

Slip Sliding Away

Written by P.G Fitzgerald

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After last month's "Capo Time" article I've had a number of comments about it. One was why don't I focus on other instruments rather than guitar? Well, there are a couple of reasons! Firstly, most songwriters are guitarists and most importantly I write mainly with a guitar. To have an article written by someone who doesn't play a particular instrument could be misleading. However, if you'd like to write an article on keyboard types, or songwriting using the computer, etc be my guest as I welcome all articles as long as they pertain to songwriting and music.



However, I'm a guitarist and I'm looking at another aspect of guitar which give songwriters another avenue to explore in their songwriting. So, let's go "*Slip Slidin' Away*" to misquote Paul Simon to explore the world of guitar slides!



Where did the use of slides come from? Reading on the internet I find stories of African instruments that use a slide like mechanism, which could have evolved into the diddley bow. A diddley bow consists of a single string of baling wire tensioned between two nails on a board over a glass bottle, which is used both as a bridge and as a means to magnify the instrument's sound. These can be used with a slide.



There is a story that in Hawaii around 1887-89 a boy called Joseph Kekuku was walking down a road or an old railway track playing his guitar, when he picked up a metal bolt and started sliding it on the strings. He perfected the technique and went on to perform in front of audiences throughout Europe and America. Now the Hawaiian guitar is also known as 'steel guitar', or 'lap steel', the 'steel' is referring to the solid steel slide bar used when playing. Around 1915, after the emergence of Hawaiian guitar in America, the slide guitar associated with the blues also appeared.



Whether it had its origins in African music, or on the Hawaiian Islands, there was documented evidence from famous blues man W.C. Handy, about hearing a guitarist around 1907 sliding a knife across the strings to great effect. From the Deep South it followed the blues through its many pathways, connecting with other types of music like folk, country, etc.



So, what is slide guitar? Basically, it is running a smooth object (The slide) up and down the neck of the guitar changing the pitch of the strings as it goes. I've looked up a number of sites to give a quick idea of the techniques used and I've combined their ideas to give a shortcut for the beginner:

1. **The Slide:** You will need a slide to use. There are many different ones mentioned later. Try different ones to see what suits you.
2. **Strings:** Basically, the thicker strings are more taunt so give a better tone. However, there are thinner slides that work well on thin electric guitar strings, so once again up to you.
3. **Which Finger?** Once again up to you. They can be played on the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th fingers. You do need to have some of the earlier fingers to mute the slide as well.
4. **The Neck:** Keep the slide parallel to the frets – more advanced players may change this. Also, you should play above the actual metal fret, not between them like you would place your fingers. Keep the touch light so you don't press the strings on the frets.
5. **Muting:** Use the fingers that are towards the neck from the slide to lightly touch the strings so unwanted notes don't ring out.
6. **Vibrato:** This involves moving the slide back and forth quickly over the metal fret.
7. **Tunings:** Once you have conquered the slide on normal E tunings you can opt for open tunings – so called as they have a chord tuned into their unfretted sound. That way if you move the slide, covering the six strings, up and down the neck you are moving a whole chord.

There are many sites online where you can teach yourself slide guitar such as: <https://www.guitarworld.com/lessons/slide-guitar-technique-the-five-essentials> or <https://www.justinguitar.com/guitar-lessons/essential-slide-guitar-techniques-te-801>

Now its time to look at the actual slides themselves in our journey going "*Slip Slidin' Away*"! What constitutes the "ideal" slide does depend on personal taste so I recommend you try a whole variety – I have about 20, or 30, different types I've picked up over the years which can sound different on different guitars.

The "ideal" slide can come down to a combination of four different factors:

1. **Proper Fit:** This does depend on which finger you choose to use. The slide needs to slide over that finger's knuckles, without easily coming off. Some people add rubber, or leather to the inside of the slide to stop movement.
2. **Hardness:** The hardness of a slide can differently sustain and frequencies. If they are too soft then the sustain will die off, while too hard then you'll get too much extra string noise. Glass is softer, and produces a more mellow and rounder tone, while metal slides are harder so have a more metallic and brighter tone. Ceramics are in between these two.
3. **Weight:** The heavier the slide the more volume, more sustain, less string buzz and has warmer tones. However, a heavier slide could make you push down on the strings too much hitting the fretboard, especially on thinner strings. Generally electric guitars work better with lighter slides, while acoustic guitars require the heavier slides.



4. **Wall Thickness:** The thicker the wall of the slide, the more weight it carries. However, thinner walled slides can be easier to play as your fingers are closer to the actual strings, which allows you to “feel” them more. Most electric guitar players find they can play faster with thinner slides.

With those ideas in mind there are some other considerations in using a slide:

1. **Material:** The material a slide is made from can heavily influence its use, especially its hardness. There are a variety of materials including Perspex, hard wood, carbon fibre, etc available and they would have their tones and uses, so would be interesting to try. However, the three main materials used are:

a. **Glass:** Glass has the warmest tone, shortest sustain and its smooth texture allows it to glide across the strings, but it can break easily. The original glass slides were from cut off bottle necks and medicine bottles. You can buy slides online that copy these styles. As well, you can find straight glass slides of various thicknesses. Ernie Ball and Dunlop sell a variety of them.



b. **Metal:** The two main offerings here are steel and brass. As metal slides are harder and heavier than glass the sound is both brighter and harsher, with a longer sustain. That's why you find them being used on the electric guitar in the rock and blues genres. They are also more durable than glass so more roadworthy. Brass is slightly denser and softer than steel, resulting in a slightly louder, yet darker sound, with a similar sustain. Ernie Ball, Rock Slide, Fender and Dunlop sell a variety of them.



c. **Ceramic:** These are generally thought to be midway between glass and metal in weight, hardness, and texture therefore the sustain, tone, and glide are all in between as well. How far in between depends on what the ceramic is made from, so some can be harder & grittier, while others are softer & smoother. You need to check them out to get their feel. However, they tend to be more fragile than glass, so you have to be careful not to drop them. A number of people say they are a good place for beginners to start. Ernie Ball, Rocky Mountain and Dunlop sell a variety of them.



2. **Shape:** Most people think of slides as being hollow tubes and for the most part they are, but there are a variety of different shapes that can be used:

a. **Steels:** These are usually the slides used on lap steels, Hawaiian guitars and the like. They are held by a lip between the 1st and 2nd fingers. These are generally used on the guitars that are facing up but have been used by guitarists on slideways guitars as well. Usually quite heavy and kind of specialised. Examples include Slide/Shubb-Pearse Steel Bar, or Dunlop Lap Dawg.



b. **Flat:** These are the usual cylindrical symmetrical style that can be hollow at each end, although some are enclosed at one end, and some also have cut outs at the end for finger bending. An example would be D'Addario Rich Robinson Brass Slide, or the Fender Steel Slide.



c. **Flared:** These have a curve in them that's meant to follow the curvature of the strings on the fret board. Examples are Dunlop Harris or Dunlop Eric Sardinas' Preachin' Pipe.



d. **Partial:** Also called Knuckle, these are smaller length slides that allow the guitarist to still use the finger the slide is on, but also to use the slide on a few strings. An example is Dunlop 221 Chromed Steel Slide.

e. **Reversible:** These have a ring and partial slide so the slide finger can be used normally, then the slide flipped around when needed. The best of both worlds? I've used them and still prefer the usual slide. The Dunlop Shy Slide uses a Velcro strap and slide – I've just ordered one to try out, but it is a partial slide as well. Examples are Shubb Axy's, or JetSlide.



So, there's an absolute plethora of types and style I hope I've summarised for you. I've written a number of songs with both slide and lap steel, which I have played a concert over the years. I'm no slide expert I can tell you but doing something different with your instrument can open up new ideas that can help let loose the muse so new songs can be created. Have fun “Slip Slidin' Away”!

The below I are some site on slide I used for this article and may be of interest if you wish to explore this avenue:

<https://ehomerecordingstudio.com/best-guitar-slides/>
<https://parlor.guitars/blog/guitar-slide>
<https://guitargearfinder.com/guides/best-guitar-slides/>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slide_guitar
<https://equipboard.com/posts/best-guitar-slide>
<https://happybluesman.com/how-choose-right-guitar-slide/>
<http://www.guitaradventures.com/guitar-slides>
<https://guitarfella.com/guitar-accessories/slides/>
<https://www.guitarworld.com/lessons/slide-guitar-technique-the-five-essentials>
<https://www.justinguitar.com/guitar-lessons/essential-slide-guitar-techniques-te-801>

