

## Cindy Cashdollar

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Article by Andy Ellis

Known for her lush, vibrant tone and impeccable intonation, Cindy Cashdollar is one of the planet's finest lap slide guitarists. She has played with Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson, the Dixie Chicks, Dolly Parton, and Merle Haggard, and she earned five Grammy Awards as a member of the swinging Asleep at the Wheel. Equally at home picking a vintage Dobro, an old National resonator guitar, or laying down fat horn voicings on a tripleneck 8-string steel, Cashdollar is a master of bluegrass, gutbucket blues, honky tonk, swampy R&B, and Western swing. Cashdollar visits each of these worlds in her long-awaited debut solo album, *Slide Show* [Silver Shot]. Joined by Dobro master Mike Auldridge, pedalsteel legend Herb Remington, slide guru Sonny Landreth, and Jefferson Airplane and Hot Tuna cofounder Jorma Kaukonen, Cashdollar explores the full range of slide sonics, from sweet and sassy to gritty and growling and all points in between.

(side bar)

### **Velvet Shimmer**

One of Cashdollar's favorite instruments is her Electro Hawaiian Model 1, build by Southern California luthier Bill Asher. Inspired by Weissenborn hollowneck acoustics from the 1920s, Asher designed the Electro Hawaiian for Ben Harper in 1998. Built from Honduras mahogany and routed with cylindrical body chambers, the 25"-scale lap slide guitar features a figured koa top and fretboard, a curly maple bridge with an aluminum saddle, an ebony nut, Gotoh tuners, and a nitrocellulose lacquer finish. Its two custom humbuckers are connected to a 3-way toggle switch and master volume and tone controls. The latter's pull pot is wired to split the pickup coils. "My Asher sound amazing," says Cashdollar, "like rich, dark velvet with shimmer on top. Finally – a Weissenborn sound you can hear onstage."

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### **Was it a challenge to make this work?**

Two slide players is a dangerous concept. What's the definition of a half-step? Two slide guitarists playing in unison [*laughs*]. The potential for disaster is real, but there's an advantage, too, because you both have leeway to adjust your tuning. Fortunately, the players who join me on *Slide Show* all have great pitch and know how to listen. To avoid getting a big mish-mash of notes, I made sure our instruments were panned apart in the mix. That way listeners could hear how we spontaneously responded to each other's playing.

### **So you recorded fact-to-face, as opposed to having your partners add their parts to pre-recorded tracks?**

Like a chain letter? I hated the thought of doing this album that way. Actually, you need to be face-to-face when playing such an unforgiving instrument as slide guitar. You have to watch your partner's body movements, and be able to feel the air around him

to sense what he's going to do. For that reason, we recorded all the tunes live – though I went back and redid a line here and there.

**The album's dual-slide work is unusually intricate. Did you spend a lot of time working out the arrangements?**

Not really. I could only get these people on the fly, which is why this record took three-and-a-half years to finish. We had a small budget, so there wasn't time to get together with anybody in advance of the session. We'd go into the studio and slog it out as we went along. One exception is "Sliding Home," a beautiful tune originally recorded by Jim Weider [on the album *Big Foot*]. I knew it would be way too difficult to do without come advance planning, so I sent the track to Sonny [Landreth] along with an arrangement I'd charted out – complete with "you are here" areas marked with highlighter [*laughs*]. He was familiar with the music before he came to Austin to record it.

**What tunings did you each use on "Sliding Home"?**

Sonny tuned his Strat to open *D* [*D, A, D, F#, A, D*, low to high], and my Campbell 6-string lap steel was in Dobro open *G*, which is *G, B, D, G, B, D*.

**That's higher tuning than the open *G* guitarists typically use.**

Yes. Actually, on "Spanish Fandango," you can hear both tunings. Steve James tuned his National Resophonic Style EN to the "guitar" open *G* [*D, G, D, G, B, D*], and I tuned my 1929 National Tricone to Dobro open *G*.

**Whether playing acoustic or electric slide, you always use a tonebar and a lap-style technique, correct?**

Right – through my first instrument was guitar, and the first slide I heard was John Fahey playing bottleneck. Even when I picked up the Dobro and started to play with a tonebar, I was listening to bottleneck music. Then I discovered Mike Auldridge, and I got involved with bluegrass. I'd see him at festivals all the time, and he became a huge inspiration. He was my idol when I was learning Dobro. Ironically, if it weren't for Mike, I wouldn't be playing steel. When he got an 8-string resonator and recorded *Eight String Swing*, it made me want to add more strings, too. I got an 8-string steel, and I began to explore the world of Western swing.

It was a thrill to have Mike play on *Slide Show*. I asked him to surprise me by bringing a couple of tunes for us to work out in the studio. He had his 8-string Deneve resonator, which has a big range. It was a creative challenge for me to come up with 6-string resonator parts to play in tandem with his. Once we took a few minutes to go over the two songs, it became clear what voicings each of us should use, who would take the low road and who would take the high road, and where one of us needed to back off a bit to let the music breathe. Having listened to him for so many years, I knew his phrasing and timing, so it wasn't too hard to work around his lines. I'd watch his shoulder, and I's know when he was going to lay into it. For "The Other Woman in My Life," I played by Paul Beard resonator tuned to open *G*. On "Keep My Hear," I used by tobacco sunburst '37 Dobro Model 27 tuned to open *A* [*A, C#, E, A, C#, E*]. That Dobro is the first resonator guitar I owned.

**Some resonator guitarists – including Jerry Douglas and Rob Ickes – stick to Dobro-style instruments with wooden bodies. Others, such as Bob Brozman, favor National-style metal-body reso instruments. Tell us why you play both.**

I love the different sounds so much. The Nationals are a little grittier and organic with a gutbucket appeal. The original tricone models – they type of Nationals I play – don't sustain as much as a Dobro, so they're a bit funkier. If I think something needs a little dirt rubbed on it – even a country track where it's less expected – I'll use the National. The Dobro is a little sweeter, and it can be really pretty. But I don't think these differences should dictate or limit the musical context. A funky blues might sound great with a Dobro. To me, music is like cooking – a mix of sweet and sour – and these different resonator tones are my spices.

**In addition to the guitars you've already mentioned, what other instruments play a key role in your music?**

I have a new National Baritone Style 1 Tricone, which I posed with on the album cover. Such a beautiful low end! For the baritone, I use the same Dobro *G* tuning, but dropped down to open *C*, *D* or *E*. I also have a Bill Asher Electro Hawaiian that's the most amazing instrument I've ever owned. It sounds like an amplified Weissenborn. And it records great. I just used it on the new Ryan Adams album, *Cold Roses*. The Asher stays in open *D*.

As far as traditional steels, I love my old double-8 and triple-8 Fenders. I own a modern triple-8 Remington Steelmaster, and I had its George L's pickups custom wound to Fender specs for a brighter tone. I run all my electrics through a new Fender '65 Twin Custom 15 – a Twin Reverb with a single 15" speaker. I'm thrilled with the sound. It's the perfect amp for non-pedal steel.

**Do you use many stompboxes?**

For overdrive on "Sliding Home" - my duet with Sonny – I used an Ibanez TS9DX Turbo Tube Screamer that he gave me. I generally don't use pedals in the studio, because I find they compress the sound – and there's already enough compression thrown on the tracks after you've done your job. Instead of using pedal distortion, I often run a lap steel through a small combo amp. On "Something I Can't Do," for example, I cranked up a tweed '61 Gibson GA-20 Crest to get a gritty sound. I always use an Ernie Ball volume pedal with my steels.

**How do you approach miking your resonator guitars in the studio?**

Every room is different, so I like to take time to experiment. I'll play and have the engineer move the mic around until we find the sweet spot. Often that's down by the lower bout, pointing at the edge of the coverplate. When I want a sound that's condensed and bassy, I'll move the mic away from the cone and more toward the neck. On my hollowneck Weissenborn, I'll use two mics – one up at the neck and another over the soundhole.

**What about your tonebar and fingerpicks?**

For my acoustics, I have a custom tonebar that looks like a Stevens, except, instead of being square, the tip is rounded like a bullet-nose steel bar. The round end makes the transition from string to string so smooth. This bar has indentations like a Stevens – so you can hang on for dear life – but it's much heavier, and it has a heat-treated matter finish that doesn't nick. With the lap steels, I use a John Pearse Thermo-Cryonic round bar with a  $\frac{1}{2}$ " diameter.

I use a John Pearse Vintage Thumbpick – it has a small tip, which I prefer to a typical thumbpick's larger tip – and I wear Dunlop .0225-gauge nickel-silver fingerpicks on my index and middle fingers. They're indestructible and won't bend out of shape. And

I put John Pearse strings on all my guitars. The specific gauges for each tuning are listed on my website [[cindycashdollar.com](http://cindycashdollar.com)].

**Who do you listen to for inspiration?**

It varies from day to day, but [jazz trumpeter and vocalist] Chet Baker has been my mainstay for years. I simply can't get enough of his phrasing and tone. I listen to a lot of bossa nova. My favorite is the record Stan Getz made with Joao Gilberto, *Getz/Gilberto*. I'm enjoying David Alvin's latest DC [*Ashgrove*] and Ben Harper with the Blind Boys of Alabama [*There Will Be a Light*]. I can't forget Daniel Lanois' beautiful *Shine*. It made a big impression on me.

**Now that you've completed your debut album, what advice do you have for anyone contemplating a similar journey?**

When you go into a studio, it's tempting to make it this tremendous undertaking. Some people decide to record difficult material because they think it's cool, or they hope it will impress the world, But, it's always better to choose songs you're comfortable with. You can sit there and Pro Tools all you want, but the music will never feel right unless you're comfortable, and ultimately, that's what listeners care about.

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