



# TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

About five years ago, I had the good fortune of meeting Muddy Waters' former harmonica, Jerry Portnoy, and getting some valuable pointers from him on how tongue blocking is used in the Chicago style of blues harp. Up until this time I played blues with the lip-blocking technique of Sonny Terry, using tongue blocking as a straight harp technique only. This encounter led me to revise my blues style, and in this column I'd like to pass along what I learned from this great bluesman.

Portnoy explained that the Chicago style is characterized by frequent changes between the two basic mouth positions: tongue blocking – where the tongue covers the holes to the left and the corner of the mouth plays a single note on the right – and lip blocking, where the lips are pursed and play a single hole. Furthermore, this is done in such a way that the first six draw reeds are usually lip-blocked to allow note bending, and the blow reeds in the middle part of the harp – holes 3 through 6 – are usually tongue-blocked so that chords can be added. To get the hang of this we'll need to go through some exercises before trying a solo.

The first exercise is for switching mouth positions. Start by lip blocking 1-blow and then 1-draw (the first hole is always lip-blocked). Then alternate positions, tongue blocking the blow reeds and lip blocking the draw reeds as indicated by the letters "L" (lip blocking) and "T" (tongue blocking) appearing under the hole numbers.

## C-Harmonica

### Exercise #1 - Position Switches

1 ① 2 ② 3 ③ 4 ④ 5 ⑤ 6 ⑥ 7 ⑦  
L T L T L T L T L

Exercises 2, 3 and 4 teach the three basic tongue movements found in blues harp. Number 2 shows you the "slap," which is a quick lowering of the tongue onto the holes as a note is sounded, producing a staccato chord. To indicate this, I've written out a percussion line below the hole numbers. A diamond (◇) represents a draw chord and an "X" a blow chord. Eighth-note stems descend from the ◇'s and X's to show their time value, along with rests that show when the tongue is not in use.

Exercise 3 teaches the "lift," which is the opposite of the slap. Here, you lift the tongue after the note is sounded and then slap it down quickly to produce the staccato chord.

Exercise 4 shows the "reverse slap," which is really two chords – the first a draw chord sounded by lifting the tongue, and the second a blow chord slapped at the same time a blow note is sounded. I call this the reverse slap because of the change of breath directions involved. I've added arrows to make the tongue movements more clear.

### Exercise #2 - The Slap

4 ④ 5 ⑤ 6 ⑥ 7 ⑦  
L T L T L T L T L

### Exercise #3 - The Lift

4 ④ 5 ⑤ 6 ⑥ 7 ⑦  
L T L T L T L T L

### Exercise #4 - The Reverse Slap

2 ② 3 ③ 4 ④  
L T L T L T L T L

Before going on to the last two exercises, let's learn a new note-bending technique – the grace-note bend. Start by sounding a note (2 draw is good for this) already bent down a whole step. Then quickly release the bend, allowing the note to jump up to its normal pitch. This technique is often used in the Chicago style, and is indicated by grace notes appearing before the main notes.

Exercises 5 and 6 combine position switches, grace-note bends and slaps. In Exercise 5 – the ascending scale – the mouth positions alternate, with releasing grace bends on the draw notes and slaps on the blow notes. In Exercise 6, the descending scale shows you slaps on draw notes (Big Walter Horton did this a lot) as an alternative to the more common bends.

### Exercise #5 - Ascending Scale

② ② 3 ③ ③ 4 ④ ④ 4 ⑤ ⑤ 6  
L T L T L T L T L

**Exercise #6 - Descending Scale**

After you have the exercises down, try the solo. You'll find that slaps occur in almost every measure – it's the most common of the three tongue moves. The reverse slap occurs in Measures 5 and 6 (this is a riff in the style of Walter Horton), and the lift is used in Measures 9 and 10. Listen to the Music Access recording; it will be a big help.

**SLAPHAPPY BLUES**

Swing 8th Notes  
Moderate; ♩ = 88

Any questions?

Write to me at P.O. Box 2551, Albany, NY 12210.

Later!

*Glenn Weiser began playing guitar at age 14. He studied classical guitar during high school, picked up harmonica and banjo, and then began teaching professionally. He is the author of two harmonica books, Fiddle Tunes for the Harmonica and Blues and Rock Harmonica, two Celtic guitar books, The Minstrel Boy and Harp Music of O'Carolan for Solo Guitar, and the transcriptions of 70 Little Walter solos. Glenn performs solo acoustic blues, Celtic music with Greg Schaaf, and blues and old-time music with the St. Regis String Band.*

