

TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

Little Walter Jacobs is widely regarded as the greatest blues harmonica player ever. Along with Muddy Waters and Jimmy Rogers, he helped launch the electrified Delta sound that defined the postwar Chicago blues. Although he is famous for being the first to record playing the harmonica through an amplifier and incorporating elements of jump jazz into his music, we'll look at an acoustic solo of his that is pure country blues for this issue's teach in.

Jacobs was born in Marksville, La., on May 1, 1952, and started playing waltzes and polkas on harmonica at age eight. When he was 12 he left home and started playing blues around Memphis. Stylistically, he began as a John Lee Williamson imitator, but after listening to the saxophone of Louis Jordan and learning horn riffs on his harmonica, he became a virtuoso with an original sound.

In 1947 he went to Chicago with Honeyboy Edwards and started playing on Maxwell Street, where large crowds would come on Sundays to shop and listen to street music. It was there that Jimmy Rogers and Muddy saw him play, and Walter started gigging with them. Eventually Jacobs recorded for Chess with Muddy, and the Windy City's harmonica-driven postwar blues sound was born.

When his 1952 instrumental "Juke" became a hit, Jacobs left Muddy's band to go off on his own. He had several hits

on the R&B charts, but the advent of rock 'n' roll in the mid-fifties hurt the sale of blues records and he became embittered. A downwards slide began and he started drinking heavily. Worse, Walter would sometimes wave a gun around onstage, which made keeping a band together difficult. Fast fists were also a problem, and on February 14, 1968 he died from injuries sustained in a Chicago street fight. Walter Jacobs was only 37 years old. Still, he left behind a recorded legacy that has been the envy of every blues harp player since.

"Forty-Four Blues" is from the Testament LP *Johnny Young And His Friends* (#2226), an album of informal recordings made in between 1962 and 1966. Played in a down home style, Walter's solo makes extensive use of both octaves and double notes played on neighboring reeds in triplet and swing eighth rhythms. The phrasing follows the classic call and response pattern that goes back to the work song tradition. In blues this usually means each of the three four-bar lines is divided roughly in half between the call and the response.

The solo starts out with a quick move from the 2-5d minor seventh interval to the 3-6b octave, followed by a descending line. Stay in octave position (for this, cover four holes with your mouth and cover the middle two with your tongue) until the last pair of notes before beat 3 in measure two. These are on adjacent holes. Little Walter may have

played the entire solo in tongue-blocking position – all the details of his technique aren't known – but I switch to lip-blocking for the parts involving neighboring double notes. Measure two finishes with a releasing double note bend followed by a single 2d. Measures three and four are the first response and end with the same releasing double note bend. The next four-bars also follow a pattern of octaves concluding with double and single notes.

At the V (D in G) chord Walter switches to single notes, getting a crying sound by slowly releasing a bent 4d at the beginning of the third in combination with the articulated tremolo – this is done by cupping and uncupping the harmonica in time with the notes. To play over the V chord he uses different note bends than in the first two lines: the whole step bend, on 3d, the minor third bend on the same reed, and the half step bend on 2d. Halfway through bar 10 he switches to double notes, and ends with a headshake on 4d and 5d.

For more Little Walter transcriptions, visit my Web site at www.celticguitarmusic.com/harppage.htm.

Little Walter Jacobs

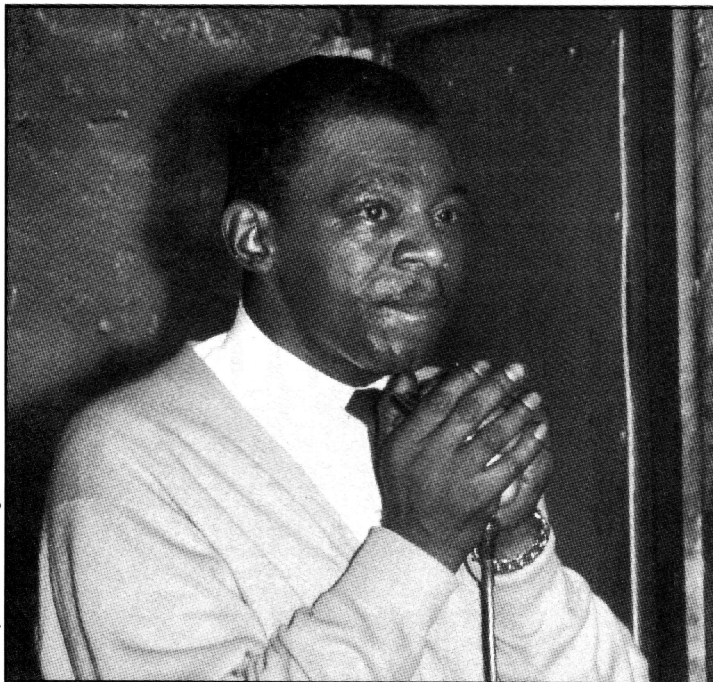


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FORTY-FOUR BLUES

Slow Shuffle
C Harmonica

1 G O.T. vib. 2

5 6 5 6 5 4 5 4 4 4 2
2 3 2 3 2 1 2 3 3 3

3 4 5 5 5 4 5 4 4 2
1 2 2 2 1 2 3 3

4 4 5 5 4 5 4 4 5 6
1 1 2 2 1 2 1 1 2 3

6 5 6 5 4 4 4 4 4
2 3 4 3 3 3 3

7 G 3 4 5 5 5 4 5 5 4 4 2
1 2 2 2 1 2 4 3 3

8 A.T. 3 4 5 5 2 4 4 4 4 4
1 2 2 2 1 3 3

9 A.T. D 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 3 3 2 1 1

10 4 4 4 3 4 5 4 4 4 3 4 4 3 4
3 3 3 3

11 G 3 2 3 4 4 5 5 4 3 4
2 1 3 3 4 4 3 3

12 G7 H.S. 3 4 5 5 4 5
2 3 4 4

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