



TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

BLUES IN FIRST POSITION

Remember the difference between “straight” harp and “cross” harp? Cross harp, most often played in the dominant key (G on a C harmonica, for example) was for blues while straight harp, played in the tonic key (the one stamped on the harmonica), was for folk music, right? Well, this distinction is about to be blurred as we play the blues in the tonic key. Jimmy Reed used this approach, and if you’ve ever listened to him, you already have an inkling of what’s in store. Otherwise, grab your harmonica and read on.

When blues is played in the dominant key, it’s known as the second position. In second position, the “blue” notes – the flatted third, fifth and seventh – can be obtained easily by overdrawing, which is bending any of the first six draw reeds. But when you learn the more difficult technique of overblowing, which is bending any of the four highest blow reeds, the blue notes become available in the tonic key. The straight-harp approach to blues is called first position and is worth learning for the variety it will add to your playing, not to mention the practical value of being able to play blues in two keys with one harp. (Later, when we learn third position, this will become three keys.)

To get started with overblowing, you’ll need an A or G scale harmonica – first-position playing always seems to be done with one of these. When you get into the higher-key harmonicas, the high bends don’t work as well.

Note bending, you’ll recall, is done by changing the internal shape of the mouth. For overdrawing, the tongue lowers in front and lifts in the back. But when you overblow, the middle of the tongue lifts up without lowering in the front. When we first discussed this technique [V.39#4], an exercise was given in which you whistled a note in the middle of your range and then allowed it to slide as far down as possible. This was intended to demonstrate what the mouth does on overdrawing. To get the hang of overblowing, you can invert the whistling exercise as follows: Whistle a note in the middle of your range and then let it slide up as far as it can go.

Reeds 7- and 8-out can each be bent down by a half-step, 9-out can be bent by either a half or whole step, and 10-out can be bent by a half-step, a whole step or a minor third. Be advised, though, that 10-out is very tough to

control. For now, you should content yourself with being able to bend it down by a whole step only.

Remember, there are four basic moves in note bending:

- Lowering from an unbent to a bent note on the same reed (Exercise 1);
- Beginning a note with the reed bent and “releasing” the note so that it rises to its unbent pitch (Exercise 2);
- Starting a note bent and not releasing the bend (Exercise 3);
- Going directly to a bent note from another reed (Exercise 4). [Note: Everything except Exercises 6a, 6b and 6c is played one octave higher than written.]

Swing 8ths Exercise 1

Exercise 2

Exercise 3

Exercise 4

Exercise 5

In V.41#1, we learned the headshake or trill, a technique used by Big Walter Horton as an overblow on 8- and 9-out (Exercise 5).

First-position playing does not take place solely on the high blow reeds. While it’s true that the middle part of the harmonica isn’t used much in this position, there are many riffs that are done in the low register. This is because the blue notes $\flat 5$ and $\flat 7$ can be obtained by bending 2-in and 3-in respectively. (We’ll deal with blues theory in future teach-ins.) To further guide you along, here’s a mixolydian mode, which can be used as a blues scale:

Exercise 6a - Mixolydian Mode

a riff in the style of Rice Miller (a.k.a. Sonny Boy Williamson II);

Exercise 6b - Rice Miller Style

and the hook riff Little Walter Jacobs used in "Hoochie Koochie Man."

**Exercise 6c
Hoochie Koochie Man**

Exercise 7

Although it's not standard practice, it's worth mentioning that tongue blocking can be used in the high reeds in a way that is the reverse of how it's done in the middle reeds. In the high end, you can tongue block on the draws and bend on the blows as shown on the previous page in Exercise 7.

Finally, here's a solo in first position. It can be done by using lip blocking only.
Later!

TRY A NEW POSITION

Swing 8ths
G-scale harmonica

The musical score consists of two columns of staves, each with four lines. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo/style is 'Swing 8ths'. The piece is titled 'TRY A NEW POSITION' and is for 'G-scale harmonica'.
 Column 1:
 - Staff 1: Measure 1 (Chord G), notes G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. Fingerings: 8, 8, 9, 8, 8, 7, 8.
 - Staff 2: Measure 2 (Chord G7), notes G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4. Fingerings: 8, 10, 10, 9, 9, 8, 8, 8, 7, 6.
 - Staff 3: Measure 3 (Chord C), notes C4, D4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. Fingerings: 6, 7, 6, 6, 7, 8, 8, 7.
 - Staff 4: Measure 4 (Chord G), notes G3, A3, B3, A3, G3, F#3, E3. Fingerings: 6, 9, 9, 9, 8, 10, 6, 6.
 Column 2:
 - Staff 5: Measure 5 (Chord D7), notes D4, E4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3. Fingerings: 7, 8, 8, 8, 8, 9, 8.
 - Staff 6: Measure 6 (Chord C7), notes C4, D4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. Fingerings: 8, 7, 6, 6, 7, 8, 7, 6, 6, 7.
 - Staff 7: Measure 7 (Chord G), notes G3, A3, B3, A3, G3, F#3, E3, D3. Fingerings: 7, 7, 9, 9, 10, 9, 9, 10, 9, 9, 8, 8.
 - Staff 8: Measure 8 (Chord D7), notes D3, E3, F#3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2. Fingerings: 7, 8, 8, 9, 6, 6.

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