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TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

THE HEADSHAKE

When blues harp great Walter Horton showed up in Chicago in the late '40s, he soon acquired the nickname "Shakey." He was often seen shaking his head from side to side while playing, hence the moniker. In this column we'll learn this important technique of the *headshake* or *trill*, and use it in a solo.

The headshake is just what it sounds like – a rapid alternation between two adjacent reeds of the same direction produced by a quick shaking of the head. Although it can also be done by holding the harmonica in one hand and shaking it horizontally (this could possibly be called a *handshake*, but that's already a term for a technique used by campaigning politicians who often rapidly vacillate between two positions on an issue), using your head is considered preferable. It works better

with a mike. Headshakes are frequently used in Chicago blues and can be very effective, say, in building tension in a slow blues solo.

Let's try some exercises to get the hang of a headshake. First, you must be in lip-blocking position, which is how the headshake is usually done.

The first exercise, Example 1, consists of alternating between 4 and 5-draw in eighth-note rhythm. Remember to slur all the notes by using only one breath.

Example 1



Example 2 requires you to do the same in sixteenth notes – twice as fast.

Example 2

Now you're ready for your first headshake. Move your head even faster than the sixteenth-note exercise, being careful to sound only the two holes required. Example 3 shows you how the headshake is written: A grace note indicates the lower hole and the main or "graced" note the upper. The two notes are connected with a diagonal line and the designation "H.S." appears overhead. (For technical reasons, the usual method of notating a trill is not suitable for the harmonica.) Note that the headshake always begins on the lower hole.

Example 3

Example 4

After you've practiced this, try beginning the headshake with a releasing grace-note bend on 4-draw, as shown in Example 4. Note the double grace note here: The first note represents the releasing bend, and the second the lower hole of the headshake. This is a very common technique when the headshake involves two of the lower draw reeds.

Headshakes can be short or long. To illustrate this, here are two Little Walter riffs. Example 5 is the opening of "Blues With A Feeling." Here the headshake occurs on a slow swing eighth note. Make sure you make the switches in mouth position as shown below the notation [see the "Harmonica Teach-In" in V.40#1].

Example 5: "Blues with a Feeling"

Example 6 is the beginning of a slow blues instrumental "Quarter To Twelve." Here the headshake is on a long note.

Example 6: "Quarter to Twelve"

Headshakes on neighboring pairs of reeds can be strung together into chains, and are usually alternating in breath direction. Example 7 is a riff similar to one that has been used by Junior Wells.

Slow Example 7

In addition to the grace-note bend that often begins a headshake on the low draw reeds, note bending can be applied to the headshake itself. Try a headshake on 3 and 4 draw, bending the notes and releasing them, as shown in Example 8.

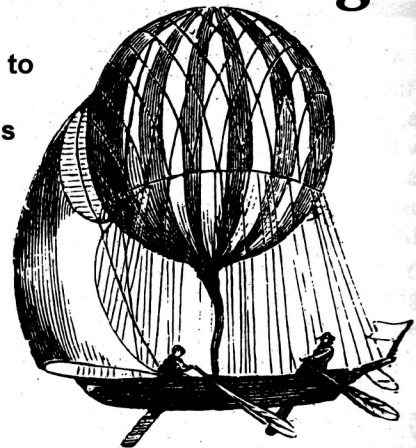
Example 8

You can also break up a long headshake into shorter units by using grace-note bends. This has the effect of creating rhythms within the headshake, as shown in Example 9.

Example 9

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USE YOUR HEAD

Slow Shuffle

1 H.S. H.S. H.S. H.S. 2

3 H.S. H.S. H.S. H.S. 4 H.S.

5 6

7 H.S. 8 H.S.

9 D7 10 C

11 H.S. H.S. H.S. 12 D

Another interesting technique is altering the position of the lips to change the tone of the headshake. To do this, tense the lips (which are ordinarily relaxed) and allow the harmonica to move out closer to the edge of the lips. This will add more treble to the tone. Example 10 illustrates this technique. Also, you can increase the rapidity of the headshake by tilting the harmonica in such a way that the right end of the harp is elevated to about 30 degrees. (I learned this trick from harmonicaist Shredni Vormer, who plays with Rick Danko.)

Example 10

Lastly, when Groucho Marx was performing stand-up comedy back in the days of vaudeville, he incorpo-

rated the cigar into his act because, he said, it gave him time to remember his next line. The headshake has a similar value for the improviser – if you are momentarily at a loss for a melodic idea, throw in a long headshake and use the time to think of your next riff.

Any comments or questions, write to me at P.O. Box 2551, Albany, NY 12220 or in care of *Sing Out!*, P.O. Box 5253, Bethlehem, PA 18015-0253.

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.

