

Bars and Picks

By: Mark Prucha

The steel guitar gets its name not because it's made of steel but because the tools we use to play it are made of steel—most notably the bar. While a normal guitar has raised frets to determine string pitch, a steel guitar's string pitch is determined by the location of the bar on the strings. The earliest steel guitar players used flat bars to slide up and down the neck. Over the years, bars evolved, becoming more rounded for easier grip and movement. The most commonly used bar for Hawaiian Steel Guitar is the bullet-nosed bar.

The rounded tip of the bullet-nosed bar is advantageous for slants, particularly split-string slants that cannot be performed with other bars.



Sol Ho'opi'i's Bar (1930-1949)



Dunlop Tonebar (3/4" Diameter)

Bars have also become thicker over time. This Dunlop tonebar has a 3/4 inch diameter and length of 3 inches. The BJS Jerry Byrd bar uses similar dimensions with a tapered nose.

Fingerpicks have largely remained the same over the years. It's important to try



BJS Jerry Byrd Bar

out different sizes and brands to find a good fit for yourself. I personally use National nickel silver picks with a short plastic thumb pick.



Fingerpicks

Fingerpicks have a large effect on the steel guitar's tone. Although they are an adjustment when starting out, they make a huge difference in how you sound as a player. It's important to take the time to learn to play with fingerpicks. A simple exercise to get acclimated to them is to choose an open string to pluck. Pluck that same string over and over, alternating between your index finger, middle finger, and thumb. When starting out, this exercise will be easiest on the outer strings. As you get more practice, complete this exercise on the middle strings.