



TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

BLUES HARP SPECIAL EFFECTS

Blues harmonica can be challenging to learn, particularly because of the many unusual techniques that are involved. We've already talked about note bending, lip blocking, tongue blocking, the headshake and the vibrato, and there are others. To fill out your bag of blues tricks, here are some of the more commonly used effects in a series of riffs.

Octave Tonguing – This technique makes it possible to play octaves and other large intervals. First, cover four holes (try 1 through 4) with your mouth as you would in tongue blocking. Then use the *underside* of the tip of your tongue to cover the two holes in the middle. Certain combinations of holes played in this manner will produce octaves. Example 1 shows several commonly used octaves and a minor seventh. Example 2 provides some riffs, the first of which is from “Blues With A Feeling” by Little Walter Jacobs.

C-Harmonica

Example 1 - Octave Tonguing

4 ④ 5 ⑤ 6
1 ① 2 ② 3

Example 2a (Little Walter, “Blues with a Feeling”)

4 5 ⑤ 6
1 2 ② 3

Example 2b

② ③ ③ ④ 6 ⑤
↓ 3 ↓ ②

Example 2c

④ ④ 5 6 ⑤ ⑤ ④ ③ ③ ②
① 2 3 ↓ ↓ ↓

Staccato Tonguing – Tonguing, as we discussed in V.39#2, is a lip-blocking technique in which the tip of the tongue is touched to the roof of the mouth as if whispering the syllable “ta.” This is done when repeating a note or a chord. It can also be used on each note of a riff to provide a contrast to the usual legato (smooth, connecting the notes) way of playing. Staccato tonguing is indicated by dots appearing over the notes as in Example 3.

Example 3 - Staccato Tonguing (Ending Riff)

② ③ ③ 4 ④ ④ ③ ② ① ②
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓

Bass-Side Tongue Blocking – Reverse the usual tongue-blocking position so the single note is on the left and the tongue is on the right. This is called bass-side tongue blocking and can be used to jump rapidly over several holes. To jump upward, begin with the tongue on the right and quickly switch it to the left. To jump downward, do the reverse. This technique can also be used for fiddle tune passages like the B part of “The Devil’s Dream” or “The Mason’s Apron” when melody and drone notes alternate.

Example 4 - Bass-Side Tongue Blocking

B.T.B. T.B.
① ② ⑦ 6 ④ ⑤

The Squawk – This is a double note bend in which 3 and 4-draw are sounded bent by a half step and not released. Squawks have short time values and are usually heard on C- or D-scale harps. This sounds very gutsy when properly done.

Example 5 - The Squawk

② ② ④ ④ ② ② ① ② ②
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓

The Cry – For a wailing sound, play a half-step bend on 4-draw, release the bend and then re-bend the note. Junior Wells uses this to great effect on Muddy Waters’ classic “Standing Around Crying.”

Example 6 - The Cry

The Growl – This is a trick Big Walter Horton used occasionally. Inhaling, vibrate the tongue against the back of the throat as if snoring. This will produce a growling sound. It can be done in either mouth position and is indicated by a wavy line.

Example 7 - The Growl

The Slide or Glissando – This is done by playing a note and quickly moving at least two holes away to another note of the same direction without stopping the breath. This is commonly used to ornament long jumps in either direction.

Example 8a - The Slide or Glissando

Example 8b

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. You can write to him in care of Sing Out!, P.O. Box 5253, Bethlehem, PA 18015-0253, or send e-mail, with Harmonica Teach-In in the subject line, to singout@libertynet.org.