

## Did You Know :-.....The History of THE STEEL-GUITAR

### Part 1 - A round trip to Hawaii via Nashville

As "Winter draws on," let's brighten up the atmosphere with a little guided tour of what is known as the "steel guitar" family, aka the Hawaiian guitar, lap steel guitar, Dobro and Pedal Steel guitar.

We can sure do with some Hawaiian sun to enlighten us about instruments that are used to create those "sliding" sounds. For the average European musician, Hawaiian music stands for sliding "hula-hula" effects, used to illustrate commercials and cartoons.

The true relation between Eric Clapton's Dobro and Sol Hoopii is yet to be defined. How is it that Hawaii has come so close to the Mississippi Delta; how come one musician will play the bottleneck in a "classical" stance and another with the instrument set on his lap using a metal rod (steel bar); what is a lap-steel; how can one reproduce these sounds and riffs realistically on a regular guitar; these are just a few of the questions we will attempt to answer in this brief outline of the Steel Guitar's influence on Blues and American music in general.

Hawaiian music has migrated to Europe and become quite popular in the United Kingdom, France because of the connection to the Antilles or to Tahiti, and Holland with its relationship with Indonesia.

Remember the French have been through their own kind of exotic fad. They've also had their own sources of inspiration! Josephine Baker and her "Negro Review", in the twenties and thirties when the songs were basically about Colonialism in Africa, Indochina, with orchestrations written with a "tropical" flavour, certainly with a few Hawaiian effects built in for good measure.

At the turn of the century, the Americans naturally turned to Hawaii to get their fill of tropical delights. The popularity of the Hawaiian sound was perpetuated by some great musicians who used their technique and influence to incorporate this sound to typical American musical styles like Blues, Western Swing, Bluegrass and Country Music.

Before we go any further, we need to state a few basics:

**Steel guitar** = When one refers to a Steel Guitar, one is more likely to be thinking of the steel bar than of the actual metal body of certain resophonic instruments like the Dobro or the National.

**Lap steel** = Guitar played by laying the instrument on your lap. This was the first electric guitar. Generally comes with 6 to 8 strings.

**Pedal Steel** = the most recent and the most sophisticated instrument. This instrument was first built in

1939, and played sitting down using thin metal rods attached to pedals in order to alter the pitch of certain strings. It's the Country Music sound with 10 or 12 strings, and one or two necks.

**Dobro** = the name comes from the **Do** in **Do**-pyera, (name of the instrument's creator) and from the **Bro** in brothers.

**National** = another brand name. Pictured on the album sleeve "Brothers In Arms" by Dire Straits

**Resophonics** = means an instrument with a built in resonator, such as the National, the Dobro but also the Brazilian Del Vecchio.

**Weissenborn** = in 1915 this American stringed instrument maker began surfing on the waves of Hawaii and built a guitar that would suit the growing demand. Made of Koa, it is the most significant model of guitar played lying down on your lap.

we will first go back to the birth of Hawaiian guitars and the historical landmarks it has left in the American culture.

Two musicians have significantly contributed to the lap playing method's popularity, Jerry Douglas and his Bluegrass riffs, and Ben Harper who takes his Weissenborn to the limit on Hip-Hop sequences.

A century since its first appearance in the US, the Hawaiian guitar is still going strong. Ben Harper and his fuzzed Weissenborn on MTV, Jerry Douglas and his Dobro in Nashville's biggest studios, have all responded to the call of "Bali Hai".

It was only in 1810 that Hawaii was first introduced to the Spanish guitar brought to them at the time by the missionaries. Then followed the Mexican cow-boys and the Portuguese sailors who promoted the instrument on the island to such an extent that by the end of the century the guitar simply became part of the Hawaiian picture except for the fact that Hawaiian singers had decided to use it their own way: playing it flat on their laps, with open strings and a slide to match their particular vocal technique.

You may wonder who originally invented the Hawaiian guitar sound? some say Gabriel Davion, a slave brought from India to Honolulu, who played a traditional Indian slide known as the gottuvadyam. Officially though, it's origin has been attributed to Joseph Kekuku back in 1880, who played this technique around the country. The whole island soon began to slide away. Just about anything could be used to slide : combs, knives, glass cylinders, metal cylinders etc... Shortly after which at the end of the century, Hawaiian bands began touring the American continent with their musicians and singers, dancers and naturally guitars. They soon became the most popular attraction in

some of the most massive venues such as the World Expo in Chicago or the Panama Canal inauguration in 1915. At the time, this was considered good promotion with some 17 millions people attending these.

Hawaiian music became quite famous in the US all the way through to the 1940's. In 1916 the American record industry sold more Hawaiian records than all the other styles put together and guitar makers sold Hawaiian model guitars galore, do-it-yourself kits including metal bars, bridge elevators, finger and thumb picks, as well as song books. Raising the bridge on a six steel string guitar was already the beginning of an answer to enhance the volume for the average Hawaiian guitar amateur. And soon enough, a specific Hawaiian model was designed with a square neck, flowered frets and strings set 2 cm away from the neck: Weissenborn even designed a model with a hollow koa neck in 1915. Then came Martin, followed by National (the very first resonophonic model with a built-in resonator) in 1927, and the electric Rickenbacker in 1932. Even Selmer created a model in the U.K. at the time.

Sol Hoopii was the biggest star of all. He created a unique style by blending blues and jazz into the traditional Hawaiian style on a Martin then on a tricone National, then in the 30's on an electric Rickenbacker. He even went to Hollywood where he was featured in a few films.

All kinds of American musicians were influenced by the Hawaiian sound. Many of them learned to play the slide technique on various models of Dobro and Nationals made popular by famous Hawaiian performers. Two different styles of playing were then confronted: the standard upright position or the laid down one. The regular upright stance was more commonly used by bottleneck blues performers from Robert Johnson to Duane Allman. The laid down flat position was also used by certain blues musicians and in extension by electric Western Swing or Country musicians playing their pedal-steel guitars. However to hear the acoustic slide technique, you have to listen to Bluegrass. After Mike Auldridge, you find Jerry Douglas who developed a mind-boggling technique with his Dobro (tuned GBDGBD). As for Ben Harper, we owe him (after Ry Cooder) the rebirth of the Weissenborn (often tuned 1 tone under the DGCFAD or CGCGCE or DADDAD in addition to the standard open D & G tunings) in a legendary style of fuzzed slides, rock, hip-hop patterns and Delta-blues riffs.

Hawaiian guitarists were the first to introduce slide sounds to the world as early as the 1900s. Open tunings and metal objects sliding on strings were the two main characteristics of this technique that was originally created simply because it was easy; slowly but surely, this technique became more and more sophisticated thanks to the talented contributions of musicians such as Sol Hoopii. At the same time, the black

slaves arriving from Africa had come with their own ethnic stringed instruments, which later became the banjo's ancestor (related to the gimbri that can still be found in Western parts of Africa).

All over the world, from Viet Nam to Hawaii, musicians were using ordinary everyday objects to slide on their strings, in order to modulate or change the notes of their instruments. This was what Southerners used to call "playing Hawaiian style" or with a "diddley bow" that even B.B. King described as a string attached to a wall and played on by sliding a bottle. The bottle became so familiar amongst blues musicians, that it very naturally turned into what is now known as the "bottleneck", or its metal counterpart, which have become akin to the blues tradition. No one really knows where or who invented the slide sound, sometimes played with animal bones, bamboo shoots, blades, pipes or regular glass bottles. But one thing is for sure, is that no American musician could ignore the successful contribution the Hawaiian sound created at the turn of the century.

Travelling shows, records and radio did the rest. Bluesmen took the trend into their stride, used it, adjusted it and developed their own sound with it, along with the Hawaiians who were gradually turning it into Swing. Metal or glass slides, Dobro or National Resophonics became the emblems of the Mississippi Blues. Bob Brozman says that even the tunings were identical: "The open G (DGDGBD) is the first open tuning commonly used amongst Hawaiian or Mississippi Blues musicians as a basic tuning." (I'm not so sure about that Baz.)

Originating in the Afro-American culture, the Blues expanded. The basic tradition of telling the story of everyday life hardships, the rhythm, led to an electric interpretation of the Blues in Chicago, Jazz or Rock 'n Roll. At the same time, Hawaiian music remained more or less the same. But as Billy Gibbon's (Z.Z. Top) put it : "If you listen carefully to Sol Hoopii, you'll notice that many aspects of Hawaiian music have been used to define Bottleneck Blues".

Hawaiians were accustomed to playing their instrument flat on their laps. The necks of these instruments were square shaped and sturdily built to withstand the extra thick strings (from .016 to .059). Some Bluesmen were known to play their instrument just like that (Tampa Red, Black Ace), along with a steel blade like Charlie Patton, one of the Mississippi Blues pioneers. But most musicians played in an upright position, tuned G or D, and playing slide or bottleneck depending on the song. Patton introduced the style and inspired many more such as Son House, Bukka White, Muddy Waters (who played open G and E, but also standard), Robert Johnson or Elmore James who both played open D like Blind Willie Johnson, who became Ry Cooder's mentor.

From Claude Samard & Guitarist Magazine 1998 (to be continued)