# Bending Strings

Glenn Weiser

*String-bending techniques help you re-create the blue notes of the African vocal scale.*

Introduction TRACK 32

String-bending techniques on the guitar can be traced back to the turn of the century and the rise of the blues. Before the Civil War, most black musicians played folk songs, spirituals, and dance tunes on either the banjo or the fiddle. The period from Reconstruction until the turn of the century saw the ascendance of the guitar and the harmonica, which were more capable of expressing the emotional intensity of the blues and technically better suited to recreating the "blue" notes of the African vocal scale.

Harmonica players learned to "bend" or flatten the pitches of reeds, creating the sounds of blues harp. Guitarists developed two ways of playing blues notes: using a slide and bending the strings. By the time Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, Lonnie Johnson, and other guitarists began recording in the 1920s, string bending—also known as "choking"—was a standard blues technique. From there it spread to country music, rock, and other styles.

To bend a string, place the middle of your fingertip on a string, press it down, and then push or pull the string on the fretboard until the pitch rises. The sixth, fifth, second, and first strings are usually bent in toward the center of the neck; the middle two strings can be bent either way. On an acoustic guitar, bending can raise the pitch of a string by a half or a whole step, which is equivalent to the distance of one or two frets, respectively. On an electric guitar, the strings can be bent further, up three frets (a minor third) or, with very light-gauge strings, up four frets (a major third).

When you bend a string with the second, third, or fourth finger, you can place the finger immediately behind it on the same string one fret lower, so that you can push the string with two fingers rather than just one. This technique, known as "bracing," makes bending strings easier. To make sure you are reaching the desired pitch when you bend a string, play the note you are trying to reach on an unbent string and compare the sound with the bent note. For example, here's how you can practice bending the second string. First, fret the string at the tenth fret and play the unbent note. Then place your third finger on the ninth fret and bend the string up until the pitch matches the tenth fret unbent; this is a half-step bend. On an acoustic guitar, a whole-step bend takes a good deal of finger strength, so it may take some practice and patience to accomplish this.

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF BENDS

There are many different string-bending techniques. You can bend a note up and then allow it to return back down to its normal pitch. You can bend the note up and move directly to a note played on another string without releasing the bend. It is also common to bend a note before striking the string, strike the bent string, then release it. This creates a lowering rather than a raising of the pitch. It is possible to play two strings simultaneously—bending one and not the other, or bending both strings at once—or you can bend one or more strings of a whole chord.

Don't be surprised if you find your guitar out of tune after practicing this technique. If your strings have not been stretched out beforehand, or if they are not wound properly around the posts of the tuners, they will go flat after being bent. To prevent this from

happening, wrap each string several times around the post before putting it through the eye when restringing, and tug on the strings to stretch them out after raising them to normal tension.

Another problem associated with string bending is the noise that can result from unintentionally hitting neighboring strings with the finger being used for the bend. There are two ways to avoid this. You can silence the string next to the bent string by slightly resting your first or second finger on it a fret lower than where the bend is occurring (obviously this does not work for index-finger bends). Or you can push the other string out of the way with the very tip of the finger that's doing the bending. On an electric guitar, you can also hook the bending finger under the neighboring string, but I find this doesn't work very well on an acoustic guitar.

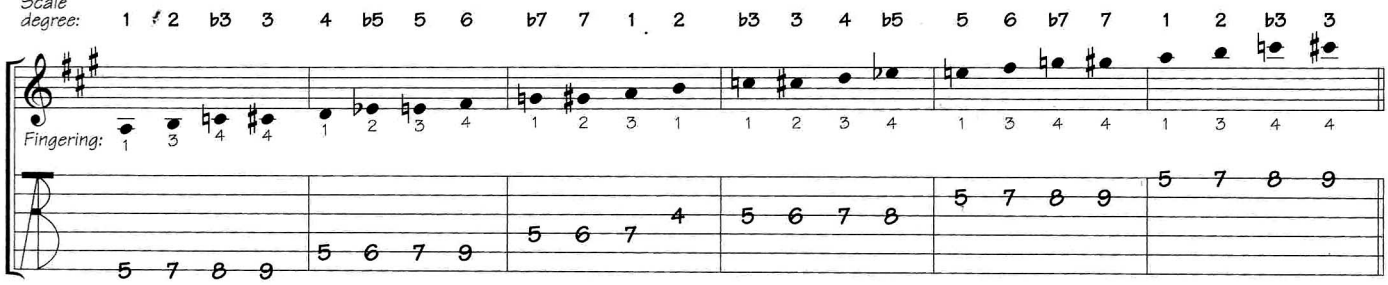
## CLOSED-POSITION SCALES

To show you some string bends, I've written out a blues in A, "Around the Bend." But before we try it, look at the three scales in Examples 1–3.

TRACK 33

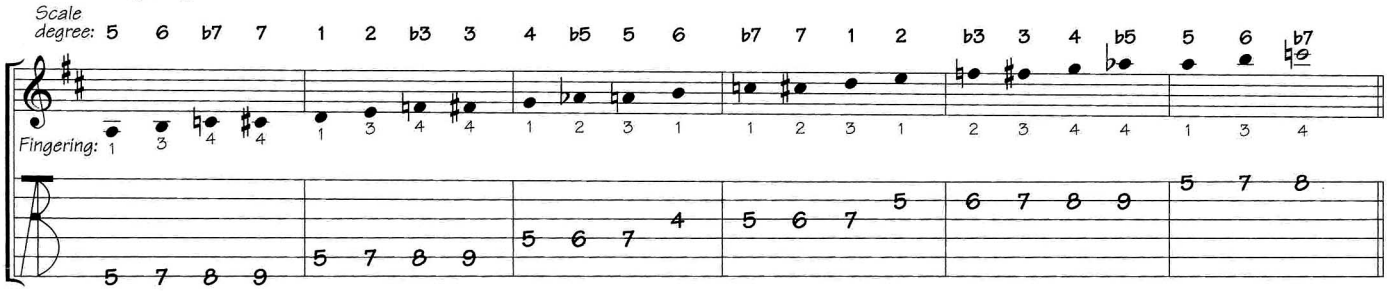
**Ex. 1**

Fingering in A



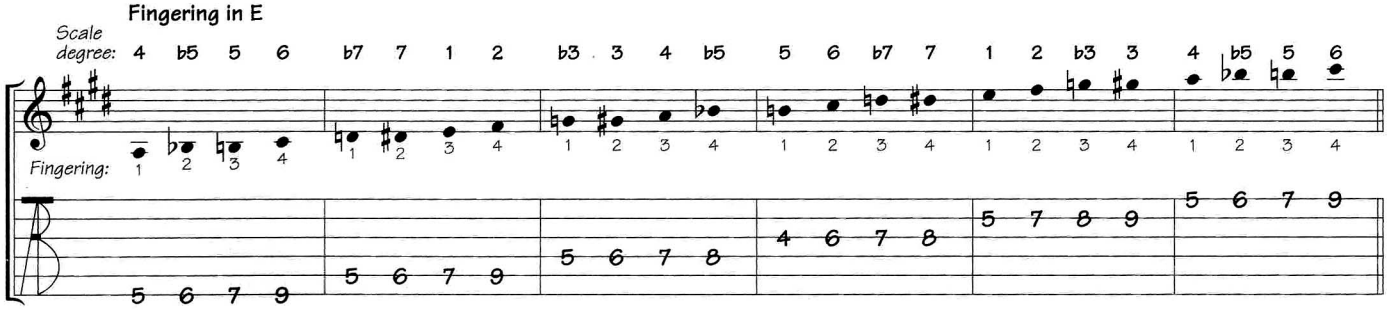

**Ex. 2**

Fingering in D




**Ex. 3**

Fingering in E




These are closed-position major scales with the blue notes added. The term *closed-position* refers to anything that uses no open strings; you can play a closed-position riff, scale, or even an entire solo in any key by shifting to the appropriate fret.

These scales are written out with the left-hand fingerings below the standard notation. Above the notation are the scale degrees, which are the steps of the scale identified by number. *Do re mi fa sol la ti* are represented by the numbers 1–7. The notes marked ♭3, ♭5, and ♭7 are usually referred to as the blue notes, but it should be understood that the original blue notes of the African scale are not exactly the same as these three accidentals of the Western scale. Most of the string bends in the solo involve blue notes.

The scales all follow the same pattern but have scale degree 1 at different places on the fretboard. There are 12 of these closed-position scale fingerings; few guitarists know them all. Practice these scales until you know where all the scale degrees are in each one. Learning the fingerings this way is essential to understanding the relationship between the string bends and the blue notes.

## INSIDE THE SONG

"Around the Bend" starts with the Example 1 fingering at the fifth fret. This fingering is used for all the I chord (A in the key of A) riffs in the solo. Most of the bends are half-step bends, except for a few whole-step bends. In the pickup measure, the index finger bends the C up a half step to C♯ (♭3 to 3). You'll see that the pick direction is also indicated above the tablature.

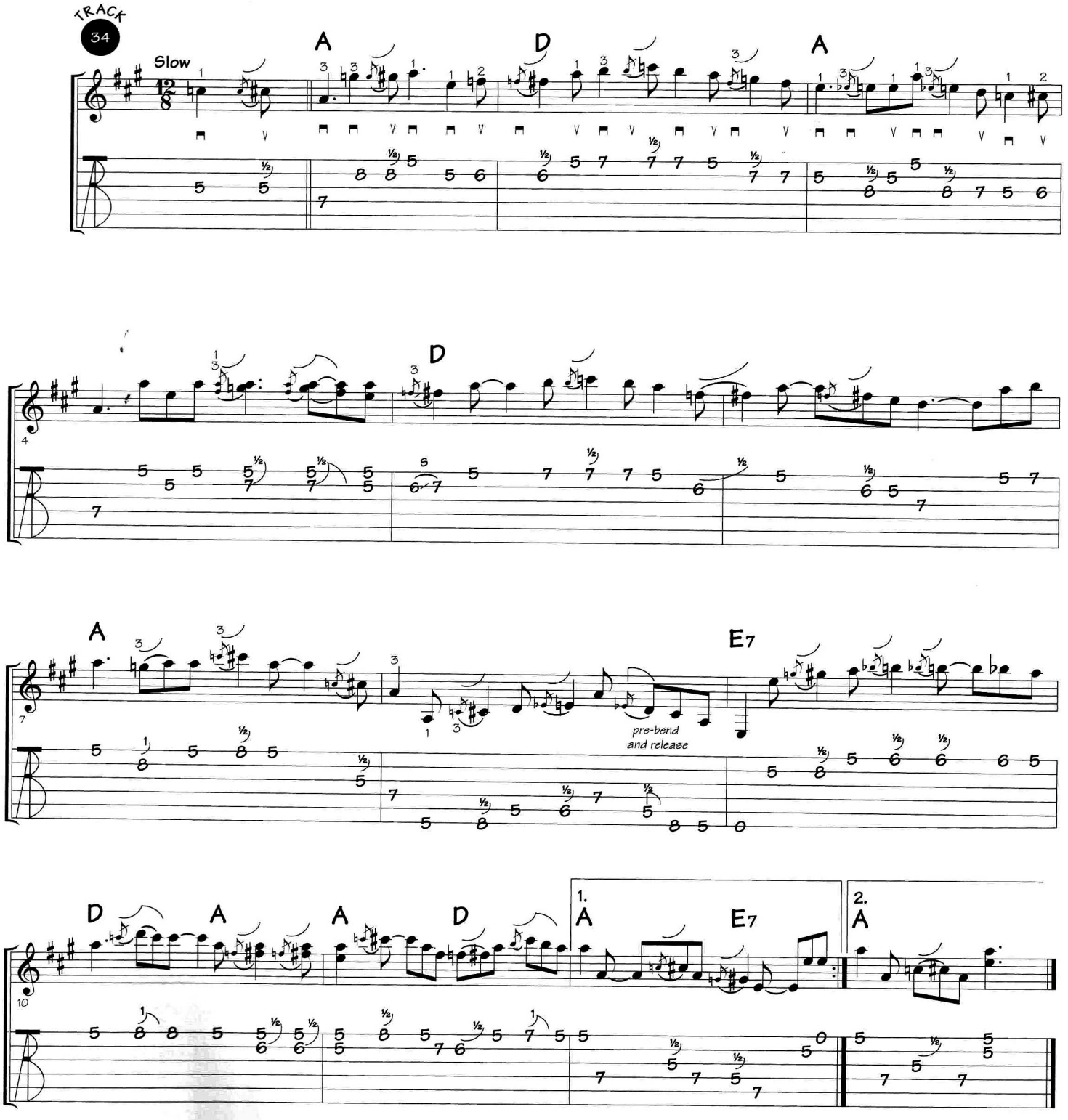
In measure 1, a bend occurs when the ring finger pushes G (♭7) up a half step to G♯(7) on the way to A (8). In measure 2, the chord changes to D (the IV chord), and the Example 2 fingering is used. First F gets bent up to F♯ (♭3 to 3). Then after the B (6) is played, the ring finger bends the B up half a step to C (♭7). This technique is repeated when the ring finger bends F♯ (3) up a half step to G and then releases the bend after the note is struck. In measure 3, we return to the A chord and to the Example 1 scale. Here the ring finger plays the E♭ on the third string, eighth fret, and very quickly bends the note a half step up to E. This quick bend is followed by playing the E on the second string, fifth fret, and the A on the first string, fifth fret—a blues guitar cliché. In the fourth measure, A and F♯ are played at the same time and F♯ is quickly bent up to G. Then the G is lowered to F♯.

By now, you've probably noticed that the ring finger is playing notes that were played by the pinky when the three scales were introduced earlier. The ring finger is obviously stronger than the pinky, so it tends to be used as a substitute. At measure 5 the chord changes to D. Here again are the bends we used in measure 2.

In measure 7, the chord changes back to A, and the ring finger bends the second string up a whole step to A, after which the A on the first string is played. A brief dip into the lower octave of the Example 1 fingering follows in measure 8. Here the ring finger bends the C on the sixth string up to C♯. Then the second finger bends the E♭ on the fifth string up a half step to E.

In measure 9 the chord changes to E7 (the V7 chord), and the Example 3 fingering is used. First the G on the second string is bent up a half step to G♯ (♭3 to 3), then the B♭ on the first string is bent up a half step to B (♭5 to 5) and played twice with grace-note bends.

In measure 10 the chord changes to D with its Example 2 fingering. This time the ring finger bends the C on the first string up a whole step to D (♭7 to 1) and releases it back down to C. Then A and F on the first and second strings are played together and the F is

# Around the Bend

*Music by Glenn Weiser*