Learning Dobro®
Rolls
by Phil Leadbetter

It seems impossible that I'm already writing my fourth "Resonator Guitar" column for Guitar Sessions®! I have really enjoyed reminiscing and refreshing my memory of old concepts, and re-examining questions I had as a beginner learning to play this instrument. One memory that really sticks out with me is when I first started learning to do "rolls". I learned the rolls early on as I began to play the resonator guitar. I remember practicing my rolls on my desktop during class in high school. Well, here it is 30 years later, and I still find myself unconsciously tapping out forward rolls on my office desk while I write this month's column.

Rolls have to be almost unconscious or automatic to render them effectively. The only way to get to that point is through repetition. I used to keep a set of resonator picks in my pocket at all times. Many times as I drove to work each morning, I would put these picks on and practice "rolls" on the seat of my car along with the local radio station. Rolls feel as natural to me today as riding a bicycle. The rolls we are going to learn this month are called "forward rolls". Forward rolls start with the thumb, then the index finger plays followed by the middle finger. Then the thumb moves up one string and repeats the same process.

The 1st line of tab below shows the forward roll out of the "G" (or open) position.

The 2nd line of tab shows the same roll in the "C" position.

The third line of tab shows same roll into the "D" position.

The 4th line returns the roll back to the "G" (or open) position.
Keep playing these rolls over and over and work to increase speed. More important than speed though, is to play the rolls cleanly. Work to get the roll clean-sounding as you increase your speed. When I say "clean", I mean without major pick or bar (slide) noise. You should also pay close attention to the downward pressure you apply to the slide. If you don't use enough force, you will create "buzzing" sounds or "rattles"; if you apply too much pressure, you will stretch the strings out of tune. The key is to find the point where the "rattle" of the slide is eliminated. Only practice will help you learn the right "touch" or proper amount of pressure needed to get the best tone. It's all in the touch! The more you practice the above rolls, the better your touch will become on this instrument.

Mastering the roll is a matter of ongoing practice. Like I said, I still practice them, if not on the guitar itself, then on a tabletop or car seat. Now then, the rolls I do on tabletops only serve to develop my right or picking hand. To develop the right touch you need to apply rolls as often as you can on the actual resonator guitar. It takes both hands to make that happen!

Phil