the other three fingers down one fret each. The diminished seventh chord here is a substitute for the more common IV chord used in the quick-change variant of the 12-bar blues form. In measure 3, return to the first A7 chord by keeping the first finger in place and sliding the other fingers back up one fret each.

Measure 4 uses a higher voicing of A7, in the tenth position. Change to a D chord in measure 5 by sliding the fourth finger down to the tenth fret and barring the first three strings on the seventh fret with the first finger. This chord changes to D7 in measure 6, and then the first A7 chord returns in measure 7. In measure 8, the A7 returns in a new voicing that you play in the fifth position. You can find the E7 voicing in measure 9 by sliding a first-position B7 chord up so that the first finger is at the sixth fret; this is a beautiful guitar chord.

The turnaround begins at measure 11. Because there is one chord per beat here, I have simplified the strumming pattern to make it easier to play. On beat 3, you'll play the same diminished seventh formation you used in measure 2, but with the first and second fingers at the fourth fret instead of the seventh. Because diminished seventh chords recur every three frets (there are really only 3 of them, versus 12 of every other type of chord), it is still called Adim7.

Boll Weevil Blues

Traditional, arranged by Glenn Weiser

A7
001324 VII

Slow blues

MIS-TER BOLL WEE - VIL

A^{dim}7
001324 VII

A7
001324 VII

DON'T SING THE BLUES NO MORE

A7
002314 X

D
x00114 VII

MIS-TER BOLL WEE - VIL

D7
x00112 VII

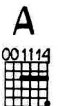
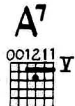
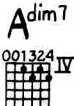
A7
001324 VII

DON'T SING THE BLUES NO MORE


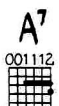

A7
003241 V

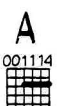
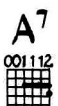
E7
021304 VI

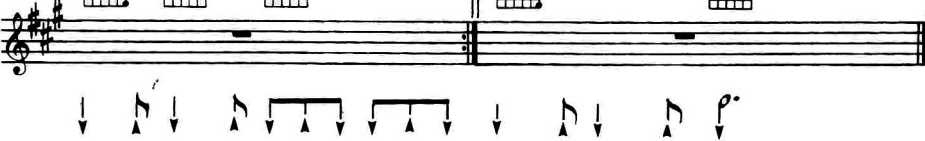
BE - CAUSE THE BOLL WEE-VIL HERE BOLL

D7  **A**  **A7**  **A^{dim7}**  **Dm⁶** 



1 and 2 **A**  **A7**  **E7** 

3 **A**  **A7** 



1. MISTER BOLL WEEVIL DON'T SING THE BLUES NO MORE
 MISTER BOLL WEEVIL DON'T SING THE BLUES NO MORE
 BECAUSE THE BOLL WEEVIL HERE
 BOLL WEEVIL EVERYPLACE I GO.

2. THE FIRST TIME I SAW THE BOLL WEEVIL,
 HE WAS SAILING THROUGH THE AIR
 THE NEXT TIME I SAW THE BOLL WEEVIL
 HE HAD ALL HIS FAMILY THERE
 MISTER BOLL WEEVIL DON'T SING THE BLUES NO MORE
 BECAUSE BOLL WEEVIL HERE
 BOLL WEEVIL EVERYPLACE I GO.

3. IF ANYBODY SHOULD HAPPEN TO ASK YOU
 BOY, WHO WROTE THIS SONG
 TELL HIM IT WAS A FAT DUCK
 AND A MAN WITH A PACK UP IN HIS ARMS
 MISTER BOLL WEEVIL DON'T SING THE BLUES NO MORE
 BECAUSE THE BOLL WEEVIL HERE
 BOLL WEEVIL EVERYPLACE I GO.

Note: In verses two and three the melodic rhythm speeds up so that the first four lines are sung during the first four bars of music.