

A BENT FOR THE BLUES

The last column began a discussion of the harmonica. (You can catch up on any of the previous columns on Page 4 of every back issue at www.folkWorks.org.) The discussion centered around “straight-harp” or 1st position on the harmonica. Straight-harp, as the name implies, is the most straightforward way to play the harmonica. When you play straight-harp you are playing in the native key of the instrument, which is usually stamped or printed somewhere on the harmonica itself. Most of the examples given used a C harmonica and that means that you would actually be playing in the key of C. Your starting point for playing melodies in straight-harp is the C, found at hole-4-blow (see Figure 1). Starting from there you can play the entire 7 note C scale and end with an additional C one octave up by using the set of holes 4-5-6-7. These four holes are known as the “home” position and are shown in gray-tone on the harmonica diagrams. Blowing the combined holes 4-5-6 or 4-5-

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

Figure 1. The arrangement of the notes on a 10-hole harmonica.

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

Figure 2. Locating the missing notes on a C harmonica.

The last issue also mentioned that certain notes are just plain missing from the standard harmonica. Figure 2 shows the location of these 3 missing notes. Fortunately there is an odd quirk of physics that allows us to play these missing notes even though they don't really exist on the harmonica. This feature is exploited by the technique of “bending” certain notes on the instrument. Not every note on the harmonica is “bend-able” and, even then, some reeds are more “bend-able” than others. Figure 3 shows the location of these “bend-able” reeds and the “bent” notes they can produce.

The mechanics of bending notes will be discussed a little later. Right now let's talk about where you should use these bent notes. As mentioned above, when playing straight-harp, you can use bent notes to pick up the notes that are missing from a standard harmonica. But most of the other bent notes (see

Over-Blow											
Blow 2 nd Bend										Bb	
Blow 1 st Bend									Eb	Gb	B
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	
Draw 1 st Bend	Db	Gb	Bb	Db		Ab					
Draw 2 nd Bend		F	A								
Draw 3 rd Bend			Ab								
Over-Draw											

Figure 3. Locating the “bent” notes on the harmonica.

Figure 3) appear to be pretty useless in this environment. Where the technique of bending notes really begins to shine is when it is applied to playing the blues. Blues music relies heavily on what some people call “blue-notes.” These are usually notes that are a half-step flatter than you would expect or that start out flatted and slide up or resolve to the more expected note. This is a perfect place to use the harmonica's ability to flatten or bend certain notes.

When playing blues-harp (also called cross-harp or 2nd position) you actually wind up playing in a different key than the one noted on the harmonica. Playing cross-harp repositions the bend-able notes within the scale

making them more usable. On a C harp, your starting point for playing cross-harp melody is the G found at hole-2-draw (see Figure 3). Drawing the combined holes 2-3-4 together gives you a G major chord, the most important chord in the key of G. If you are playing cross-harp on your C harmonica you will find yourself in the key of G. So how is a mere mortal to know this? Because there is a rule that says that when you play cross-harp your key is a fifth above the key written on the harmonica and G is a fifth up from the native key of your C harmonica.

But what if you had the opposite situation? You sit down with a guitar player who is playing blues in the key of G. You look at your harmonicas and need to decide which key of harmonica to use to play blues in G. Before, we had to go up a fifth from the key of the harp (from C to G) to find its key for blues, now we must go down a fifth (from G to C) to find out which harmonica will play blues in the desired key. Since it's easier to visualize intervals going up than it is to try and calculate them going down, it is good to remember that a fifth down is the same as a fourth up (see the Bonus Tip for Roger's Rule of 9).

In past discussions it was stated that the circle of fifths would keep showing up as a basic tool with all sorts of applications. Well here it is again. Look at the Circle of Fifths diagram (Figure 4) and notice that going clockwise (up a fifth) from C lands you on G and, of course, going counter-clockwise (down a fifth) from G lands you on C. So the Circle of Fifths can be used when selecting keys and harmonicas for blues.

Which key of harmonica to use? – Go DOWN (counterclockwise) a fifth from the blues key. What key are you in if you play cross-harp? – Go UP (clockwise) a fifth from the harmonica key. Here are a few examples: Suppose

you've been using a D harmonica to play straight-harp along with a fiddle player. A guitar player sits down and says, “What key blues can you play with that harmonica?” You look at the Circle of Fifths tattoo that you got during

your last lost-weekend bender, find D and go clockwise to find the fifth above. Now you can tell the guitar player that he will be playing blues in A. Here's another example. Most guitarists like to play blues in the key of E. What harmonica should you be using to accompany them? Going back to the Circle of Fifths, locate the E. To go down a fifth you must go counter-clockwise bringing you to A. So pick up an A harmonica and you are good to go. As a final example,

you want to accompany a piano player who is playing blues in the key of C. You visualize the Circle of Fifths, find the C and move counter-clockwise to go down a fifth and arrive at F. You take out your F harmonica and play cross-harp or 2nd position and there you are. Well, a lot of ground was covered this time but there is a lot more I want to tell you. I will continue the harmonica discussion in the next issue where I will delve deeper into the physics and practice of bending notes on the harmonica. There's lots of really cool stuff to learn so keep playing, keep learning and of course stay tuned.



BY
ROGER
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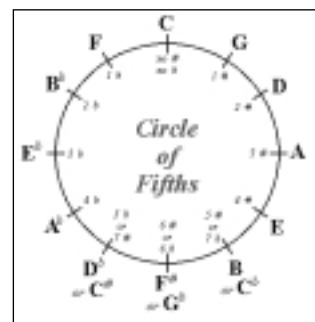


Figure 4. The circle of Fifths

Bonus Tip

Here's a neat little trick that's good to know.

Roger's Rule of 9

Interval Up + Interval Down (to same note name) = 9

Example 1. For G blues we need a harp that is a 5th down from G. But a 5th down (C) is really the same as a 4th up. Starting at G and going a 5th down (G→C), or starting at G and going a 4th up (G→C), both land you on the same note name (C).

The two intervals add up to 9 (5+4=9).

G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G
| -4th → | ← -5th -|

This works for any interval.

Ex. 2: A 5th down lands on the same note name as does a 3rd up. These two intervals also add up to 9 (5+3=9).

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