



## Country Ragtime Harmonica

by Glenn Weiser

Among the old time string bands recorded during the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Carolina Tar Heels stood out for using a harmonica instead of the usual fiddle. The original duo included Dock Walsh on banjo and vocals, and harmonica wizard Gwen Foster, who also played guitar and sang. (Clarence Ashley joined the group a bit after their first session, and Gwen was replaced by another mouth harp player, Garley Foster, no relation.) The harmonica playing on these recordings incorporated many blues effects, like note bending and vibrato, into the style. For the duo's debut recording, the country ragtime classic "Ain't No Use Working So Hard," Gwen Foster throws in a rarely used technique I call the "growl" which produces a rapid fluctuation in the intensity of a note. This time, we'll look at this technique and the others Foster uses in the first two of the song's several harmonica choruses.

The growl is a type of tongue flutter in which the tongue is moved against the roof of the mouth back towards the throat. To do this, spread out your tongue so that it covers your upper molars and tense it. If you try to imitate the sound of a snore while exhaling with your tongue flexed up against your molars, you should produce a guttural sound like a motorboat. This is the trick to the growl. Next, try practicing the growl while inhaling. Then play some whole notes on the harmonica with the growl, first on 4-blow and then 4-draw, and then some half notes on each reed. After that, try growling your way up the major scale in a whole note rhythm: 4b-4d-5b-5d-6b-6d-7d-7b.

"Ain't No Use Working So Hard" (Victor 20544-A), was recorded on February 19, 1927, and was the Carolina Tar Heels' first side. The song, which has a four-line, sixteen-bar structure, is about a laborer with a girl-

friend working as a domestic who plies him with food – a theme also heard in blues.

"Ain't No Use" was anthologized in Samuel Charters' 1971 compilation LP Ragtime 2: The Country Fiddles & Guitars, (RFB 18). Charters considered it an example of country ragtime – in his liner notes he writes, "The country ragtime took on some of the characteristics of city ragtime. The harmonies became more complex, there was a tighter sense of structure, certain



The Carolina Tar Heels (1928, l to r): Clarence Ashley, Dock Walsh and Gwen Foster.

melodic figures were used over and over in instrumental pieces." The track is available on Good for What Ails You: Music of the Medicine Shows, 1926-1937 (Old Hat CD-1005).

The song is played on harmonica in straight harp (first) position. In the first, fifth, and twenty-fifth measures, the 8-blow unbent and half-step bent notes alternate in eighth note rhythm. It sounds like Foster is using the "ta" articulation (done by whispering "ta" as you start a note) on each note, which is tricky to

♩ = approx. 185  
C - Harmonica

### Ain't No Use Workin' So Hard: Chorus 1



### Ain't No Use Workin' So Hard: Chorus 2

The image shows three staves of musical notation for the chorus of the song. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. It features a melody line with notes and rests, and a bass line with fret numbers (8, 9, 7, 10, 10, 10, 10, 9, 8, 8, 8) and a circled 8. A 'Gr.' (growl) symbol with a horizontal line above it is positioned over the first measure. The second staff continues the melody and bass line, with fret numbers (8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 9, 8, 8, 8, 7, 6, 6, 7, 8, 9, 9, 8, 8, 7, 8) and circled 6s and 8s. The third staff concludes the chorus with fret numbers (8, 8, 9, 9, 9, 8, 8, 7, 8, 7) and circled 8s. Chord symbols C, C7, F, and G7 are placed above the staff lines.

do. Also, Foster often starts 8-blow and 9-blow with a bent grace note that pops up to normal pitch. In the tenth measure, he uses vibrato on a bent 6-draw.

Foster begins the second chorus with a pop-up grace note on 9-blow, and then applies the growl, which he holds throughout the next seven measures. In the music, this is indicated with a "Gr." with a line extending after it. In the sixth

bar of the second chorus he uses a descending grace note bend from 10-blow unbent down to the whole step bend.

If you have any comments or questions about the song or the harmonica in general you can email me at <banjoandguitar100@yahoo.com>. Ciao. 🎸

(SEE THE NEXT PAGE FOR THE FULL SONG. 🎵)