

TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

THIRD-POSITION BLUES

In the last issue, we played the Irish reel “Pigeon On The Gate” in the Dorian mode, which is the one beginning on scale tone “re.” Here we’ll continue to look at the Dorian mode, but this time from the standpoint of the blues, where it is known as *third position*. This position is important not only for the variety it can bring to your playing, but also because it is the usual approach to playing minor-key blues.

If you’ve been following along, you’ll remember there are three positions or modes used in blues harp: *first position*, which uses the major scale (or Ionian mode) as its basis; *second position*, which uses the Mixolydian mode (starting on sol); and now the Dorian-based *third position*. Second position is the most frequently used, with third and first position following in that order. If you listen to the playing of Junior Wells, you’ll hear a lot of third-position work, and it’s also often used by West Coast players such as Charlie Musselwhite, Rod Piazza and others. This time we’ll get a taste of third position by learning the New Orleans classic “St. James Infirmary” in two different octaves.

Third position places you in the key a whole step up from the key stamped on the harmonica. For the seven most common keys used in blues harp, that would be as follows:

A=B third, B \flat =C third, C=D third, D=E third,
E=F \sharp third, F=G third, and G=A third.

The lower keys of G through C, however, tend to be used the most for this position. Also, because the low-pitched G-scale harp tends to be a little unwieldy in second position, which is the key of D, the C harp in third position tends to be favored for playing blues in D.

Here’s a Dorian-mode exercise to start you off on third position:

Exercise 1 - Dorian Scale, two octaves

Lower reeds

Middle reeds

You’ll find that the lower octave is harder to play than the upper because of the note bends involved – in the low octave, you must use whole-step bends on 2-draw and 3-draw to play the third and fifth steps of the scale, respectively. For this reason, the middle reeds are used most in this position. In a sense, this makes third position the opposite of first, where the high and low registers are preferred to the middle. When you practice this scale, pay particular attention to hitting the whole-step bend on 3-draw accurately. This is one of the most difficult to master.

In minor-key blues, the standard 12-bar accompaniment is changed so that I and IV are minor while the V remains a dominant seventh. In D minor, this could be written like this:

//Dm/Dm/Dm/Dm/Gm/Gm/Dm/Dm/A7/Gm/Dm/Dm//

In third position, draw reeds 4, 5 and 6 give you the tonic or I chord, which in this case is minor. The availability of note bends on these reeds and the minor quality of the chord are what make third position the preferred approach to playing minor-key blues.

New Orleans was an early hotbed of blues as well as Creole jazz, and “St. James Infirmary” is one of the most famous blues ever to come from there. [Stefan Grossman based a Fingerpicking Guitar Teach-In on Dave Van Ronk’s version of the tune back in V.37#1.] It follows an eight-measure pattern rather than the usual twelve-bar form. In the version used here, the melody is introduced in the middle reeds and then repeated down an octave in the low reeds. Watch out for the minor-third bend on 3-draw that appears in the second chorus. It’s very tricky to hit this note accurately.

Beginning with this issue, I am introducing a simplified system of notation for blues harmonica. Instead of using a percussion line to indicate the tongue slaps and switches between the two basic mouth positions, a letter “s” will be used to tell you when to slap down with the tongue. This should be much easier to read. As before, draw reeds 1-6 will usually be played in lip-blocking position, and blow reeds 2-7 will usually be tongue blocked. The higher reeds in both directions will usually be lip blocked, with occasional slaps on the draw reeds.

Well, that ought to get you started, at least, with third-position blues on the harmonica. If you have any comments, questions or suggestions for future columns, drop me a line.

1 *Dm* *A7* *s.*

2 *Dm* *s.*

3 *Gm* *s.* *s.*

4 *A7* *H. S.* *H. S.* *H. S.* *s.*

5 *Dm* *A7* *s.*

6 *Dm* *Octave Tonguing* *Dm/C*

7 *Bb* *A7* *s.*

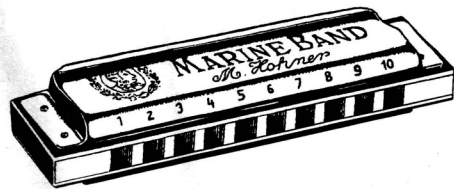
8 *Dm* *Octave Tonguing* *A7* *s.*

10 *Dm* *Gm* *s.*

12 *A7* *s.* *Dm* *A7*

14 *Dm* *Dm/C* *s.*

15 *Bb* *A7* *s.* *Dm*



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 to harmonicati@singout.org.