

SLIDE GUITAR: PLAYING A ROCK BALLAD IN STANDARD TUNING

Slidemaster Ry Cooder once said there ought to be a law against playing slide guitar in standard tuning. Well, I do it anyway, without guilt. As a player of ~roots music," I am used to breaking musical laws. In fact, I'm wanted by the music police for numerous violations. But it's true that slide guitar is usually associated with open tunings, and for a couple of good reasons:

- The Mississippi Delta blues players and other first-generation blues guitarists used open tunings.
- Slide is easier to play when you're in open tunings!

Still, slide in standard tuning has one big advantage: You don't have to retune your guitar to do it. On a gig or in a jam session, you can whip out the slide for a song and not hold up the show while you tune. This is important for those of us who can't just ask the roadie to hand us Guitar #3, the one in D tuning.

There are important precedents. Muddy Waters played slide in standard tuning most of his life...but always in the key of E. If he wanted to sing in a higher key, he capoed up (as high as the 8th fret) and still played those E licks. George Harrison, on the other hand, plays very tasty, souful slide guitar in standard tuning and isn't stuck to one key. Michael Bloomfield, famous for his amazing lead guitar playing in the Butterfield Blues Band and with Bob Dylan, played slide in any key, in standard tuning, and burned.

The secret is: find convenient chord positions. In my Mel Bay book/CD *Slide Guitar for the Rock Guitarist*, there's a chapter on slide in standard tuning. Let's take a look at a rock ballad/instrumental from that chapter and, in the process, learn some of those positions.

To start with, look at "A HIGHER STANDARD," below, and listen to if you own the book/CD (if you don't, buy several copies at your neighborhood music store).

A Higher Standard

Fred Sokolow

Standard Tuning
Slow Rock Ballad

Musical notation for the first system, measures 1-4. Chords: G, Dm, C, B \flat .

T: 12-12-12-12-12-12 | 12-10-10-12-10 | 8-8-8-8-8-8 | 6-6-6-6-6-6
A: 12-12-12-12-12-12 | 12-10-10-12-10 | 8-8-8-8-8-8 | 6-6-6-6-6-6
B: 12-12-12-12-12-12 | 12-10-10-12-10 | 8-8-8-8-8-8 | 6-6-6-6-6-6

Musical notation for the second system, measures 5-8. Chords: G, Dm.

T: 12-12-12-12-12-12 | 12-10-10-12-10 | 10-10-10-10-10-10 | 8-8-8-8-8-8
A: 12-12-12-12-12-12 | 12-10-10-12-10 | 10-10-10-10-10-10 | 8-8-8-8-8-8
B: 12-12-12-12-12-12 | 12-10-10-12-10 | 10-10-10-10-10-10 | 8-8-8-8-8-8

Musical notation for the third system, measures 9-12. Chords: C, B \flat , G, Dm.

T: 5-5-5-3-3-3 | 3-3-3-0-8-12 | 15-15-15-15-15-15 | 10-10-10-10-10-10
A: 5-5-5-3-3-3 | 3-3-3-0-8-12 | 15-15-15-15-15-15 | 10-10-10-10-10-10
B: 5-5-5-3-3-3 | 3-3-3-0-8-12 | 15-15-15-15-15-15 | 10-10-10-10-10-10

11

C B \flat G

T
A
B

14

Dm C B \flat G

T
A
B

You may have noticed that this 16-bar tune is really just a 4-bar chord progression, repeated four times. The lead guitarist (yours truly) improvised a variety of licks over this four-bar phrase in the key of G:

||: G | Dm | C Bb | G :||

Don't say it's simple minded! Dylan's "Knocking on Heaven's Door" and "I Shall Be Released," two classic rock ballads, consist of a four-bar phrase repeated over and over. "All Along the Watchtower" is a two-bar phrase... That's it! Simplicity is a GOOD THING in rock and roll.

To solo over these changes with a slide, you need some chord positions for four chords: G, Dm, C, and Bb. Slanting the angle of the slide is very tricky, so it's easiest to use straight-up-and-down positions, or mini-barre chords like these:

G Positions

12th 15th

C Positions

5th 8th

Dm Positions

10th

Bb Positions

3rd 6th 15th

Each of the above positions relates to a chord. That's what the chord grids tell you. For instance, the barred, three-note G position at the 12th fret is an abbreviated version of the full G barred chord

full barre = mini-barre full barre = mini-barre full barre = mini-barre

Before you tackle the tune, play a few slide licks with each of these mini-chord positions. Here are some examples:

The image shows a musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). It contains four measures of music. The first measure starts at fret 17 and features a slide from the 8th fret to the 6th, then back to the 8th. The second measure starts at fret 5 and features a slide from the 5th fret to the 3rd, then back to the 5th. The third measure starts at fret 8 and features a slide from the 8th fret to the 6th, then back to the 5th. The fourth measure starts at fret 10 and features a slide from the 10th fret to the 8th, then back to the 10th. Below the staff are five guitar diagrams showing mini-chord positions at frets 17, 5, 8, 5, and 10. Below the diagrams are three lines of tablature labeled T, A, and B.

T	8 6 8 8	5 3 5 5	8 8 6 5 5	10 8 10 12 10 8 10
A				10 12 10 10 12 10
B				10 10 10 12 10

Now try playing "A Higher Standard." Once you've done that, find some tunes you already know that have simple chord progressions and apply these same ideas to slide improvisation.

Have fun!

Fred Sokolow

