

Hot and Sweet

The role of the Hawaiian steel guitar in the emergence of western swing

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Abstract:

Although the origins of the steel guitar are irrefutable, historians have been loath to attribute much of the art of western swing steel guitar to Hawaiian influences. First applied to the inceptive stylings with which Bob Dunn cemented the position of the instrument in the western swing ensemble in 1935, this prejudice does not survive a close examination of the evolution of steel guitar style in the 1930s. This paper will show how prominent steel guitarists of the South West drew on innovations and stylings from a dynamic Hawaiian music scene that was evolving simultaneously.

Good morning. I am very pleased to be here and would like to thank James Akenson and Don Cusic for giving me the opportunity to speak. I am also grateful for the support of the University of Adelaide, my faculty, the Elder Conservatorium of Music in getting me here.


My address today concerns the influence of the tradition of Hawaiian steel guitar on southwestern steel guitarists as western swing took shape in the 1930s. The content is drawn from my current research project and is informed by my master's thesis. Sweet and hot refers to a number of things; the two extremes of the swing era as characterised by the sweet arrangements of Guy Lombardo on one hand and the hot jazz of Goodman and Ellington on the other. This range is mirrored in the diverse repertoire of western swing and again, in Hawaiian music of the 1920s and 30s where sweet evocative tunes contrast with hot hapa haole numbers. And crucially, it is applicable to the expressive range of the steel guitar, a range that has been exploited by players throughout the instrument's history.

In a nutshell, I argue that Hawaiian influences, that have previously received little recognition, run deep within the styles of the western swing steelers in the 1930s. It is not my intention to make a definitive statement on the influences of early steelers, but merely to open a discussion that admits a wider range of possibilities than has so far been canvassed.


This paper has two distinct sections. In the first I will examine the music of Bob Dunn, the father of western swing steel guitar and the leader of a generation of southwestern players. I want to bring to your attention what seems to be an overlooked aspect of Dunn's legacy, and that is the extent to which Dunn was influenced by his Hawaiian peers. In short, Dunn is a missing link that helps us to understand the second part of my argument today - which concerns the subsequent generation of southwestern players and how the evolving Hawaiian music scene provided models that were adopted by steelers as western swing matured.

It begins in late 1934 with Dunn, the first western swing steeler and, as Kevin Coffey puts it, a colossus of the steel guitar. As a pathfinder, Dunn both initiated amplification in country music and positioned the steel guitar at the front of the emerging western swing ensemble, a prominence that the instrument would maintain in country music for many decades.

Using a Volu-Tone pickup attached to his acoustic guitar, Dunn was an integral part of Milton Brown's efforts to modernize the sound of his ensemble the Brownies. He injected jazz flavoured solos into the band's dance music that turned heads all over the southwest. Never before had a steel guitar sufficient volume to advance to a dance band's frontline and the overdriven sound of his amplified steel was a revelation.



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By Using the Volu-Tone on Your Guitar."*

18

Oahu Publishing Co. catalogue, 1935

Let's hear an example from his first session with the Brownies in Jan 1935.

<https://soundcloud.com/guy-cundell/ex-1-icmc-2018>

You're Tired of Me

swung 16ths
High A Tuning

Milton Brown and his Brownies
C-9724-A
Chicago, Ill, 28/1/35
transcribed G Cundell 2018

♩ = 80

1.26

6 11 17 23 27

F A⁷ D⁷ G⁷ C⁷ F A⁷ D⁷ G⁷ C⁷ F A⁷ D⁷ G⁷ C⁷ F

N.C.

Dunn is viewed in the literature as an exceptionalist who broke the mold by transforming the steel guitar from an instrument of sweet diatonic tradition into a hard-edged band instrument, drawing influences from jazz wind players and, particularly, trombonists.

However, a detailed examination of Dunn's recordings reveals not just a soloist, but an adaptable sideman who was able to fill disparate roles. While Dunn's hot solos have grabbed attention, his playing across the Brownies' catalogue, and recordings of many others, is both **sweet** and **hot**. As much an accompanist as soloist, Dunn matches musical affectation to the requirements of each song. With technical mastery, he evinces the wide range of expression of which the instrument is capable, always in the service of the music.

Let's return, for a moment, to the common perception of Dunn's style and how it evolved. The first scholarly scrutiny of Dunn, in Bill Malone's *Country Music USA* has been extraordinarily influential. Informed by an interview that he conducted with Dunn in 1966, Malone advanced a jazz wind instrument analogy, declaring that Dunn played the steel guitar like a horn and concluded that he had moved the instrument "dramatically away from the chorded Hawaiian style". In subsequent commentary, this characterization became the norm with few references to other influences anywhere. The portrayal became even more entrenched following Cary Ginell's 1994 book, *Milton Brown and the Founding of Western Swing*, where Dunn's contemporary, Red Varner, advanced his private theory that Dunn's trombone technique had influenced his steel playing. The trombone theory was promoted by Ginell and others and is now *de rigueur*.

As a steel player with some trombone experience, I was skeptical when I first read these claims but it is no easy task to assay musical influences in the absence of word from the subject. Fortunately Dunn's word is available in the form of handwritten notes of Malone's interview with Dunn in which appear comments that didn't make it to the book. Three pages of nine are devoted to Dunn's seminal influences. Dunn first mentions an admiration of Sol Ho'opi'i, the most prominent of Hawaiian steel guitarists, known both for his sweet Hawaiian stylings and hot jazz solos. Mention is then made of Frank Ferera, early Hawaiian steel guitar hero and the most recorded of the first generation of players. Dunn recalled learning at least two of Ferera's tunes from recordings. Furthermore, Dunn declared that his jazz technique had been developed by playing demanding Hawaiian marches, tunes that I note were often laced with ragtime rhythms in early recordings.

One of Malone's salient observations was that Dunn maintained a life long campaign to make the steel guitar a jazz instrument or, in Dunn's words, a 'modern' instrument. Judging from the notes, the jazz emphasis is Malone's. His **notes** record that Dunn wanted to make steel guitar part of modern music, a term that could apply to the entire range of the Brownies dance-oriented repertoire, from hot to sweet.

A significant note that follows records Dunn's admiration for Bob Pano'ele of the duo Jim and Bob, the Genial Hawaiians who broadcast for years from Chicago's WENR. Dunn states that Pano'ele was the first real Hawaiian steel guitarist that he admired and that he played "modern".

Only twelve recordings of Jim and Bob are known to exist, made in 1933. I have chosen two excerpts to hear today. The first is a solo from 'By the Waters of Minnetonka' that demonstrates Pano'ele's rhythmic sophistication in a jazz vein. Played on an acoustic National Tricone, Pano'ele employs bold syncopated phrases and staccato articulation, equivalents of which can be identified throughout Dunn's hot solos.

<https://soundcloud.com/guy-cundell/ex-2>

By the Waters of Minnetonka

not swung

♩ = 136

Jim & Bob, The Genial Hawaiians
77333-1, BB B-5944
Chicago, IL, 12/12/33
transcribed G Cundell 2017

steel solo: Bob Pauole

1.12

A second example, the final chorus of 'Song of the Range,' represents a high point of steel guitar expression in the acoustic era. One can see how Dunn could have been inspired the fluidity, invention and superb technique of this piece, which is deeply impressive even by contemporary standards.

<https://soundcloud.com/guy-cundell/ex-3>

The Song of the Range

Jim & Bob, The Genial Hawaiians
77332-1, BB B-5316
Chicago, IL, 12/12/33
transcribed G Cundell 2017

steel solo: Bob Pauole

♩ = 108

The musical score is written for a steel guitar solo in 3/4 time. It consists of six staves of music. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 108. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and triplets. There are also some unusual notations, such as a '5:4' time signature change in the second staff. The score is transcribed by G Cundell in 2017.

It is instructive to compare the last two examples with one of Dunn's more lyrical solos from his 1935 session with the Brownies. While the context is entirely different, there are glimpses of Pano'ele's modern style evident in the rhythmic control and smooth transition between differing note subdivisions.

<https://soundcloud.com/guy-cundell/ex-4>

Shine On, Harvest Moon

swung 16ths

steel solo: Bob Dunn

Milton Brown and his Brownies

C-9728-A

Chicago, Ill, 28/1/35

transcribed G Cundell 2018

♩ = 62

1.33

5

9

13

In summary, the characterization of Dunn's style as one largely derived from jazz horn players is inadequate. Dunn was a well-schooled Hawaiian steel guitar player who had developed extensive technique over a professional career that had begun in 1927. There is no question that he absorbed jazz influences but, given his comments to Malone, it is evident that they were derived, at least in part, from the stylings of Hawaiian steel players.

As for the trombone technique theory, in his interview with Malone Dunn stated that he began playing trombone in 1934. My study of 170 recordings across Dunn's 15 year recording career reveals that his style was mature when he began with Brown in January 1935 providing him with scant opportunity to absorb trombone technique. I must conclude, therefore, that the proposition has no merit whatsoever.

Through the Brownies success in the southwest, Dunn's influence was immense. Bandleaders scrambled to find players who could emulate his style and many answered the call. Players mimicked the hot elements of his style but Dunn had set the bar high. Some persisted with flawed imitations while others began to develop their own individual styles.

But it should be noted that when Dunn auditioned for Brown in late 1934, it was on an acoustic instrument. So the mature style displayed in recordings of January 1935, despite amplification, had been developed acoustically. Even his famous composition 'Taking Off' had been composed on acoustic. Employing the High A tuning favoured by Hawaiians since the late 1920s, Dunn's syncopated phrasing and staccato-dominated articulation referred back to the steel players of the acoustic era. So those who sought to emulate him were also unwittingly looking backwards.

But a new direction was to come from those who learned to harness the advantages of amplification.

Two notable Dunn disciples, Noel Boggs and Leon McAuliffe, went on to national fame. Initially, both were greatly influenced by Dunn but they evolved very different styles that eclipsed that of their mentor. Boggs' musical transformation is hidden. After his Dunn-flavoured sessions with Hank Penny in 1939, he passes out of our sight for five years, playing with Jimmy Wakely and his own ensemble in Oklahoma. He reemerged on recordings with Bob Wills in 1945 to reveal a new highly developed style. I have been unsuccessful in a search for any of his recordings in the interim but I believe they could tell a fascinating story.

In contrast, Leon McAuliffe's metamorphosis is documented in recordings with Wills in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

McAuliffe had idolized Dunn and was encouraged by him. Dunn allowed him to sit in for him on occasion and promoted him to Wills. McAuliffe's early style was clearly modeled on that of his hero.

In this example from 1937, 'White Heat', McAuliffe evokes the energy and forward motion of Dunn's hot monophonic solos.

<https://soundcloud.com/guy-cundell/ex-5>

swing

E Maj Tuning

♩ = 260

White Heat

solo: Leon McAuliffe

Bob Wills & his Texas Playboys

058 DAL 212,

Dallas, 7/7/37

transcribed G Cundell 2017

1.36

E♭

6

A♭

E♭

B♭

11

E♭

16

A♭

E♭

21

B♭

E♭

TAB

In this next example from 1938, McAuliffe again mimics Dunn using Dunn's A major tuning. His staccato phrasing and some of his rhythmic motifs are straight from the Dunn playbook. At times he encounters some of the same problems of maintaining fluency at a brisk tempo that Dunn had experienced with Brown.

<http://picosong.com/wcMsd>

swing

High A Tuning

You're Okay

Bob Wills & the Texas Playboys

126 DAL 634,

Dallas, Tx, 29/11/38

transcribed G Cundell 2017

♩ = 266

solo: Leon McAuliffe

0.55

B \flat

C 7

F 7

B \flat

C 7

F 7

B \flat

A \flat^7

3

3

D \flat^7

G \flat

F 7

B \flat

C 7

F 7

B \flat

At some point, between the recording of the previous example in November 1938 and the date of the next example I will play, April 1940, a change began to engulf McAuliffe's style. It was as if he had come to a realization that hot improvisations were not imperative. Perhaps this was a lesson learnt from the success of 'Steel Guitar Rag' in which the steel guitar's role is purely one of melody and improvisations are left to other instruments. However, subtle but unmistakable parallels can be observed between McAuliffe's emerging style and the Hawaiian steel guitar sound that had been developing in the 1930s where the electric steel had also been widely adopted.

In this scene, the steel was no less prominent than in western swing but it played a different role. A typical Hawaiian song format of the era saw the melody first presented by steel guitar, which was then followed by a vocal rendition. The richness of the sound of steel guitar melody was paramount. The Hawaiians exploited the sustain inherent in amplification with harmonised legato melodies of full tone and evocative inflection. Improvisations, though still a significant ingredient, took a back seat as rich sonorities were enhanced by new more complex tunings. As an example, here are the first few bars of Pau Rose played by David Keli'i.

<https://soundcloud.com/guy-cundell/ex-7>

E7 tuning

♩ = 52

Pua Rose

steel guitar solo: David Keli'i

Al Kealoha Perry
and his Singing Surfriders
MacGregor MAC- 119-2
prob. Los Angeles, c 1938
transcribed G. Cundell

The musical score for 'Pua Rose' is presented in two systems. The first system contains 9 measures, and the second system contains 10 measures. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb). The score includes a treble clef staff with a key signature change to two flats, and a guitar staff with fret numbers. Chord symbols are written above the staff: Ab, C7, Fm, Eb7, Ab, E, B, C#m, Eb, Eb+, Ab, Eb, Ab. The guitar staff shows fret numbers for each string (E, A, B) and includes a capo symbol at the end of the second system.

In 1940, an emphasis on sound also becomes discernable in McAuliffe's performances. In 'The Lone Star Rag', McAuliffe employs a C#m tuning, a Hawaiian invention of the mid 1930s. The impression is that of a carefully composed solo as an alternative to the risky improvisations of earlier years.

<https://soundcloud.com/guy-cundell/ex-8>

swing 16ths
C#m tuning

Lone Star Rag

Bob Wills & his Texas Playboys
134 DAL 970-1
Saginaw, Tx, 15/4/40
transcribed G Cundell 2017

solo: Leon McAuliffe

♩ = 106

19 19 17 15 17 19 12 10 8 15 15 15 14 15 13
18 18 17 15 17 18 11 10 8 15 15 15 14 15 13
17 17 17 15 17 17 10 10 8 15 15 15 14 15 13

8 C A7 D7 3

12 8 19 18 19 17 15 17 19 10 10 10 10 9 10 9
11 8 16 17 18 17 15 17 18 10 10 10 10 9 10 9
17 16 17 17 17 10 10 10 10 9 10 9

13 G7 C

8 1 3 3 3 3 3 5 8
8 1 3 3 3 3 3 4 8
1 3 3 3 3 3 3 4 8

Before I looked closely into McAuliffe's transformation I surmised that it might have taken place after the Playboys began their regular visits to the West Coast. I thought the change may have occurred while McAuliffe was in LA, the crucible of Hawaiian styles from which Joaquin Murphey was soon to emerge, but no. This all happened in the southwest. Without evidence, we can surmise that McAuliffe's sources were recordings and radio broadcasts of Hawaiian music but given his use of Hawaiian tunings, it would seem that his efforts were considered rather than just shallow mimicry.

The next example, from 1941, demonstrates what appears to be improvisation that relies on the more conservative device of paraphrase rather than Dunn's preferred method of abstract or harmonic improvisation. It is a much less risky endeavor that allows the player to concentrate on sound and articulation, an advantage that McAuliffe uses to good effect. Swinging hard, the predominately

legato articulation contrasts with Dunn's staccato approach resulting in a smooth and relaxed line of great force. The tuning McAuliffe employs here is A6, a Hawaiian innovation of the late 1930s.

<https://soundcloud.com/guy-cundell/ex-9>

swing
A6 tuning

New Worried Mind

Bob Wills & his Texas Playboys
149 DAL 1170
Fort Worth, Tx, 24/2/41
transcribed G Cundell 2017

♩ = 168

The score is written for a double-neck guitar in A6 tuning (E, C#, F#, E, C#, F#). It consists of four systems of music, each with a treble clef staff and a guitar tablature staff. The first system (measures 1-4) starts in E-flat major and changes to A-flat major. The second system (measures 5-8) changes to F minor. The third system (measures 9-12) changes to E-flat major. The fourth system (measures 13-16) changes to B-flat 7. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and accidentals, as well as guitar-specific notations like fret numbers and bends.

The final example I have is of McAuliffe fully immersed in his new style in 1942. Whether this solo is composed or improvised is moot but its organization and unhurried nature suggest the former. Here he employs the two tunings of his double neck instrument hopping seamlessly between necks mid-phrase as can be seen at the end of the first system. You can hear a slight discrepancy in volume as the switch is made. This is the earliest instance of this technique that I have documented. He also utilizes the emerging electronic technique of 'boo-

<https://soundcloud.com/guy-cundell/ex-10>

*boo-wah: manual manipulation of tone control ∞: removal of attack with volume pedal

I am grateful for having the opportunity to conduct this research and it is my pleasure to share these early findings. Thank you.

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