



# TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints and suggestions from instrumental masters

## Introducing Cross Harp

Styles for the Marine Band-type harmonica, the kind most used for roots music, fall into two main categories. When the “harp” (the term comes from “French Harp,” a 10-hole diatonic model once marketed exclusively in the South by Hohner) is played in the key stamped on the reed plate cover, the music is based on the major scale. This is known as “straight” harp. “Jacob’s Ladder,” which appeared in this column last issue, was arranged as a straight harp tune. But, when a mode other than the major scale is used, the music is in another key. This is called cross harp, and is the basis of most blues and country playing. The mode most used in cross harp playing is mixolydian, which is the subscale that starts on the fifth step (sol) of the major scale. (It’s also very common in Scottish bagpipe music.) In this mode, the seventh step is lowered by a half tone, giving the scale a lonelier character. To hear the difference between the two, try playing the major scale (4-out, 4-in, 5-out, 5-in, 6-out, 6-in, 7-in, 7-out) and then the mixolydian mode (6-out, 6-in, 7-in, 7-out, 8-in, 8-out, 9-in, 9-out).

When the harmonica was invented in Germany in the 1820s, it was designed for straight harp playing. German emigrants brought the pocket-size instrument to America in the mid-19th century and the harmonica got tossed into the melting pot. Soon afterward, cross harp playing was discovered. One theory holds that this style evolved from train imitations, which relied heavily on the draw reeds for the sound of the whistle and the wheels on the tracks. W.C. Handy reported hearing harmonicists doing such imitations in the 1870s — the earliest mention of cross harp that I know. By the time blues harmonica was first recorded in the 1920s, it was widespread in the South. The style became more refined in the ’30s and ’40s, reaching its peak in the Chicago blues of the ’50s and ’60s.

“Cross My Harp” is an easy solo that should be played using the lip blocking technique (playing double notes is difficult in the tongue blocking position). No advanced techniques are required. Remember, though, that the curved lines indicate where notes should be played with the same breath. Also play the eighth notes with a “swing” feel. Enjoy!

Walking; ♩ = approx. 112

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Swing the eighth notes: ♩ = ♩<sup>3</sup>