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Elizabeth Cotten's Music

Elizabeth Cotten (1893–1987) was born and raised in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and lived most of her adult life from her middle age onward in Washington, D.C., after moving there to help out her daughter. She grew up in a home with music, first teaching herself to play her older brother's banjo, and then guitar. Because she was left-handed, and every instrument she encountered was strung for a right-handed player, she devised a technique whereby she played the guitar left-handed and upside down, picking the alternating bass with her left index finger and the melody with her left thumb. As a young woman, she gave up guitar playing after being told by the leaders of the church that she had joined that she could not continue to play secular music and be a member of the church, too. She might have stopped playing for good, had not a chance meeting put her in the employ of the Seeger family. When Peggy and Mike discovered her playing the guitar one day, it was only a matter of time before her music became more widely known.

Elizabeth Cotten's music is notable for her beautifully flowing sense of time and the attention to detail that she gave to voice-leading, phrasing, and choice of chord voicings. Of the Country Blues players who were roughly contemporaneous with her, only Blind Lemon Jefferson showed a comparable degree of nuance in his arrangements and playing. Elizabeth Cotten most often finger-picked in the C and G positions, in standard tuning, but, like the Carter Family, often tuned a whole step low, so her songs sounded in the sweet "flat" keys, B \flat and F. She was also comfortable playing in open G and open D tuning. Her playing often had an improvisatory feel, for within the loose structural framework of a song, she would recompose and reassemble as her imagination dictated. One way in which she prefigured many of today's finger-picking guitarists is in her predilection for composing original instrumentals, something not commonly encountered in other musicians of her generation.

When you see Elizabeth Cotten interviewed, you can see that she was justifiably proud of her music. When you work on tunes like "Freight Train" or "Mama, Your Papa Loves You," you begin to realize that the way she put them together and played them cannot be improved upon — changed, perhaps, but not improved. We are so fortunate to have been able to hear her music.

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 (♩³) 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!