

# ***"Not From the American South, But From the Blue Pacific": The Steel Guitar in Early Country Music***

## ***Part One: The Earliest "Hillbilly" Steel-Guitar Recordings***

Perhaps no one sound conjures up the image of country music more-immediately than-as the Judds phrased it in the chorus of their 1988 hit "Turn it Loose" - "the slide of the steel guitar." Given the instrument's long association with American country music (and its early use on recordings by musicians from the southern United States such as Jimmie Rodgers and Roy Acuff), many people are surprised to learn-as Tom Armstrong notes in his essay "Amplified Steel" - "that the instrument's deepest roots . . . lie not in the American South, but in the blue Pacific".<sup>1</sup>

Tradition ascribes the invention of steel-guitar technique to an eleven-year-old Hawaiian schoolboy from northern Oahu, **Joseph Kekuku** (1874-1932), who-the Hawaiian Music Hall of Fame website relates-discovered the technique while "'fooling around' with his [six-string wooden] guitar [and] slid[ing] different objects across the strings to see what sounds he could produce . . .".<sup>2</sup>

After spending seven years refining his technique (settling on a slim steel cylinder for a slide, raising his guitar's strings via a converter nut [to enable his slide to glide along them without touching the frets], and replacing his gut strings with wire ones [for more sustaining power]), Kekuku began teaching his "steel method" to fellow-students at Honolulu's Kamehameha School for Boys and performing concerts in the city.<sup>3</sup>

In 1904, Kekuku travelled as an entertainer to the American Mainland, where a fascination with "things Hawaiian" was fast-developing in the wake of Hawaii having been accorded territorial status four years earlier. Touring units such as Kekuku's (as well as visits by acts such as Irene West's Royal Hawaiians and Major Kealakai's Royal Hawaiian Sextette) did much to spread the popularity of the steel guitar.<sup>4</sup> San Francisco's Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915 brought many more island musicians to the Mainland, helping to make Hawaiian music the most-popular style of music in the Victor Record Company's catalogue by the following year.<sup>5</sup>

In America's southern and Appalachian hinterlands, interest the steel guitar was generated by Hawaiian musicians' appearances on the vaudeville, tent-repertoire, and Chautauqua (adult-education) circuits. As country-music scholar Bill Malone postulates:

When a Hawaiian unit visited an American town or hamlet, it was certain to leave behind a number of enthralled partisans and a least one young boy who began badgering his parents to buy him a guitar and enroll him in a steel-guitar correspondence course.<sup>6</sup>

Bob Dunn (who played steel guitar with Milton Brown, Bob Wills, and Jimmie Davis, among others) related to Malone in a 1966 interview that an encounter at c. age nine with a Hawaiian stage show in eastern Oklahoma was the inspiration for him obtaining a steel guitar, enrolling in correspondence lessons with native Hawaiian guitarist Walter K. Kolomoku (1889-1930), and entering into a vaudeville- and radio-performing career in the late 1920's.<sup>7</sup>

Robert Armstrong and George S. Kanahale have observed that-of all the different types of American musicians who were exposed to the steel guitar-the ones most-influenced by it were "country [music] musicians", noting that "the new [guitar] style was well-suited to mimicking the human voice much like the fiddle or harmonica", and that "it [also] had an inherent mournful quality that [well-]augmented country harmonies".<sup>8</sup>

Kip Lornell cites the steel guitar's ability to easily produce the microtones ("blue notes") employed by southern blues musicians in his observation that "the slurring of the slide upon the strings mirrored the ability of [blues] harmonica players to move between the whole- and half-steps of Western scales."<sup>9</sup> Malone speculates that "southern rural audiences may have been preconditioned to enjoy the whining sounds of the steel guitar" from "having heard similar sounds produced by black [blues] guitarists using knife-blades, bottle-necks, and similar devices."<sup>10</sup> David Evans-placing the origins of "hillbilly steel guitar" at around 1920 (the term "country and western" not commonly-used until the 1940s )-sees the playing-style as a hybrid which blended Hawaiian, knife, and bottleneck influences.<sup>11</sup>

The first hillbilly steel-guitar recordings appeared after 1925. Some performers (e.g., Lemuel Turner) recorded instrumentals; others (e.g., Frank Hutchison and Frankie Marvin) used the instrument mainly to accompany their singing. Sometimes a steel guitarist recorded with a second, standard guitarist, with one (or both) of them handling vocals. On occasion, the two performers were brothers (e.g., Ralph and Kelly Masters, of Masters' Hawaiians), anticipating the "brother-group" "fad" that would sweep country music in the later 1930s.

Steel guitarists also recorded as members of string bands, alongside the fiddle, banjo, and possibly a mandolin or ukulele. (Examples include **Frank Wilson** [1900-?], a North Carolina textile-mill-worker who recorded with three different string bands in Ashland, Kentucky and New York City from 1928-29, **Jimmy Yates**, who recorded with four different string bands in Atlanta, Memphis, and Birmingham between 1928-1930, and **Anthony G. ["Andy"] Sannella**

[1900-1962], a jazz reed-player/guitarist who played steel guitar on the recordings of three different New York City-based string bands from 1930-31.)

The interest in Hawaiian culture sometimes carried over into group names, with southern steel guitarists becoming part of aggregations bearing such names as the Hawaiian Pals (or-rather incongruously-the North Carolina Hawaiians!). Sometimes the "cross-cultural" references led to unexpected juxtapositions, as when a group calling themselves the Hawaiian Songbirds recorded "Arkansas Sweetheart" (1930), or when the improbably-named "Hoosier Hawaiians" (christened after the nickname for residents of Indiana) recorded the "Utah Trail" (1931)! (Or-conversely-when the Blue Ridge Ramblers [named after an east-coast Appalachian mountain-range] recorded the "Honolulu Stomp" [1929].)

One of the first hillbilly musicians known to have played a steel guitar was **Frank Hutchison** (1897-1945), a white, blues-influenced guitarist, harmonica-player, and vocalist from southern West Virginia who steel-guitar historian Rich Kienzle believes may also have been the first country-music performer to feature the instrument. [12](#)

Hutchison utilized a "knife-style" of guitar-playing (brushing a pen knife along his guitar's strings) on his first recordings, the blues songs "Worried Blues" and "Train That Carried the Girl From Town" (made in New York City in September 1926). [13](#) (Hutchison apparently learned his "knife-style" technique as a child from an African-American laborer laying track for railroads servicing coal mines in his area of West Virginia.) [14](#)

Hutchison's other "'knife-slide' guitar" sides (which number a "half a dozen or so", according to country-music scholar Tony Russell) include the instrumental "Logan County Blues" (1927) (a reworking of the 19th-century "parlor" guitar piece "Spanish Fandango"). [15](#)

The white southerner **Lemuel Turner** recorded four steel-guitar instrumentals in Memphis in February 1928, including "Way Down Yonder Blues" (which Evans describes as being "[close] to typical black 'bottleneck' style") and "Jake Bottle Blues". [16](#) The latter title refers to Jamaican Ginger Extract ("Jake"), a patent medicine containing 75-90% alcohol used as a booze substitute by low-income, working-class southerners during Prohibition until two amateur chemists/bootleggers began adulterating the extract with a paralysis-causing plasticizer. Turner recorded "Jake Bottle Blues" nearly two full years before the paralysis epidemic hit (in early 1930), so-presumably-the tune refers only to the intoxicating (and addictive?) qualities of the extract (and was perhaps recorded-one might hypothesize-using a Jamaican Ginger bottle as a slide?). [17](#)

Oklahoma-born **Frankie Marvin** (1904-1985) sang (and yodeled, in Jimmie Rodgers-esque style) to his own steel-guitar accompaniment on a series of recordings made in New York in the late 1920s/early 1930s (often under several pseudonyms). As "Frankie Wallace", Marvin recorded "My Hula Girl" (1929) and a cover of Jimmie Rodgers's double-entendre hit "Everybody Does It In Hawaii" (1930). (Marvin would later attain his greatest fame playing steel guitar behind Gene Autry.)

Some of the most-influential early hillbilly steel-guitar recordings were made by **Darby and Tarleton**, a duo consisting of South-Carolina-born steel guitarist **Jimmie Tarleton** (1892-1979) and Georgia-born guitarist **Tom Darby** (1884-1971).

Tarleton-an itinerant textile-mill worker-learned to play bottleneck guitar by age 12 from African-American musicians he heard as his sharecropping family moved around the South; a west-coast encounter with Hawaiian guitarist **Frank Ferera** (1885-1951) (who had come to America as an entertainer at the Panama-Pacific Exhibition) enabled Tarleton to learn how to use a steel slide. [18](#) (Tarleton's ultimate slider-of-choice proved to be an automobile wrist pin, which he used from the late 1920s onwards.) [19](#)

Darby and Tarleton began recording in 1927; their second session yielded the double-sided hit "Columbus Stockade Blues"/"Birmingham Jail". (With sales of over 200,000 copies, the record became one of Columbia's best-sellers at the time, helping to establish both songs as country-music standards.) [20](#)

*"Birmingham Jail" offers a good example of Tarleton's early steel-guitar playing and vocal harmonizing. (The recording-the first of the folk song-was supposedly inspired by Tarleton being incarcerated for moonshining.) Here-as on many Darby and Tarleton recordings-Darby sings lead, with Tarleton supplying a descant above the melody. The recording features several steel guitar solos by Tarleton (at the opening and also between the song's first, second, and third verses).*

"Birmingham Jail" was covered at least fourteen times by a dozen different hillbilly acts through 1938; five of these covers utilized steel guitar, including Bud and Joe Billings's 1928 rendition, with perhaps multi-instrumentalist **Roy Smeck** (1900-1994) on steel. (Smeck-who played steel guitar for opera-performer-turned-hillbilly-singer Vernon Dalhart in 1926 [on "Far Away in Hawaii"]-similarly backed Gene Autry, Elton Britt, and Frank Luther in the early 1930s.)

Another hillbilly act pioneering the steel guitar was the **Johnson Brothers**, a duo (possibly from east Tennessee) consisting of steel guitarist/vocalist **Paul Johnson** and his brother Charles on standard guitar. Not much is known about the Johnsons' background, although country-music historian Charles K. Wolfe believes their repertoire-which included vaudeville numbers-suggests they probably worked professionally before participating in five recording sessions in New Jersey, Tennessee, and Indiana from May-September 1927. [21](#)

The Johnsons' third session (in late July 1927) was part of Ralph Peer's historic "Bristol Sessions" (in-the-field recordings made in Bristol, Tennessee of regional talent for Victor Records).

*The Johnsons' Bristol rendition of "A Passing Policeman" (properly titled "The Little Lost Child", an 1894 vaudeville song popularized by Lottie Gilson) features Paul's mid-song steel-guitar solo (essentially an ornamented version of the melody), accompanied by El Watson (an African-American musician) on the bones (flat clappers made of bone or wood harkening back to the minstrel-show days).*

The Johnsons's other Bristol sides with steel guitar include the murder-ballad "The Jealous Sweetheart", featuring another mid-song solo by Paul (as well as one to open the recording).

Other steel-guitar duos included **Nelstone's Hawaiians**, a south-Alabama act consisting of **Hubert A. Nelson** (1902-1985) on steel guitar and vocals and **James D. Touchstone** (c. 1895-1937) on standard guitar, harmonica, and vocals. (The performers-who were not Hawaiian-formed their group name from a combination of their surnames.)

Wolfe believes the Hawaiians may well have been the first south-Alabama act to use a steel guitar. [22](#) The duo made eight recordings between 1928-29, including the steel-guitar-laced sides "The Fatal Flower Garden" (1929) (a version of the 18th-century British murdered-boy ballad "Sir Hugh" [Child 155]) and Nelson/Touchstone's own "Just Because" (1929). [23](#) (The latter tune was covered by six different hillbilly acts over the next seven years, including the Cajun group the Hackberry Ramblers, with **Lonnie Rainwater** [1915-1982] on steel guitar.)

Interest in the steel guitar extended to the **Carter Family**, who-by the spring of 1928-had seen the six sides they recorded in Bristol, Tennessee (beginning several days after the Johnson Brothers) released by Victor as their first commercial recordings. In May 1928, the Carters were summoned to New Jersey for two sessions at Victor's Camden headquarters; during their initial session, **Maybelle Carter** recorded on steel guitar for the first time (on the prison-song "Meet Me By the Moonlight, Alone" and the forsaken-love song "Little Darling, Pal of Mine"), using her Stella guitar, converted to a "Hawaiian setup". [24](#) As Malone explains:

Maybelle played acoustic steel guitar [in Camden] by raising the nut on her Stella guitar which she had used at the Bristol sessions and using an open tuning (she played the two steel guitar numbers at the [first Camden] session in the key of E). By this time . . . [Maybelle] had bought a Gibson L-5 cello model, which she now used for her conventional guitar work . . . [25](#)

Over the next year-and-a-half, Maybelle played steel guitar on fourteen more Carter Family recordings, including "My Clinch Mountain Home", "The Foggy Mountain Top", and "Sweet Fern".

*"Sweet Fern" (1929)-based on Westendorf and Persley's 1876 parlor-song "Sweet Bird"-features solos from Maybelle at the opening and in the middle of the recording; at the end of the each chorus, Maybelle echoes her cousin Sara's yodelling on the lower strings of her Stella. [26](#)*

The recordings of **Ashley's Melody Makers** (aka **Ashley's Melody Men**)-from the Ozark Mountain area of northern Arkansas-offer an example of a late-1920s hillbilly string band incorporating a steel guitar. The groups were led by Arkansas-born steel guitarist/vocalist **Hobart M. Ashley** (1896-1970). (Ashley-who worked as a farmer-was the constant in the groups, which varied in size from three to five performers, and contained-at various times-his two oldest sons.) [27](#) The Melody Makers/Melody Men had three recording sessions in Memphis and Dallas from 1929-1932.

*"Bath House Blues" and "Searcy County Rag" - from the Melody Makers' first, October 1929 session in Memphis-were included on the 1977 County Records LP "Echoes of the Ozarks", volume I (518). On Ashley's own "Bath House Blues", his steel-guitar "swoops" on intermittent downbeats are clearly heard behind the fiddle lead. "Searcy County Rag"-named for Ashley's home county in Arkansas-is a square-dance tune related to "Jake Gillie". [28](#) The recording begins with a spoken introduction including Ashley's banjoist (and Ashley himself?), leading into an energetic rendition of the dance-tune (repeated seven times), laced with assorted square-dance calls from the bandmembers ("swing that gal with the red dress on", "promenade around, boys", etc.).*

## Notes

- 1 Tom Armstrong, "Amplified Steel," *The Rough Guide to Country Music* (London: Rough Guides, 2000) 78.
- 2 "1995 Hall of Fame Honoree: Joseph Kekuku" web page, Hawaiian Music Hall of Fame website, 28 August 2007 <<http://www.hawaiimusicmuseum.org/honorees/1995/kekuku.html>>.
- 3 Donald D. Kilolani and George S. Kanahale, "steel guitar," *Hawaiian Music and Musicians: An Illustrated History* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979) 367-368.
- 4 "1915" (web page with scanned photos of artifacts from the 1915 Panama-Pacific World Exhibition, assembled by David Gansz), 28 August 2007 <<http://www.gansz.org/David/Guitars/Hawaiian/Hawaiian6.htm>>.
- 5 "The Hawaiian Steel Guitar" (web page sub-section created by Emmanuel Rivet), 28 August 2007 <<http://www.swer.net/english.knutsen.weiss.html>>.
- 6 Bill Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.: A Fifty-Year History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969) 169.
- 7 - - -, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 2nd rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 157 and 507; "W.Kolomoku, Hawaii Music Leader, Dead," *The Honolulu Advertiser*, 15 Nov. 1930: 2. (According to *ibid.*, "Kolomoku . . . had been a resident of New York [City] for 20 years, leaving Honolulu in 1910. Kolomoku conducted the Hawaiian Conservatory of Music in New York, specializing in Hawaiian music and devoting his time to the teaching of the guitar and ukulele. He conducted courses in the playing of these instruments through the mails and thousands learned to play through his methods. . . .")
- 8 Robert Armstrong and George S. Kanahale, "American Music, the Impact of Hawaiian Music Upon," *Hawaiian Music and Musicians* 20.
- 9 Kip Lornell, *Introducing American Folk Music* (Dubuque: Brown and Benchmark, 1993) 165.
- 10 Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 2nd rev. ed. 26.
- 11 David Evans, "Steel Guitar Classics" (review of Old Timey Record LP-113), *Ethnomusicology* 20.3 (1976) 618.
- 12 Rich Kienzle, "Country Music Instruments and Players," *The Country Music Book*, ed. Michael Mason (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985) 241.
- 13 Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 2nd rev. ed. 127.
- 14 Richard Carlin, *The Big Book of Country Music: A Biographical Encyclopedia* (New York: Penguin, 1995), s.v. "Hutchinson [sic], Frank."
- 15 Tony Russell, "Frank Hutchison: The Pride of West Virginia," *Old Time Music* 1 (summer 1971): 6. (According to Jennie Wilson, of Peach Creek, WV, [who met Hutchison in 1916 and played banjo with him for a couple of years], Hutchison "played . . . with a knife . . . [with] the guitar held on his lap . . . [to produce a sound] like [a] Hawaiian steel [guitar]" [*ibid.*: 5].)
- 16 Evans 618.
- 17 Cecil Munsey, "Paralysis In a Bottle (The 'Jake Walk' Story)," *Bottles and Extras* Winter 2006: 7-12.
- 18 Barry McCloud, *Definitive Country: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Country Music and its Performers* (New York: Berkley, 1995), s.v. "Darby and Tarlton."
- 19 John Morthand, *The Best of Country Music* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984) 69.
- 20 Charles K. Wolfe, "Darby & Tarleton," *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 134.
- 21 - - -, "The Bristol Sessions: The Cast of Characters," *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and Ted Olson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005) 45-46.
- 22 Harry Smith (?), "Fatal Flower Garden" (liner notes from *The Anthology of American Folk Music, Volume 1: Ballads* [1952, reissued 1997] SFW CD 40090), posted on the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings website, 28 August 2007 <[http://www.folkways.si.edu/learn\\_discover/anthology/liner\\_notes/track\\_02.html](http://www.folkways.si.edu/learn_discover/anthology/liner_notes/track_02.html)>.
- 23 Guthrie T. Meade with Dick Spottswood and Douglas S. Meade, *Country Music Sources: A Biblio-Discography of Commercially Recorded Traditional Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 2.
- 24 Meade, Spottswood, and Meade 421 and 179.
- 25 Bill Malone, *Stars of Country Music: Uncle Dave Macon to Johnny Rodriguez* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975) 100.
- 26 Meade, Spottswood, and Meade 229.
- 27 1930 *United States Federal Census* (Wileys Cove township, Searcy County, AR; 14 April 1930), accessed at ancestry.com, 28 August 2007 <<http://content.ancestry.com/Browse/view.aspx?dbid=6224&path=Arkansas.Searcy.Wileys+Cove.23.5&fn=Hobart%20M&ln=Ashley&st=r&pid=23550804&rc=&zp=75>>.
- 28 Meade, Spottswood, and Meade 781.

To ascertain or confirm the names of performers, the instruments performers played, recording dates, and/or recording locations, the author also frequently consulted Tony Russell's *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).