

How to Play Like Steve Cropper

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If you're looking for a one-stop, ultimate source for exquisitely crafted rhythm and lead guitar parts, you won't find a better virtual mentor than Telemaster, producer, and songwriter Steve Cropper. Over the course of a half century, during which he virtually defined the “Memphis sound,” Cropper has been laying down charismatic guitar figures that have since become must-know moves for every working guitarist.

The decade between 1961 and 1971 found Cropper—armed primarily with a Fender Telecaster and various Fender amps from the period—cranking out hits with Booker T. & the MG’s (“Green Onions”), the Mar-Keys (“Last Night,” on which Cropper played organ), Eddie Floyd (“Knock on Wood”), Sam & Dave (“Soul Man”), and Otis Redding (“[Sittin’ on the] Dock of the Bay”), and culminated with the release of his first solo album.

In fact, if Cropper never played another note after 1971, he would have still achieved guitar immortality.

It’s this particularly fertile period that we’ll be examining here.

Simply put, Cropper’s playing has always been about melody, phrasing, timing, arranging, restraint, and coming up with parts that are a blast to play. And he manages to do it all with fewer notes than anyone else! Let’s investigate.

ONIONS REDUX

We decoded Cropper’s first chorus from Booker T. & the MG’s 1962 classic, “Green Onions,” in the October, 2013 installment of *You’re Playing It Wrong*, but that, plus a couple of other key parts, certainly merit mention here.

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb), and a 4/4 time signature. The tempo is marked as ca. 132. The notation includes a series of notes with accents and a fermata. To the right of the staff are three guitar chord diagrams for Bb/F(I), Eb/Bb(IV), and F/C(V). Each diagram shows a six-string guitar fretboard with fingerings (1) 1 1 or (1) 1 1 or (1) 1 1 or, and strings muted (X) or played (0). The diagrams are labeled with Roman numerals VIII and X.

In case you missed it, **Ex. 1a** (above) reprises the revelation that Cropper’s anticipated I-, IV-, and V-chord Tele stabs were actually voiced a fourth above the organ chords to create a trio of suspended-sixth sounds throughout the 12-bar blues progression. Crank the treble and play Bb/F over the I chord (F), Eb/Bb over the IV chord (Bb), and F/C for the V chord (C)—with or without the parenthetical roots.

♩ = ca. 132 (♩ = ♩)

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For the next few choruses, Cropper grooves on a single-note bass riff like the one in **Ex. 1b** (above left). Move it up to sixth position (or stay in first position and play the same shape on the fifth and fourth strings) over the IV chord, and transpose either of these moves up a whole-step to cover the V chord. The same sixth- and eighth-fret transpositions apply to the snarly lick shown in **Ex. 1c** (above right). Start it with an upstroke and observe this important detail: Instead of simply releasing the bend to sound the third note, Cropper adds extra edge by silently releasing the bend and picking the Bb before pulling off to Ab. Sweet!

PLAY IT, STEVE

... came the singer's cry of approval during the second chorus of Sam & Dave's 1967 smash hit, "Soul Man." ("Play it, Steve" eventually became the title of both a 1998 solo album and Cropper's website.)

mind that this is the second verse—Cropper lays out on the first round.)

♩ = ca. 103 G E G A G E

The chorus figure shown in **Ex. 3b** (above), which marks the first entrance of Cropper’s electric guitar, consists of the same moves from bar 1 of Ex. 3a supplemented on the end of beat four by a fourth interval (B-over-F#) that creates a plaintive sus2/add9 tonality over the underlying *E* chord. On the third pass, Cropper syncopates and breaks up the moves in bar 1, playing them a whole-step higher for the *A* change, before concluding the eight-bar section with similar syncopations over *G*, plus a barely audible open-*E* string. (Tip: Hear Cropper talk about and demonstrate his work on the song at playitsteve.com.)

TIGHTEN UP

Booker T. and the MG’s 1969 hit “Time Is Tight” epitomizes Cropper’s knack for coming up with tasty rhythm figures.

♩ = ca. 136 C(I)

*P.M. = palm mute

Essentially a harmonized bass line built from a pair major third intervals (which suggest *C* and *G* chords) surrounding a perfect fourth played on the open fifth and fourth strings, his palm-muted I-chord rhythm figure presented in **Ex. 4a** is a model of economy. Use the indicated fingering, or substitute your first and second fingers. Play it twice for the intro, and three times during the instrumental “verse,” and then transpose it to *F* (the IV chord), by playing the identical shapes in the same position on the fourth, third, and fifth strings, before returning to two rounds of the I chord.

Cropper’s playing on the instrumental “chorus,” as shown in **Ex. 4b** (above), is a true lesson in restraint. Not many guitarists could resist the urge to mimic Booker T.’s organ part and nail a six-beat *G* power chord on the downbeat of bar 1, but Cropper chose the opposite route, covering the first bar-and-a-half with staccato *G*-chord “chicks” on beats two and four before giving full rhythmic value to the accented *G-D-G* changes in bars 2 and 3. It’s a simple concept, but one that carries a lesson well worth learning.

BUMPER CROP

Cropper’s first solo album, the hopefully soon-to-be-re-released *With a Little Help from My Friends* (1971), featured greasy (and sometimes fuzzed-out) Memphisstyle instrumental versions of various hits of the day, including the title track, “Funky Broadway,” “Land of 1000 Dances,” “In the Midnight Hour,” plus a few outstanding originals.

♩ = ca. 125
Gtr. 1

tacet 2nd x -

Gtr. 2

Am(D)

Asus2(D) or D6/9

"Crop Dustin'," the album's opening track, begins with some nice layering captured in **Ex. 5a** (above), as Gtr. 1 establishes a smoky bass figure that redefines Gtr. 2's open *A* and *Asus2* voicings.

Eight bars later, Cropper joins the horn section for **Ex. 5b**'s funky ensemble riff, where he adds a cool harmony part on the second round.

♩ = ca. 125 Am D A D

2nd time - - - - -

1st time - - - - -

grad. B hold - R

w/Rhy. Fig. 1

Ex. 5c (above) approximates the funky rhythm figure that frames **Ex. 5b**.