



DAWN AND DAVID JACKSON

## 'Pulling strings since 1955'

JACKSON STEEL BUILDS ON A LEGACY OF TWANG BY CANDICE DYER

**W**henver Harold "Shot" Jackson was tinkering in his workshop, he did not fret—in any sense of that word.

He clearly reveled in playing his steel guitar and dobro on stage at the Grand Ole Opry with artists such as Roy Acuff and Kitty Wells, and, noodling around, envisioned all kinds of sonic innovation, installing string pullers with pedals on Fenders and Rickenbackers to bend a note in sly, unconventional ways.

In 1955, Jackson, who grew up in Blackshear, Georgia, teamed up with his musician friend, Buddy Emmons, to develop a fretless instrument that you almost have to see—and then hear—to fathom its honky-tonk physics. It relies on a metal bar to fret, or shorten, the length of the strings, along with pedals for the feet and knees to change the pitch, enabling what composers call *portamento* or *glissando*. As if country music were not plaintive enough, suddenly even the guitar could weep. Jackson and Emmons christened this newfangled ax the "Sho-Bud," a combination of their nicknames, and the pedal steel guitar helped usher in the historic era that became known as "The Nashville Sound."

"You might not know exactly what a pedal steel is, but you certainly recognize that sound when you hear it," says David Jackson, the son of "The King of Pedal Steel." "It opened up new possibilities for musicians because if they wanted a note to waver, they could do it on pedal steel in ways they couldn't on a regular guitar. They used this steel bar to express their inward self, to make a soulful, crying kind of sound."

### Pedal to the metal

So high lonesome went high-tech as the pedal steel enhanced the music's range of expressiveness while smoothing and polishing its

rougher "hillbilly" barbs to a tear-stained gleam. Porter Waggoner became the first spangled headliner to use a Sho-Bud, and then Webb Pierce went wild with it. Soon enough, Shot Jackson was crafting, customizing and refitting instruments for Roy Clark, George Jones, Ernest Tubb and anyone else who drifted into the Sho-Bud music store on Broadway, trailing sequins from the Ryman Auditorium next door.

"It was a full music store, but it also had kind of a lounge, where stars sat around and told stories, pounding a lot of whiskey," David Jackson recalls, explaining somewhat apologetically that "it was just the lifestyle most of those singers had back then."

Shot Jackson's sons expanded the business, adding coveted features and gadgets. In the late 1960s, David patented a new pedal device that would become the most replicated string-pulling mechanism in the guitar industry. He operated Music City Manufacturing Company, where his older brother, Harry, built most Sho-Bud steel guitars, while their dad transformed the dobro into the "Sho-Bro" and worked on other nifty projects upstairs in the shop. Today, Willie Nelson still plays "Trigger," which the elder Jackson repaired and customized for him, and, in Branson, Buck Trent dazzles tourists with the pedal banjo that he acquired in the early '60s. Shot Jackson's instruments not only made history; they have endured it "on the road" and everywhere else.

"My dad was a mechanical genius who absolutely loved—lived and breathed—music," David says.

Pedal steel eventually infiltrated rock 'n' roll—Eric Clapton and the Eagles took up Sho-Buds—and found a jubilant home in the Sacred Steel tradition of gospel music, an African-American Pentecostal movement that originated in the House of God Which

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### Back by popular demand

In 1981, Gretsch-Baldwin bought Sho-Bud, and, later, Shot Jackson sold his repair shop. A couple of months after retiring, he suffered a stroke that impaired his speech and left him unable to play music until his death in 1991. The master inventor—whose handle was a truncated version of his childhood nickname in South Georgia, "Buckshot"—was inducted into the Steel Hall of Fame in 1986.

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"I'm not 100 percent sure about this, but I believe the Jackson family claims more patents in the business than any other," David says.

And they are not finished.

After a long hiatus, the music-loving clan—now with David's daughter, Dawn—recently revived the family business and based it in Dahlonega, with the motto "Pulling Strings since 1955."

"We relaunched it for reasons of heritage," David says, "but also because I get down on my knees to pray, and God just keeps sending ideas. I'm 67 now, but if the good Lord lets me work, I'm going to keep doing it. We've applied for three patents, and I have six or seven more in the works, all related to pedal steel and string pullers, to standardize the tuning to simplify the playing. We're planning a pedal-slide."

Before these developments, David had worked on touring vehicles for musicians. During a bus repair, he met his current wife, Susan Peck, who sings with her sister in the award-winning gospel act Karen Peck and New River, based in north Georgia. In 2005, he unveiled the next generation of instruments, a Jackson Steel guitar, at the band's annual homecoming celebration in Dahlonega.

Along with his prayer-driven creativity, he was inspired by his daughter's growing interest in music. Another Jackson with a dual flair for science and the arts, Dawn had studied biology at Mercer University and then worked in the healthcare industry, but in 2002, she founded Sho-Bud Music Inc., an indie record label and publishing company. (Its first single, "Beer on the Table," recorded by Josh Thompson, went to #17 on the *Billboard* charts.) She handles sales and marketing while writing songs and working on a documentary about the Sho-Bud dynasty. Her uncle Harry who still lives in Nashville, does metal fabrication, manufacturing and development for the company.

"Word is out that the Jacksons are back in business!" David says.

One of their hippest exponents is Robert Randolph, who grew up in Sacred Steel and now plays R&B. "In my church, the pedal steel guitar substituted for the organ," he says. "I wanted to do with it what Stevie Ray Vaughan and Jimi Hendrix did." Randolph was working with T Bone Burnett on last year's much-praised release, *We Walk This Road*, a jukin' celebration of black roots music, when he called up the Jacksons to request more instruments.

"With so many others out there, you have to cut and paste parts together," Randolph says, "but the Jacksons have figured out a way to nail it all down in a cohesive way that meets in the middle and consistently gives you a superior tone. You can plug one of their pedal steels into any amp and know you'll get a great sound."

It is one of "pure emotion," Dawn says.

"It's ironic to me that these guitars truly come from *men of steel*," she muses, "in the sense that Papaw and Dad and Uncle Harry are men of few words who don't show much emotion in talking. But these instruments say it all." **gM**



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