THE HISTORY OF SLIDE GUITAR adapted from article by Mark Humphrey

From Hawaii to Tennessee

On a cool May evening in 1996, I saw a legendary old Tennessee hillbilly entertain the parents and children of a largely Hispanic California school with Hawaiian tunes recalled from his youth. A multicultural experience? Yes, though unselfconsciously so. Pete Kirby (1911-2002) had spent over half a century with the stage name ‘Bashful Brother Oswald,’ hillbilly comedian, high harmony singer and Dobro player in Roy Acuff’s Smoky Mountain Boys. At age 84, he had been invited to California by a lifelong country music fan, Wayne Brandon, principal of Palmer Way Elementary School in National City, a few miles north of the Mexican border. Brandon’s elementary school students had spent the previous month studying the history of Dobros. Under palm trees and a bright moon in an outdoor amphitheater, Oswald, old enough to recall when hillbillies and Hawaiians first made music together, played his 1935 Dobro as a girl danced a hula to “The Island March,” a tune he learned in the early 1930s in Flint, Michigan from a Hawaiian known as Rudy Waikiki. The students then did traditional Mexican dances to honor their guest (one featured the balancing of water glasses atop heads). The juxtaposition of the venerable Tennessean and his Hawaii-influenced slide guitar music with Hispanic California seemed both sweetly surreal and metaphorically perfect, a homecoming for a sound washed ashore short of a century ago in California and which then went on to transfix the world.

While we can’t date its landfall precisely, one event was pivotal. On February 20th, 1915, the Panama-Pacific International Exposition opened in San Francisco for a seven-month run. Ostensibly a celebration of the completion of the Panama Canal, it featured exhibits from across the U.S. and the world, including the Territory of Hawaii. The Hawaii Pavilion became the ‘hit’ of the Exposition, offering shows featuring hulas dancers and the music of the Royal Hawaiian Quartette. Several notable Hawaiian guitarists performed at the Exposition, including the father of Hawaiian-style guitar, Joseph Kekuku (1874-1932). Over 13 million visitors came to the Exposition, and while it wasn’t the first exposure of mainlanders to Hawaiian music (the Royal Hawaiian Band had been at the 1895 Chicago Fair), it is considered the watershed event for the so-called ‘Hawaiian music craze’ of the next 20 years. A torrent of Hawaiian recordings appeared in 1916, and some estimates suggest more Hawaiian records were sold on the mainland that year than recordings in any other genre. By 1917, Hawaiian-style guitars were being offered by such mail-order catalogs as Sears; the first Hawaiian guitar method book was published in 1916.

The popularity of the Hawaiian guitar style quickly spread worldwide via record, radio, and touring troupes. For every Frank Ferera, the Hawaiian-born Portuguese cowboy who made literally hundreds of records, there were unrecorded obscurities like Rudy Waikiki who were nonetheless important for inspiring men like Oswald, disseminators of Hawaiian guitar styles into other genres.
The melding of Hawaiian music with what we now call country music was widely evident in the 1920s, and Hawaiian guitar sounds were popular and much-emulated far beyond the American South. Widely-traveled Hawaiian troupes took it across Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Australia: recordings of regionally popular music with Hawaiian guitar are everywhere from at least the 1930s.

**Is Slide Guitar a Hawaiian or American invention?**

The relationship between the Hawaiian-style guitar and African-American blues is less clear. It is often stated that the bottleneck style is an adaptation of Hawaiian-style guitar, but this is, at best, a half truth. African-American bandleader and composer, W.C. Handy (1873-1958) heard the bottleneck style in 1903 at a Mississippi train station: “a lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept,” Handy wrote in his 1941 autobiography, *FATHER OF THE BLUES.* "His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar and the effect was unforgettable...the weirdest music I had ever heard.” Handy’s encounter with Delta style slide guitar predates the earliest known Hawaiian guitar recordings (1909 Edison cylinders by Joseph Kekuku), and surely no touring Hawaiian troupes had made it to Mississippi by 1903. While some slide-style blues guitarists were indeed influenced by Hawaiians (Casey Bill Weldon was dubbed ‘the Hawaiian Guitar Wizard’), there’s good reason to believe the blues slide style is essentially African in origin. One-string bow instruments were and are common in Africa, especially the west coast and Congo regions from which slaves were taken. The musical bow is essentially a hunting bow; its pitch is varied in a number of ways, including sliding a hard object (such as a stick or a knife) along its length. According to Dr. Dave Evans’ “Afro-American One-Stringed Instruments,” (*WESTERN FOLKLORE*, 1971), “There is even one report of a genuine ‘bottleneck’ tech-nique: a member of the Mtende tribe of Kenya used a gourd resonator attached to his bow and the broken-off neck of this gourd as a slider worn on the middle finger of his left hand.” Notable blues slide guitar innovators such as Son House (1902-1988), pictured, and Bukka White (1909-1977), have influenced generations of electric blues guitarists with the power, expressiveness and rhythm of their playing.

In Hawaii, however, there is no parallel tradition to ex-plain the origin of Hawaiian guitar. Guitars probably appeared with the *vaqueros* brought from Mexico to thin out cattle herds in the
1830s. Portugese laborers may have introduced steel-string guitars in the 1860s. Hawaii’s ‘slack key’ style is believed to have emerged in the 1880s. If we believe the legends concerning the Hawaiian guitar’s origins attached to Joseph Kekuku, the whole thing was an accident. In one account, Kekuku drops his comb on his guitar, is intrigued by the sound, and begins (around 1894) fretting with the back of his comb. (A variant of the comb story also brings a Honolulu barber, William Bradley, to claim inventing Hawaiian guitar.) In another account, a pocket knife falls on Kekuku’s strings, and in yet another, Kekuku drops his guitar on railroad tracks and falls in love with the steel-on-steel slide wail; picturesque tales of clumsiness transformed into serendipitous discovery.

Kekuku’s triumph over the tonal limitations of the fretted guitar illustrates a thread common to the many approaches to slide guitar. The slide style allows a guitarist to approximate the fluid tone of the violin and, even more importantly, the human voice. The vocal quality of slide guitar is everywhere evident in its many variants: in the Hawaiian approach and its country derivatives; in the African-American bottleneck blues style and its gospel relative where slide guitar often acts as a second voice.

And as for slide guitar’s connections with country music? Jimmie Rodgers (1897-1933), nicknamed “the Father of Country Music”, featured Hawaiian guitarists in his recordings beginning in 1928. His recordings with Hawaiian accompanists helped ingrain their sound into the music we now call country. It would be hard to imagine it without the presence of some sort of slide guitar, be it acoustic or a pedal steel.

The Dobro (pictured, right) is a kind of ‘missing link’ between the acoustic slide guitar and the electric pedal steel. It is a resonator guitar invented by the Slovakian-American Dopyera Brothers in Los Angeles. The Dobro appeared late in 1928, selling for $27.50. Cheaper than the metal-bodied National resonator guitars favored by blues musicians, (pictured left), Dobros with their internal metal cone resonators quickly became widely popular, and by 1937 the company was making as many as 55 guitars a day. The rise of electric lap steels (pictured below with legendary Hawaiian player Sol Hopii) and metal shortages as America prepared for World War II ended Dobro production a little over a decade after it began. The ‘missing link’ instrument might have been largely forgotten if it weren’t for the presence in Roy Acuff’s Smoky Mountain Boys of Bashful Brother Oswald’s crying Dobro lines, prominently featured on record and radio by Acuff, who was at the height of his popularity during World War II. Oswald kept the Dobro sound alive in traditional country music and influenced its subsequent use in bluegrass.