

BOTTLENECKING

How to take your first slide into the blues

by Glenn Weiser

Late one night in 1903, in the Mississippi Delta town of Tutwiler, W.C. Handy—the man who was later to proclaim himself "inventor of the blues"—had fallen asleep on a bench in a railway station while waiting for a train. He was awakened by the sound of another black man, shabbily dressed, singing and playing guitar in an unusual manner — instead of fretting the neck with his fingers, he was sliding a knife up and down the strings. The musician's moaning singing style and the guitar thus played struck Handy as "the weirdest music I have ever heard in my life."

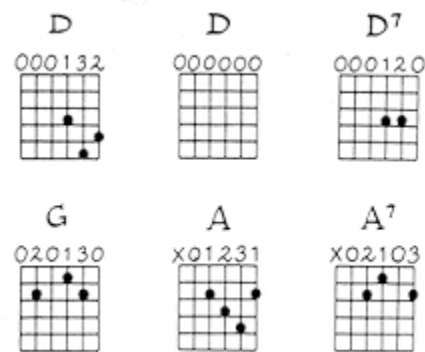
Handy's description of his encounter with this unknown blues player gives us an early glimpse of slide guitar, which is the technique of using a smooth, hard object—usually a hollow metal or glass cylinder—to change the pitches of the strings. Also known as bottleneck guitar (the necks of bottles make good slides), this style had its origins in African one-stringed instruments and also, some say, in Hawaiian guitar styles, which were brought to the south by Hawaiian soldiers during the Spanish-American War. Slide guitar was played by several important bluesmen, including Eddie "Son" House, Tampa Red, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Blind Willie Johnson, and others. Because it offers effects unavailable with conventional guitar technique such as glissandos, voice-like cries, and notes between the frets, it is worth learning at least a bit of this style. In this article we'll take a look at slide guitar and try some riffs and a blues solo in open D tuning.

First, you'll need the slide itself. They are usually made of metal or glass and are available in most music stores. Metal slides are louder; glass ones produce a smoother sound. Alternatives to commercially manufactured slides are lipstick holders, 3/4-inch spark plug sockets, Coricidin bottles, or what many slide guitarists prefer: a straight neck from a wine bottle such as Mateus, fifth size (it has to be carefully cut or broken off from the bottle, and then the cut has to be ground down until smooth). Any slide you do use should be both wide enough to fit loosely over your pinky finger and long enough to cover all six strings of the guitar.

Because slide guitar is usually played in open tunings, you'll have to do some retuning. The most commonly used slide tunings are open E (from the sixth string to the first, the notes are E B E G# B E), D (D A D F# A D), and G (D G D G B D). The open E and open D tunings are the same except that open D is tuned a whole step lower than open E. Of these two I recommend open D; open E creates additional stress on the neck and top of an acoustic guitar because it raises three of the strings (third, fourth, and fifth) above their normal pitch.

Here's how to tune your guitar to open D from standard tuning: Leave the fourth (D) and the fifth (A) strings as they are. Lower the sixth string (E) until its seventh fret matches the open fifth string (A). After that, lower the third string (G) until it matches the fourth fret of the fourth string. Then, lower the second string (B) until it matches the third fret of the third string. Finally, lower the first string (E) until it matches the fifth fret of the second string.

Here are diagrams for the primary chords in the key of D in D tuning: (right).



I advise using medium-gauge strings with the action set no lower than 1/8-inch at the 12th fret for playing slide. Using lighter strings or an instrument with lower action may result in rattles, missed notes, and diminished volume.

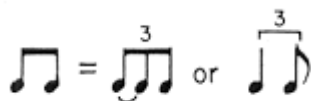
To start, put the slide over your left pinky so that both knuckles are covered.

The slide should fit loosely enough to allow you to bend your finger slightly. Then place the thumb behind the neck and position the slide on the first string directly over the 12th fret. The slide should be both perpendicular to the string and parallel to the frets, and it should lightly rest on the string without pushing down. The index finger must also rest lightly on the string- this "damping" of the string helps prevent unwanted buzzes or rattles.

Some slide guitarists keep their left-hand fingers together and straight while others keep them separate and slightly curled. Which position to use is mostly a matter of individual preference, although other factors, such as the length of the slide or whether you're playing single notes or fingerpicking with a bass line, can enter in. Experiment and see what suits you, but damp with the index finger in all cases and keep your hand relaxed.

Because slide guitar is traditionally a fingerpicking style, I recommend as a general rule that you use the right-hand thumb to pluck the fourth, fifth, and sixth strings and the other fingers for the first, second, and third strings. In the examples that appear below, right-hand fingering is indicated as follows: i for the index, m for the middle, a for the ring, and p for the thumb. Avoid resting the pinky on the soundboard-it's easier to pick with four fingers (thumb, index, middle, and ring) if you keep the pinky up. A "floating" right hand also makes it easier to get different tone colors at various points along the string length-ranging from sharp and bright near the bridge to round and mellow near the left side of the soundhole.

With the slide still on the 12th fret, try playing a few notes, making sure that the index finger is damping behind the slide. As soon as you can do this, work through the following series of riffs. When you practice them, at first play the treble only and then add the bass. The eighth notes in all these examples are to be played as swing eighths:



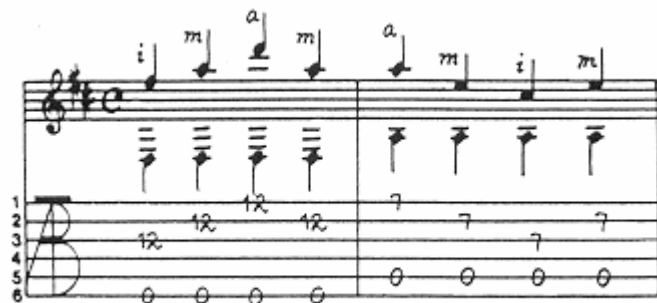
The following riff uses consecutive notes on the same string. As you move the slide along the string, make sure it is right over the appropriate fret bar and parallel to the fret. Alternate the index and middle fingers of the right hand as shown.



The next riff will help you develop your ability to play staccato notes on the same string. Play each note and then lift the slide, but keep the damping finger down. The note will cut off cleanly.



The riff below uses consecutive notes on the same frets but on different strings. Because open tunings allow the guitarist to play complete chords on the same fret, riffs built around this device are common. Make sure that the damping finger shifts correctly from string to string. Here the slide has to cover the top three strings, leaving the lower three open.



The next riff illustrates how to change from an open note to a fretted note. The slide and the damping finger have to work together as a unit. This includes situations where you must lift the left hand to play an open string and replace it to play a closed note.



Guitarists often ornament notes by placing the slide anywhere from one to four frets above or below the desired note, plucking the string, and sliding up or down to the note as quickly as possible. This is called a grace note slide, and is indicated by a straight line in between the grace note and the main, or "graced," note. Learn to do it without looking-it will train your ears.

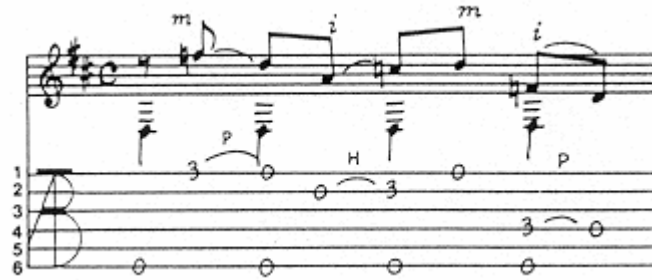
Another basic technique is picking a closed note and then moving the slide upwards or downward to a different fret without using the right hand again, as in this example:

You must be able to jump up or dive down a long distance on the fretboard with accuracy, by either sliding or picking the notes individually. The example below shows you the same riff played both ways-the first measure has long slides and the second short slides.

Slide guitarists fret with the other three left-hand fingers in addition to using the slide, although rarely at the same time. The example below shows you measures 9 and 10 of a 12-bar blues (over the V and IV chords). The V chord (A) riff uses fretting; the IV (G) riff uses the slide over all six strings. Note the alternating thumb in the bass and the double notes in the treble

In slide guitar, hammer-ons and pull-offs are done in combination with open strings only. Hammers are done by plucking an open string and lowering the damping finger and the slide onto the string (don't use

too much force or you'll wind up fretting with the slide). Pulls can be done by plucking a closed note and pulling the slide and the tip of the damping finger laterally off the string. In other words, don't lift the slide and the finger straight up-pull them off to the side, catching the string with the tip of the left index finger. Pulls are easiest from the first string, but they can be done from the others also. Hammers and pulls are indicated by curved lines in between the two notes and are marked H or P in the tablature.



The following string combinations produce octaves: sixth and fourth, fifth and second, fourth and first. Unlike the previous exercises, you should practice this by playing the bass the treble together right away, without playing the treble alone beforehand.



Vibrato is an essential slide technique to master, and it is a big part of the eeriness that impressed W.C. Handy so long ago. Vibrato is most often done with long notes or chords to give them a singing, shimmering quality, but it's also used with shorter notes when the slide is being held in place.

A tilde (~) placed over the note indicates vibrato. To play with vibrato, keep your thumb in place on the back of the neck and use it as an anchor; quickly shake the left hand back and forth from a point just over the fret to about halfway down the fret toward the nut. The slide should not go up over the fret bar, because the vibrato won't sound right if the pitch goes sharp-it has to range from flat to normal. When adding vibrato, your hand must be loose and relaxed. It's possible to vary the speed of the vibrato, but this is something you can experiment with later, after you have learned the basic movement. Try these riffs, and then return to the earlier exercises, adding vibrato on the long notes.

1
2
3
4
5
6

1
2
3
4
5
6

After you have practiced these exercises, try playing the guitar solo, "Delta Dream." This slow blues makes use of most of the techniques you've just learned. As before, play it with treble only; then add the bass.

Delta Dream

Music by Glenn Weiser

D

♩ = 69

DADF#AD

1 2 3 4 5 6

G

1 2 3 4 5 6

D **A**

1 2 3 4 5 6

G **D** **FINGERS, L.H.**

1 2 3 4 5 6

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If you have any questions or comments, feel free to email me at: banjoandguitar100@yahoo.com