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Tuning!

'The SAGA continues!!!!'

A contribution to...

"My History of Tuning the Pedal Steel"

...by Al Brisco

Disclaimer: Before treading into the deep waters of this 'Tuning' subject, let me state that 'Opinions are like noses....everybody has one', so therefore we should all agree to disagree & use what's best for your purpose.

From my 45 years of playing pedal steel, here's what works for me.

Before the advent of the electronic tuner, we simply tuned by ear from a reference note from such things as pianos, tuning forks, etc.

Back in the 1970's some influential pedal steelers such as Jeff Newman, Tom Bradshaw, etc. developed a tuning chart for the pedal steel with the introduction of the (Korg) Electronic Chromatic Tuner. This version of tuning chart (as still viewable in such publications as the Mel Bay Anthology of Pedal Steel by DeWitt Scott), has the 4th & 8th strings (root notes) of the E9th tuning tuned with the needle on the meter 'straight-up' to the center point of 440 Hertz (0 Cents).

NOTE: When tuning a regular lead or rhythm guitar or bass, all the strings are tuned 'straight-up' to the center point...440 Hertz or '0' Cents. NOTE: There is virtually no string on a pedal steel that is tuned 'Straight-Up to the center point (440 Hz or '0' Cents) on electronic tuner. Since the pedal steel uses a tempered tuning...(with no adjustable bridge, etc.) we compensate by tuning the other strings in relation to our root notes. These tempered 'Tuning Charts' are readily available. For instance, I supply one with every pedal steel that I sell.

Now, here's where my story begins....

Around 1977 I was playing with Johnny Burke & Eastwind (considered the top country band in Canada at the time). I discovered that when I tuned my pedal steel to that 'original 440 Hz' tuning chart that, yes my open 'E' chord was in tune with Joe Howe's electric guitar, however when I pressed my A&B pedals on the E9th neck, my 'A' chord was flat to the open 'A' chord on the lead guitar.

I then started tuning my 3rd string 'A' note with the A&B pedals engaged to an 'A' on the electronic tuner & ear-tuned my open 'E' (4th string) to this 'A' note, then continuing to tune the rest of the strings by ear to these reference notes.

NOTE: You can view a copy of my 'Ear Tuning Method' from the 'Tuning Setup Charts' link from my home page or directly from this link:

<http://www.steelguitarcanada.com/tunings/AI%20Brisco%20Ear%20Tuning%20Method.htm>

A Change Is Made...

During the 1970's & '80's, most every pedal steeler was using that original '440 Hertz' tuning chart. In the early 1990's while attending Scotty's convention in St. Louis I encountered a conversation between a pedal steel player & Jeff Newman, in which Jeff was being contested on the correctness of this original '440 Hertz' tuning chart.

Of course, anyone who knew Jeff would accept that it was 'his way or the highway'...I lovingly called him 'A Banty Rooster'...ha...ha.

Anyway, Jeff was defending this original tuning chart, stating 'We've been doing it this way for years!'

At this point I stepped into the conversation, & reinforced the other steel player's position that when he used this original tuning chart he was flat to the lead

guitar & other instruments. I then proceeded to offer my solution...that is to tune my 3rd string 'A' note on the E9th tuning with the A&B pedals engaged to the A-440 Hertz ('0' Cents) position, etc.

Well, within several months after this encounter, Jeff published a rebuttal in his 'The Pedal Rod' newsletter, stating...Ooooooops!!! (We've been doing it wrong). He starts his article by stating, "Last year at the Texas Steel Guitar Convention I was corrected about the 'tempered' tuning numbers I have been putting out for years.

(NOTE: I really think it was at Scotty's convention, however it really doesn't matter. By the way, if the pedal steeler who remembers having this conversation with Jeff & myself should happen to read this article, I would really appreciate having him contact me.)

The New (& Present) Method:

The current popular tuning method (with some variations) that Jeff Newman (along with other input) developed from my theory (& probably other's), is the one we commonly share with everyone today. It has the 4th & 8th open 'E' strings on the E9th tuning tuned to 442½ Hertz (= +9 Cents), with the remaining strings tuned in relation to this.

This tuning method was designed as a generic model to compensate for various brands of pedal steels. If your guitar has more or less body collapse, you should adjust your personal tuning chart to suit your own guitar. You can even purchase the Peterson VS-F Strobe-Flip strobe tuner which as all the E9th & C6th tuning settings built in, both in the open tuning as well as with the pedals or knee levers engaged.

This is why I tune the E9th neck on my pedal steels by tuning the 3rd string with the A&B pedals engaged to an A-440 pitch. I find that this way your guitar is 'bang-on' with the open 'A' chord on an electric or acoustic guitar. Yes, your open 'e' chord will be a tad sharp to the other guitars, but your ears will like it a lot better than the open 'A' chord being flat.

Follow-up....

It wasn't till recently that a good friend of mine (Denny Mohan) brought it to my attention that another mutual friend, Rick Dunn had asked Jeff at one of Scotty's conventions where he had come up with the idea of this modified 'sharpened' tuning method, & Jeff replied... **"Some 'Nut' in Canada told me about it"**...an example of Jeff's typical humour. Unfortunately, Jeff is no longer with us to verify this information.

Summary...

No doubt, these tuners have assisted in developing better ears with players being more in tune with each other.

Another friend of mine has a profound statement...."All this talk about body collapse is 'out the window' as soon as the player puts their bar on the strings".

There were many great recordings made on less than perfect pedal steels & never any mention of body collapse before the invention of the electronic tuner! Guess what?...the good players use their ears & are always compensating with their tone bar to play in tune with the rest of the band.

Happy 'In-Tune' Steeling!

NEW Resource DVD **(coming soon)**

"Care & Feeding of your Pedal Steel Guitar"

by Al Brisco and Joey Ace



Al Brisco repairing a pedal steel in his store

Joey Ace has again assisted me in producing a Resource DVD containing instruction & explanation of many aspects of playing & maintaining a pedal steel that we feel needs to be presented.

Some of the topics covered to assist the Beginner to Advanced player include:

- assembling the pedal steel & how to take it out of the case & put it back in;
- how to replace strings;
- tuning your pedal steel;
- lubrication of both top & bottom;
- pedal height adjustment;
- proper cross-shaft movement;
- pedal & knee lever stops;
- balancing pulls & minor set-up explanation;
- 1/2 Stop explanation;
- Tunable split explanation;
- minor Push-Pull tuning explanation;
- volume pedal pot replacement;
- & more.

DVD

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