

# puCkett

RILEY PUCKETT by Larry Polansky

It has always seemed to me that music writers spend too much time on the foreground. To practicing musicians, it is, I think, overwhelmingly "clear" that "comping" is equally as virtuosic as the great solo. Indeed, a case might be made that the history of American music, particularly country and jazz, is largely an evolution of accompanimental styles.

In this respect, Riley Puckett is the patriarch of country guitar players. He was a chordal and rhythmic innovator, and the progenitor of acoustic guitar soloists. In the late '20s and early '30s, Puckett invented a distinctive guitar style of his own: transforming the rhythmic and textural feel of American string band, and eventually, all country music.

Puckett was not alone in his experimentation. Robert Johnson, Blind Willie McTell, and Charlie Monroe, among other acoustic guitarists of the period, transformed the instrument's role completely. Formerly the guitar had been primarily used as a rather unsophisticated percussion device. In their hands, it became a beautiful accompanimental and soloistic tool. But Puckett's importance in this respect is often overlooked. I think that his contribution, like that of other great accompanists—Carl Kress, Bucky Pizzarelli, and even the great lap steel player Bob Dunn (whose contribution to the Musical Brownies is usually mentioned for his solos alone)—is rather subtle. Riley Puckett had the unique ability to create significant musical ideas from the back of the stage.

Some history: Puckett was born in Alpharetta, Ga. around 1890. He was blinded at an early age through a medical accident, and took up music simply to survive. In 1924, Puckett teamed with fiddler Gid Tanner of Dracula, Ga., to record what may be the first string band record (for Columbia). Later that year, Tanner and Puckett joined fiddler Clayton McMichen and banjo-player Fate Norris to form the very loose musical organization the Skillet Lickers (Bill Malone's *Country Music USA* is a fine source for the history/discography of this "band"). They broke up around 1931, and Puckett pursued a solo career until his death in 1946. He even had some hits on Decca and Bluebird.



A good place to start with Puckett is the excellent Rounder 1023 release called Gid Tanner and His Skillet Lickers/*The Kickapoo Medicine Show*. This album features a wide assortment of instrumental and musical styles, and a few of the cuts are extremely interesting examples of Puckett's early playing. He excels when accompanying McMichen, who had a more modern and forward-looking musical approach than did the more conservative Tanner.

Although Puckett's fine playing is in evidence even on those tunes (like "Jerusalem Moan" and "You Gotta Stop Drinking Shine") in which the focus is mostly vocal and/or novelty, a few tunes especially showcase him: "You Gotta Quit Kicking My Dawg Around," "Paddy Won't You Drink Some Cider," and especially "The Farmer's Daughter," a vocal tune which features some extraordinary fiddling from McMichen and strong ensemble interaction. In this tune can be found many of the elements of Puckett's style which would become integrated into the playing of later guitarists. In particular, his use of syncopation, chromatic leading tones, and the unorthodox placement of auxilliary tones (almost always the sixth of the tonic chord) is astonishingly clear evidence that Puckett was one of the forerunners of modern bluegrass and flat-picking guitar playing. Puckett sounds like Clarence White without the ornamentation and high-speed maneuvers.

What I like especially about Puckett's accompaniment is the way he maintains the freedom of bass line, never allowing the simple harmonic and melodic patterns to settle too definitely into any sort of groove. He only uses a few pitches (usually the tonic triad with an added sixth), but he permutes, accents, anticipates and deletes in a variety of interesting ways that seem to propel the band in a style disproportionately complex to the apparent simplicity of the material. "A Farmer's Daughter" is a nice example of this, and I recommend it as a kind of accompanimental textbook for any guitarist. Something else rather unusual takes place in that same tune, which may be the earliest "flat-picking" guitar solo on record (1928). Puckett, on cue from McMichen ("Play that mean run, Riley"), turns one of his (accompaniment) runs into a short guitar solo. The original run (Example 1) is itself a development of his standard "G-run" (later known as the Lester Flatt G-run, perhaps slightly Charlie Monroe even more than Puckett). The solo itself is simply a short set of variations on this run (Example 2 for one of them), and although the melodic ideas are extremely simple, in the subtle manipulation of rhythm, timbre, and harmony, they are quite beautiful. Puckett, like Clarence White, was gifted with a "machine-gun" right arm, and whether he is soloing or accompanying, we can hear a relentless rhythmic drive.

