

AROUND THE BEND: CROSS-HARP AND BEYOND

By ROGER GOODMAN

OUR OLD FRIEND – THE CIRCLE OF FIFTHS

In the last issue (www.folkworks.org) we saw how the Circle-of-Fifths can help us select the correct key and the right harmonica for playing the blues. Remember that blues-harp is also called cross-harp or 2nd position. Calling it 2nd position implies that there are more “positions” on the harmonica and, indeed, there are. To find them, we once again turn to our old friend, the Circle-of-Fifths, to assist us because harmonica positions progress by fifths. Here’s how it works: if you are playing in 2nd position on a C harp, you are in G—a 5th up from C. If you go up from there to 3rd position, you wind up in D—a 5th up from G. In this way, you can find all positions and their keys. However, some positions are more useful for certain types of music or are less awkward than others. Few players go beyond 5th position; in fact, most use only 1st, 2nd and 4th.

Figure 1 lists the first five positions. Take a look: you know that 1st position is “normal” or straight-harp. Playing in 2nd position is good for blues and country and gives you access to some nicely placed “bend-able” notes. 4th position has not been previously discussed. It puts you in the relative minor to the key of the harmonica. For instance, on a C-major harmonica this places you in the key of A-minor. Get a harp in any major key and, starting on hole 6-draw, try to pick out the melody for “Greensleeves” (“What Child is This?”). Can you hear that you are now playing in a minor key on your major key harp? Pretty cool, huh?

Pos	Key on a C Harp	Pos Starts with Hole	Known as – Style
1 st	C	4 Blow	Straight Harp – Folk/Classical
2 nd	G	2 Draw	Cross Harp – Blues/Rock/Country
3 rd	Dm	4 Draw	Draw Harp
4 th	Am	6 Draw	Natural/Relative Minor
5 th	Em	2 Blow	Spanish Minor

Figure 1 – Some of the Other Positions on the Harmonica

BENDING NOTES – HOW DO THEY DO THAT?

Now, back to the seeming magic of “bending” notes. Why is it that we want to bend notes on the harmonica? There are two reasons. First, as discussed in the previous column, there are those nasty missing notes that can only be “found” by bending the appropriate existing notes. The second, and probably more compelling, reason is the “wailing” sound effect. This ooh-wah ooh-wee effect can be inflected to make the music very expressive and adds significantly to the “soulful” quality of the blues on the harmonica.

Trying to explain the how-to part of note bending is not unlike trying to tell someone how to whistle. Most people that bend notes (or whistle) do it by feel and don’t know how they actually make the sound. If someone tries to teach it to you they will likely guess at the mechanics of the process. But, like whistling, until it “just happens”—that is, you produce a bent note or a whistle, all the mechanics don’t seem to mean very much. So I will tell you what I can and then you just have to do it over and over until it “just happens.”

Start playing hole 4-draw. Now think “Wee-Ooh-Wee” as you play “Normal-Bent-Normal.” When I do this I can feel my tongue move up and forward in my mouth. You can get the same tongue position feeling by whistling a low note, then a high note and back to a low note again. Try it. You should feel your tongue position change. Rick Epping, the resident genius at Hohner Harmonica, tells me that this process actually involves not only the tongue and mouth, but also the entire resonant cavity including the throat, chest and the diaphragm.



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THE PHYSICS INVOLVED OR, GEE, MR. SCIENCE, HOW DOES THAT WORK? –

Once you get the hang of bending notes, you may find yourself wondering why you can’t bend all of them. As it turns out, the ability to bend a note on the harp is dependent upon there being second reed in the same hole. This other, lower, reed is what “enables” the original, higher reed to be bent. The amount of bend available is dependent upon the pitch differential between the two reeds. The higher note can be bent down to approach the pitch of the lower reed.

Figure 2 (you’ve seen it before) shows that the pitch space between the two reeds in holes 1, 2 and 3 gets successively greater, hence the draw note on each successive hole is more and more bendable. Bent draw notes on the first four holes are the most useful for blues. Notice that hole 5 does not show a bend note. That’s because there is only a half step between the pitches of the two reeds. You can get a little bit of bend out of the 5-draw hole but you shouldn’t try too hard since the interplay of the two reeds is so close that you can actually ruin your harmonica. In general if you bend a reed too far and too hard you can knock it out of pitch to the point that it just stays flat.

Blow 2 nd Bend							Eb Gb Bb			
Blow 1 st Bend							Eb Gb B			
Blow	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	E	G	C
Hole Number	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						

Figure 2 – Bend-able Notes on the Harmonica

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

The harmonica has not changed much since its invention in the 19th century. In the 1910’s the slide chromatic harmonica came into use. Since then, there has been little evolution to give the player more control—but that is about to change. There is a new breed of harmonica players who are also harmonica “innovators.” The two most notable are Brendan Power and Rick Epping. Brendan Power retunes the reeds on his harmonicas to give him altered scales. Rick Epping recently developed a new type of harmonica, the Hohner XB-40 (eXtended Bend, 40 reed). The XB-40 allows the player to bend every note! A second reed has been added to each note (40 reeds instead of 20) that is not played but “enables” the first reed to bend. He arbitrarily decided to allow for a bend of one whole-step on every hole with an additional half step on hole 3-draw to avoid a missing note in the chromatic scale. I was fortunate to have seen and heard Rick play this new harmonica. The enhanced control and expression promises to propel the next wave of harmonica players beyond anything now possible. When it is available it should sell for about \$70 and be offered in C, G and one other as yet unspecified key. In addition to Brendan Power and Rick Epping there are other amazing contemporary players worth listening to: Dave McKelvy & the Dave McKelvy Trio sometimes billed as the Ace of Harps, Mark Graham, Dave Rice and George Thacker. The brave new world of the harmonica is just about to begin so you should look for it, listen for it and, as usual, stay tuned...



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