

“Dust My Broom”—Elmore James (1951)

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Essay by Jas Obrecht (guest post)*



Elmore James



Original label

The passionate blues song “Dust My Broom” has been filling dance floors and exhilarating listeners for more than 60 years. The song’s been covered by a wide array of performers--Robert Johnson, Howlin’ Wolf, B.B. King, The Yardbirds, Fleetwood Mac, Johnny Winter, and ZZ Top, to name but a few--and has been adapted to piano, accordion, acoustic guitar, and, most of all, electric guitar.

The best-known version of “Dust My Broom,” by Elmore James, begins with the world’s most recognizable slide guitar riff. Performed with the guitar tuned to an open-D or open-E chord, this riff delivers propulsive full-octave glides to the guitar’s 12th fret. Since the mid 1960s, mastering this lick and the song’s subsequent solo as played by Elmore James has been a rite of passage for up-and-coming blues guitarists. Sonically, it’s the perfect accompaniment for the song’s lyrical message, which in its later incarnations concerns a man’s dissatisfaction with his woman. Perfect fodder for the blues.

What exactly does “dust my broom” mean? In the 1800s, the expression “get up and dust” meant to leave in a hurry. In the Depression-era South, where the song likely originated, “dust my broom” meant to get out of town in a hurry. Big Joe Williams, who grew up in the Mississippi Delta, explained it as “leaving for good,” as in “I’m putting you down. I won’t be back no more.”

The earliest known version of the song that evolved into Elmore James’ “Dust My Broom” is Aaron and Milton Sparks’ 1932 piano-based recording of “I Believe I’ll Make a Change,” which came out on 78 credited to Pinetop and Lindberg. Six years later, Jack Kelly and His South Memphis Jug Band recorded the plaintive “Believe I’ll Go Back Home.” In these early versions, the singer accepts blame for being unfaithful and longs for home, a lyrical sentiment that would continue for a few years, and then disappear with the Robert Johnson and Elmore James recordings. Another ancestor, Carl Rafferty’s “Mr. Carl’s Blues,” from 1933, contained the familiar lyrics: “I’m going call up in to

China, just to see if my babe's over there" and "I do believe, I believe I'll dust my broom." Other notable pre-war versions were recorded by Josh White, Leroy Carr, and Kokomo Arnold, a slide guitarist whose "Sagefield Woman Blues" echoed the "I believe, I believe I'll dust my broom" line from the Rafferty record. On another 78, "Sissy Man Blues," Arnold resurrected the China reference.

Robert Johnson, arguably the Mississippi Delta's most skilled blues performer of the 1930s, recycled portions of Arnold's "Sagefield Woman Blues" and "Sissy Man Blues" in his 1936 recording "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom." Johnson played his version in open-E tuning. While he did not use a slide, his high-pitched triplets set the template for future slide versions, and his shuffle bass pattern anticipated how electrified blues bands would arrange the song.

At the time of Robert Johnson's death in 1938, his contemporary, Elmore James, was already moving toward adapting traditional Delta blues music to a blues band setting. A rhythmic, rollicking slide guitarist and superb vocalist, James was born in rural Mississippi on January 27, 1918. He plucked his first notes on a diddley bow, and then fashioned a one-string guitar from a can, board, and wire. By his late teens, Elmore had acquired a National Reso-Phonic guitar and was playing at Delta juke joints and restaurants.

After serving in the Naval Reserves during World War II, James settled in Canton, Mississippi, where he worked in a radio repair shop and appeared on the radio with master harmonica player Aleck "Rice" Miller, who performed under the name Sonny Boy Williamson II. In early 1951, Sonny Boy asked Elmore James to accompany him on some recordings he'd agreed to make for Trumpet Records, an independent label owned by Lillian McMurry in Jackson, Mississippi. James initially recorded as a sideman for Willie Love and Sonny Boy Williamson II. Then, in early August 1951, he and Sonny Boy demoed "Dust My Broom" for Mrs. McMurry, who immediately signed Elmore to an artist contract. The following day, Elmore James recorded his first song as a leader, "Dust My Broom," laying down 2:43 of pure dynamite. His backing band consisted of Sonny Boy Williamson II, bassist Leonard Ware, and drummer Frock O'Dell. This performance was among the very best James would ever give. He based his lyrics on Robert Johnson's version, with some variations:

*I'm gon' get up in the morning, I believe I'll dust my broom,
I'm gon' get up in the mornin', I believe I'll dust my broom,
I quit the best girl I'm lovin', now my friends can get my room*

*I'm gonna write a letter, telephone every town I know,
I'm gonna write a letter, I'll telephone every town I know,
If I don't find her in West Helena, she's in East Monroe, I know*

*And I don't want no woman wants every downtown man she meets,
I don't want no woman want every downtown man she meets,
Man, she's a no good doney, they shouldn't allow her on the street*

*I believe, I believe my time ain't long,
I believe, I believe my time ain't long,
I've got to leave my baby and break up my happy home*

Aural evidence suggests that Elmore played on an acoustic guitar outfitted with a soundhole pickup, using his bare right-hand fingers rather than a guitar pick. James had no other songs ready to record, so Mrs. McMurry released “Dust My Broom” paired with Bobo Thomas’ “Catfish Blues.” The 78, Trumpet’s biggest hit, reached No. 9 on the “Billboard” national R&B chart in March 1952 and placed high on local surveys from January through April. James began dividing his time between Mississippi and Chicago, where he fronted one of the era’s best blues bands, the incandescent Broomdusters.

Due to the single’s success, James was asked by producers to re-record the song or recast its famous slide riff several times over the next decade. His “Dust My Blues,” for example, was virtually the same song, with the word “blues” substituted for “broom.” But it’s a mistake to brand him a one-lick wonder or Robert Johnson imitator, as many have done. Elmore James played in a variety of styles, almost always with unstoppable body rhythm. His ferocious, anguished vocals were as fearless as his solos. While “Dust My Broom” remained James’ signature song on stage and record, he also composed and/or popularized the enduring blues songs “The Sky Is Crying,” “The Sun Is Shining,” “Madison Blues,” and “Done Somebody Wrong.” Elmore James passed away on May 23, 1963. Thirty-five years later, his 1951 version of “Dust My Broom” was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

Jas Obrecht is a longtime editor for “Guitar Player” magazine and is the author of “Rollin’ & Tumblin’: The Postwar Blues Guitarists” (Miller Freeman, 2000), “Early Blues: The First Stars of Blues Guitar” (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), and “Talking Guitar: Conversations with Musicians Who Shaped Twentieth-Century American Music” (University of North Carolina Press, April 2017).

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.