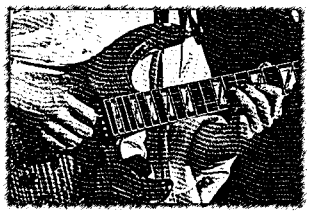


BENDING

It cries, laughs, sings, moans, wails, screams, whispers, talks... descriptions that come from the most common, and undoubtedly the most idiosyncratic technique in modern guitar playing. Along with vibrato, it's arguably the most fundamental building block in constructing your personal sense of a physical "style" in playing electric steel string lead. What we're talking about is *BENDING*.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Figures 1 and **2** illustrate the two most common bends. **Fig. 1** shows the 3rd finger pushing the G (3rd) string up a full tone, and **Fig. 2** portrays the 3rd finger pulling the 3rd string down, again raising the pitch of the note by a full tone.

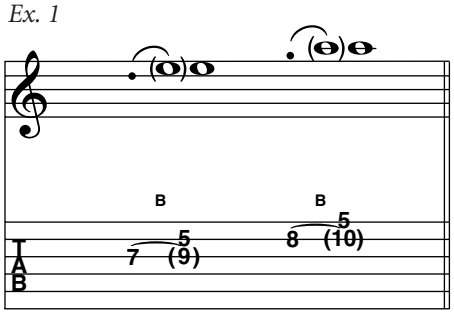
There are some other specifics in the pictures - notice how the 1st and 2nd fingers are in behind the 3rd finger, both fretting down and helping out on the bending action of the string, while remaining in their respective, consecutive frets. Some players often forego using the 2nd finger behind the 3rd to push the bend up in this particular circumstance, as they find that the 1st finger alone provides enough stabilizing behind-the-scenes support. Likewise, they often skip using the 1st when pulling the G string down. In **Fig. 2**, notice how the 2nd finger has a tendency to slide to the front part of the fret space, and tuck itself up lengthwise to the 3rd finger. That's how one achieves the extra strength and stability needed to accomplish the bend, and then to CONTROL it, either by holding it, putting some vibrato on the note, or releasing it at any chosen speed to suit the phrasing of the musical passage being played.

You can also see that the thumb has come up and hooked over the top of the fingerboard, providing a position of strength for the controlled power necessary to accomplish this squeezing and string-stretching movement.

Figure 3 shows the **Fig. 2** pull-down action of the bend from another angle. Check out how the position of the left hand has rotated almost a quarter turn, so that the fingertips are almost sideways on the string, and the joint where the 1st finger meets the hand is banging up hard and tight against the bottom side of the neck and fingerboard. This provides a solid pivot point for the bending action, and any subsequent vibrato movement that might take place. (Check the "Vibrato" chapter in Book Three, The Basic Brainstorming Book.)

When to push, and when to pull; that is the question. The answer is that it's really up to you, but obviously, some circumstances logically dictate one direction over the other. In **Ex.1**, for instance, to accomplish these "unison" bends, where the 3rd string gets bent up to match the pitch being sounded on the 2nd, and the 2nd string gets pushed up to match the pitch being sounded on the 1st, it would

Ex. 1

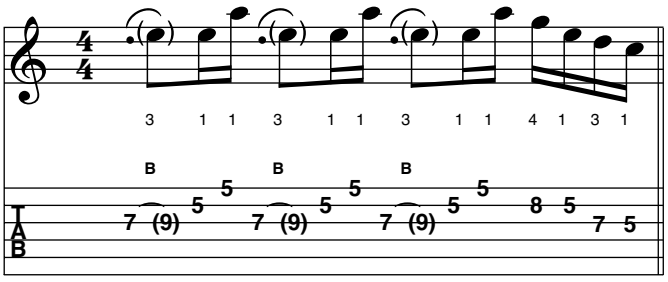


Continued • • • • • •

be practically impossible to achieve the same sonorous effect by bending with a pull-down action. By the same token, experimentation can sometimes provide interesting results.

Ex. 2 is an old Chuck Berry-esque chestnut of a lick: if you employ a pull-down action on the 3rd string bend, it slides over and gets muted by the tip of my left hand's first finger, which is laying kind of sideways across the 2nd and 1st strings, awaiting their subsequent plucking. That 3rd string gets muted at the instant of releasing the bend, too. So, in this instance, the pull-down action provides an interesting, unintentional by-product: articulation.

Ex. 2



Articulation is one of the most difficult and critical aspects of any technique, but bending in particular. Looking at **Fig's. 1** and **2** again, you can see how the action of bending the string just runs it over into the adjacent ones. How do you keep them from sounding if you don't want them to? (Check out the next chapter, entitled "Muting and Damping: How Not to Play Stuff".)

The trick is that you must use the exposed fleshy tip of your principal bending finger's callus (the one that's fretting down on that bending string) to touch and push against the SIDE of adjacent strings, WITHOUT pushing them down into contact with the frets so that they'll actually make any sound. When you're pulling to bend a string down, it's the fleshy pad on the back of your finger just below the callused tip that provides the muting function. The angle at which your fingers contact the string is the crucial element here: if the string "action" on your guitar is adjusted low, and the finger angle where you bend is too flat, i.e., rotated too far down and around to the back of the neck, you're going to get some unwanted string noise.

Which is not to say that sometimes it can't be a cool effect: the wide vibrato on the first note that grows into feedback at the beginning of Hendrix's "Foxy Lady" has plenty of intentional adjacent string rattle noises. One of the sublime moments in Jeff Beck's version of "Pork Pie Hat" from "Wired" is a repeating, crying overbend that's pushing into the adjacent string way up the neck, creating a really unique-sounding de-tuned unison. But we're not really discussing exceptional exceptions here, in a book about basic technique, are we? Most of the time, basics can serve our musical and artistic purposes most admirably - and that's what this book is all about. We'll get around to some of the fancy stuff somewhere down the line, right?

They say a few pictures are worth a few thousand words. Okay, look at **Fig. 4**. Now, most players use the bending technique illustrated in **Fig. 5**, where you can see the 4th finger bending the B string up and the upper part of the callused fingertip pushing INTO the adjacent G string. But being largely a "self-taught" guitarist I always preferred to use the **Fig. 4** technique, keeping the bending finger a little more erect as I pushed the bend upward across the fingerboard, so that the nail of my bending finger slid UNDER the adjacent string (or strings).

Fig. 4

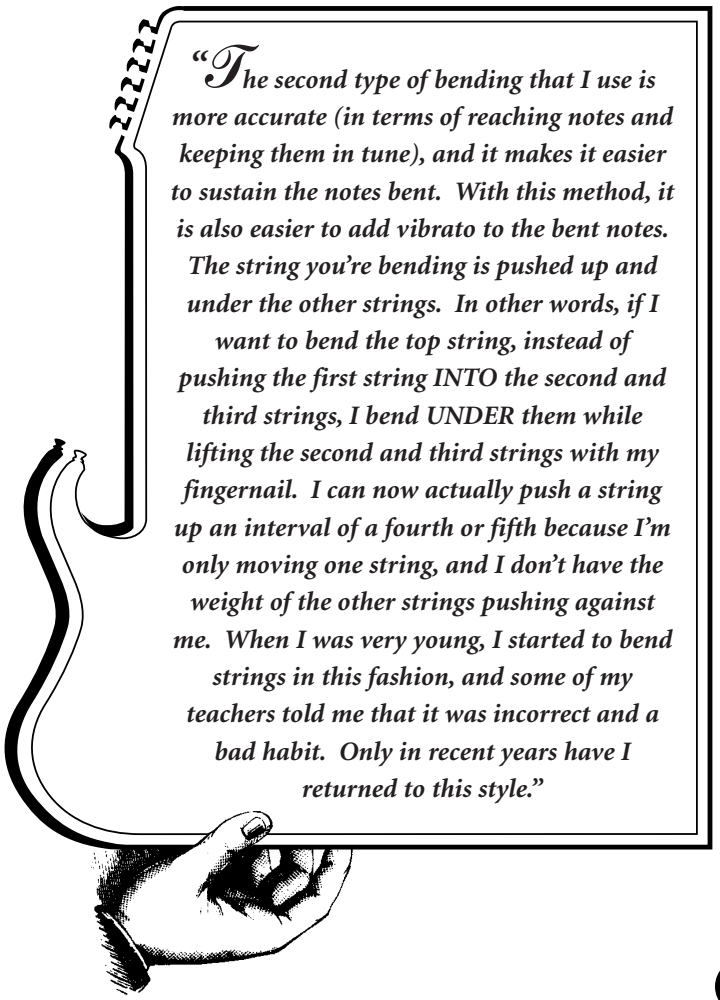
Fig. 5

Continued • • • • • •

Everyone's Self-Taught

The term "self-taught" is in quotation marks because, as with many casual labels, it's misleading. As renowned guitarist and educator Mick Goodrick has said, "...people learn in their own way." Most of my guitar education didn't come from academic institutions or paid private instruction (still doesn't). But guitarists whose experience includes a more formalized education are still, in a very real sense, "self-taught" players, and always will be. How we learn depends on what we personally choose to digest from the world that spins ever faster and closer around us.

Speaking of which, back to the advantages of this bending technique, and an interesting point of view on "self" instruction. Here's Mr. Lee Ritenour from a GUITAR PLAYER magazine (Miller Freeman publications) column he wrote in September of 1979:



"The second type of bending that I use is more accurate (in terms of reaching notes and keeping them in tune), and it makes it easier to sustain the notes bent. With this method, it is also easier to add vibrato to the bent notes. The string you're bending is pushed up and under the other strings. In other words, if I want to bend the top string, instead of pushing the first string INTO the second and third strings, I bend UNDER them while lifting the second and third strings with my fingernail. I can now actually push a string up an interval of a fourth or fifth because I'm only moving one string, and I don't have the weight of the other strings pushing against me. When I was very young, I started to bend strings in this fashion, and some of my teachers told me that it was incorrect and a bad habit. Only in recent years have I returned to this style."

And there you have it: simple words, but at the time they were an epiphany for me. Discovering that paragraph (with accompanying photo, worth a thousand words, at least) let me know that I was not alone, that there was a completely rational method in my madness. Even now, it reassures me about learning. Of course, there are qualifications to be made here, as there are in most technical approaches.

- This technique isn't too good for players with big, thick fingers. However, if you've got monster hands, you've probably got enough strength that you can make the conventional technique work for you.

- It's obviously easier to get under adjacent strings if your action is set high. I know that a lot of modern two-hand tappers like their action as low as possible, so that may preclude your ability to give this approach a decent shot.

Fig. 6

- Look at **Figures 6 and 7**, and you can see why I have calluses on my CUTICLES.

Fig. 7

Despite these potential drawbacks, you should give this little idea a try. You'll find it less tiring, and a welcome relief late in a tough piece, or late in a set. Look at **Figures 6 and 7** again, and notice how in **Fig. 6** the 2nd and 3rd fingers, and in **Fig. 7** the 2nd and 4th fingers, are "flying" away from the board, straightening out. (This little quirk exists in Eric Clapton's technique, too.) These positions for fingers that aren't actively involved in string-fretting are a completely inadvertent reaction to what the other fingers are up to, but they offer tremendous relief from that tense, cramped, burning feeling that so often turns flying fingers into hands of stone.

Continued • • • • • •

The Courage of Instinctive Convictions

Do you think your unconscious choices reveal anything about your psychological makeup? Hmmmm... well, again from that seminal 1979 column:

> ***"For the most part, I do not bend the strings downward except for the sixth (low E) string, which cannot be bent upward. Besides, bending downwards gets confusing, since the first string always has to be bent upwards. Still with me?"***
>
> Lee Ritenour
> (Guitar Player magazine, Miller Freeman publications, Sept. 1979)

Still "with" him, but personally, not buying this approach. That's okay, though: one of the most important lessons to be learned from his words is to have the courage of one's own technical and musical convictions, as long as you have a sense that they're bearing artistic fruit. And so, it's no big sacrilegious deal if I report that, for the most part, I do not bend most strings UPWARD, except for the 1st and 2nd (E and B) strings, which haven't got enough fretboard to accommodate the pull-down bend. For all the rest of the strings, I just naturally prefer to pull 'em down, and I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because I'm dextrosinistral, (a natural southpaw who writes with his right hand, not to be confused with someone who is fully ambidextrous), and therefore perhaps a little right brain dominant. Now, here's a thought: you know the way water has a tendency to circle down the drain in a counter-clockwise direction in the southern hemisphere? Consider for a moment that some natural (unconscious, or subconscious) tendencies are like geophysical realities, or even universal inevitabilities! Yoicks! *Gettin' too cosmic for ya?*

Okay, never mind, let's just cut to the graphics. Check out **Figure 8**, pulling down that wound 4th (or D), which has considerably more tension than the plain, unwound strings. You'll notice that the first finger has slid up into the same fret as the second finger, in behind the third, and that all three fingers are wedged tight together like pigs in a blanket. It's the Three Musketeers approach to getting a big bend accomplished.

Fig. 8

Now look at **Fig. 9**. It's the same principle at work here, except sometimes those big wound string bends require all Four Musketeers on deck, hauling metal together. In fact, notice how the third finger isn't even really in contact with the bent string in question, as much as it's backing up the 2nd and 4th with rear support.

Fig. 9

Fig. 10 is included to illustrate that bending is not something to be confined to your strongest and longest middle fingers: numbers 1 and 4 can do some really cool things, too. Notice how the hand has rotated down and almost vertical to the plane of the strings. This leveraged position is excellent for that "B.B. King" blues vibrato that has come down to us via Clapton, Santana, etc.

Fig. 10

Continued • • • • • •

Fig. 11

Fig. 11 shows a full tone bend at the 2nd fret. Just like the heavy tension problems you encounter when bending the heavier gauges of strings, the closer you get to the nut, the tougher it gets. Fortunately, the fret spaces are wider there, too, so it's easier to fit two or three piggies into the blanket and make 'em work together.

Fig. 12

Finally, **Fig. 12** is included to reiterate a preference for the "nail-under-and-lift" bend up technique. It's easier to get those really big loopy "over"-bends of intervals like a third, fourth or even a fifth.

The picture shows the 8th fret 2nd string A note being bent up to the equivalent of the 13th fret C note, a fairly common overbend of a minor third interval. This also shows what happens in terms of finger positioning sometimes. Let's assume, for example, that in this case there was an A Dorian scale in the VIIth position being played, and the A note provided the launch point for the bend up to the C. Notice how the first finger has slid up from the seventh fret position it would normally occupy for the scalar activity, in order to provide strength support for the bending done by the third finger.

T E C H N I Q U E
should be
A C T I O N
FOR A REASON,
not unreasonable action.

Remember that BENDING is a physical expression of an emotion, or an intellectual, musical thought. Remember that ANY method or technique is a means to an artistic end. As such, it is always worth re-considering and re-examining in order to maintain the bond between the ACTION and the REASON. BREAK IT DOWN, and, by all means,

KEEP IN TOUCH...