



## Getting Started with the Resonator Guitar

by [Phil Leadbetter](#)

In the overall guitar experience, there is nothing like getting started in playing the resonator guitar. It's always best to go ahead and buy the correct equipment from the beginning when trying to learn a new instrument, as having the right gear will make learning a less frustrating experience. The good thing is you don't have to spend a

ton of money on the good stuff. There are lots of inexpensive items that I use (even after all these years) that are still the best way to go. My reasoning is that you save money in the long run when you buy the right instrument and accessories because you don't have to keep replacing them.

Let's start first with the accessories that you will need. We'll discuss getting a guitar later in this column. Throughout, I'll be addressing the "bluegrass style" resonator guitar played with the instrument in the horizontal position using a slide and three picks. Assuming you are right handed, the slide is held in the left hand, and you will have fingerpicks on the index and middle fingers as well as a thumbpick on the right hand.

### **Pick Selection**

For the thumb, I recommend a pick that is very sturdy. A plastic thumbpick always sounds best. A metal pick is just too "scratchy" for my taste. You also need just a slight bit of flexibility, but not too much. My preferences are the Golden Gate Multi-Colors, the Dunlop Calicos (called "black and tans") or the tortoise colored Nationals. These picks seem to be the most popular among players today. There is also a pick called a "Zookie" which has an angled pick blade to compensate for an awkward attack on a string. The "blade" is the part of the pick that actually strikes the string. Always use metal fingerpicks. Plastic fingerpicks just don't sound good on a resonator guitar. These should be very firm, and the "blade" should not bend (or flex) very easily. Most of these picks are gauged by thickness or weight. I like the Dunlop .25s myself. I have used these since the 70s. Pro Pik makes a very good pick as well. These are the two brands that I recommend. There are others, but these seem to work best on the resonator guitar.

### **Slide Selection**

When selecting a slide, it is VERY important that you choose a "cutaway" slide. This type of slide has indentations along the sides that allow you to hold onto it easily and comfortably. In today's popular styles, there are lots of situations where the bar is lifted from the strings to attack specific notes. A cutaway bar will help you keep from dropping it. I use a Scheerhorn Slide, but for a beginner, a Dunlop "Lap Dawg" is a great choice for around \$25 as it's very similar to the Scheerhorn slide but less expensive. I would highly recommend the "Lap Dawg" as your first slide. It might even be the only one you'll ever need! There are other cutaway slides available such as the Scheerhorn Standard (around \$50.00), the Shubb-Pearse (around \$20.00) and the Stevens Steel (about \$17.00). There is a great new slide on the market called the "GS Steel". The GS Steel is custom fitted to your hand. It is a little pricy (\$50.00 or more depending on model), but this one is a real keeper! The higher-end Scheerhorn slides are made of solid stainless steel which means they will never wear out. Anyway, look around at websites such as Resophonic Outfitters

<[www.beardguitars.com](http://www.beardguitars.com)>, Elderly Instruments <[www.elderly.com](http://www.elderly.com)> or First Quality Music <[www.fqms.com](http://www.fqms.com)> to find most of these items at the best prices.

### **String Selection**

A resonator guitar requires slightly heavier strings than a standard acoustic guitar due to the wear placed on the strings by the slide. Some people prefer nickel-wound strings because they seem to have a long life. I have always preferred phosphor bronze strings because they have a "warm" tone to them. They sound really good on a wood guitar.

As with all strings, you can increase string life by taking extra time to wipe them off after playing the instrument. The string gauges I use are (from smallest to largest): .16, .18, .28w, .36w, .44w, and .56w. The "w" behind the last 4 strings denotes that these strings are "wound" strings. There are lots of really good string sets available. GHS, D'Addario, John Pearse and Black Diamond all make really good sets. NOTE: I like a .28w for the 3rd string. The reason is that anything lighter seems to wear out and start "buzzing" sooner than a .28w. This is due to the fact that the winding seems to loosen on the lighter strings when using a slide. The loose windings then start to buzz. On the other hand, anything heavier seems to lose "brilliance" due to the fact that a heavy string can't vibrate as well as a lighter gauge string. I have experimented for quite a few years with strings. Save yourself some headaches and try a .28w. It will save you money in the end because you will replace strings less frequently, and you will avoid those nasty "buzzes".

### **Now the Fun Part- Selecting a Guitar**

If you're just starting out, you won't need the most expensive resonator guitar ever made. In fact, you could simply place a raised nut on a standard guitar and play it like a resonator guitar. That's the way I started, and it was good enough to get me going.

There are a couple of very important points to keep in mind when purchasing an actual resonator guitar. The first thing you should learn is to identify the different types of guitars that are available. Here are a few:

**Square Neck:** This type of instrument is used for the bluegrass style that we will be discussing in this column. Again, this guitar is played in a horizontal position. The square neck helps to keep the guitar in tune due to the tension from the strings as well as the neck strap, which connects at the headstock on this style.

**Round Neck:** These are mainly used for "Spanish" style playing. The round neck allows for you to form chords and press the strings against the frets. These can be used with a slide, but the strings must first be raised with a riser nut which fits over the existing nut. Some people use round-neck guitars for horizontal playing, but it is not recommended.

**Slotted or Solid Headstock:** Slotted headstocks have openings where the strings connect to the tuning machine rollers. When held in the horizontal position, the tuning keys usually face upward (vertically) on these models. By contrast, solid headstocks have no openings and the tuners usually face to the side (horizontal).

**Pros and Cons of Slotted vs. Solid Headstocks** It is easier to adjust the tuning of a guitar with a slotted headstock due to the fact that the tuning keys stand vertically. The downside is that the strings are harder to change than on a guitar with a solid headstock. In my opinion, guitars with solid headstocks stay in tune better because the solid structure is less affected by barometric changes. Anyway, the choices are pretty much a personal preference or simply a cosmetic issue.

## **Other Variables:**

**Wood Body:** These guitars are the best for playing in the horizontal position. The wood tone is the best for most playing styles and offers a "warmer" tone. I have always played a wood-body guitar, as do most bluegrass players.

**Metal Body:** Metal body guitars are most often used in the "Spanish-style". Most are played fretted, or sometimes with a bottleneck slide. The metal body style is often used by blues resonator players.

**Sound Well Guitars:** The first Dobros® (resonator guitars) built in the late 20's had sound well designs. A sound well is basically a circular well in the body with openings to let the sound escape. The well is not visible unless you take the cover plate or screens out of the guitar. The cover plate is the large round metal cover that makes up a large section of the guitar top. The screens are the two circular screen holes that look like speakers on either side of the fretboard on the guitar's top.

**Baffle/Soundpost Guitars:** This design came about in the late 70s to early 80s. These guitars have NO sound well, but have sound posts that transfer sound from the top to back of the guitar. The "baffle" is used to divert air movement thus preventing unwanted tones from escaping. Like the sound well guitar, you can't tell what the internal structure is like without removing the cover plate or the screens. These types of guitars are usually louder than the sound well guitars, and are preferred by most of the bluegrass players today. I prefer a baffle/sound post design as well.

There are many great resonator guitars available on the market. Gibson now owns the Dobro® name, and makes quite a few different styles of guitars. They even build my "Phil Leadbetter" Signature Guitar which offers a baffle/soundpost design. Other companies that manufacture resonator guitars include Crafters of Tennessee, Regal and Goldtone to name a few.

Then you have the "custom-built" resonator guitars. These instruments are usually priced much higher than manufactured guitars and are suggested for those who are at the "next level" in their playing, or those who want to invest in a one-of-a-kind instrument. Most custom resonator guitars are hand-built, one at a time. Some of the most popular builders are Beard, Scheerhorn, Wolfe, Harlow, Clinesmith, Harper, Meridith and Guernsey, to name a few.

The guitar you decide on is totally up to you. There are lots of resonator instruments out there to choose from, and many of these companies and custom builders have websites to assist you in your search.

With these essential items in hand, you should be ready to go. Next month we'll get started on playing this thing.

So long until next month,  
Phil