

Theory in a Booklet - Lesson 5

Slide Handbook

with Newing stoneware slide

A musical score for guitar slide technique, consisting of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 4/4 time signature. It contains four measures of music, each marked with "Vib." above the staff. The notes are: Measure 1: G4, Ab4, Bb4, C5; Measure 2: Bb4, C5, D5, Eb5; Measure 3: Eb5, F5, G5, Ab5; Measure 4: Ab5, Bb5, C6, D6. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 4/4 time signature. It contains four measures of music, each marked with "Vib." above the staff. The notes are: Measure 1: G2, Ab2, Bb2, C3; Measure 2: Bb2, C3, D3, Eb3; Measure 3: Eb3, F3, G3, Ab3; Measure 4: Ab3, Bb3, C4, D4. The music is written for a guitar slide technique, with the top staff representing the melody and the bottom staff representing the bass line.

No one knows when slide guitar playing began. My own introduction was bizarre: in a 'modern classical' piece in the late 60s, but it has a much older history. Joseph Kekuku, a student in Hawaii in the mid-1890s held his guitar flat on his lap & used a comb to play slide style. This new technique possibly found its way to the US via sailors. Knives, bones, wrenches and, of course, bottlenecks were used & most blues players held the guitar sitting in the 'normal' position. There was no one correct way then ... nor is there now ...

You can play slide using standard tuning but an 'open' tuning (i.e. to a chord) is more usual. There are two common 'dropped' tunings - D ('Vestapol') & G ('Spanish' or Slack key'), which this booklet centres on; and two 'raised': E & A (as D & G but a tone - 2 frets - higher). There are many more, most of which can be found in a broadsheet by Ron Middleton called 'Open Guitar Tuning'.

As a rule use heavier strings (depends on tuning) & a higher action (heavier strings may create this!) - you'll get a better tone. Where to wear the slide - try pinky first (the most popular finger) & make sure it's not too tight, not too loose - allow room: the finger will swell as it warms up.*

The slide? Heavy but not too heavy to control, at least as wide as the guitar neck. (Shorter slides are used but this is a more advanced technique). Some wear it only as far as the second knuckle. Comfort is all important.

*The Newing slide is glazed outside making it smooth, cutting down on string noise; rough, unglazed inside helping to grip & reducing problems caused by sweat.

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Perhaps the hardest thing in playing slide is...

INTONATION

Frets are only there for the eye now! Hold the slide over the fret (not behind where you normally fret a note with the finger) & at right angles to the neck (unless trying for an interval greater or smaller than your tuning allows - that's advanced stuff!).

DAMPING - see also 'Picking Hand' below

This is the most important aspect of clean playing. Some damp always behind the slide (with index finger, say, lightly held against the strings); others prefer to hear the extra overtones created by not damping at this point. I use a mixture - experiment to see what you like.

Too much pressure on the slide will cause clatter (against the frets) & the slide may 'properly' fret notes. Too little pressure will cause buzz & maybe the odd accidental open string. A heavier slide helps.

VIBRATO

The frequency & depth is personal - often the reason you can tell without being told who is playing is that good players (& some bad ones!) have instantly identifiable vibrato. Most players use the wrist (very relaxed) & start just after the initial sound of the note - else it can sound too 'wobbly' - but watch the intonation. Going too sharp is generally less forgiving than being too flat. Try singing with your playing: good slide playing should 'sing'.

PICKING HAND

Damp well to mute unwanted notes; this is easier if you don't use a pick. Picking with fingers also produces a warmer sound. Using a pick makes damping awkward but also gives a louder attack. Finger picks are a compromise used by some. Your picking hand needs to be able to mute out those strings which you don't want to sound, otherwise a messy collection of notes will build up.

Single string work is possible on the top or bottom strings and on the others by muting the non-sounding strings. Hold the slide at an angle to suit:



Open G tuning

Open A tuning

Open D tuning

* these strings are dropped a tone below standard

⊙ these strings are raised a tone above standard

Open E tuning

We'll use G & D to give examples of chords, scales & licks. A & E are just a tone higher & therefore use the same relative frettings respectively.

Get used to sliding up to a note: sometimes you may want to move the slide straight to the note or slide down from another but much of the slide character comes from approaching from a flatter position (just as the voice does). Where you begin to slide is a matter of taste; in this example the note in brackets gives you an idea of where to start, then after picking, move slowly, but decisively, up to the intended note.

Slide players tend not to be slavish about scale patterns but, since you probably have a good sound picture of simple pentatonics, the opposite page gives you a few possibilities to practice clean picking & accurate sliding: listen while you play & work on which notes you can use the slide-up approach.

G Major Pentatonic Scales

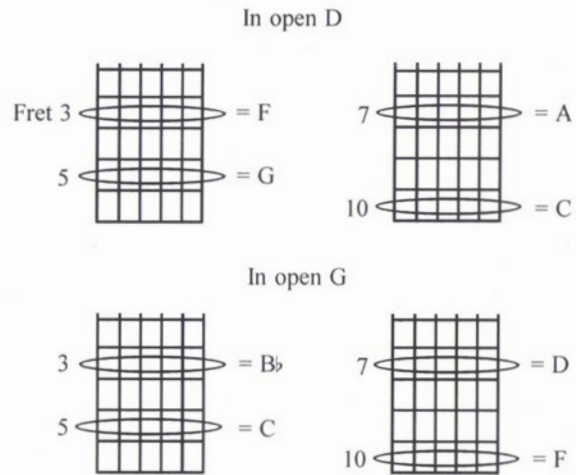
G Minor Pentatonic Scales

D Major Pentatonic Scales

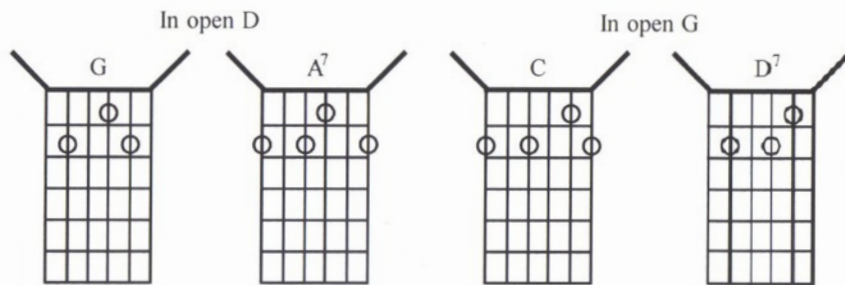
D Minor Pentatonic Scales

CHORDS

Most slide playing is heavily chord-driven: KNOW your chord tones! Nuances & inflection - tone, vibrato, use of passing notes, good use of double stops, damping & other subtleties make your playing sing. In open D & E your roots are on strings 6, 4 & 1; in open G & A the roots are on 5 & 3, so it's easy to work out chords when you hold the slide across all the strings:



& fret 12 will give you the (very useful) octave, where it all begins again. Other, normally fretted, chords are possible, of course, for example:



This isn't a book of tunes, but here's a page of small licks to give you some practice at trying for a good sound:

Open G

Open D

CHORDS & INTERVALS

Remember to take it slowly & LISTEN: if it doesn't sound right slow it'll only sound worse fast! Now, back to those chord tones. Perhaps the most useful, or the most used, chord types for the slide player are the dominant 7ths - I'm going to look at these from an intervallic point of view: knowing the intervals available in your chosen tuning will enable you to use the whole neck. The 7th chord has four notes: root, 3rd, 5th & 7th. The distance between the first two notes is a major 3rd ('4 frets'); between the 3rd & 5th it's a minor 3rd ('3 frets'); & the last interval is another minor 3rd. The diagrams below give the interval relationships between pairs of notes -

Open G

Open D

For a primer we are getting into deep water but it is worth you taking time to learn these relationships as it will allow you to play parts of chords all over the neck without having to stick to the particular fret a given chord would dictate. You can also embellish chords, turning them into 7ths & 9ths for instance by adding these to the chords. (See previous page for a description of the distance in frets from the root to each note of the chord).

Adding an extra note can be used to change the chord that is being played. For example playing d and f to a background of G major turns the chord into G⁷ (the f being the 7th above g); playing f and a to a background of G major turns the chord into G⁹.

Let me quickly demonstrate how these can be used:

Open G tuning

If you play only two notes simultaneously then, because chords are composed of a minimum of three notes, these can belong to a number of different chords. e.g. The notes d and f can belong to the chords D minor, B^b major, or G⁷; the notes g and b^b can belong to the chords G minor, E^b or C⁷; the notes f and a belong to the chords F major, D minor, D minor⁷. If you are playing in a band then another member of the band will most likely be playing the missing note which will specify the chord.

Two-note intervals are ambiguous; they appear in more than one chord type - the better you know your chords & intervals the more ground you can cover.

Just a note about the other intervals: the distance between the root & the 5th (an interval of a 5th) when inverted (turned upside down) is a 4th. e.g. d up to a is a 5th; a up to d is a 4th. Likewise, an inverted major 3rd is a minor 6th; an inverted minor 3rd is a major 6th.

Slide playing is all about listening - throw away that automatic tuner, if you have one - if you can't tune well by ear then your slide technique will always be less than adequate. Listen to your own playing and to those who do it well. Here's a list of just some excellent & interesting slide guitarists:

Sonny Landreth
Roy Rogers
Ry Cooder
Bonnie Raitt
Joe Walsh
Duane Allman
Mississippi Fred McDowell
Tampa Red
Chris Whitley
Alvin Youngblood Hart
Johnny Winter
Keb Mo
Kelly Joe Phelps
Robert Johnson
Lee Roy Parnell
Muddy Waters
Elmore James....

There are many more, of course, particularly among the earlier recordings & nothing beats witnessing some real live playing.

Here's a cheesy ending: *Goodnight Ladies* in open G; just one of many ways to play it. When you're comfortable or maybe just confident, try to embellish it or find an alternative position or inflection for some or all of the notes.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the song "Goodnight Ladies" in open G. Each system consists of a standard musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a corresponding guitar tablature staff below it. The first system shows a four-measure phrase. The second system shows a six-measure phrase. The tablature includes fret numbers (e.g., 12, 17, 13, 12, 10, 11) and slide techniques indicated by slanted lines and arrows.

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Gill Summers plays classical guitar, piano, bass & drums.

Other publications:

*3 *Ragged Pieces* (3 ragtimes for guitar)

**Berlioz: The Guitar*

**Guitar Neck* - a fretboard map

**Modebuster's Handbook*

“Remarkable...amazing” (Guitar Techniques Magazine)

*The Capo-Users' & Chordbusters' Handbook

“You'll love this book.” (Guitarist Magazine)

**Circles & Cycles for Musicians* (linear relationships in scales and chords)

“Incredibly informative” (Guitar Techniques)

*Chords that Matter...for guitar players

*Chord Construction & Interval Busters' Handbook

**Modebusting for Bass*

*MS Papers:

T1 TAB

T2 treble clef

T3 treble clef/TAB

T4 TAB & chord blanks

TC1 Chord blanks

TB4 bass (clef & TAB)

TB5 bass (5-string)

TB6 bass (6-string)



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