

Technique

By: Mark Prucha

When playing any instrument, technique is important. When playing the steel guitar, it is essential! How you approach notes and manipulate the bar will directly affect your touch and tone. There are many components to technique as it is related to the steel guitar. We will go over some of them here.

Vibrato

The notes played on the Hawaiian Steel Guitar are in many ways representative of a singer's vocals. Think of a classical singer. When a classical singer holds a pitch, he or she does not hold it straight for multiple bars. The singer will hit the pitch and then waver around it, using a technique called vibrato. This technique is used to add a warmth expressive quality to the voice. Believe it or not, it does the same for the steel guitar. A medium, consistent vibrato will add a beautiful quality to your overall tone.

The P-tah

While playing the correct notes is important, how you go about reaching those notes can be just as important. When playing a melodic passage, a steel guitarist can connect notes using a technique called "P-tah". This is a term coined by Jerry Byrd to describe a way of seamlessly flowing from one note to the next. Think of a yodeler. A yodeler doesn't fire off choppy notes one after another. A yodeler will bend his or her voice from one note to the next, seamlessly integrating the notes into one dynamic performance. To implement the P-tah, pluck a note on a string. Let the string continue to ring while moving the bar toward the next note. When you reach the next note, mute the previous note with a palm block. Then pluck the next note and so on. While vibrato makes you sound warmer, P-tah makes you sound smoother.

Picking

Fingerpicks will add a richer quality to your tone. However, it's important not to let them get the best of you! For some reason, when we use fingerpicks we are naturally inclined to pick too hard. Remember to pick lightly. When playing, you should not be able to hear the tinny sound of your fingerpicks through your amp. Also, remember to not pick too close to the bridge of your guitar. Picking a bit further from the bridge will eliminate any thinness in your tone.

Bar Slants

There are three types of slants a steel guitarist can implement: 1) Forward 2) Reverse 3) Split-String. One of the most common mistakes we make when starting out is bending our wrist to slant the bar. This severely limits bar mobility when moving up and down the neck. While it takes a lot of practice, using your fingers to slant the bar will give you much greater mobility while also allowing you to maintain proper bar pressure.