

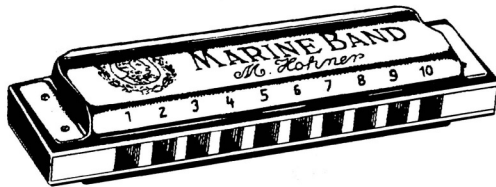
# TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints and suggestions from instrumental masters

## Learning Your Way Around The Reeds

This time I'd like to explore the layout of the 10-hole harmonica's reeds with you. This needs some explaining because the harmonica was designed with some irregularities so that a melody in the treble could be accompanied by a chord line in the bass. Understanding how the reeds are arranged will greatly demystify the instrument. To help acquaint you better with all this, I've written out the folk song "Billy Boy" in two different octaves.



The standard diatonic or Marine Band-type harmonica has 10 holes and 20 reeds. Each hole has a blow reed and a draw reed. These 20 notes cover a range of three octaves, but only the middle octave is complete. The low octave lacks the fourth and sixth steps of the scale (fa and la) and the high octave lacks the seventh step (ti). The reeds are arranged so that each blow reed is one of the three notes of the tonic chord (1, 3 and 5 or do, mi and sol). Read the key stamped on the harmonica to figure out which chord this is on your harmonica. The draw reeds are the remaining steps of the scale (2, 4, 6 and 7 or re, fa, la and ti). Try playing the different octaves, starting with the low: 1-blow, 1-draw, 2-blow, 2-draw, 3-blow, 3-draw, 4-blow. This is the sequence do-re-mi-sol-sol-ti-do. Note that the same note, sol, can be found on both 2-draw and 3-blow. There are many blues riffs in which this note is repeated using the two different reeds. The low octave is designed to give you a dominant or V chord in the first four draw reeds, with the aforementioned tonic or I chord in the blow reeds. This is why tongue blocking works; without this arrangement, these two chords would not be so conveniently available for accompaniment. (Like Cajuns, the 19th century German folkies who first played the harmonica didn't seem to have much use for the subdominant or IV chord.)

The middle octave, which is complete, can be played like this: 4-blow, 4-draw, 5-blow, 5-draw, 6-blow, 6-draw, 7-draw, 7-blow. Note two things here: First, you have to play two consecutive draw reeds to go from "la" to "ti" in the scale. Second, in the first six holes, all the draw reeds are higher in pitch than the blow reeds of the same hole, but starting with the 7 hole, the reverse is true. The odd number of notes in the scale necessitates the switch at the 7 hole.

Play the high octave like this: 7-blow, 8-draw, 8-blow, 9-draw, 9-blow, 10-draw, 10-blow. This yields the sequence of do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-do.

Because the melody of "Billy Boy" doesn't use the seventh step of the scale, the tune can be played in both the middle and the high octaves. Try playing it both ways, and you should gain a better sense of where the notes are.

We'll be back to blues next time. Hasta luego!

## Billy Boy

Moderate; ♩ = approx. 88

C

1. Middle: 5 (5) 6 6 6 7 5 (5) 6 6 (6) 6 5 (5)  
 2. High: 8 (9) 9 9 9 10 8 (9) 9 9 (10) 9 8 (9)

Am G G7

6 6 6 7 (5) 5 5 (4) (4) 5  
 9 9 9 10 (9) 8 8 (8) (8) 8

Dm G7 C Em F

(5) (5) (5) (5) (5) 6 (5) 5 (4) 5 (5) 6 7 (6)  
 (9) (9) (9) (9) (9) 9 (9) 8 (8) 8 (9) 9 10 (10)

C G7 C

6 5 6 6 (5) (4) 5 (4) 4  
 9 8 9 9 (9) (8) 8 (8) 7

Glenn Weiser started playing guitar at age 14. He studied classical guitar during high school, also picking up harmonica and banjo, and began 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 music with the St. Regis String Band. Feel free to write him at Box 2551, Albany, NY 12220.

