

Enter the Dobro

I was sitting on our back steps smoking cigars and trying to play a guitar I had fished out of a trash can.

The guitar was junk. Somebody had gotten frustrated or had been trying to emulate The Honky-Tonk Man on WWF wrestling and smashed it to pieces. The entire lower bout was broken, and there was a large hole in the back like somebody gave the instrument a swift kick.

It may have been crap, but it was still a guitar! For years I had dreamed of becoming a guitar player, but my dad was convinced that I did not pack the gear. He said the guitar was too difficult, and that every kid in Philly has a guitar gathering dust in the closet. Everybody wants to play the guitar, but very few are willing to put in the time and effort it takes to learn.

My father did see that I was getting better with the banjo, and helping me satisfy my burning desire to be like old Tiny with his National resonator guitar, he purchased a Dobro banjo for me. This instrument had the wood body of a resonator guitar with a five-string banjo neck. The strings went over an aluminum cone inside the body to make the instrument ring with rich tones. It wasn't very loud, but it looked cool and sounded even cooler. Everywhere I went with my Dobro banjo people wanted to jam with me and talk about Dobro and National instruments. I almost forgot about the guitar, right up until Roger came along.

Roger was an almost-famous banjo player. He played bluegrass and frailing banjo better than anybody, but he never quite managed to get as famous as he thought he should be. Because of this and probably other things, Roger got mean. I would run into him two or three times a year, and I always walked away so mad that I would practice endlessly so that I would be stronger the next time we met.

When I got my Dobro banjo, I was so excited to show it to Roger. I was convinced that this instrument would help me start a real conversation with him.

He was such a good musician. I really wanted to learn from him.

Alas, it wasn't to be. Roger took one look at my Dobro banjo and frowned. "Why don't you get a real banjo?"

I tried to laugh it off and get the group jamming. After a few songs, Roger said, "Play that thing like a banjo or a guitar. You can't be both. It's distracting. Make up your mind."

As much as it pained me to admit, Roger was right. I wasn't frailing my Dobro banjo. I was wearing picks and playing rolls I had picked up from guitar players. As much as I loved my Dobro banjo, it was neither guitar nor banjo. I had to choose one and stick to it or get my grubby mitts on a guitar. Rather than scheme like a kid hoping for a Red Ryder BB gun for Christmas, I put my fate onto the drifting currents of the Tao. If I was supposed to be a guitar player, God or the universe would find a way to put an instrument in my hands.

Not long after that, I spotted the smashed guitar in the trash.

If my trashcan find had been a steel-string guitar, I would have left it. Steel-string acoustic guitars are engineering marvels. The wooden box of the guitar body is under immense strain from the tension of bringing steel wire strings to concert pitch. Luckily, I had found a classical guitar.

Classical guitars evolved from baroque instruments strung initially with gut. Modern classical guitars use nylon strings. It takes much less force to bring nylon strings to concert pitch. This meant that I would be able to make the trashcan guitar playable with Elmer's glue, popsicle sticks, and duct tape.

Lots and lots of duct tape.

In the space of an afternoon, I finally had a guitar of my very own. I did not care that it smelled like expensive cheese and looked like cheap junk. I finally had a guitar! Now I had to learn to play the damned thing.

We had a couple of folk song anthologies in the house, and most of them had basic guitar chords. I sat down on the back steps and started twisting my fingers to make chords for the keys of G major and C major.

On the five-string banjo, we play out of open tunings, and the chord shapes are easy except for the F major chord. That one is a bitch. I was confident as I sat down and prepared to put my fingers on the fretboard to make the G major chord.

I placed my ring finger on the first string at the third fret. Okay, not too bad. Next, I had to reach across the fretboard and grab the sixth string at the third fret. Holy Shit! I felt like I was reaching across the Grand Canyon! To finish the G major chord, I fretted the fifth string at the second fret with my index finger.

Recap G major chord:

- First string at the third fret.
- Fifth string at the second fret.
- Sixth string at the third fret.

All of that to make a G major chord? No wonder everybody quit! I strummed the chord and it was awful. It took me hours to get my hand and fingers in place to fret the chord cleanly. Then it was time to work on the C major chord. Second string at the first fret, fourth string at the second fret and the fifth string at the third fret.

Recap C major chord:

- Second string at the first fret.
- Fourth string at the second fret.
- Fifth string at the third fret.

Once I could play the G major and C major chords I had to choose between the D major or the F major chords. Everybody I knew said the F chord was the worst, so I decided to tackle that one next. To form an F major chord I had to grab the first and second strings at the first fret, the third string at the second fret, the fourth string at the third fret and reach around the guitar neck with my thumb to fret the sixth string at the first fret.

Recap F major chord:

- First and second strings at the first fret.
- Third string at the second fret.
- Fourth string at the third fret.
- Sixth string at the first fret.

The G major chord had been a challenge.

The C major chord had been downright hard.

The F major chord kicked my ass.

The F chord was so hard and so difficult that I started wondering if maybe somebody was playing a joke on me, that tomorrow a television host would jump from the bushes telling me that the F major chord in all my books had been made intentionally hard by some mean bastard.

As time went on, I started to understand why such a hard chord form has become the default F major chord. It was a shared hardship. No matter where you go in the world, you will have the common bond of mastering the bloody agonizing chord of death. All guitar players, regardless of genre or style, have endured the days of trying to force their fingers to form an F major chord.

Making chords is only part of the battle. The next step is to sing songs while strumming the rhythm on guitar and changing chords for harmony. Even songs as familiar as Happy Birthday in the key of C will require that you sing while running through the C, F and G chords – and you have to put your fingers in the right position to make the chords without a moment of hesitation.

I quickly realized that my dad might have been right. I could not do this. I would be better off sticking to the banjo, but then I thought about Tiny with his National resonophonic guitar. I wanted to be that cool.

So, I rubbed my sore hands, cracked my knuckles, and went back to practicing that God-cursed F major chord.

I told myself that it would get better with practice. It took me two weeks to teach myself a few songs on my trash-can guitar.

I was feeling cocky, so I went with my dad to The Wednesday Night Banjo and Donut Marching Society, a loose band of banjo students that met at Paul and Kitt's house. Everybody was surprised to see me playing and singing with my stinky guitar. By the end of the jam, somebody offered to loan me a nice old Epiphone if I would give up the trashcan guitar.

Everyone seemed to be afraid it was going to give me tetanus or something.

The Epiphone was a great guitar, but it did not belong to me. That meant I couldn't drag it all over Hell's half-acre like I did my banjo. It also meant I couldn't take it with me to school — or cut school if you know what I mean.

I knew it was foolish to complain. I guess the truth of it was that the guitar took everything I had to play at a basic level. To work so hard on a guitar I did not own was frustrating. Frustration has its good points. My hearing was almost gone by the time I got serious about the guitar. I could hear my banjo because banjos are louder than awkward gas-passing at a job interview. The guitar was nearly silent to me. In frustration, I laid my cheek against the upper bout of the instrument. When I strummed the strings, I could hear the guitar!

I had discovered bone conduction. I have conductive hearing loss. That means my inner ear is not working, but my auditory nerves were/are just fine. By resting my cheek —and later my teeth — on the guitar, sound waves travelled through my skull to my auditory nerves allowing me to hear my guitar! As I was working on all this guitar stuff, my schoolwork went out the window. My family was not happy about this. I was trying to play a blues song out on the back steps. My dad came out. He was eating an apple.

(bite-chew) "What are you doing?"

"I'm playing the blues, dad."

(bite-chew) "That's not the blues." He paused, took another bite of his apple, and looked like he was searching for the right word. He smiled. "That's shit."

He laughed and went back inside. I sat there with a borrowed guitar that I had to use my teeth to hear. I wanted this more than anything, and nothing was working out. I sat there and cried for a while. Then I put my teeth on the upper bout and went back to work. Deafness, epilepsy, crappy guitars and the awful F major chord were not going to get the best of me. I was going to play the guitar. Nothing was going to stop me.

The next day my dad woke me up early. It was his day off, and he said we were going to take a ride. I got in the truck with him. Dad said, "let's go get you a real guitar." Being Irish and Pennsylvania Dutch and Catholic, I tried to tell my dad that I did not need a new guitar. He called bullshit on that, and we were on our way.

“Where are we going, pop?”

“I put a lot of thought into this. We’re going to Mandolin Brothers.”

I just about shouted for joy. Mandolin Brothers, at that time, was the single most fabulous music store on God’s green earth. They carried the rarest and most desirable acoustic fretted instruments ever made. As excited as I was, there was also a knot of nerves in the pit of my stomach. Guitars at Mandolin Brothers ran from a few hundred bucks to hundreds of thousands of dollars. How was I going to know what to buy? How could I get a good guitar without breaking the bank? As we drove from Philadelphia to Staten Island, I told myself to stop worrying. Let the Tao take me where I was supposed to go and focus on this once in a lifetime trip with my best friend. We got to Mandolin Brothers before the store opened. My dad feels like he is late unless he is an hour early.

While we waited for the store to open, Dad asked me what I was looking for in a guitar. Right away I told him I wanted a resonator guitar like Tiny played, but I was quick to add that it was unlikely because vintage National guitars were crazy expensive at that time. There was a company making new metal-body resophonic guitars, but I did not know where to get one. Dad asked me about Martin or Gibson guitars. I shrugged. “I guess they are okay.” The front door of Mandolin Brothers opened. We climbed out of dad’s truck and went into the store.

Walking into Mandolin Brothers was surreal. You stepped into the area where the actual business of the store was conducted. Stan Jay set up his workstation this way so that he could greet every customer, and he did just that when we walked in. He welcomed us to the store and told us not to be afraid to pick up and play any instrument on display. He shook our hands and then, like Willy Wonka, escorted us to a room pulled from the imaginations of his customers. Everywhere you looked, there were *wonderful* things. Guitars, ukuleles, banjos and then I saw it.

In one of the little rooms set off from the main display floor, hanging on the wall bathed in a ray of early morning sunshine much like Jake Blues in the chapel when he was sent on a mission from God, was a metal-body guitar that was bigger and badder than Tiny’s old National. The moment I saw it I knew that this was my guitar. Before I went to look closer at the beautiful and mysterious metal-body resophonic guitar I did the normal guitar shopper thing and tried a few vintage

and new Martin guitars; then I did the same with some Gibson guitars. I didn't want to run the risk of chipping or drooling on the finish, so I skipped the bone conduction trick. Instead, I just strummed a simple rhythm while holding a C major chord to get a sense of how these instruments felt in my hands. Somebody working the counter noticed that I was playing the same chord over and over. He came over and asked me if I even knew how to play the guitar.

"Well, I know how to play a C chord."

"Okay. . . but do you know anything else?"

"No, but I can play the hell out of a C chord."

The counter guy made a face and left me alone.

After that, dad and I had one of our silent conversations. It's almost like sign language only with looks and facial expressions instead of hand gestures.

Dad: "Okay. He really was a weenie."

Me: "Yup."

Eventually, I could put it off no longer. We went into the room with the resophonic guitars on display. The instrument that had caught my eye was a Dobro model 33 Hawaiian. The hangtag also called it a bottleneck special, perfect for playing slide, country blues and anything else you could imagine. It was a massive guitar and, unlike Tiny's National, this guitar was made from bell bronze rather than steel. It had a maple neck that had all the grace of a two-by-four compared to the other guitars I had played that morning, but you needed a heavy neck to balance out the weight of the chrome-plated bronze body. I was in love. I looked at the price tag: twelve hundred dollars. Holy shit! Nope! Danger Will Robinson! Danger!

As much as I wanted – needed this guitar, there was no way in hell I was going to stick my dad with that price tag.

"That looks cooler than Tiny's guitar." Dad said.

"Yeah, but it's too much. They have a plywood Dobro for a lot less."

"Plywood? You'll never play it."

"But dad. . ."

“If you buy the cheap guitar, it’s going to let you down. You won’t practice. You won’t progress. You won’t learn.” He pointed to the 33H. “That is your guitar!”

Dad went to get a sales rep to help us take the Dobro 33H down so that I could give it a whirl and maybe try the bone conduction trick. Dad came back with a guy, and he would not take the Dobro down unless we agreed to let him fit me with a more traditional acoustic guitar. I didn’t want to be a dick, so I reluctantly agreed. He came back with the same guitars I had checked out earlier. Dad went to get another salesman.

The second sales guy was also reluctant to put the Dobro in my hands. Instead, he decided to play it for me. Again, I was polite up to a point, but after a while, I started getting mad. Was this guitar on hold for a friend? Defective? Were these guys screwing with us? I could not pin down exactly what was happening, but it was clear that they did not want to sell me this guitar.

Dad sensed my growing frustration. He went and got Stan Jay. Stan, thank God, finally handed me the Dobro, but even he started rattling off reasons I should not buy this guitar. I looked Stan in the eye.

“Do you want to sell this guitar or not?”

Stan left me alone with the Dobro at last.

I strummed a chord. The vibrations from the strings transferred to the maple bridge, to the aluminum cone under the bridge and filled the room like a pipe organ in a cathedral. On top of that, the bronze body vibrated allowing me to feel the bass in my chest. I leaned forward and rested my cheek on the upper bout as I strummed. My head filled up with musical fireworks.

Dad watched me the whole time.

“Well?”

“It’s a great guitar, dad, but it’s too much money.”

“Let me worry about that.”

I started to argue, but dad pointed out that he couldn’t buy me my first car because of my epilepsy. He could, however, buy me my first good guitar. I got

choked up. I stood there in the greatest guitar shop in the world receiving one of the greatest gifts a father ever gave a son with tears running down my face.

As Stan was tracking down the case for my guitar and writing up the bill, Dad went back into the shop and got a National guitar for himself. His guitar is a 1928 tenor meaning it has four strings and you play it like a tenor or plectrum banjo. “In for a penny, in for a pound,” said my dad. We drove home buzzing with excitement. Mom and grandpop looked at us like we were crazy, but I did not expect them to understand.

My Dobro 33H is more than just a guitar. It is a promise from my dad that he believed in me when I gave him almost no reason to do so.

The Dobro also created opportunities for me. Old pickers would see me sitting on a curb smoking a cigar and strumming this big shiny guitar, and they had to walk over to find out more about me. The Dobro was also perfect for my bone conduction trick. I could practice for hours with my teeth resting on the upper bout of the guitar so that the sound waves could travel through my skull to reach my auditory nerves. It filled my head, heart, and mind with music, love for my dad and fear of the mighty F major chord.

The finish is worn off the neck of my Dobro 33H now. The chrome is still in pretty good shape, but there is a big dent shaped just like my big toe. The guitar is so heavy that my strap broke, sending the instrument crashing down directly on my big toe like a watermelon falling on a grape. The guitar has other scars, and each one has a story. Some of the stories are fun to share and others. . . Well, some are best kept between me and my guitar.

When I ran up to Tiny with my Dobro, he nodded in approval but cautioned me that if I carried this guitar around, people would eventually expect me to be able to play it.

I wrestled with the evil F major chord and, over time, started to make sense of the fretboard. I was lucky to meet guitar players who were willing to share with me. Best of all, I got to sit with my dad — he with his National tenor and me with my Dobro 33H. We made music together on the front porch, on stage, on television and on the radio. Heck, the book you are reading right now is another adventure I am having with my dad.

Sometimes I stop and wonder, "What if."

What would have happened if I had never pulled that battered guitar out of the trash?

What would have happened if I had given up when I realized how hard it would be to learn the guitar?

What would have happened if I had backed away from buying the Dobro?

The answer?

Nothing would have happened. Nothing at all.