

The Sky Is Crying (Elmore James)

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 23 November 2017 22:05 - Last Updated Friday, 24 November 2017 16:30

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It has been more than half a century since Elmore James bent over to pull up his socks before going out to play in an Chicago nightclub . . . and went face down on to the floor with his third and final heart attack. Although he was not widely known, the world lost a good one who left an immense legacy. Elmore James is a giant of the blues. His work as a songwriter, singer and guitarist put him near the top of the short list of greats. The songs he wrote and revived - "Dust My Broom", "Cry For Me Baby" and "Rollin' and Tumblin'" - are revered as blues standards. He recorded "The Sky Is Crying" in 1959, and it would go on to become another classic of the blues.

The Sky Is Crying

"The Sky Is Crying" is a slow-tempo twelve-bar blues notated in 12/8 time in the key of C. An impromptu song inspired by a Chicago downpour during the recording session, it features James' slide guitar work and vocals. James' unique slide guitar sound on the recording has generated some debate. Accompanying James is his longtime backing band, the Broomdusters: J. T. Brown on saxophone, Johnny Jones on piano, Odie Payne on drums, and Homesick James on bass.



Elmore James & The Broomdusters

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In 1959, entrepreneur from N.Y., Bobby Robinson was searching up talent in Chicago for his record company when he saw a cardboard sign on a club announcing "Elmore James Here Tonight". Robinson went in to ask if this were *the* Elmore James and even asked James to play "Dust My Broom" to prove his identity. The song was a good luck charm again for James, because Robinson wanted to record him.



Bobby Robinson

The following day, James and his band met to rehearse in a band member's apartment. Robinson remembered that the landlady was cooking in the back while outside the rain was pouring down in buckets. Robinson was there when James spontaneously wrote "The Sky Is Crying". Robinson was so impressed that he called around for a studio and the song was recorded that very night.



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Elmore James

James, who started his recording career as an electric musician fronting a full band, opted for a loud, full sound seemingly before his peers. Though B. B. King integrated horns into his band, King was influenced by the uptown swing, even jazz, of musicians like Louis Jordan. For King, a full band lent polish to his sound, smoothing out the rough edges and filling out the gaps between just guitar and bassist and drummer.



Sky is crying, single 1959

With James, it's hard not to believe sometimes that he wanted to front a band simply because a band with horns and piano could -- in his case, would -- be louder than a band without. As with the amps he customized so that he could wring more distortion and feedback from them (decades ahead of Spinal Tap), James's band actually intensified the rough edges of its leader's own cacophonous slide and sandpaper-on-gravel voice. Before Willie Dixon's poppy neoprimitivism shaped the Chess sound and while B. B. King used a band to echo jump and swing and jazz, James made the virtually unprecedented move of expanding to increase the hard force of his music.

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Elmore James is one of the greatest blues guitarists of all time. His playing is a perfect blend of power and grace.



Steve Ray Vaughan & Albert King - The Sky is Crying



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