



TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints and suggestions from instrumental masters

For this issue, I'd like to go over how to jump from a low to a high note (or vice versa) on the harmonica, something that can be difficult for a beginner.

When a melody contains a wide leap – say four or more steps of the scale – it usually requires the player to hop over one or more holes without sounding them. Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home" features some of these leaps and is, therefore, a good tune for learning this technique. I'll show you how to do this using either the lip or tongue blocking method.

When a wide skip occurs at a slow tempo, as in "Old Folks at Home," you can simply cut the breath short at the end of the note before the leap. This can be trickier than it sounds – if you wait too long to do this you'll get an unwanted note. The diagonal slashes appearing on the staves tell you when to cut the breaths short. This approach can be used by both lip and tongue blockers. There are different jumping techniques, other than cutting off the breath, for the two methods. While their use is optional at slow tempos, they are necessary for rapid melodies such as fiddle tunes or the quick rhythms that can be found in blues harp.

Lip blockers have to use "tonguing," which is the technique of touching the tongue to the roof of the mouth just above the front teeth as if whispering the syllable "ta." Tonguing has the effect of cutting off the airstream and can be done when either the first or second note of the jump is played (it works both ways).

Tongue blockers can play quick, wide leaps by switching the tongue from one side of the mouth to the other. For example, to go from a low to a high note, play the low note with the left side of the mouth by moving the tongue to the right (this is called bass-side tongue blocking). Then play the high note on the right side of the mouth by moving the tongue back to the left. To go from a high to a low note, play the high note with the right side of the mouth. After that, move the tongue to the right.

"Old Folks at Home" has been translated into every European language and a number of Asian and African ones as well. When Foster was first writing the lyrics, he needed an appropriate-sounding two-syllable name of a southern river. Stumped, he went to visit his brother, Morrison, who suggested first the Yazoo and then the Pedee. Stephen rejected these. The two then got out a map and picked Florida's Suwannee River, which flows into the Gulf of Mexico, and condensed the name. Foster's soul was evidently "yearnin' ever" for a place he'd never even been to!

Moderate; ♩ = approx. 116

The musical score consists of five staves of music in 4/4 time. The tempo is marked 'Moderate' with a quarter note equal to approximately 116 beats per minute. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The melody is written in treble clef. Chord progressions are indicated above the notes: C, C7, F, C, Am, D7, G7, C, C7, F, C, G7, C, G, G7, C, C7, F, Dm, G, G7, C, C7, F, Em, Am, D7, G7, C. Fingering numbers are provided below the notes, with circled numbers indicating specific techniques. Diagonal slashes (//) are placed above certain notes to indicate where to cut the breath short.



Glenn Weiser started playing guitar at age 14. He studied classical guitar during high school, also picking up harmonica and banjo, and beginning to teach professionally. He is the author of two harmonica books, *Fiddle Tunes for the Harmonica and Blues and Rock Harmonica*, as well as two Celtic guitar books, *The Minstrel Boy and Harp Music of O'Carolan for Solo Guitar*. He has also recently completed transcriptions for 70 Little Walter solos. Glenn currently performs solo acoustic blues, Celtic music with Greg Schaaf, as well as blues and old-timey with the St. Regis String Band. Feel free to write him at Box 2551, Albany, NY 12220.

