

GT157

Country Essentials 4

Pedal Steel Imitation

This month Dario Cortese will take us into the world of one of country's favorite instruments: Pedal Steel!

Pedal Steel is one of the hardest instruments on the planet as far as I'm concerned. They use a fingerstyle technique with the picking hand (thumb-pick and finger-picks) and a slide technique with the fretting hand (with all the relative pitch accuracy problems). In addition they use pedals to bend the strings (mainly higher) and/or knee levers (engaged by moving the knees left, right or vertically). If this isn't enough they also use a volume pedal to create the famous Pedal Steel fade-in sound.

The instrument has a quite sustained sound (longer than a guitar but shorter than a saxophone) and at the same time has some similarity with the harmonic possibilities of a piano. Let's say that Pedal Steel is in-between many instruments and combines the best of many 'worlds'.

Being such a great sounding instrument its use couldn't be restrict to country music only. In fact, you can hear a Pedal Steel (believe it or not) on albums by Dire Straits, Sting or even Megadeth (thanks to guitarist/producer Dann Huff).

Country guitarists have always tried to emulate this incredible sound and often they had to fight against the physical limitation of the guitar. This developed into two main areas: the improvement of the bending technique and the creation of mechanic devices as B-Bender.

The B-Bender was probably invented by Gene Parson and Clarence White (The Byrds) around 1965. This device consists in levers and pulleys inside the guitar body that are activated by pulling a forward guitar strap, usually by pushing the neck down. This device enables guitar players to bend the B string only (thus the name) a whole tone up without moving the string from its normal position. This

means that you can play a triad on the top three strings of the guitar and bend one note within the chord!

Since 1965 many other similar devices have been developed (palm bender, etc) and nowadays you can easily buy different types of B-Bender or, as Brad Paisley, G-Bender (which works on the G string). It seems like modern players prefer to use the system developed by Nashville luthier Joe Glaser because of the tiny amount of wood that needs to be taken off the guitar body especially compared to the quite invasive Parson/Green.

A while ago Joe Glaser told me that if you're crazy about bending devices you can either get a guitar with both B and G Bender at the same time or an old system (out of the market now) called Mackenzie String Puller (that I had the pleasure to receive as gift from our own Lee Hodgson) which bends the top three strings through a pedal board mechanically connected to the guitar.

A B-Bender is a great device that makes our life much easier when it comes to Pedal Steel emulation. It's not a necessary piece of equipment but certainly helps considerably. B-Bender users include Albert Lee and Brent Mason while Brad Paisley sticks to his McVay G-Bender (quite similar to the Glaser one).

The bottom line is that Pedal Steel emulation is a sound that you need to have under your fingers. B-Bender or not you need to recreate some of its incredible sound and this requires a strong and accurate bending technique.

Jerry Donahue has developed his own trademark style around string bending. Instead of focusing his work on mechanical devices such as B-Bender – which he used for a period of time – he developed an incredible bending technique that completely broke to boundaries of the instrument. Jerry has in fact started and developed the bend-behind-the-nut and multiple string bending techniques. Just listen to his version of 'The Claw' by Jerry Reed in the first Hellecaster album to understand what I mean. Danny Gatton once said that Jerry Donahue is the 'King of string bending'... and personally I believe him!

For this article I've decided to leave out some of the most super-human techniques by Jerry Donahue even if you will still find some of them in examples 6 and 7. I've chosen instead to focus more on sounds and techniques that can be easily learnt and applied in other styles. It's crucial that you have a good bending technique before approaching any of the following examples. Also I would highly recommend using not more than 0.09/0.42 string gauge as it really makes a huge difference. I hope you'll enjoy!

Ex 1: This example shows most of the position that you can use over a C (or C7) chord. These are all very common and seem to be used widely by many players. Some like to stick to one or two of these shapes and repeat them over and over, some prefer to explore all the possibilities. See which one you like and which one you can easily refer to a chord position (and consequently use it). There is no need to learn them all at once! Use the 3rd finger to execute the bend and try to sound as ‘mechanical’ as possible. Let all the notes ring whenever you can.

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Ex 2: Ex 02 shows a variation of the previous example. This one incorporates a ‘ghost-dead’ note that adds a chicken-picking flavor at the phrase. It’s built on 2nd and 3rd strings that, along with 1st and 2nd strings, are the most common sets used for Pedal Steel emulation. This line requires a pre-bend with the 1st finger. Approach this technique with very light strings and at start move the shape above the 12th fret where the string tension is loose. The index should start with a ‘straight’ position when the note is bent and finish on a ‘diagonal’ position when the note is released.

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Ex 3: Every pedal steeler seems to use this lick widely. As Ex 01 this one connects many positions often used over a C chord and there’s no need to learn them all at once. I would suggest sticking to one or two of these shapes and

exploring the rhythm possibilities to create a more unexpected line. Again the 3rd finger does all the bending work. Let all the notes ring whenever possible.

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Ex 4: This line should be split in two. The first bar is a ‘major-ish’ line often used by Paul Franklin on pop recordings. The second bar is a jazzier line in the style of Buddy Emmons that superimposes a Gm chord over C creating a C9 chord. I’ve used the 3rd finger for the bending in the first bar and 2nd finger for the second bar. Let all the notes ring whenever possible.

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Ex 5: This line is in the style of country star Steve Wariner and involves a new finger movement which consists in sliding a bent string. The first pre-bent note is played with the 3rd finger on the 12th fret of the 3rd string. Once you’ve hit that try to do a very quick release while sliding the finger on the 7th fret. Use the 3rd finger for all the string bending.

C

1 3 1 3 4 3

full full full full full

T
A
B

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Ex 6: This is a short composition to show how you can incorporate some of the movements we've seen so far. This one is influenced by country virtuosos Brad Paisley (for the semitone bends on the low strings) and Jerry Donahue (for the bends behind the nut). All the notes should ring out as much as possible so it'll be worth spending some time on the fingerings before actually attempting performing the piece. The guitar is tuned in Drop D tuning (detune the low E string down to D). For the bend behind the nut use the 3rd finger with the 2nd behind to help. Light strings are highly recommended on this one. Let all the notes ring whenever possible.

$\text{♩} = 60$

D

1 2 3 1 3 1 3 1

1/2 1/2

T
A
B

w/drop D tuning

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3 G A D

3 3 3 1 3 3 3 3

1/2 1/2 1/2 1/2 full full full full

T
A
B

* Bend Behind Nut

Ex 7: Moving to a more traditional territory we couldn't leave out a traditional ballad in the style of pedal steeler Buddy Emmons. There are a few new 'ingredients' in this one. Double string bending: use 2nd and 3rd fingers to perform every double bend. Try to keep the two fingers together as one to get the desired result. Chords: pedal steelers (especially Emmons) often use 6 chords in closed position. On guitar this required a bit of stretching. Raise the neck of the guitar if necessary but do not bend the wrist of your fretting hand as that is the cause for many guitarists' injuries. To perform the last bent note you need to keep the 3rd finger

down (on the D string) while ‘pulling’ the string down (towards the floor) with the index finger.

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Ex 8: This example is played with a B-Bender and shows how you can easily get a Pedal Steel sound out of it. If you don't have a B-Bender guitar just look at the 2nd tablature (with-out/B-Bender). Listen carefully to the audio file to hear to differences between the two and you'll notice that the B-Bender one is more 'ringing' especially at the very end where you can get the top 3 strings ringing out altogether.

with-out/ B-Bender

P.M.---|

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Ex 9: These last 3 examples are composed on the same backing track to show you how you can incorporate some of the movements we've seen into a 'real life' situation. At the end you'll find a longer version of the backing track for you to experiment with.

This one is in the style of country superstar Vince Gill. Vince has an incredible bending technique and he performs Pedal Steel licks without B-Bender or any

Ex 11: This is a line composed in the style of country Maestro Brent Mason. The lick shows how Brent incorporates Buddy Emmons' style (recognize the Gm triad in bar 2?) into a very modern guitar approach. This phrase is also quite unexpected on the rhythm side and this factor makes it a bit more exciting and modern. In the last bar there's a 'backwards' sweep so make sure you use the correct picking direction as indicated.

♩ = 180
C

full

full

full

3

V V V

T
A
B

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STONE SETTINGS

For the mp3 I've used my '69 Tele and my B-Bender Tele through the Line6 POD XT set on the Plexi 45 amp. I slightly varied the amount of distortion here and there but the basic patch was set as follow:

Drive: 4.5

Bass: 5.5

Mid: 6

Treb: 10

Pres: 10

Vol: 6

Cab: 4x12 Green 20's

Mic: 2:57 Off Axis

77% Room ambient

Line6 POD XT Compressor/Gate

Comp Thres: -23dB

Comp Gain: 6dB

Gate Thres: -81dB

Gate Decay: 69%

Example 7: higher compressor settings has been used on Example 7 (Comp Thres around -30/40dB)

Example 8: I've used an analog chorus on the lead guitar for Example 8 set as follow: Speed: 0.80HZ and Depth: 66%.

The reverb (when presents) has been added from the desk. Since I don't have a very expensive Lexicon reverb I had to simulate it using two reverbs: Large Hall (a long reverb usually quite low in the mix) and Small Room (short reverb usually quite high in the mix).

The '69 Tele has 0.09-0.42 strings while the B-Bender Tele has 0.10-0.46 and they have been set on the bridge pick-up most of the times (original '69 Fender on the '69 and Seymour Duncan Five-Two Brent Mason on the B-Bender). I've used a Jim Dunlop Jazz III XL pick in combination with middle, ring and little fingers with acrylic nails.