

RUDIMENTS OF SLIDE TECHNIQUE: LEFT HAND POSTURE

I'm a card carrying member of the school of blues that understands that noise is a part of the signal. The slide is like another voice. Think of the vocals of Koko Taylor or Ray Charles. Think of the bottlecaps loosely nailed to the rim of the djembe. Noise is emotional. Noise is okay. But either the noise controls you, or you control the noise. I teach and practice the later. Noise happens: when and where I want it.

I have seen professional slide players with their hands in positions like **Figure C** and **Figure D**. Noise is an inescapable part of their hand posture and so, their style. If that's cool with you, fine. If you want to be the master of your fate/sound, read on.

As you've figured out by now, when you simply put a slide on the strings of the instrument: you lose control.

We take that control of the instrument back by muting. The slide only divides the string, it doesn't mute it. So both segments are free to vibrate. At the 12th fret (octave) this is fine: they're equal length. Everywhere else, it's a problem. One note goes up while the other goes down and they are not in harmony. Unless you're scoring horror films you're going to want to mute the back (headstock side) segment of the string.

This muting is done by 'dragging' a finger or two behind the slide in order to silence the unintended notes ringing behind the slide [see **Figures A & B**]. Your knuckles should be flat, your fingers relaxed (this is the hard part) and barely—only sufficient—touching the strings.

Your thumb should be parallel to your fingers and slide, touching the guitar in the middle of the back of the guitar neck [**Fig. A**]. This position will make a nice controlled vibrato easier. Your hand basically is forming a U-joint into which you slip the guitar neck. You should be able to easily slide your hand in this position up and down the neck and also across the neck—taking in all the strings for a chord or playing just on the high strings while leaving the high strings open.

Be attentive to where your thumb is as you move your hand around the neck. If you let it remain behind when you move your slide up the neck [**Fig. D**], your thumb joint will lock and you won't be able to play vibrato. At all. If your thumb remains close to parallel to your other fingers and the slide, you can use its open joint to swing on the string and create a nice, fat vibrato. You'll fail at this if your thumb is locked. Trust me. (You haven't got it yet? The check went out last week...).

A lousy vibrato will eventually cause you to stop playing slide. When you practice this hand position, let your muting fingers lightly 'sand' the strings of the guitar behind the slide as the slide is moving on the strings. Develop your vibrato slowly, try to relax your arm, your shoulder, your hand. If you practice this hand position carefully, it'll come.

After you get relaxed in this new hand position, try lifting your thumb off the neck or playing with your hand in the position of **Fig. C**. Your arm and shoulder will tense up all the way to your ears. This is another reason to learn correct hand posture. I don't mind working hard, but I relax whenever I can. I recommend it. Having the guitar neck at about a 45 degree angle off horizontal (or vertical) will make it all easier.

