Written by Karen McFarland
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(Listen to the interview here .)

"I've been around it all my life," Calvin Cooke said in a phone interview when asked how he learned to play steel guitar.

He grew up immersed in a Pentecostal culture, where he heard bands in church playing lap-steel guitar, lead guitar, and drums. Starting on regular guitar at an early age, Calvin's hands were too small to go around the instrument's neck, so he played it on his lap like a steel guitar, using the back of a knife for a slide. "Then when my mother realized I really wasn't going to play the lead guitar, she went to the pawn shop and got me an old steel guitar ... and she started teaching me by ear. ... That was back in the '50s. I got better and better, and then my cousin learned the lead guitar and we would play together" in church.

Now, Calvin Cooke is a master of "sacred steel" music, a virtuoso dubbed "the B. B. King of steel guitar" by Nashville's country-music steel guitarists. Mentor to young sacred-steel superstar Robert Randolph, Cooke joined him for appearances in 2004 on *Austin City Limits* and as an opening act on Eric Clapton's tour. *Big City Rhythm & Blues* magazine praised Cooke's playing on his 2003 debut CD as akin to the best of blues/jazz guitar legend Danny Gatton. Cooke himself describes his sound as "maybe rock and gospel. We come from the Pentecostal Church - they are pretty lively, and that's how we learned how to play."

The tradition of what's now called sacred-steel music began in the black Pentecostal Church as a spinoff from the Hawaiian steel-guitar craze of the first few decades of the 20th Century. A steel guitar is not made of steel; it derives its name from the steel bar in the hand that holds down the strings on the fretboard. The resulting slide sounds are similar to blues slide (or "bottleneck") guitar. But the steel guitar is played horizontally (hence the term

"lap steel").

Eventually the steel guitar grew more necks and then legs; pedal steel guitar was the next form. An unschooled player, Willie Eason, is credited with bringing the steel guitar to Pentecostal Church of God services in the late '30s. His single-string passages imitating singing and shouting voices remain today the signature sound of steel-guitar praise music. It was not until 1996, when Arhoolie Records released an anthology of newly discovered sacred-steel music, that Calvin Cooke, Willie Eason, and many other performers in the black gospel steel tradition were recorded.

By age 13, Calvin was so adept at playing sacred steel that the church leaders asked him to come on tour with them. Always wanting to learn more, Calvin paid attention to the music around him: "I would listen to a lot of country-and-western music because we traveled a lot down South. When I came home, the older ones, the ones that wasn't in the church, would play a lot of Elmore James back then, slide guitar, and it related to the steel. I would listen to the different sounds they would make, and that helped me a great deal." Later, Calvin listened to the Grand Ole Opry and the Ernest Tubb Show on the radio, especially for the pedal-steel playing.

Cooke is now known as an innovator of unique tunings on the 10-string pedal-steel guitar. "In 1973 when I got the pedal steel, Chuck Campbell [of the Campbell Brothers] showed me how to set it up; he showed me how to work the pedals, and I started inventing different sounds, tunings, with that. Then the other guys started following after me in the tunings I was playing," he said, acknowledging his leadership position in the sacred-steel "movement." For 48 years, more than any other sacred-steel musician, Calvin Cooke has been the principal steel player for services at the 10-day National Assembly of the Church of God organization in Nashville. And in 2001 he was presented with the Sacred Steel Heritage Award at the Second Annual Sacred Steel Convention

Born in 1944, Calvin moved to Detroit in 1967, and he's been there ever since. During the 31 years he worked for Chrysler, he played the steel guitar - lap steel and pedal steel - in the same church on Detroit's east side. When he's home now, he plays at his church, but not as regularly as he used to. "I still remain one of the top musicians in the organization," Calvin said, even though "when I got older ... then everybody's kids started learning how to play." He likes to listen to the young ones play "to see what they have and take what they got. It's like I'm learning all over again."

Cooke now focuses on bringing his talent and the call-and-response of his steel guitar to "congregations" of all kinds around the world. When asked how he feels about performing for non-church audiences, Calvin said: "It's like a different world to us. We're so used to playing for the church, when we start playing for the festivals it's such an open feeling they're giving us - it makes us be more creative. That makes us play harder because we want them to *feel* what we've been playing and what we feel spiritually."

To listen to the River Cities' Reader *interview with Calvin Cooke, click here .*