



# TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

## THE STRATHSPEY

I've heard it said that you have to be a Scot to fiddle a strathspey well. These Scottish dance tunes sound like slow hornpipes, but with often fancier rhythms including running sixteenth notes, multiple triplets, and sixteenth-dotted eighth "Scotch snaps," all of which can be technically challenging. Although we've learned several fiddle tunes on harmonica in this space, we've never played a strathspey, so I have one by Scottish fiddler-composer William Marshall for you to try.

"Strathspey" literally means the valley of the Spey River in the northeast of Scotland and originally referred to a dance for four people similar to but slower than the reel and marked by a long step at the beginning. According to the Oxford dictionary, the term can be traced back to 1653.

Just what sort of music was first played for the dance and which instruments were used is unclear, though. Some scholars think the music originated on the bagpipes, which seems likely given that the dance evidently predates the arrival in Scotland of the modern violin in the late 17th century. But as the Scottish harp dates back to medieval times, it too could have been used to accompany the dance.

By the early 18th Century, fiddlers in Aberdeenshire were playing strathspeys. In the Fall 2001 issue of *Fiddler* magazine, Andrew Kuntz credited fiddlers of the Brown family of Kincardine with developing the strathspey form from the reel. According to Kuntz, the earliest example of a tune with the rhythmic characteristics of the strathspey is "MacFarsan's Testament" (more famously known as "Macpherson's Farewell"), which appears in the 1710 Sinkler Manuscript. In 1745, the first full-fledged strathspeys were published in London in Book 3 of James Oswald's *Caledonian Pocket Companion*.

From there Scottish fiddling blossomed with a line of folk composers including Niel Gow (1727-1807) and his son

Nathaniel (1766-1831), Donald Dow (1732-1783), William Marshall (1748-1833), and James Scott Skinner (1843-1927). The earliest, Niel Gow, developed the famous "up-driven bow" technique for the strathspey in which he took phrases beginning with a Scotch snap and used a bowing pattern in which the first note is played with sharp down-bow, the next three are slurred with an up-bow emphasizing the third note of the phrase, and the last note is played staccato. The effect so produced may be one of the reasons Duke Ellington said there are only two kinds of music that swing-jazz and Scottish music.

"Banks of Spey," the tune I've arranged here for harmonica, was published in 1822 by William Marshall in the second of his three collections. Like Niel Gow, Marshall's formidable skill on the fiddle won him fame in Scotland – so much so that when as a practical joke a blind Scot was once told that a "bungler" would fiddle a tune for him, and the bungler was in fact Marshall, the blind man wasn't fooled and identified Marshall immediately from his playing.

In this arrangement, the tune is set in the Aeolian mode. On harmonica, the mode is played like this: 6d, 7d, 7b, 8d, 8b, 9d, 9b, 10d. But because the 6th step of the scale never occurs in the melody, "Banks of Spey" is actually modally ambiguous and could also be played using the Dorian mode (the Aeolian mode begins on "la" of the major scale and has a flat 6th, while the Dorian begins on "re" of the major scale and has the natural 6th). On harmonica, though, it works out better as an Aeolian tune.

Before we play the tune, here are a few exercises to show you around the Aeolian mode. The first is the mode itself, ascending and descending. Next are broken thirds, step-step-leap, in which you go up the scale two steps and back down by a third and move that sequence up a step at a time, and arpeggios, which are broken chords. All these melodic patterns are common in fiddle tunes.

C - Harmonica

### • EXERCISE 1: Aeolian mode

### • EXERCISE 2: Broken thirds

**KEY**

Circled numbers or d = draw  
Circled numbers or b = blow



5 6 7 5 6 7 8 7 7 8 8 7 8 8 9 8 8 9 9 8 9 9 10 9

• EXERCISE 3: Step-step leap

9 9 8 9 9 8 8 9 8 8 7 8 8 7 7 8 7 7 6 7 7 6 6 7 6

• EXERCISE 4: Arpeggios

Am (I) Bdim (II) C (III) Dm (IV) Em (V) F (VI) G (VII) Am (I)

6 7 8 7 7 8 9 8 7 8 9 8 8 9 10 9 5 6 7 6 5 6 7 6 6 7 8 7 6 7 8 9

Finally, if you don't happen to be a Scot, have at the strathspey anyway. Music is, after all, a universal language. Ciao!

For more on playing traditional music on harmonica, check out my book, *Irish and American Fiddle Tunes for Harmonica*, published by Centrestream.

# Banks of Spey



♩ = approx. 100  
C - Harmonica

Traditional, arr. by Glenn Weiser  
© Glenn Weiser

6 6 7 6 7 7 8 8 7 7 6 6 6 6 6 7 6 7 7 8 8 7 8 8 9 9

10 9 8 7 8 8 9 10 8 9 9 7 6 6 7 6 5 6 7 7 8 8 9 8 8 7 7 6 6 7

6 5 6 7 6 5 6 7 7 7 8 7 6 6 7 6 5 6 7 6 5 7 8 8 7 8 8 9 9

10 9 8 7 8 8 9 10 8 9 9 7 6 6 6 5 6 7 7 8 8 9 8 8 7 7 6 6

Glenn Weiser, author of several books on harmonica and Celtic guitar playing, performs solo acoustic blues, Celtic and old-time stringband music. You can write him c/o Sing Out!, P.O. Box 5460, Bethlehem, PA 18015-0460; or send e-mail to [harmonicati@singout.org](mailto:harmonicati@singout.org).

