

Getting Started on the Hawaiian Steel Guitar

Acoustic Hawaiian Steel Guitar Played in the Old
“Taro Patch” Open G Tuning



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When Hawaiians began playing guitars flat on their laps, the guitars they used were nothing fancy. Any steel string guitar that happened to be available was put into use, and what we know today as the Hawaiian steel guitar grew out of those simple beginnings...

What Do You Need to Convert any Acoustic (6 steel-string) Guitar into a Beautiful-sounding Hawaiian Steel Guitar?

A Nut Extender: You need some way to raise the strings off the neck of the guitar so that the tone bar cannot push the strings down to touch the frets on the neck. In the early days, folks would simply slide a fat nail or cotter pin under the strings up at the nut end of the strings. Eventually, music stores began to sell inexpensive “Nut Extenders”, which do a much better job.



Your Tuning: There are many different possible tunings, but for this class we will be using the classic “Taropatch G”. Tune your guitar so that the strings are D-G-D-G-B-D (low to high). All six strings should be about the same tension, and they should feel tight enough so they won’t sag when you place the bar on them. There are several companies that make sets of strings that work especially well on steel guitars. I use the John Pearce 7300 strings on any guitar that is 25.5 inches from the nut to the saddle. The top three strings are plain steel, and make less noise as you slide around on them.

(<http://www.juststrings.com/jps-7300.html>)

A Tone Bar: You need something smooth and heavy to slide on the strings with your left hand. Early players used, bolts, metal combs, shot glasses & spark plug wrenches to get that “Hawaiian sound”. Today, it is easy to find a variety of “tone bars” for around \$20 at music stores. They are solid (not the hollow “slide” that blues musicians wear on their finger) and come in a variety of shapes and weights. My particular favorite is the Shubb SP-2 (<http://www.shubb.com>), as it is easy to hold and has a rounded tip which doesn’t catch on the strings as you slide it around.



Finger Picks: Getting your finger and thumb picks to feel comfortable is critical to your future as a steel guitar player. As a steel guitar teacher, I have found that uncomfortable picks are one of the biggest obstacles to beginning students! Your picks should feel snug enough that you can’t make them fall off by shaking your hand around, but they should also not hurt you or cause your fingertip to turn red. Metal picks are easy to adjust, but I find that plastic picks, adjusted properly, will feel better, stay in place better, and have a sweeter tone. Soak them in very hot water for a moment (putting them in a mug of water in the microwave for 1 minute works great!), then shape them to fit your finger. Adjust the tip of the finger pick so that it curves up around the tip of your finger, extending slightly past your fingernail, as in the example below, on the right.



Learning to Play

Your guitar will be lying across your lap with the neck of the guitar pointing to your left. Your left knee should be far enough up the neck that the guitar won't move when you slide your bar up and down the neck.



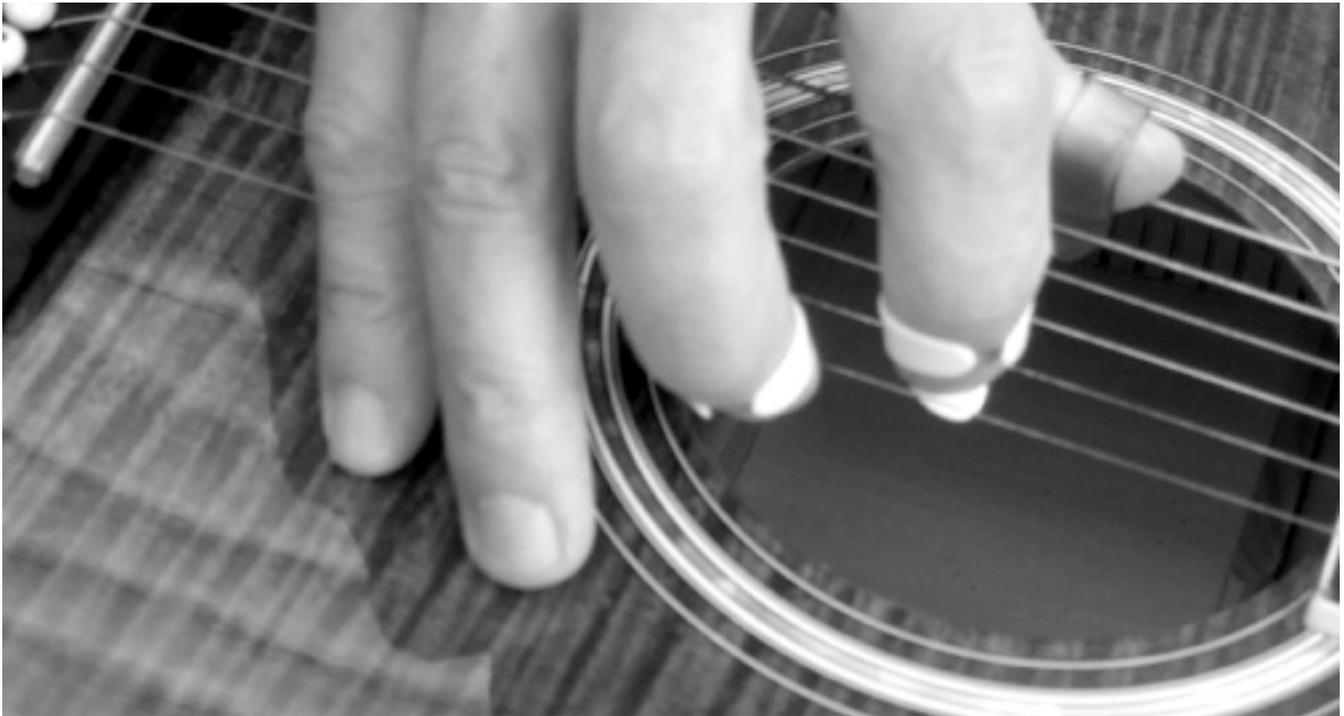
Joseph Kekuku, originator of the Hawaiian Steel Guitar (left picture)
Holding the Tone Bar correctly (right picture)

You should not have to press down on the bar. Its own weight and the weight of your hand are enough to do the trick. If the bar is lying flat across all six strings, you should not hear any buzzing or “chatter”. The tone of each string should be clean and pleasant.

Regardless the type of bar you choose, it should be held in such a way that the left thumb, pointer and middle fingers are able to hold it securely, leaving the ring finger and pinkie relaxed and lying flat across the strings in back of the bar. Their job is to dampen the strings as you lift and set down the bar. If they try to curl up, remind them to stay relaxed. The bar is taking the place of the frets. **You hold the bar directly over the fret, not behind it.**

**Your eyes should be watching your left hand,
not your right hand!**

The right hand must learn to feel where the strings are without the help of the eyes. Anchor the right hand to the body of the guitar with the right pinkie and ring finger. The thumb and first two fingers are wearing the picks and do all the real work.

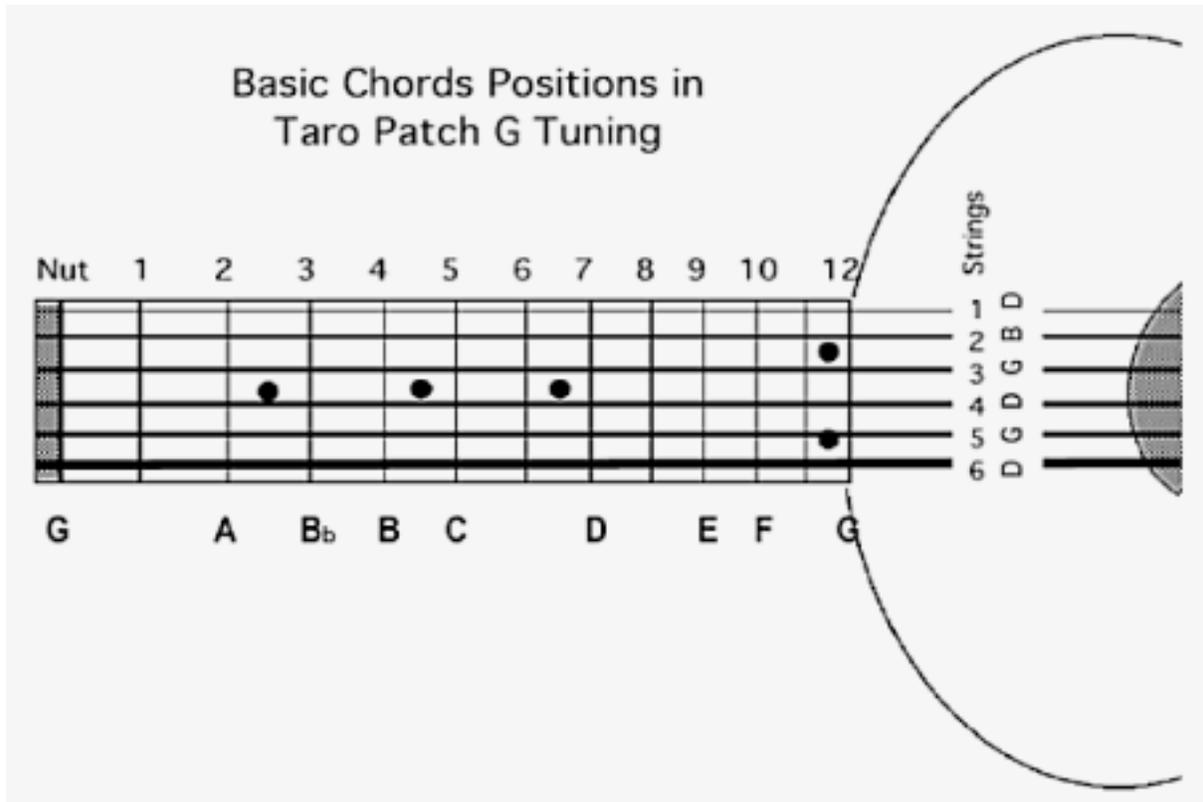


When you move your bar, make sure you keep it straight across the neck of the guitar, unless you actually mean to play a “slant chord”. To get a nice vibrato sound, shimmy the bar by wiggling your hand from the wrist - not the elbow or shoulder! Every player develops their own shimmy, and it becomes part of their style.

Moving your bar from one chord to another *without sliding* is done by lifting the bar off the strings, and muting the strings with the pinkie and ring finger. Next, set the pinkie and ring fingers down in the new position and then softly lower the bar to the strings. When done well, you will not hear the sound of the bar hitting the strings. Practice this!

You can strum with your thumb pick, but the steel guitar comes alive when you begin picking combinations of 2 or 3 strings at a time with the thumb and fingerpicks, and from learning when to slide and shimmy the bar. (We will practice this later in the workbook.)

Exercises for Your Left Hand



In the picture above, you can see how easy it is to learn the basic major chords. Since the guitar is tuned to a G major chord, placing the bar over any fret will give you a major chord, and the chords proceed up the scale as you move up the neck of the guitar. (For clarity, I have omitted G#, C#, Eb, and F#.)

Exercise:

Place the bar over the 5th fret, and strum the C chord.

Slide the bar up five frets to the 10th fret, and strum the F chord.

Slide up two more frets to the 12th fret, and strum the G chord.

Slide back down to the 5th fret, and strum the C chord.

These 3 chords are used to play songs in the key of C.

You can repeat this exercise using frets 2, 7 & 9 for the key of A, or

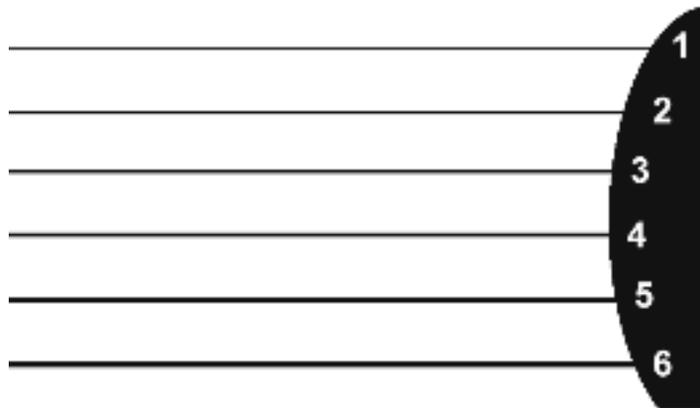
Start with the nut, and slide up to frets 5 & 7 to play in the key of G

Start with the 10th fret, and slide down to frets 3 & 5 for the key of F.

Repeat these exercises until you can find all three positions without hesitating between chords.

Listen as you play & strive to play in tune!

Exercises for the Right Hand



Anchor your right hand to the body of the guitar with your ring and pinkie fingers. (See the photo two pages back.) Then...

Exercise:

With your thumb, pluck string 5

With your middle finger, pluck string 1

With your thumb, pluck string 4

With your pointer finger, pluck string 2

Repeat this as you count to yourself: “one, two, three, four”.

Continue this until you can do it without looking at your right hand.

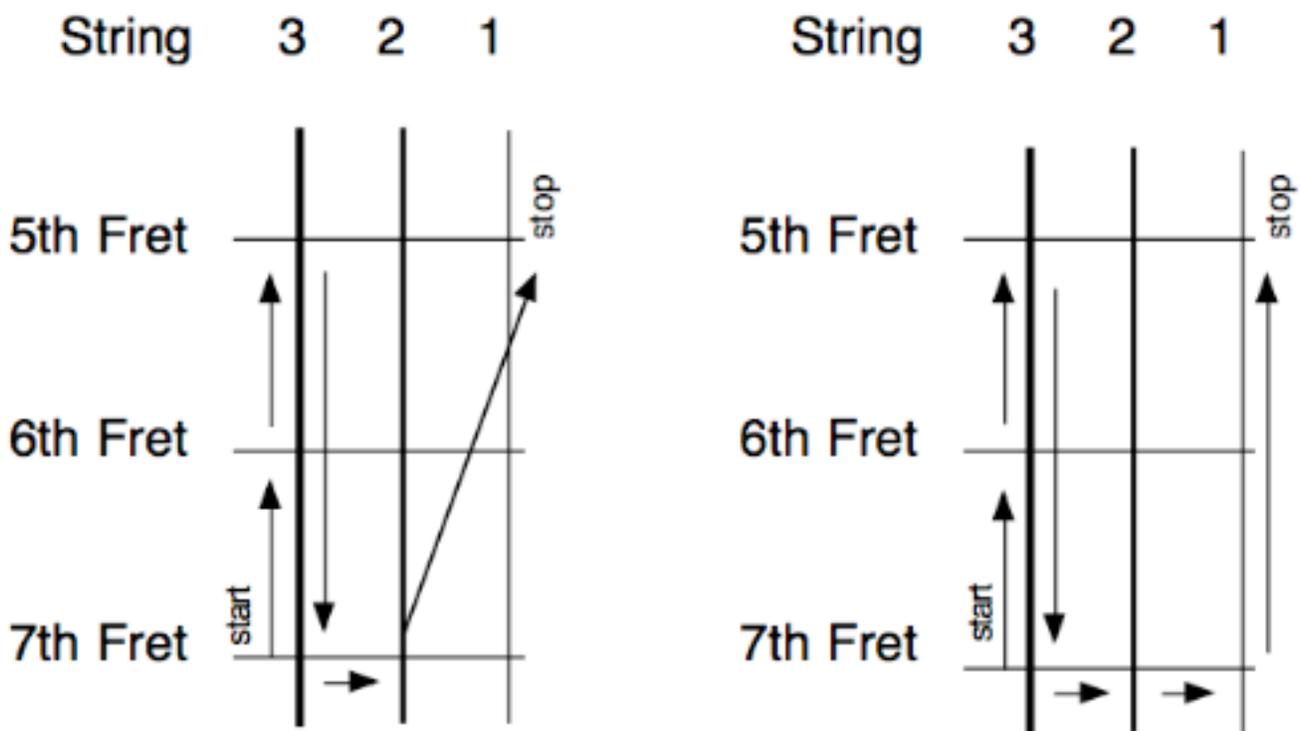
Now try combining the exercise for the left hand with this exercise, and count “one, two, three, four” as you move your bar from C position to F position, G position and back to C position. Now try this exercise as you play in the other keys.

Another Exercise is to try plucking only 2 strings simultaneously for each chord position. For example, try plucking only strings 2 & 3 as you play each chord in the key of C. Now try plucking only strings 1 & 2. Finally try plucking only strings 1 & 3. Listen carefully. You are playing the same chord positions each time, but the sound quality changes depending on which two strings you choose.

Playing Two Simple Hawaiian Kaholo (“turnarounds”) in G

One of the distinctive features of Hawaiian music is the kaholo or Hawaiian turnaround. There are many different kaholo. They usually come at the end of a verse or chorus, and are also often played at the end or beginning of a song, especially when accompanying hula dancers.

Here’s the “how to” for a couple of commonly played Hawaiian kaholo. The first note played is on string 3 with the bar on the 7th. The second note is played is on string 3 with the bar on the 6th fret. The third note is on string 3 with the bar on the 5th fret...Continue playing by following the arrows.



You can finish these kaholo by strumming a low G chord when you get to the “stop”. To amaze your friends, put your bar down close to the nut, and slide all the way up to the 12th fret. This produces the classic “Waikiki finish”. This long slide is very dramatic, but should be used sparingly. I generally reserve it for slow, “hapa haole” songs.

Playing with Others

So now you have the basics. What do you do to put them to good use? Often the biggest challenge for a beginning musician is knowing “what” to play. An excellent way to get around this problem, and to gain confidence and skill is to play along with another musician - preferably with a guitar or ‘ukulele, as these instruments will establish a rhythm. This frees you to concentrate on using your ear to tune into the chords that they are playing. Unlike the guitar and ‘ukulele, you will need your eyes to watch your bar, not the sheet music. Let your ears tell you which chords to play and which strings to choose. Remember the first rule in music: “If it sounds good, it is good!”

Some people prefer to play by themselves, and with a lot of practice it is quite possible to become a solo performer on the steel guitar. I personally prefer playing with other musicians, adding the unique flavor of the steel guitar to the group. I don’t try to strum or play continuously like a rhythm instrument would. I may play a few chords quietly if someone is singing, and play louder when I play “fills” between phrases, or when the singer is silent, such as at the end of a verse or during a “turn around”, and of course, during my solos.

I also find that people enjoy it when I **slide into a chord**. For example, if I am going to play a C chord, I put the bar down on the B position, pluck the strings, and slide up to the C position. Try this. It sounds very Hawaiian!

If a song contains **seventh chords** (C7, for example), I will pluck strings 2 & 3 in the C position, and then slide down two frets to the Bb position. This sounds very Hawaiian also!

If a song contains **minor chords** (Am, for example), I can either place my bar in the A position, and pluck strings 1 & 3, or I can place my bar 3 frets up the neck in the C position and pluck strings 2 & 3.

Using these few tricks, you will quickly find that your musician friends look forward to having you join them on steel! The following song is a real classic Hawaiian steel guitar tune that many people know.

Hanalei Moon

Words & music by Bob Nelson Source: Copyright 1974 Criterion Music Corp

 G A
When you see Hanalei by moonlight
 C D7 G D7
You will be in heaven by the sea (by the beautiful sea)
 G A
Every breeze, every wave will whisper
 C D7 G D7
You are mine; don't ever go away

G A
Hanalei, Hanalei moon
 C D7 C G
Is lighting beloved Kaua`i
G A
Hanalei, Hanalei moon
 C D7 G
Aloha nô wau iô `oe

Repeat from the top
Second time through, end with:

C D7
Aloha nô wau iô (pause)
C G (slide to high G)
Hanalei moooooon

Tips Regarding Hawaiian Music in General

If you are playing in the Key of:	Expect these chords in the Song:	Expect these chords in the Vamp:
G	G, C, and D	A7, D7, and G
A	A, D, and E	B7, E7, and A
C	C, F, and G	D7, G7, and C
D	D, G, and A	E7, A7, and D
E	E, A, and B	F7, B7, and E
F	F, Bb, and C	G7, C7 and F

Remember that the last chord in a song is the key that you are playing in at least 99% of the time.

Shyness is natural for some people, but don't assume that it is a permanent condition. It can be unlearned. It is much better to be grateful for whatever talent we do have, to enjoy that talent, and to share it with others. This attitude will allow us to make progress, to grow, and to overcome the fear that we are not "good enough".

Comparing oneself to another musician that you admire is a trap. No two humans are exactly alike, so it is natural that our music will not sound exactly like another person's, even if we love their music. Each person's style will appeal to a certain set of listeners.

It took me a while to appreciate my own style, but once you stop comparing yourself to others and realize that you have that unique ___Your Name Here___ sound, you will begin to feel like an artist.

May the steel guitar bring you great happiness! Aloha,
-Konabob