

Zen and the Art of Pedal Steel Guitar



by Gianni Rosdri

"I would love to play the pedal steel guitar, if I had another lifetime in which to play it. It's really a weird instrument... It's crippling if you think of it as some sort of mutated guitar; you have to erase the guitar entirely from your thinking."

JERRY GARCIA

Many of you may think of pedal steel guitars as "weird" music instruments of a very strange kind (to put it mildly), and chances are that some of you may have never seen or touched one of these "guitars". Actually, I will agree that pedal steel players are usually the least exciting musicians on stage sitting stone-faced and lost in thought, while playing something that few people recognize as a musical instrument until they hear it. But, the point is: I am sure that most of you are quite aware of the fact that Mr. Jerry Garcia himself did play some pedal steel guitar in the early seventies (... and how did he play it!). This intriguing paradox has led me to believe that starting this article could appropriately begin with a brief overview on the features of the pedal steel guitar before we go into discussing Garcia's own playing style. Those of you who don't want to hear about the ins and outs of this "bizarre" instrument may as well skip the next few paragraphs; we'll meet you further on shortly.

Well, for those who decided that it was about time to catch up

with "Development of Pedal Steel 101", you are now about to read much of what you've missed so far. The concept of playing a string instrument with a bar appears to have been adopted in the late 1800's by the Hawaiians; by 1935, an electric Hawaiian lap steel guitar was introduced by Gibson which used one of the earliest magnetic pickups. In order to overcome the obvious limitation of playing all notes in a straight line with the bar, the next step in the 1940's was to develop a system which could allow string pitches to raise and/or lower by the use of floor pedals. Since then, lap-steel and Hawaiian-steel guitars have also been called "non-pedal" in order to stress the main difference with the new member of their family. During the next decade many U.S. companies introduced double- and triple-neck pedal steel guitars (as well as non-pedal ones), thus enabling the player to use different tunings without having to shift guitars; later, knee-levers were added to pedals in order to provide an even larger combination of string "changes". Besides, "copedants" (from co = chord/ped = pedal: personalized combinations of peculiar tunings, pedal and knee-lever arrangements) were being devised by innovative players; they also transferred on to the pedal steel the slide and steel guitar "blocking" technique obtained by resting the palm of the right hand on the string(s) immediately after picking it. This "damping" technique allowed for a staccato-like sound, best suited for fast, breath-taking lines. Thumbpicks and fingerpicks were also introduced, made either of steel or plastic. The attack of the picked strings was mellowed out by the use of a volume pedal which the player would control with his right foot (imagine the poor player, literally embedded in an instrument affected by the slightest movements of his fingers, palms, legs, knees and feet!!) Even the "bar" itself underwent changes: the glass bottle-neck was substituted by bullet-shaped steel bars (with one rounded end for single-string passages); hollow bars were best fitted for fast playing, whereas the heavier ones helped to obtain a warm and thick tone from the instrument. Some accomplished steel players even started their own pedal steel guitar companies! Brands such as "Sho-Bud", "MSA", "Emmons" and "ZB" have since become among the most popular ones in the pedal steel guitar market. By the end of the sixties the pedal steel guitar had established its role as a fully-respected instrument in Country & Western music when apparently it began to attract the interest of many different young players outside Nashville musicians who had grown up listening to folk and rock 'n' roll music... what followed is well known: the pedal steel guitar became a key instrument for popular bands such as Poco (featuring Rusty Young), The Flying Burrito Brothers ("Sneaky" Pete Kleinow), Steve Nicks' Manassas (Al Perkins), the Eagles (Bernie Leadon), the New Riders (Jerry Garcia and Buddy Cage), and many others. Apparently though, the Nashville scene hardly absorbed anything from these "new" players, and it still continues to rely on a "traditional" playing style which was established by the earlier masters of the steel. Nowadays, the pedal steel may be considered as an instrument in transition. In the course of its brief existence, there have been countless ideas developed concerning its tuning and pedal arrangement; today many organizations are active both in America and in Northern European countries which allow thousands of young steel players to obtain information about their instrument by means of newsletters, conventions, recordings, seminars and courses. Before heading off for GarciaLand, I would like to spend one last word about one guitar player whom I believe almost re-invented the pedal steel playing altogether, thus reaching unprecedented peaks of creativity and of unbelievable great taste within the format of popular rock 'n' roll outfits: I am talking about Jeff Baxter, whose pedal steel playing graced several early recordings of Steely Dan and of the Doobie Brothers, among others. To me, he is THE guy I strongly suggest you to check out if you want to hear some of the best pedal steel in rock music.... (or, you can choose Jerry Garcia for the rest of the best....).

It seems like Jerry Garcia played the pedal steel guitar only for a few years in his career as his steel recordings date between 1969 and 1974. Having been a former banjo player he was in a way familiar with fingerpicking techniques, but the pedal steel stands worlds apart from the banjo - and if you've read the previous paragraphs, you may now start to realize why it does require such a unique approach. Before the New Riders formed officially, Garcia used gigs by Dawson (N.R.P.S.'s leader and vocalist) as an excuse to practice pedal steel, so by the time he played the instrument with any regularity live, he had mastered it to a degree. Actually, he appeared steadily at live shows with the New Riders from 4-May-70 to 17-November-71 until he was relieved by Buddy Cage (dates are as accurate as I can get); the New Riders were opening for the Dead then, and it's well known that Garcia (and occasionally other members of the Dead) used to join them. Their early sets consisted of material off the New Riders' long-awaited first album (it was released only in September, 1971), along with several popular tunes such as "The weight", "If you hear me when I'm leaving", "Lodi", "Honky tonk women", "Workingman's blues". The warm, round and thick tone of his pedal steel perfectly fit in with Dave Nelson's thin-sounding Telecaster phrasing, and their tones seemed to blend amazingly well. It's interesting to notice that tapes of his last shows with the New Riders feature Garcia playing steel in songs such as "Rainbow", "Hello Mary Lou", "Willy and the hand jive" and "Lochinvar" which the band would later record with Buddy Cage on the Powerglide album. (By the way, I must admit that I never heard or read about Garcia playing pedal steel live with the Grateful Dead, not even when he and the New Riders were opening for the Dead themselves! if you know more about this, please let me know). I believe that Jerry Garcia played the pedal steel guitar in ways which sounded as a natural extension and a complement to the melody of any song, by not distracting the listener's attention from the singing part. Maybe you will share my point after you try this experiment by yourself: listen to his beautiful playing on any of the tunes included in the discography at the end of this article and see for how long you can keep your attention focused on the pedal steel guitar exclusively, before you shift it on the vocals; this may sound strange at first (or even detrimental to Garcia's playing), but I really believe that this is one of the peculiarities which made his style so great and unique. In fact, his playing does indeed reinforce the song's melody, whereas most pedal steel players usually tend to "do-their-own-thing" while comping (something like clarinet players do in dixieland bands, soloing on top of the melody) which may as well be great, if you decide to listen JUST to the steel player in lieu of the song itself. Instead, Garcia was used to playing lines which would fit in with the vocal parts, always leading the ears of the listeners back to the song's core. Even Garcia's extensive use of the wah-wah pedal sets his playing apart from that of most other steel guitar players, who would never sacrifice the use of a volume pedal; actually, it's quite hard to use both volume and wah-wah pedals when your knees are controlling two or three knee-levers each, and your left foot is already taking care of about half a dozen steel guitar pedals (well, it's hard unless you have one extra leg and foot somewhere!). In those years, Garcia was often using a wah-wah pedal in conjunction with his regular electric guitar (just listen to his 1973 Keystone live albums with Merl Saunders) and he mastered the technique of smoothing out the attack of the note by releasing the pedal (deep tone) while picking the string, and then pressing the pedal (crispy tone) afterwards. When applied to the pedal steel, this technique helps to simulate the "bow" effect of the volume pedal, while at the same time adding that tasty wah-wah sound (listen to "Candy Man" on the "American Beauty" LP). It should also be noted that sometimes Garcia combined the wah-wah pedal with the use of rotating Leslie speakers, thus obtaining a sound similar to that of a Hammond organ (Rusty Young of Poco does that too). If you happen to see the movie "Fillmore - Last days", you will get a brief and rare glimpse of Garcia rehearsing pedal steel backstage along with the New Riders ... just enough to trigger your musical appetite! However, this otherwise great movie leaves you quite hungry; as a temporary relief, I strongly suggest you to quickly put NRPS's first album on the closest record player available and play it. Actually, I do consider this album as the best resumé of the pedal steel according to Garcia: there you have bouncin' C&W tunes such as "Glendale Train", "Henry" and "I don't know you" in which you can enjoy Garcia's amazing right hand-blocking technique (I still can't figure out how he does that, with one missing finger in his right hand!!). And from there you can go on listening to his peculiar Leslie-like phase-shifted sound on "All I ever wanted" and "Garden of Eden", appreciating his tasty fills and turnarounds in slow ballads such as "Portland woman" and "Last lonely eagle". And when you finally think you've heard it all, you'll be awe-struck and baffled in wonder of the spacey sounds and the eerie atmosphere which Garcia's steel conveys in "Dirty Business". This song alone makes you want to go back to the store and wisely buy a half dozen spare copies of the album as a legacy for next generations to come. Regardless of any obscure live recordings with the Dead (which I faithfully expect to surface someday), it is quite obvious that Garcia recorded some excellent steel with his main band. His earliest effort that I know of is on Aoxomoxoa; you can hear the pedal steel in "Doin' that rag" if you listen carefully back in the mix during the second part of the song (the task of listening will be a lot easier for those of you who have access to a tape of the Aoxomoxoa outtakes; there you will undeniably recognize the pedal steel on "Doin' that rag", although Garcia's lines sound naive and sometimes awkward when compared to his later works). In 1970 the Grateful Dead recorded Workingman's Dead and American Beauty, their acoustic gems. Off the first one is "High Time", a slow country lament enhanced by expressive steel guitar playing, sounding on this track like a wounded animal crying in distant hills. "Dire wolf" is a simply beautiful song featuring extensive steel phrasing: listen to it with headphones on, in order to fully appreciate the steel guitar track being panned between channels of your stereo. Apart from the already mentioned "Candy Man", the American Beauty album contains one song which has made me wonder for years: I don't know whether he originally did it on the electric or on the steel guitar, but perhaps you too may have noticed that his electric guitar soloing (with wah-wah) in live versions of "Sugar Magnolia" amazingly resembles his

pedal steel playing in the studio version of that song (also with wah-wah). Which one came first? Another appearance of Jerry Garcia on pedal steel is to be found on Bob Weir's "Ace" album in "Looks like rain": a very clean, "unprocessed" sound was aptly chosen for a song where the pedal steel plays counterpoint to the strings, through many suspended 4th chord changes (apparently Bob Weir must be very fond of these chords, as he has often used them in so many of his songs). I purposely left three songs at the end of this quick dissertation, each one for a specific reason which I believe deserves recognition:

- "The wheel" on Garcia's first solo album: the intro features what possibly is the most beautiful and spacey pedal steel guitar sound ever obtainable with human means. It does make sense to get a cd player JUST to listen to this song on the re-issue.
- "Teach you children" (on C.S.N.Y.'s Deja Vu, milestone album of American music) is easily the most famous song featuring Jerry Garcia's unique pedal steel licks. Apart from the beauty of this song by Graham Nash, the tune stands out for the tremendous impact it had on non-musicians who were first exposed to the pedal steel guitar, as well as on musicians who fell in love with this instrument. If you want, you may compare this with what Jimi Hendrix alone has done for the Fender Stratocaster guitar.
- "Pride of Cucamonga" on the Mars Hotel album (1974); this is where our journey ends, as there is no evidence that our man has since sat in front of a pedal steel again. This otherwise "mundane" song shows how, by the time Garcia decided to quit, his tone, pitch and right-hand blocking chops were really not bad for a musician whose main instrument was actually another one....

So many times I've thought "why doesn't he play steel anymore? Why can't we all hear him once again?"... my selfish claim, although understandably due to a devoted addiction which I share with countless Deadheads, may best be replied to by Garcia's own words, quoted here below from one 1978 interview with Guitar Player Magazine:

"I haven't played the pedal steel guitar much for quite a while, though I played it pretty steadily for about four years. I really got into it, but it kind of became an either/or situation: I found it very hard to play half the night with a pedal steel and a bar in my left hand and then switch to straight overhand guitar. The difference between a solid finger configuration and a moving arm, wrist and fingers was too great. It was painful to the muscles. I got to where I couldn't play either of them very well, and I realized it just wouldn't work. I don't consider myself a pedal steel player...."

Even though the last line is really too much for me to take, I will try and live with it. I hope that you may have thoughts to share about the subject of this article, and again I strongly encourage you to send in your own comments on Garcia's steel world as well as any information which I lack; for all this let me thank you all ahead.

Thanks to my friends:

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Jerry Garcia (playing with NRPS) at M.I.T. - 1970
Photo by Peter Simon