How To Play The Harmonica
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1. What Kind of Harmonica should I use?

- This software is designed for the ten hole Marine Band style harmonica (which comes with several names). If your harp has a single row of ten holes with the numbers one through ten engraved in the cover over the holes, then this course is for you.

- These diatonic scale harmonicas are for us musical dummies. The diatonic scale is the do-re-me-fa-so-la-te-do scale that you may have learned in chorus at school. It would include only the white keys on a piano in you were playing in the key of C.

- There are chromatic scale harmonicas which would include both the black and the white keys or all the notes in an octave. These require much more knowledge of music. However, you can play songs in all the keys on just a C harmonica.

- You do not have to know as much about music theory with the diatonic scale harmonica. But you do have to own a separate harmonica for each major key in which we plan to play. We could own as many as 12 harmonicas, though I think you will find that five or six will cover just about every song you will ever play. You can easily get by with just a C and a G harmonica if you are not going to be playing with a band.

- You should have at least two harmonicas to get the maximum benefit from this software. You should have a diatonic scale harmonica in both the keys of C and G.

- It is important that you keep in mind that you can play any song, regardless of the key in which it was composed, on any harmonica. If you only own a harmonica in the key of A, then every song you play will be in the key of A, even if it was composed in G or C. And if you pick up a harmonica in the key of D and play the same numbering system, you are playing the song in the key of D. You do not have to relearn a song for each key.

2. My simple harmonica notation system is as follows:

- Over each word or syllable in the lyrics to a song is a number.

- If that number is a 4, then you blow in hole number 4.

- However if it is a -4 then you suck into hole number 4.

3. Only attempt to play tunes with which you are familiar.

- If you can hum it or whistle it, then you can learn to play it reasonably soon.

- In fact, think of yourself as singing the song through your instrument and the reeds of the harmonica as a substitute for your vocal chords.
4. How do I improve my playing?
   - Choose any song with which you are familiar. Then play each line at least five times.
   - Start slowly and increase your speed with each repetition.
   - Once you have played each line at least five times, then play the entire song at least twenty times.
   - Do not move on to another song until you have mastered the first one.

5. Do I have to play clear single notes?
   - It is not necessary that you play clear single notes.
   - When trying to blow hole #4, it is OK if you include holes #3 and #5.
   - Eventually you will want to learn to play single notes.
   - Work at it, and it will come to you naturally.

6. Concentrate on tone, not speed.
   - The harmonica sounds best when you try to express emotion.
   - Speed only distracts from the real beauty of the harmonica.
   - Do not try to be a harmonica whiz. Concentrate on the quality of tone, rather than speed.
   - The harmonica sounds best when playing slow emotional tunes.
   - Try to make your music express emotion.

7. So How can I produce clear single notes that express emotion?
   - Pucker up as if drawing through a straw.
   - Wet those lips and insert the harmonica well inside your mouth.
   - Wrap those lips around the hole you are trying to play.
   - Slide your harmonica inside your lips.
   - Do not turn your head to move your mouth back and forth across the harmonica.
   - A mistake many beginners make is to try to play their harp out on the front of their lips, which makes it almost impossible to get clear single notes.
8. How To Use Your Tongue To Get Rhythm.

- Most beginners puff from their lungs for each syllable or number.
- It is much better to use your tongue to break up the syllables and produce rhythm.
- Try whispering "Taa-Taa-Taa-Taa-Taa" through your harmonica in any hole.
- Just use one gentle, steady blow but break up its rhythm with your tongue.
- Now vary your rhythm pattern, much like the old Morse Code. Whisper, "Daa-dit-daa-dit".
- When you are playing a song, use your tongue to form the words.
- In fact, try to pronounce the lyrics to the song through your harmonica.
- Think of it as "singing" through your instrument.
- It will improve your playing tremendously.

9. How come the professionals sound so much better than you?

- Most professionals that you hear on recordings are using special microphones and amplifiers that change the natural sound of the harmonica.
- However, you should know that the sound you hear from your harmonica is not the same sound that someone standing directly in front of you hears. The reason is that you hear it partially from the inside, through your throat, nasal passages and up into your ear canal.
- For a more realistic listen to what you really sound like, you should play your harmonica inside a shower stall (without the water running). Then you will hear more of what others hear as the sound bounces off the walls.
- Also, everyone has a slightly different harmonica voice. Your tone is partially produced inside your mouth. Children, with smaller mouths, will sound different from adults. Men will sound different from women. Big men will sound different from small men.
- You can have some control on your tone. In general, a gentle blow will have a more pleasant tone than a forceful blast of air. Blowing from deeper in your throat will sound different from puffing from your cheeks. The same way you change your voice, is the same way you can change your tone.
- See if you can produce noticeably different tones by the way you shape your mouth, jaw and tongue.
- The experienced harp player will have developed his ear to the point that he can tell the difference.
10. How to use your hands to change the sound.
   - You can use your hands to add effects to your music.
   - Cup your harmonica in your hands in such a way that you can enclose it completely to muffle its sound.
   - Then by opening and closing your hands with each syllable, you will be producing a "waa-waa" sound.
   - By rapidly opening and closing your hands you will be producing a tremolo effect.
   - By opening your hands wide and leaving them open to form a megaphone effect, you will increase the volume.

11. Which style is best, single notes or chords?
   - You should be able to play clear single notes by now. But occasionally you will want to open your pucker and allow three or four holes to play.
   - When you do, you will be playing a chord. It sounds well to include a chord where you feel appropriate in a song.
   - The point is that you can play a song any old way you want. Someone else may play it completely different.
   - There is no right or wrong way. Just make your own kind of music.

12. How to breathe
   - How often do you find yourself running out of breathing room in your lungs in the middle of an important note?
   - How do you plan so that this does not happen?
   - How do you smoothly change from a blow note to a draw note?
   - And, how do you keep from getting winded as if you had jogged a mile?
   - Breathing is an important factor in your harmonica playing. I wish I could give you some steps to improving your breath control. There is not too much that I can say, other than it comes naturally.
   - Each song is different. You have to play a song about 25 times before you know ahead of time when to fill your lungs.
   - Here a few tips:
     - Blow gently. It can be downright exhausting to try to increase your volume by increasing the flow of air passing through your harmonica. And it can wear the reeds out in your harmonica sooner than is normal.
     - Do not try to compete with the other instruments by playing louder than usual. It will not work. The harmonica is not a trumpet. It is a soft-toned instrument that sounds best if played the way it was intended.
     - Play single notes. If you are playing three or four holes at a time, it is like playing three or four harmonicas at a time. It just takes that much more wind to play. And it can be exhausting.
13. What is this bending notes stuff?

- A bent note is one that is not true to the note the harmonica was designated to play. A draw four on a C harmonica should be a true D note. A bent draw four is actually playing it in such a way as to produce a note that is just 1/2 step down or a D flat.

- This is how some harmonica players are able to play songs that have sharps and flats that are out of their natural position in their keys. It is how they use a diatonic scale harmonica to play notes that are not programmed into their harmonica.

- It is also how you produce a wavy or bluesy sound on your harmonica. By bending a long drawn out note, you can produce a rather nice sounding emotional expression to your music. You can make your harmonica moan or wail. It gives a song a mournful sound.

14. How do I bend a note?

- Only attempt to bend draw notes, not blow notes. Stay down on the low end of your harmonica. It is easier to bend a draw three than it is to bend a draw 8.

- Make sure your lips are well moistened and the harmonica is placed well inside your lips.

- Make sure you have an airtight connection around a single hole. If air leaks around the side of the hole you will not be able to control the amount of air flow passing through the reed.

- While drawing air through the hole (a good long draw at that), change the air pressure passing through your harmonica.

- An easy way to naturally increase the air flow is to drop your jaw while drawing air, making sure to maintain an airtight fit around the single hole.

- I suggest to my students that they say the word "Yawww" while drawing air in. This naturally causes them to drop their jaw.

- Practice this for a while until you notice the pitch of your tone lowering. Then see if you can cause the pitch to wave up and down.

- Only use this draw bent note where it seems appropriate. Do not over due it.
15. Can I repair my own harmonica?

- Far too many harmonicas end up in the bottom of desk drawers, waiting for some magic repairman to come to their aid. Their owners get frustrated with one hole that just doesn't sound right. Is there any hope?

- That weird sound coming from that mysterious hole may be the result of any one of several things.

- It may just be one of those difficult holes to produce a clear sweet tone. Every hole requires a slight different amount of air to make it sound right. Most reeds are pretty forgiving and will produce a sound pretty close to what is supposed to come out. But there is almost always one hole that just seems to sound off key no matter what we do. Even if we go out and purchase a brand new harmonica, that same hole will give us problems. It is often that this hole requires the exact air pressure.

- Perhaps your harmonica needs to warm up. This is especially so if it is a new instrument or if you have left it in a cold car. It may be a little stiff. Often all that is needed is to hold it close to your body for a few minutes.

- Perhaps a hair or thread has found its way inside your harmonica. This happens to me often as I carry a harmonica in shirt pocket with my comb.

- Perhaps a small drop of moisture was allowed to remain inside your harmonica and it formed a tiny bit of rust. A good practice is to pound your harp into the palm of your hand to knock out any moisture that has been allowed to accumulate.

- Repair Tips:
  - Purchase harmonicas that are constructed with screws or nuts and bolts. This allows you to remove the cover plates. It is OK to remove the plates and no harm will come to your harmonica.
  - Remove any hairs or threads that have found their way inside your harmonica.
  - Gently break free any reeds that are stuck from rust beads.
  - Blow any dust or crumbs out of your harmonica.

- That shiny new harmonica can lose its luster very fast. To restore its appearance get a jewelry polishing cloth from your local pound shop and polish the covers. It does wonders.
16. The Ten Hour Rule

- You can learn all the basic skills on the harmonica in about ten hours of playing time.
- After the first ten hours of playing, your skills advance very slowly. Possibly your tone and expression will improve some. And your breathing skills will improve a little. But for all practical purposes, others around you will not be able to tell much difference between you and the more experienced player.
- I have heard the statement, The only difference between the harmonica player who has played ten hours and the one who has played ten years is the number of songs they have learned.
- You have probably passed the ten hour mark by now. If so, consider yourself as having arrived at the competent level of skill.
- From here on out it is just a matter of adding to the number of songs you have memorized.

17. Playing in public.

- Sooner or later you are going to find yourself playing before an audience.
- Most harmonica players keep their skill to themselves. They only play out on their deck or porch. If they have an audience, it is most likely their dog.
- The real harmonica players find that playing their instrument is good therapy. It soothes their emotions and calms their nerves. It is their tranquilizer. Many marriages have been saved simply by the harmonica player partner going off by himself to play his instrument. In so doing, a war was avoided.
- But eventually, you will find yourself playing in front of others. It is a good idea to prepare ahead of time.
- First, begin by playing for your children or grand children. Kids are fascinated by the harmonica. And they never laugh at your mistakes.
- Second, find a guitar player who will jam along with you. A guitar can improve the sound of your playing 200%. Then when you are asked to play in front of audience at church or your local Lion's club dinner, you will not be alone. Having someone beside you, helps take away the fear.
- Third, make sure you know the song you are going to play. Practice it at least 50 times before attempting to do it in public. This will give you confidence and it will surely show during your performance.
- Fourth, only play one or at the most two songs. Always leave your audience wishing for more, not wishing for you to quit.
- Fifth, play familiar songs. Choose songs that the audience will know the lyrics. If you are playing in church, announce the hymn number and let them read the lyrics as you play.
- Sixth, do not try to improve on the composer's arrangement. Keep it simple.
Note Layout Charts for Richter Tuned Major Diatonic Harmonicas

From lowest to highest in pitch are: G, Ab, A, Bb, B, C, Db, D, Eb, E, F, F#

Remember: Notes with sharps (#) or flats (b) can be written either way, Ab=G#, Bb=A#, Db=C#, Eb=D#, and F#=Gb

Key of C

Blow C E G C E G C E G C
Hole 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Draw D G B D F A B D F A

Key of Db (or C#)

Blow Db F Ab Db F Ab Db F Ab Db
Hole 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Draw Eb Ab C Eb F# Bb C Eb F# Bb

Key of D

Blow D F# A D F# A D F# A D
Hole 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Draw E A Db E G B Db E G B

Key of Eb

Blow Eb G Bb Eb G Bb Eb G Bb Eb
Hole 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Draw F Bb D F Ab C D F Ab C
Key of E

Blow: E, Ab, B, E, Ab, B, E, Ab, B, E

Hole: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Draw: F#, B, Eb, F#, A, Db, Eb, F#, A, Db

Key of F


Hole: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Draw: G, C, E, G, Bb, D, E, G, Bb, D

Key of F#

Blow: F#, Bb, Db, F#, Bb, Db, F#, Bb, Db, F#

Hole: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Draw: Ab, Db, F, Ab, B, Eb, F, Ab, B, Eb

Key of G

Blow: G, B, D, G, B, D, G, B, D, G

Hole: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Draw: A, D, F#, A, C, E, F#, A, C, E

Key of Ab

Blow: Ab, C, Eb, Ab, C, Eb, Ab, C, Eb, Ab

Hole: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
### Key of A

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