

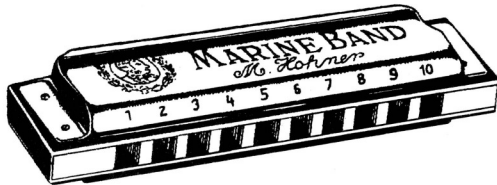
# TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

## NOTE BENDING

One of the most appealing things about blues harmonica is the variety of sounds that can be produced by note bending, which is the technique of lowering the pitch of a reed by changing the internal shape of the mouth. These effects range from soulful moans and cries to jazzy sounding sharps and flats. Because note bending allows you to play several notes which are otherwise unavailable on the harmonica, it is one of the most important techniques to master.



When a harmonicist bends a note, the airstream passing through the hole narrows, causing the middle part of the reed, rather than the tip, to vibrate. Because the middle of the reed vibrates more slowly, a lower pitch is produced.

On the harmonica, the first six draw reeds – but not the blow reeds – can be bent. From holes 7 through 10, the opposite holds true – you can bend the blow reeds, but not the draw reeds. Bending the draw reeds is called overdrawing and bending the blow reeds, overblowing. In this column we'll explore overdrawing only and save the overblows for a future Teach-in.

To bend a note, you must be in the lip-blocking position, so pucker up. Now play four-draw – that's one of the easier bends initially. First, listen to the pitch of the note. Then, as you draw breath, tense your lips slightly. After that, tense your tongue, lower it in the front and raise it in the back. Think the syllables "woe-uuu" as you do this. If you've done this correctly, the note should bend. Bending can be a very elusive technique at first, so don't be discouraged if your first attempts don't succeed. If you do have some trouble with it, try this: First whistle a note that is in the middle of your range. Then allow the note to slide down as low as you can whistle. Now do it again, inhaling instead. This exercise causes your mouth to move in a way similar to that required for note bending.

In the beginning, bending is usually a hit-and-miss process. When you can do it consistently, try lowering

the note and then raising it back to its normal pitch by allowing your tongue and lips to relax. Then bend and release the bend using exact time values – two beats, one beat, half a beat, and so on.

Different reeds can be bent down by varying degrees. Draw reeds 1, 4, 5 and 6 can be lowered by a half step only. Two-draw can be bent by either a half or whole step, and three-draw can be bent by either a half step, whole step or a minor third (1½ steps). If possible, check to see if you are lowering your notes accurately by comparing the pitches with another instrument. See the accompanying chart of the notes on the C-scale harmonica, both bent and unbent. The first six draw reeds and the last four blow reeds have more than one note listed. The notes on top are the unbent ones. The next lowest are half-step bends and the ones below that are whole-step bends. The lowest are minor-third bends.

Once you can bend accurately, there are different techniques that can be used. A note can be bent or released slowly (creating a sliding sound) or quickly (which can create the effect of a grace note). Two reeds can sometimes be bent together. Three- and four-draw or four- and five-draw bent together are frequently used in blues harp (this is also the "whistle" in train imitations).

Another important bending technique is going directly to a note bend from another reed – for example, going from one-draw unbent to two-draw bent by a whole step. This re-

C - HARMONICA										
Hole No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Blow Holes	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	E	G	C/B A/B/A
Draw Reeds	D C#/D♭	G F#/G♭ F	B A#/B♭ A G#/A♭	D C#/D♭	F E	A G#/A♭	B	D	F	A

Table of Bent and Unbent Notes

quires you to change your internal mouth shape quickly as you pass from one reed to the next.


In the following solo, note bends will be indicated like this: A hole number with an arrow pointing down will indicate a half-step bend, and a downward arrow with a crossbar will indicate a whole-step bend. (We'll avoid the difficult minor-third bend on three-draw this time.) If you've been following this column, you should know when to slur by now, so the slur lines have been dropped.


Any questions, write to me at P.O. Box 2551, Albany, NY 12220.

Adios!

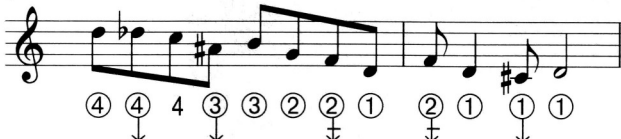
## BIG BEND BLUES

Moderate; ♩ = approx. 92


G 




② ② ① ② ③ ③ ④ ③ ③





④ ④ ④ ③ ③ ② ② ① ② ① ① ①

C 






(h) 1 4 ③ ③ ② 2 1 4 ④ ④ ④

G 











③ ③ ④ ③ ③ 5 ③ ③ ⑤ ④ 5 ④

D7  C 



① ② ③ 4 ④ ④ ④ 5 6 ⑥ ⑥ ⑥ 5

G  G7  C  Cm  3fr.  G  G7 



6 ⑤ ④ ④ ④ 3 ③ ③ ② ① 2 ②



*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.*