



A Brief History of the Resonator Guitar

by [Phil Leadbetter](#)

Here it is November, and things are finally starting to slow down a bit on the music end. This month I want to discuss the history of the Dobro® guitar so you can be a little more familiar with this great instrument.

The Dobro® was invented in the mid-1920's by five Czechoslovakian brothers. Ed, Rudy, John, Bob and Louis Dopyera began experimenting with aluminum cones called "resonators". These cones were installed in regular acoustic guitar bodies in attempt to amplify the sound. The Brothers created the name "Dobro" by using part of their last name "DO-pyera" and added the word "bro" as in brother. The word Dobro® became a new element in the music vernacular. These first guitars were marketed through large mail order outlets. These guitars were produced under the names of "Dobro", "National" and "Regal" during the 1920s and 30s. During World War II, metal became very scarce, and the government did not allow nonessential items to be manufactured with metal due to the war effort. Dobro also produced metal-bodied guitars during this time as well, but due to the fact that the Dobro's main parts were made of aluminum, the factory closed down.

In the early 1960's, Ed Dopyera opened up a new shop in Long Beach, California producing Dobro® guitars. The company was called "OMI" (Original Musical Instruments). In the mid-1990s, Gibson USA bought the Dobro® name, and moved operations to Nashville, Tennessee. The name was changed from "OMI" to "OAI" (Original Acoustic Instruments). Dobro® guitars are now being built at the Gibson Showcase at Opry Mills which is right next door to the Grand Ole Opry complex.

Up until the time that Dobro® was purchased by Gibson, the word "Dobro" was used to describe all guitars that used a resonator. The word "Dobro" just became the slang name for this instrument pretty much like the word "Kleenex" did for tissue, or "Xerox" did for copy machines. Gibson decided that since they had purchased this name, and it was a trademark, they ordered all the builders who had been using this name to describe their instruments to cease using it. It was then that names such as "resonator guitar" and "resophonic guitar" became the politically correct name to identify these instruments. Some people have even called them a TIFKAD guitar, an anagram which stands for "The Instrument Formerly Known as Dobro"- Just a bunch of folks being creative I guess.

The unique element of the resonator guitar is, of course, the resonator (or "cone") itself. In the early days of Dobro®, the resonators were stamped in a press. These cones were made of aluminum. These days, most of the players prefer a "spun" resonator. These are made by applying aluminum wire to a resonator form as the form is rotated. The aluminum wire builds up on the form to create a "cone". These cones are very thin, and have an almost speaker-like effect to them.

There are two main types of bridges used in the resonator guitar. One is called the "biscuit" bridge, and the other is called the "spider" bridge. The biscuit bridge is actually a bridge that is connected directly to the resonator through a wood block attached to the center of

the resonator. The most common bridge type with most "slide" players, however, is the spider bridge.

The spider bridge is made of aluminum and has several protruding legs. The spider has a slot where a two-piece bridge (usually wood) is inserted. The spider is attached directly to the resonator, and a center screw which connects through the middle of the bridge holds it secure. The reason for the "two-piece bridge" is to allow for this screw. The screw is tightened only enough to prevent the spider bridge assembly and the resonator from buzzing. Once the assembly is connected and becomes a single unit, the sound transfers easily from the bridge into the resonator. There is a "special art" to doing the spider bridge/resonator setup on one of these guitars. It is best to leave this task to a professional. I still take my guitars to a pro builder to do my setups.

Another feature unique to the resonator guitar are the two "screens" which are on each side of the strings near the end of the fretboard. Many players used to think that these were merely "cosmetic", but we have now found that the screens are actually very important in the sound of this guitar because it allows for the movement of air. Some players actually take the screens out of the guitars to allow unrestricted airflow. Removing the screens also changes the bass response in most guitars.

The resonator guitar is more popular today than ever; there are many custom builders who are "pushing the envelope" with new designs that are changing this guitar and seem to be constantly improving these instruments.

I hope you enjoyed this month's Dobro® history lesson. In December, it's back to some tablature!

BTW.....I was just voted "Dobro® Player of the Year" at The International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) convention in Nashville, Tennessee! I also won an award for "Best Instrumental Recording" for my CD Slide Effects!!

See you next month,
Phil