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SLASH & BURN

A Slammin' Slide Lesson with Eric Sardinas

BY ANDY ELLIS

Dressed in a crushed-velvet suit and wearing a Stetson, Eric Sardinas spins on his boot heels and sends his long, glistening braids twirling in the colored stage lights. As he lashes the strings of his battered Washburn acoustic-electric resonator with his brass slide, the audience at B.B. King's Blues Club whoops its approval. Last night, they watched King celebrate his 78th birthday—and the gala opening of his new Nashville venue—with an evening of soulful classics. Backed by a nine-piece band, and joined by ace pickers Steve Cropper, Larry Carlton, Lee Roy Parnell, and Vince Gill, King took the crowd “way, way back” to the dawn of electric blues. But tonight, blues lovers young and old have gathered to witness another side of this music's ongoing evolution, as Sardinas drags timeless Delta riffs through the blast furnace of amped-up rock and roll.

It's an amazing sight. Armed exclusively with a twangy 6-string resonator—an instrument most audience members associate with the likes of Son House—and accompanied by a pumping drums-and-bass rhythm section, the lanky, tattooed, 6'2" showman delivers a fast-paced set of adrenaline-drenched blues. But because Sardinas cranks through a Rivera half-stack and displays a penchant for crunchy, feedback-

laced tones, his wicked solos evoke Jimi Hendrix and Duane Allman, even as they pay homage to Charley Patton and Elmore James.

An hour before showtime, the soft-spoken Sardinas sat with GP, sharing his techniques and demonstrating the slide riffs he used on his latest album, *Black Pearls* [Favored Nations]. Produced and mixed by the legendary Eddie Kramer, the disc is packed with taut grooves and snarling resonator tones.

FIELD TRIPS

“I first heard slide on a compilation album of field recordings,” recalls Sardinas. “I bought it at a used record store with my lunch money. Slide guitar sounded so powerful and inspiring, I continued to explore country blues from the Mississippi Delta and Texas, as well as Chicago-style electric blues. I learned by ear, doing the best I could to crudely play what I heard—and felt—in those recordings. Early on, I was drawn to the tone of a resonator guitar. I knew that was my voice.”

For most of his songs, Sardinas uses two classic blues tunings—open G or open D—but with a twist. “I put a capo on the 2nd fret to be in open A or open E,” he reveals. “I like the tension and tone of those higher keys.”

MASTER CLASS

102 Eric Sardinas

BEGINNER

112 EZ Street

114 How Not To Suck!

120 Blues Guru:

Robben Ford

INTERMEDIATE

110 How to pla like...

Jimmy Hendrix

118 Rock Guru:

Steve Morse

122 Jazz Guru:

Charlie Hunter

124 Metal Guru:

Rusty Cooley

ADVANCED

116 Hot Guitarist Alert!

126 Acoustic Guru:

Kaki King

FULL SONG TRANSCRIPTION

128 “No Other” by

Black Label Society

SYMBOLS

132



To simplify the notation, we've written the following examples in open E or open A. To play these riffs on an electric, just retune your guitar. If you've got an acoustic with heavy strings, mimic Sardinias' approach by first detuning to open D or open G, and then slapping a capo on the 2nd fret. See "Tweaking the Tunings" for details.

ADVENTURES IN OPEN A

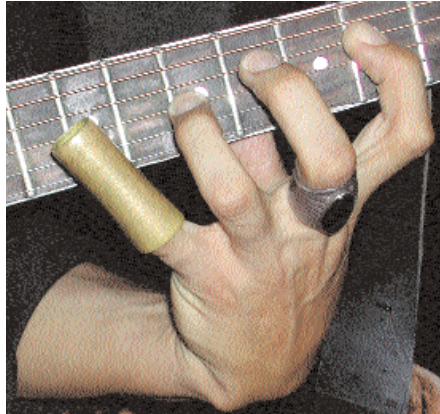
Ex. 1 shows open-A tuning, from the sixth to the first string. To reach open A from standard tuning, simply raise your second, third, and fourth strings a whole-step. "A little distortion works great on chord riffs like this one," says Sardinias, playing Ex. 2. "In this tuning, your low root is on the fifth string, so it sounds punchy."

Composed entirely of three-note (root-5-octave) power chords, this riff sounds slammin' played over a driving backbeat. For maximum thrust, use only thumbed downstrokes on all the plucked chords. To trigger beat two's pull-off, simply lift your slide off the strings after swooping into C. This release will automatically give the open strings a snappy attack.

"Once you get the hang of pull-offs," continues Sardinias, "it's a lot easier to play slide. In a descending line like this [Ex. 3], almost every other note is a pull-off. Instead of repeatedly picking each string, hit it once and



Sardinias wears his slide on his 4th finger.



Sardinias uses his 1st, 2nd, and 3rd fingers for chording and riffing.



Clamping twin capos at the 2nd fret, Sardinias transposes open G or open D tuning to open A or open E, respectively.

EX. 1 Open-A tuning

E
C#
A
B
A
E

EX. 2

♩ = 84-100 A C A D C

Open-A tuning

w/slide

SLIDE ZONE

let your slide do the rest of the work.”

Bars 3 and 4 illustrate this “strike and lift” technique. For example, the first two beats in bar 3 contain four tones, yet only two attacks. Played with a slide, pulls can actually sound louder than picked strings, but after a little practice, you’ll be able to keep an even volume with both types of articulation. Before pulling off the low C (bar 4), goose it with an upward quarter-tone gliss. This bluesy maneuver is as soulful as a dented 1928 National Tricone.

“Using octaves,” says Sardinas, playing **Ex. 4**, “you can make a slide guitar sound like a 12-string. I use my thumb and index to pluck the octaves.” With a similar vibe as “Sorrow’s Kitchen”—a moody ballad on Black Pearls that blends both electric and acoustic reso timbres—this phrase features a handful of hammer-ons. Hammers can be trickier than pulls: If you’re not careful, the clanking noise of the slide hitting the strings will obscure the target note. To minimize such extraneous sounds, let one of your fretting-hand fingers land on the strings—behind the slide—at the same instant the slide contacts them. Once you’ve mastered the art of clean, articulated hammers, you may find you actually like to include some sonic dirt. The key is learning how to control it.

“That control comes from a lot of playing and listening,” elaborates Sardinas, as he whips out a series of licks like **Ex. 5**. “One way

FIG. 1



FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 4



Fig. 1 shows a Dunlop Preachin’ Pipe—a faithful replica of Sardinas’ homemade slide. “My slide started life as a straight piece of brass tubing,” he details. “I actually wore the taper into it by playing thousands of shows. It has flown into the largest crowds and the craziest, darkest, strangest places you can imagine. Many times, I was sure I’d never see it again, but it has always come back. Dunlop weighed it and measured it with calipers to create the Preachin’ Pipe.” Sardinas wears his slide with the flared end against his hand, so the narrow tip contacts the bass strings (Fig. 2).

Onstage, Sardinas wails through a custom 50-watt Rivera Quiana head (Fig. 3), driving a 4x12 cab loaded with Celestion greenbacks. (Notice the spare Dunlop slides tucked under the amp handle.) A Rivera Sub 1 subwoofer (Fig. 4) supplies gut-wrenching oomph. “I’ve come to crave the extra bottom end,” he admits. Sardinas also used a ’60s Marshall rig in the studio for tracking Black Pearls.

The Florida-born blues-rocker keeps a lean, mean pedalboard consisting of a Dunlop CryBaby wah and a Dunlop UV1 UniVibe with a UV-1FC foot controller (Fig. 5). “I use pedals sparingly,” he explains. “I have the vintage stuff at home, but I take new gear on the road because it’s reliable and replaceable, yet it can encompass the vintage tones.”

Sardinas plays a signature model Washburn ES20 resonator, which features a 12-fret rosewood-on-mahogany neck, Grover tuners, diamond inlays, a custom Seymour Duncan single-coil pickup, and a side-mounted volume control. A close-up of Sardinas’ stage guitar (Fig. 6) shows the ES20’s Florentine cutaway, art-deco soundhole and coverplate designs, and the pickup location. “The pickup is voiced toward the single-coil, lipstick sound I grew up with,” says Sardinas, “but with a little more girth.”

Sardinas plucks his Gibson strings (gauged .013-.058) with a plastic Dunlop thumbpick and a metal National fingerpick. “My strings are heavy,” he says. “I play so hard that sometimes my fingertips split open, and I have to patch them with SuperGlue.” —AE

FIG. 5



FIG. 6



EX. 3
 ♩ = 152-176 A7
 Open-A tuning

w/slide
 let ring

EX. 4
 ♩ = 63-76 A7
 Open-A tuning

w/slide

TWEAKING THE TUNINGS

For his savage slide licks, Sardinas relies primarily on open D or open G, which he transposes to open E or open A, respectively, by clamping a capo at the 2nd fret. (Because Sardinas pounds his resonator so hard, he uses a pair of capos for extra strength.) This chart lets you compare all four open tunings to standard. If you're playing electric guitar (or an acoustic with extra-light strings), simply tune up to open E or open A from standard. If you're wielding an acoustic with a .012 or heavier set, first tune down to open D or open G, and then use a capo to raise the pitch a whole-step to open E or open A. —AE

STRINGS	6	5	4	3	2	1
standard tuning	E	A	D	G	B	E
open-D tuning	D	A	D	F#	A	D
open-G tuning	D	G	D	G	B	D
open-E tuning	E	B	E	G#	B	E
open-A tuning	E	A	E	A	C#	E

to refine your touch is to play the same basic phrase over and over. Almost unconsciously, you'll discover ways to mute the unwanted strings. Be patient—it takes time."

As you "swim laps" through this lick, experiment with various picking-hand muting techniques. For example, in the first half of bar 1, try blocking the bass strings with the lower side of your thumb. Then, as you dig into the low notes, park your fingertips on the treble strings to keep them from ringing.

Slide muting techniques can vary dramatically from player to player. That's good—idiosyncrasies become part of your sound. "Because I grew up learning by ear," Sardinas explains, "I was forced to explore my instrument. It's healthy to discover sounds on your own. You'll do things wrong that end up being right later. You can't replace this process: You have to live and breathe slide if you want to find your own voice."

EXPLORING OPEN E

Moving from standard tuning to open E—Sardinas' other favorite tuning—involves raising three strings: Crank the third string up a half-

step, and the fourth and fifth strings up a whole-step. Next, pluck the strings from low to high as shown in Ex. 6 and you'll hear an open E chord.

"Now the root is on the sixth string," says Sardinas. "With a low root, you can play riffs like this [Ex. 7a]." Again, pull-offs play a cru-

♩ = 120-138 D EX. 5 A

Open-A tuning

w/slide

EX. 6

Open-E tuning

♩ = 80-96 A EX. 7a E A

Open-E tuning

w/slide



Sardinas attacks the strings using a combination of thumbpick, fingerpick (secured to his index finger with electrician's tape), and bare middle and ring fingers.

This reso's neck wear reveals the physicality of Sardinas' slide technique.

cial role in this rumbling lick. First let the low E notes sustain, then try chunking them with your picking-hand palm. For bonus points, haul out a wah pedal and search for different ways to bounce your foot rhythmically with the melody.

In open E tuning, the root-5-octave power chord sits on the lowest three strings, and there's an octave between the first and fourth,

as well as the second and fifth strings. In **Ex. 7b**, we use the power chord and octaves to bulk up Ex. 7a's riff. The extra strings make the pull-offs more challenging to play, but once you get a grip on them, you'll be rewarded with a soaring, jangly tone. "Playing in a trio," says Sardinas, "I like to use octaves to fatten up the sound."

Borrowing a trick from Delta blues play-

ers, Sardinas often alternates between slide tones and open strings in rapid passages like **Ex. 8**. "A ringing open string provides cover when you shift positions," Sardinas declares. "It can also help with intonation. With a reference, you'll immediately know if you start drifting out of tune."

Open E tuning lends itself to riffage, Sardinas asserts. "With some distortion and wah,

EX. 7b

♩ = 80-96 A E A

Open-E tuning

w/slide

EX. 8

♩ = 72-88 E A D E

Open-E tuning

w/slide
let ring

palm mute ⑥

BOTTLENECK BASICS

If you want to investigate Sardinas' slide riffs, but haven't yet mastered the basics of bottleneck guitar, here are some tips to get you started.

Touch. Press your slide against the strings firmly enough to keep it from rattling when you pick or strum, but not so hard that you stretch the strings sharp or push them against the frets. If you're regularly banging into the fretboard, try a lighter slide or switch to heavier strings.

Intonation. To play a note in tune, park the slide parallel to and directly above the corresponding fret. Trust your ears—not your eyes—for fine tuning. Add vibrato only after you've zeroed in on the note.

Damping. Use both hands to mute strings. To tame those "behind-the-slide" sounds, lightly trail your 1st finger along the strings. Those whirring noises can add character to your lines, so don't feel obligated to mute every phrase with your slide hand. Muting with your picking hand is another matter—you must acquire this essential skill to master bottleneck guitar. Savvy sliders play fingerstyle; this lets them mute selected strings with their fingertips while simultaneously plucking others. —AE

this sounds huge [Ex. 9]. I play a similar riff in "Flames of Love." There's a lot of quick slurring action on the fifth string—three hammers and a pull—so keep your slide hovering close to the fretboard. You don't need much height to articulate the slurs; a quarter of an inch is ideal. To curtail clanking when executing the hammers, drop your slide lightly onto the string.

With its ringing octaves and double-string pull-offs, Ex. 10 offers a final challenge. Notice how in the last measure, you attack only three of the 11 notes; the others are slides, pulls, and hammers, all of which impart a singing sound to the phrase. "Slide can sound so vocal," says Sardinas. "That's what drew me to it."

It takes precise slide chops to coax a series of fast, slurred notes from one string and not have the results turn to mush. Start Ex. 10's concluding line very slowly. To gauge the physical motion needed to nail the half- and whole-step shifts between B \flat , A, and G, work on the first two beats a few notes at a time. If you need a pitch reference, hit an open sixth-string E, and let it sustain as you polish the descending and ascending moves.

WAITING TO EXHALE

"When I was really young," states Sardinas, "I inhaled the blues. Even today, my love for

straight blues is so strong that I can play it all day long and be completely happy. But as I developed as a guitarist, I realized that to be true to myself, I'd have to contribute something of my own. That's what blues is about anyway—expressing something personal, showing people who you are. For me, that means having a rock and roll thread run through my music. I can play acoustic slide in a chair or jump onstage with a band, plug my resonator into an amp, and let it feed back like crazy. The projection may be different, but I believe it's the same spirit." ■

♩ = 80-92 E **EX. 9** A E A G E

Open-E tuning

w/slide

♩ = 80-96

Open-E tuning

w/slide

A7 E7 A7 E7 E7

1. 2.