



TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

TONGUE BLOCKING: THE REVERSE SLAP

In past columns we've discussed how tongue blocking is used in blues harp and fiddle tunes. But this technique can also be applied to other styles of music. This time we're going to ride our harmonicas to Gloryland with a cross-harp arrangement of the famous spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," focusing in particular on a move I call the "reverse slap."

If you're new to tongue blocking, here's how it's done: first, cover four holes of the harmonica with your mouth. Then, place the tongue over the three leftmost holes, leaving the hole on the right to be sounded by the corner of the mouth. The tongue can then be lifted on and off the harmonica to carry a chord line while you play the melody with the right side of your mouth. Pucker-style players can get used to this technique by playing folk songs or simple blues riffs in tongue blocking position without trying to use the tongue for chording at first.

Years back in this space, I described the three basic tongue moves used in tongue blocking: the lift, the slap, and the reverse slap. If you didn't happen to catch that column (v.40#1, pages 64-65), here's a refresher:

1. The **slap** occurs when a single note is sounded and the tongue slaps down on the holes below it at the same time. It is indicated by an "S" over the note. Slaps are usually staccato and tend to occur on the onbeat. The single note should be held for its full time value and not cut short by the slap. Because they are always the holes just below the melody note, the notes of the slap are not written out.

The slap is done in two ways: if the note that precedes the chord is lip-blocked, the mouth widens for the chord

and the tongue slaps on the holes to the left of the single note. If the note before the chord is tongue blocked, the tongue has to lift off the holes and then slap. In the latter situation, the tongue doesn't have to lift very far to sound the chord before slapping back down.

2. The **lift** occurs when a chord or a succession of chords is sounded after a single note, and is indicated by an "L" above the chord(s). When playing a lift, you should sustain the single note that comes before it so that it is heard when the chord is sounded. Unlike the slap, the notes sounded by the lift are written out. Slapped chords

are usually played too quickly to tell how many holes are played, but I've written out up to three notes here.

3. The **reverse slap** is indicated by the symbol "RS" and usually occurs when a draw chord is sounded on the offbeat, and is followed by a slap on a single blow note on the next onbeat. Although the draw-blow combination is the most common, a blow chord followed by a slapped draw note can also be used. The reverse slap also allows the player to expel air taken in during the draw notes.

Here are exercises for the slap, lift, and reverse slap.

Slap

C-Harmonica

Lift

Reverse Slap

C-Harmonica

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot



Traditional

“**S**wing Low, Sweet Chariot,” is a song of unknown authorship about the Underground Railroad, which rescued slaves from the South from 1831 to 1865. The “chariot” refers to the Conestoga wagons used to spirit out the escapees, and “swing low” meant “come near me.” Home was the North, and the river Jordan represented either the Ohio to the north or the Mississippi to the west, both borders of the Confederacy. The “band of angels” were the heroic “conductors” who risked their lives transporting slaves to freedom. Harriet Tubman, who famously took about 300 slaves to the North, sang the song on her deathbed with her family gathered around her.

This arrangement of the song is peppered with reverse slaps, giving it a swiny panache. It also uses lifts and plain slaps as well as a headshake and octave tonguing, so get ready for a good harmonica workout.

C-Harmonica

The score is written for C-Harmonica in 4/4 time. It includes a Chorus and a Verse. The Chorus starts with a triplet of eighth notes (3, 3, 2) and continues with various rhythmic patterns and slurs. The Verse begins with a triplet of eighth notes (4, 4, 3) and includes techniques like 'S.' (slap), 'O.T.' (octave tonguing), and 'vib.' (vibrato). Chord symbols such as G, G7, C, Bm, A7sus4, D, Em, and A are placed above the staff. Fingerings are indicated by circled numbers 1-4, and slurs indicate groups of notes to be played together. A key signature of one sharp (F#) is shown at the beginning of the score.

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