



TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

In response to a reader's request, I'm going to devote this issue's teach-in to rack-mounted harmonica playing.

The holder, of course, allows you to play the harmonica and another instrument (let's assume it's guitar) at the same time. This is a tremendous advantage, especially if your picking tends to run toward the plainer side. Even if you can play nice instrumental breaks, being able to alternate guitar and harmonica solos is better. And if you play out, you'll find audiences love the voice-like tone of the harp.

That's the good news. Of course, there's a downside. If you are already a harp player and have yet to try rack-mounted playing, the first thing you'll discover is it's not easy to play harmonica and guitar together. (John Hammond says it took him two years to learn.) You'll also discover the harmonica can't be played as well in the rack as in your hands, even if you're practicing using the holder without

playing guitar. And furthermore, you might discover your guitar work is thrown off by trying to coordinate it with the harp. If you take the following steps, however, you can minimize the difficulties of rack-mounted playing.

- Remember, you can still do everything with the harp in the rack that you can do with it in your hands *except* use the *tremolo* or cupping technique [as explained in the Harmonica Teach-In in V.35#2]. Note bending and tongue blocking will still be possible, but you have to use vibrato, which is produced internally, as a substitute for the tremolo. If you don't know how to create vibrato, try taking a rapid series of short inhalations. The epiglottis, which is the little trapdoor covering your windpipe, will wiggle when you do this. Then increase the speed of the inhalations until it becomes a vibration. Now play a long draw note, tensing your diaphragm and moving your throat

(Scroll down)

as described. For blow notes, do the same, but allow your cheeks to vibrate also. Vibrato, like tremolo, will liven up the long notes in a solo.

- Have the rack properly positioned with the wing nuts tight. If the rack is too close to your mouth, it will interfere with your singing. If it's too far away, it will be more difficult to play, especially if you want to use tongue blocking. To position the rack correctly, have it close enough to your mouth so that when your head and neck are perfectly upright you can fit your index finger between the harmonica and your lips. Also, remember to tighten the wing nuts all the way – you don't want to have the rack loosen up and the harp to fall forward when you're onstage in the middle of a solo.

- Compensate for the limitations of the rack mounting by playing simpler things on the harp. Using the holder decreases your facility with the harmonica. Don't try to be too fancy in the beginning. Instead, develop simple, solid ideas for your harp solos. If you're playing a folk song, try tracing the vocal line without elaborations. If you're playing blues, come up with strong, basic phrases that go for the gut rather than the intellect of the listener. You may also need to scale back the complexity of your guitar accompaniment. In time, though, you'll be able to do fancier things on both instruments.

- Keep practicing hand-held harp as you learn to use the holder, and compare the difference. The goal is to be able to play rack-mounted almost as well as hand-held. John Hammond and Paul Geremia are both masters of rack-mounted harp. Study their recordings and see them perform if possible.

- Finally, keep in mind that when using a microphone, you can keep the harmonica closer to the mike than you would your mouth when singing. When vocals are too close to the mike, you can get a kind of distortion called *proximity effect*. This problem doesn't exist when a harmonica is played through a microphone, so you can get closer with the harp than with your voice. You can use any standard vocal mike, such as a Shure SM-58, with the harp.

I've given you a couple exercises here and a version of the ballad "Jesse James," written with guitar tab and harmonica indications, on the following page. At first, play the parts separately. Then try them together at a slow tempo. When you can do this, increase the speed up to performance tempo.

Good luck!



Glenn Weiser 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. In addition to teaching professionally, Glenn performs solo acoustic blues, Celtic music with Greg Schaaf, and blues and old-time music with the St. Regis String Band. Questions can be sent to him at P.O. Box 2551, Albany, NY 12220.

Exercise 1

C - Harmonica

Exercise 2

JESSE JAMES

C - Harmonica

1 2

7 (8) 8 8 (8) 7 6

Guitar G

3 4 5

(6) 7 (6) 6 7 (8) 8 9 9

C G

6 7 8

9 8 (8) 7 (8)

D

9 10 11

8 8 (8) 7 6 (6) 7 (6)

G G7 C

12 13 14

6 7 (8) 8 9 8 (8) 8 (8)

G D

15 16 17

7 8 (9) (9) (9) (9)

G G7 C

18 19 20

(9) (9) 8 8 (8) 7 (8)

G

21 22 23

8 9 9 8 (8)

D

24 25 26

7 (8) 8 8 (8) 7 6

G G7

27 28 29

(6) 7 (6) 6 7 (8) 8 9 8

C G

30 31 32

(8) 8 (8) 7

D G

