

TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

FIDDLE STYLE BREAKS

Although we've looked at many fiddle tunes in past lessons, I've never done a Teach-In on playing a fiddle-style break for a song. In the early days of country music, fiddlers often followed a song's vocal line, but usually with some embellishment. With bluegrass, the breaks got more jazzed up with the "blue" notes and running eighth-note rhythms. So, this time, we're going to take "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," a hymn made famous by The Carter Family, play the basic melody, then a fiddle break transcribed from an old Roy Acuff recording of the tune, and lastly a bluegrass-type solo.

"Will the Circle Be Unbroken" was written in 1907 by Ada R. Habershon and Charles H. Gabriel; the song became a country standard after The Carter Family reworked and recorded it as "Can the Circle Be Unbroken" in 1935. **Part 1** of the music below is the vocal line pretty much as sung by The Carter Family. The harmonica is played in second position for this; the only note bend required is the whole-step bend on 3-draw.

Part 2 is a transcription of the opening fiddle solo on an early 1940s recording of the song by Roy Acuff and The Smokey Mountain Boys. Photos of the group from around the time they recorded the song show Acuff as the band's only fiddler, so I assume he played the rather plainspoken break himself. Because he repeats the solo verbatim later in the song, he probably prepared rather than improvised it. This side can

currently be heard on YouTube on the channel of poster Rubyrola1959 (<youtu.be/074EhSBkTSg>).

In measures 3, 10, 13 and 14 of the solo, Acuff added ornaments to the tune with slides from A# to B on the second string. To reproduce this on harmonica, you'll have to use releasing half-step grace note bends on 3-draw. For this, play the bend on 3-draw and let it pop up to the unbent pitch as quickly as possible. Also, play this solo and the next with a swing feel.

Part 3 presents a bluegrass-type break that I wrote. Although more rhythmically elaborate than the Acuff solo, it still adheres to the old-school bluegrass practice of following the contour of the vocal line (in the 1970s, with the advent of newgrass and the influence of the Texas fiddle-contest style, that would change as soloists broke free of their melodic confines and played freely over the chord line in the manner of jazz musicians).

On harmonica, Part 3 requires note bends on draw reeds 2 through 4 in several measures and tongue slaps on 6-blow in measures 9 and 16. I recommend playing this break in pucker position and using tongue blocking only for the slaps.

Lastly, the song's lyrics, which lament the passing of a family's mother, hold personal significance for many of us in the baby boomer generation as we reach middle age and endure the loss of our parents. Let's trust there's a better home a-waiting after all, be it the astral plane, the third bardo or the good old-fashioned heaven of which The Carter Family sang.

Will the Circle Be Unbroken



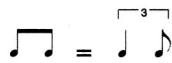
PART 1: Vocal Line

C - Harmonica

Words & Music by Ada R. Habershon and Charles H. Gabriel P.D.

PART 2: Roy Acuff Version

C - Harmonica



Chord diagrams: G, C, Em, G, D7, G

1 2 3 4 5

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

6 7 8 9 10 11

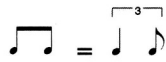
② 3 2 ① ① ① 2 ② 3 ③ ③ ④ ④ ③

12 13 14 15 16

③ 3 ③ ③ ④ ③ ③ ③ 3 2 ③ ③ ③ 3

PART 3: Bluegrass Solo

C - Harmonica



Chord diagrams: G, C, Em, G, D7, G

1 2 3

① 2 ① ② ① 2 ② ③ ③ ② ③ 3 2 ① 2 ② ③

4 5 6 7

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

8 9 10 11

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

12 13 14 15 16

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

