

Across the Pacific: The transformation of the steel guitar from Hawaiian folk  
instrument to popular music mainstay

by

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## II. Abstract

This project examines the transformation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century of the steel guitar from a Hawaiian folk instrument to a mainstay of American popular music. The steel guitar – here characterised as a prepared instrument and a performance style whereby a guitar is positioned face up on the lap of a seated player who stops the strings by means of a steel bar – is a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Hawaiian adaption of the Spanish guitar. Its original role was that of a solo and accompanying instrument in the performance of Hawaiian music, which was itself an ethnic music tradition that had developed under American and European colonial influences. Once Hawaiian music was exposed to Western audiences in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, its popularity grew rapidly and it evolved from an ethnic curiosity to a global popular music phenomenon. The steel guitar was at first synonymous with Hawaiian music, but just as the music became more global in its outreach, so too did the instrument itself. The steel guitar came to be gradually divorced from its original, ethnic Hawaiian context, and was incorporated steadily into a range of mainland American popular music stylings. This study examines the origins of the steel guitar, the evolution of early steel guitar style and the context in which the evolution occurred.

### **III. Declaration**

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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This study would not have been possible without the support of my dear wife, Jane.

## V. Notes on Transcriptions and Tablature

- All transcriptions of standard notation and tablature within this study are the work of the author unless otherwise designated.
- All transcriptions of steel guitar or Spanish guitar are notated an octave above actual pitch.

In the transcriptions that are designated as ‘swing’, the jazz convention of notating swung quavers as even quavers has been adopted for clarity and simplicity. In these cases the following applies.



Tablature is provided for selected transcribed examples throughout this study. It is used to identify and evaluate the style of performances. The determination of the tuning configuration is essential to the task of transcribing tablature. The tunings are also significant in their own right, as this study will show, and have a bearing on the origins of the instrument and also on the eventual decline of its popularity.

The process of determining tunings is a difficult one of trial and error. It is achieved through speculation as to the tuning in combination with close examination of given musical passages. The process of identification is complicated by a number of variables. These include the tuning itself, the possible use of reverse and/or forward bar slants, the combining of open and stopped strings and the identification of the steel guitar within ensembles of similar sounding instruments. The identification of a tuning from the analysis of single note melodies is the most difficult. A consideration of phrasing, bar movement, note timbre and volume provides indications though complete certainty is seldom possible. Where melodies are harmonised with dyads, the use of bar slants makes various tunings possible but, with careful consideration, assessment can be often made with some confidence. Where a performance employs full triads and bass notes, or five or six note chords, the tuning can be identified with much confidence. This study has benefited from the availability of digital

processing software created for the purpose of transcription that allows radical slowing of sound recordings that have been converted to the digital domain.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Transcribe Software' 2012. <http://www.seventhstring.com/xscribe/overview.html> (accessed 15 January 2013).