

# TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

## BIG WALTER'S BOOGIE

One of the greatest blues harp players ever was Walter "Shaky" Horton, also known as Big Walter. He is widely regarded as having had the best tone of any blues player, and was a gifted improviser. This time we'll look at Big Walter, and also introduce the technique of note bending in tongue blocking position using a version of his signature tune "Big Walter's Boogie." This will be the first in a series of profiles of great harmonica players that will appear here from time to time.

Walter Horton was born on April 6, 1917, in Horn Lake, Mississippi. He took up the harmonica at the age of five, and by the late 'twenties was playing with the Memphis Jug Band. Memphis was a hotbed of blues at the time, and the older harp players there such as Will Shade, Hammie Nixon, and Noah Lewis must have taught him a great deal. By 1939 Walter was starting to record, and was later to give pointers to both Little Walter Jacobs and Rice Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson II).

In the early '50s, Horton recorded several classic sides for Sun. His most famous cut from this period is the 1953 instrumental "Easy," a technical tour-de-force based on Ivory Joe Hunter's "I Almost Lost My Mind." In 1954 the label's owner Sam Phillips discovered Elvis Presley and turned towards rockabilly, but by then "Easy" had won Horton a gig playing with Muddy Waters in Chicago. It was there that Horton recorded most of his work.

His stint with Muddy didn't last long – he was fired for showing up loaded at a rehearsal – but he still continued to record with him afterwards. Always described as shy and nervous, Walter usually worked as a sideman. Besides Muddy, his playing can also be heard behind Johnny Young, Johnny Shines, Koko Taylor, Willie Dixon, and others. He briefly boogied on the silver screen as one of the Maxwell Street musicians in "The Blues Brothers" before his death in 1981.

So far we've talked about a mixed embouchure system based on playing the draw reeds in lip-blocking position and the blow reeds tongue-blocked. This style entails

frequent switches between the two basic mouth positions. But it's also possible to play blues entirely in tongue-blocking position, note bends and all. Many famous Chicago players favored this approach, so it's worth learning.

To bend in the tongue-blocking position, first say the syllable "kaw." You'll notice your Adam's Apple dropping slightly when you do this. Now, draw on the harp, while tightening your throat muscles around the Adam's Apple (it's known as the "K-spot" to harmonica enthusiasts) so that it lowers as you inhale. Eventually, you should be able to bend any of the six lowest draw reeds and the four highest blow reeds with this method.

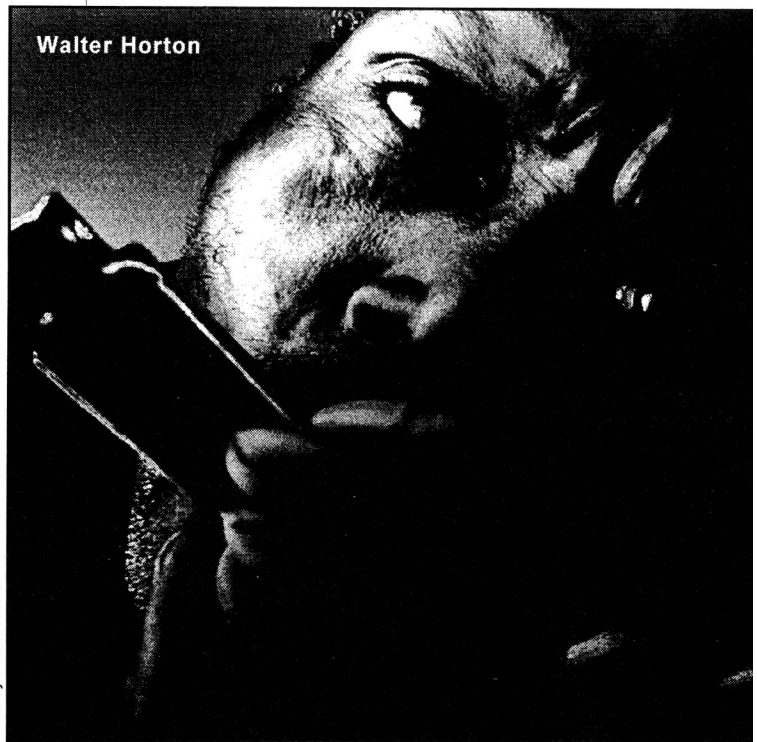


Photo by Peter Amft ©

Horton recorded "Big Walter's Boogie" under various, similar titles. After playing the theme he would then launch into improvised choruses. The version below is a typical example of the theme.

After you've gotten used to bending this way, try playing "Big Walter's Boogie" completely in tongue blocking position. Listen to the tone of the bends; some feel that tongue-blocked bends have a deeper sound. And be sure to check out some of Walter's incredible sides.

# BIG WALTER'S BOOGIE

Medium Shuffle  
C- Harmonica

1 S. S. S. S.

2 L. L.

3 S. S. S. S.

4 3 S.

8 3 3 S. S. S.

9 D S. S. S. S.

10 C

11 G L. 12 D

## SUGGESTED LISTENING

Here's a selected discography sampling some of Big Walter's work:

- Can't Keep Lovin' You**, 1989, Blind Pig #1484
- Mouth Harp Maestro**, 1988, Ace #252
- Little Boy Blue (live)**, 1980, JSP #1019 (import)
- Fine Cuts**, 1979, Blind Pig #678
- Big Walter Horton** (w/ Carey Bell), 1973, Alligator #4702
- The Soul of Blues Harmonica** (w/ Buddy Guy and Willie Dixon), 1964, MCA/Chess #9268 (1st solo recording, o-o-p)
- w/ Willie Dixon, **I Am The Blues**, 1970, Sony/Columbia #53627
- w/ Johnny Young, **Chicago Blues**, 1968, Arhoolie #1037
- Various Artists, **Chicago / The Blues / Today!**, Vol. 3, 1967, Vanguard #79216
- w/ Muddy Waters, **Chess Box**, 1990, MCA/Chess #80002

For a complete discography, check out The All-Music Guide's website: [www.allmusic.com](http://www.allmusic.com).

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