



# TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

## COWBOY HARMONICA

Watch enough old Westerns, and somewhere during a quiet moment you'll hear the plaintive sound of a harmonica. The image of the harmonica playing cowboy makes the instrument a natural for Western songs, which is why Anne Hills and Cindy Mangsen very kindly invited me to play on their lovely rendition of "The Colorado Trail" on their 1997 Flying Fish CD *Never Grow Up* (FF#671). I've never discussed the Western style of harmonica playing in these teach-ins, so I thought I'd demonstrate the style with my solo from this song.

In the movies, the harmonica is usually played in single-note style with tremolo – the warbling effect produced when the player cups and uncups his hands around the harmonica – on the long notes. Because I haven't discussed this technique in several years in this space, it wouldn't hurt to revisit it.

To do the tremolo, hold the harmonica in between the thumb and forefinger of the left hand with the numbers facing up. Keep the fingers of the left hand together. Then, bend your right hand back from your wrist with the right hand fingers also together. Lay the left palm over the right diagonally so that the heels of the two palms are touching, and the tip of the left second finger touches the base of the right middle finger. These will act as a sort of hinge. Also the right end harmonica should rest on the right thumb, and there should be no space in between the right thumb and the right index finger. There should neither be any space in between the palms on the pinky sides of the hands.

Once you have the position down, you can rapidly cup and uncup the palms, keeping them together at the heels, which will produce a fluctuation in the intensity of the note. The tremolo should be used on all notes longer than

one beat: dotted quarter, half, and whole notes. It is indicated by a "tr." appearing over a note.

Carl Sandburg collected "The Colorado Trail" for *The American Songbag*, but additional verses have since been added. Writing about the origins of the song on his website ([www.ibiblio.org/jimmy/folkden](http://www.ibiblio.org/jimmy/folkden)), former Byrd Roger McGuinn says, "A cowboy love song. All sources point to a cowboy from Duluth, MN whose name is unknown. He was brought to the hospital after being thrown and trampled by what he called 'a terribly bad hoss.' A surgeon, Dr. T.L. Chapman, treated the wrangler for 'bones of both upper and lower legs broken, fractures of the collar bone on both sides, numerous fractures of both arms and wrists, and many scars from lacerations.' As the unknown cowboy convalesced and his strength returned, he sang across the hospital ward in a mellowed tenor voice, and the other patients always called for more. One of the songs he sang was 'Colorado Trail.'"

The trail itself, now a popular hiking route, connects Denver and Durango, and in the course of its 500-mile length crosses eight mountain ranges, six wilderness areas, seven national forests, and five river systems. It's easy to see how the arduous cattle drive with its spectacular views along the way became celebrated in song. On this recording, Priscilla Herdman joins Anne and Cindy on vocals, and Pete Sutherland accompanies them and my harmonica on piano. For this solo I use pucker technique entirely.

Lastly, on *Never Grow Up*, I had the honor of being on the same record with Dave Van Ronk, who sang on "Froggy Went A-Courtin'." Dave, my Stetson's off to you, buddy. I'll see you further up the trail.

*[Editor's Note: For those of you wanting to sing and play the song, a complete lead sheet for "Along The Colorado Trail" was included in Sing Out! v.31#4.]*

# THE COLORADO TRAIL

Traditional

A-Harmonica

5 6 5 6 (6) 6 5 (4) 4

Bm tr. E A

(4) (5) (4) 4 (4) 5 8 (8) 7 (7) (6) 6

tr. tr.

5 6 5 6 7 (6) 6 (5) 4 (4)

B7 Esus4 E Bm E

(4) (4) (7) (8) (7) (6) 6 (4) 5 (5) 6 (5)

F#m C#m tr. F#m tr.

5 6 7 8 7 (8) (7) (8) 8 8

D tr. Bm tr. D

7 (7) (6) 6 (6) 6 (5) 5

E tr. A tr.

(5) 5 (4) 6 5 4

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