



TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

Just as classical musicians speak of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms, blues harp players have their own “big three” postwar Chicago harmonica masters: Little Walter Jacobs, Big Walter Horton, and Aleck “Rice” Miller, usually referred to as Sonny Boy Williamson II. (Miller used the name of the Chicago blues harmonica pioneer early on in his career and stubbornly stuck by the identity his whole life.) In previous columns we’ve explored the playing of Little Walter and Walter Horton; this time Sonny Boy II gets his due as we study his harp work on the 1951 classic “Mighty Long Time.”

Miller’s harmonica style was marked by flawless timing, terse, punchy phrasing, and a heavy vibrato that he also used in his singing. Unlike Little Walter and others, Miller did not play through an amp on his recordings, instead preferring the harmonica’s natural acoustic tone. In an interview I once did with James Cotton, who knew Miller well, he told me that Miller played entirely in tongue blocking position.

Originally recorded for Trumpet, “Mighty Long Time” is a slow blues off the Arhoolie release *King Biscuit Time*. The liner notes identify the sole sideman as Cliff Givens on bass vocals and “broom,” which may refer to a washtub bass. But to me it sounds like the tango figure underlying Miller’s vocals and harmonica is played by a standup bass and guitar staying an octave apart. I’ve written out the first bar of the bass line for you; the rest follows the standard 12-bar blues progression.

Bass Figure Swing 8th notes



Miller’s harp work on the cut features long double note bends with vibrato in-

terspersed with triplet and sixteenth note riffs. He uses no tongue slaps that I can hear, relying instead on well thought-out phrasing. I’ve written out all three harp breaks: the intro, solo and outro.

To play the breaks in “Mighty Long Time,” it is essential to have a good throat vibrato. The term refers to a rapid fluctuation in the intensity of a note, and on harmonica it is done by moving the throat muscles very quickly. To do this, first break up a long inhalation into a rapid series of short breaths by saying the syllable “ka.” Then, try it on the harp. The vibrato can also be done on the exhalation – here the cheek muscles are used more than on the inhalation. Also, for the

double note bends, do these in lip blocking position, and open the mouth a little wider to sound the second hole.

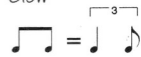
For further listening, you may want to catch the rest of *King Biscuit Time* (#310; available from 10341 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito, CA 94530, Ph: 888-274-6654; Web: <www.arhoolie.com>), plus Analogue’s reissue of the Storyville album *Keep it to Ourselves* (#3036), and MCA Chess’s two-disc reissue *The Real Folk Blues / More Real Folk Blues* (#823). Also, four more transcriptions of Miller’s harmonica solos appear in my book, *Masters of the Blues Harp* (<www.celticguitarmusic.com/harpage.htm>).

MIGHTY LONG TIME

Sonny Boy Williamson © ARC Music



C-Harmonica
Slow



Intro

Musical notation for the harmonica solo, including the Intro, first line, second line, third line, and fourth line. The notation includes notes, rests, and fingerings (circled numbers 1-4) for both hands. Chord symbols (G, C, D7) and vibrato markings (vib.) are present. A triplet of eighth notes is indicated in the first line.

Solo

The Solo section consists of four staves of music. The first staff starts with a G chord and vibrato, followed by a series of eighth notes with fingerings (4, 4, 3, 3) and (3, 3, 3, 3, 2). The second staff has a C chord and vibrato, with fingerings (3) and (3, 3, 2, 3, 2). The third staff features a D7 chord and vibrato, with a triplet of eighth notes and fingerings (3, 3, 3, 3), (2, 2, 2), and (3, 3). The fourth staff starts with a C chord and vibrato, followed by a G chord and vibrato, with fingerings (2, 2, 3, 2, 3, 2) and (3, 2, 1).

Outro

The Outro section consists of five staves of music. The first staff starts with a G chord and vibrato, followed by a series of eighth notes with fingerings (4, 4, 3, 3) and (2, 3, 3, 3, 3), ending with a G chord and vibrato. The second staff has a C chord and vibrato, with a triplet of eighth notes and fingerings (3, 3, 3, 3, 3, 2, 3, 2, 3), followed by a triplet of eighth notes with fingerings (3, 3, 3). The third staff features a G chord and vibrato, with a triplet of eighth notes and fingerings (4, 5), (2, 2, 3, 3, 4, 5, 3, 3, 3), and (3, 2, 2). The fourth staff is marked 'cupped' and 'even 8ths', with a triplet of eighth notes and fingerings (3, 3, 4, 5, 5, 5, 4, 3, 3, 2, 3). The fifth staff starts with a C chord and vibrato, followed by a G chord and vibrato, with a triplet of eighth notes and fingerings (1, 2, 2, 3, 3, 3, 3, 2).

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