MS

BIG RIVER HARP

Steve Baker

Step by Step

Blues Harp Course

HOHNER

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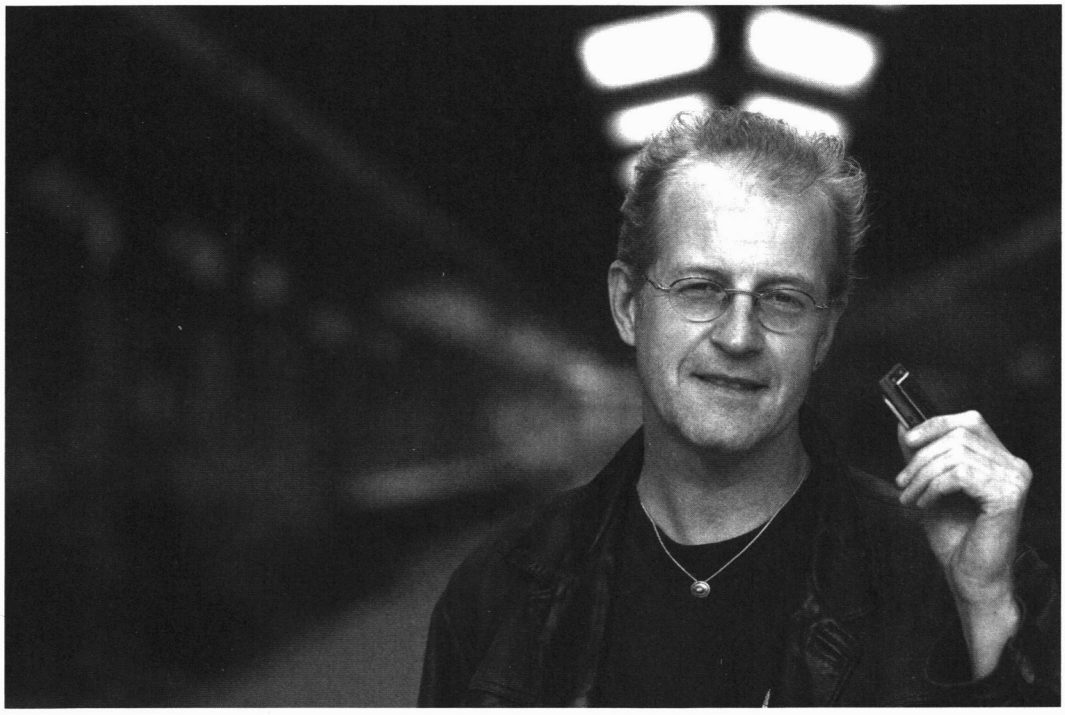
About the author

Steve Baker is one of today's most influential harp players. He has been a full-time professional for over 30 years and has earned an enviable reputation as an innovator and pioneer on this frequently under-estimated instrument. His subtle and rhythmically accented phrasing, combined with a rich command of timbre and tone, communicates an emotional intensity and depth of feeling which is rarely heard on the harmonica. Steve has also written a number of instructional books. "The Harp Handbook" is considered the standard work on the diatonic harp. Since 1987 he has worked as a consultant for the worldwide leader in harmonica manufacture, Hohner, and has been closely involved in the development of several new models including the recently released Marine Band Deluxe.



About this book

"Step by Step" is aimed at the interested musician without any prior knowledge of the blues harp. It is intended to help you get to know this unique instrument and integrate it into your music. The most important aspects of harp playing are explored one after the other and illustrated with appropriate sound examples. Tonal layout, single note playing, cross harp, rhythm, useful phrases and the secret of bending notes are explained in an easily understandable way by one of the most highly regarded players and teachers on the harmonica scene today. Playalongs with guitar accompaniment will get you playing right away and the CD also contains all the exercises found in the book.

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

"This is the sound of the blues harp!"

Track 1

10 hole harmonicas tuned to the Richter system (see diag.3) are often referred to as Blues Harps. Lots of models use this tuning system. For this package we chose a Hohner Big River Harp in the key of C. This is a professional quality, service friendly instrument which features a robust injection moulded comb and screw together assembly to ensure rapid, even response and full tone. It is ideally suited to the playing techniques described here. All exercises and tunes in this book can be played on it.

The harp has existed in its present form for over 150 years and is one of the smallest and cheapest musical instruments around. Maybe this accounts for its widespread distribution – there can be few countries where it has not been used in folk and pop music. However, its true potential is realized in blues, country, rock and jazz.

The appeal of the harp lies in its unmistakeable sound. No other instrument can so define the character of a piece with only a few notes. Countless musicians who can't really be described as virtuoso harmonica players have made use of this fact. Dylan, the Stones, Neil Young, Springsteen – all of them and many others have incorporated this inimitable quality in their music.

This book is intended to make the harp accessible for interested musicians without any prior knowledge of the instrument. The idea is to help you integrate the harp in your music, whether as a solo instrument or as a tonal colour to create atmosphere.

Tonal Layout

Note on the tabulature:
Harps are tuned diatonically, so that the same note can occur in different holes on harps

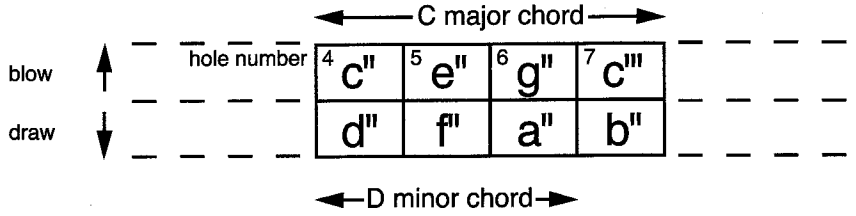
in different keys, making tabulature necessary. This is written underneath the notation and shows the hole number and note. Breath direction is denoted by arrows.

Diag. 1: Tabulature

↑ = blow (exhale)

↓ = draw (inhale)

Each hole contains one blow and one draw note. These are always of different pitch, so that a different note sounds when you blow than when you draw. It's important to learn how the notes are ordered, as this is what defines the musical possibilities of the instrument, from simple melodies to jazz improvisation. Blues harps are tuned diatonically, which means they contain only notes belonging to one major scale. The key is usually designated on the end of the body or on the edge of the upper cover plate. The relationship between the notes is the same in all keys. All examples here use the enclosed harp in C. The available notes then correspond to the white keys of the piano. Richter harps have a range of 3 octaves from the lowest (1-blow, here C') to the highest note (10-blow, here C''''). Only the central octave (holes 4 - 7, C'' - C''') contains all the notes of the C major scale. We'll start there.

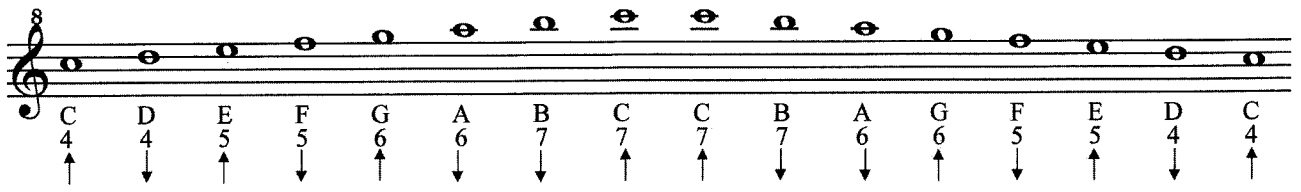


Diag. 2: Central Octave (C major scale)

Here the blow note in hole 4 is the 1st scale degree and the draw note is the 2nd. Then you change to hole 5 for the 3rd (blow) and 4th (draw) degrees. In hole 6 this pattern continues: blow for the fifth degree and draw for the 6th degree. To play the first 6 notes of the scale in the correct order, you therefore only have to perform the sequence of motions "blow, draw, change hole" 3 times. However, the breath pattern changes when you move from hole 6 to hole 7. Instead of blowing to get the next note of the scale, the 7th degree is a draw note and the octave a blow note, i.e. the breathing sequence is reversed.

C major scale in the central octave

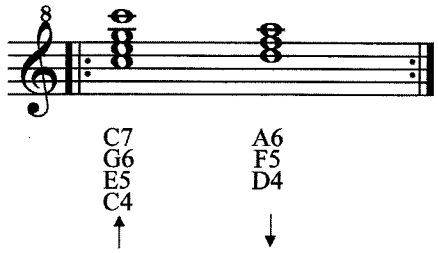
Track 2



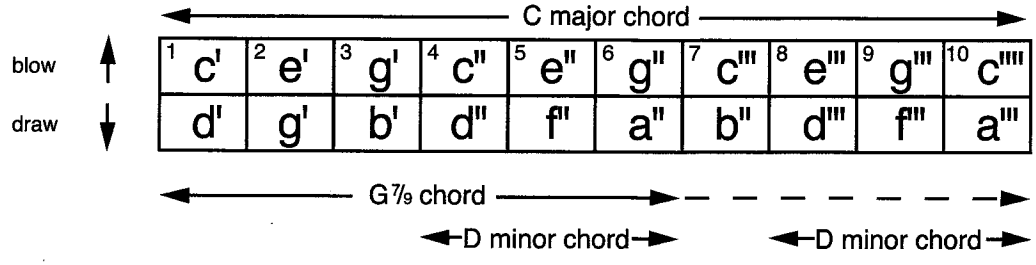
The reason for this is the chords created when several blow or draw notes are played together: if you blow all 4 notes in holes 4 - 7 simultaneously, you get a major chord. This is always the tonic in the key the harp is tuned to – here C major, C E G C). If you draw through holes 4 - 6, you get a D minor chord.

Blow & draw chords, central octave

Track 3



There are only 3 holes free in both lower and upper octaves, so only 6 notes per octave can be accommodated. As the major scale has 7 notes, neither of these registers can contain complete scales. This is actually a blessing! Let's take a look at the lower octave (diag. 3):

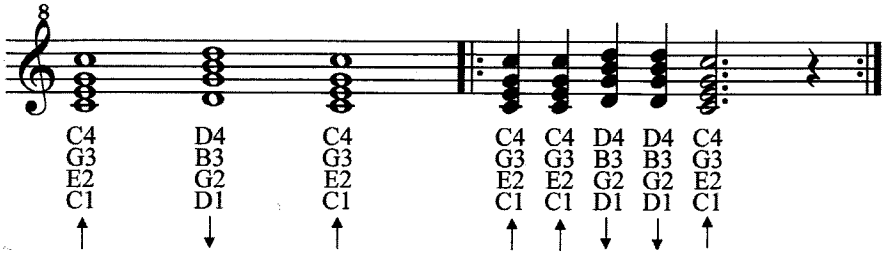


Diag. 3: Richter Tuning in C, all notes

The blow notes in holes 1 - 3 are the same as in 4 - 6, but one octave lower, thus also producing the tonic chord when played together. The draw notes are a different story! Although 1-draw is the 2nd scale degree D, as in hole 4, 2- and 3-draw respectively do not contain the expected 4th and 6th scale degrees F and A. Both these notes are omitted, so 2-draw contains the 5th (G) and 3-draw the 7th scale degree B. The fifth in the major scale (here G) therefore occurs twice in the lower octave: as a draw note in hole 2 and as a blow note in hole 3. The reason for this is that the draw notes now form a chord which is closely related to the tonic (blow chord), the dominant 7th (here G7). The fifth scale degree is an essential element in both chords and therefore occurs twice. The harmonic relationship between blow and draw chord is the most important characteristic of the blues harp and defines how the instrument is played.

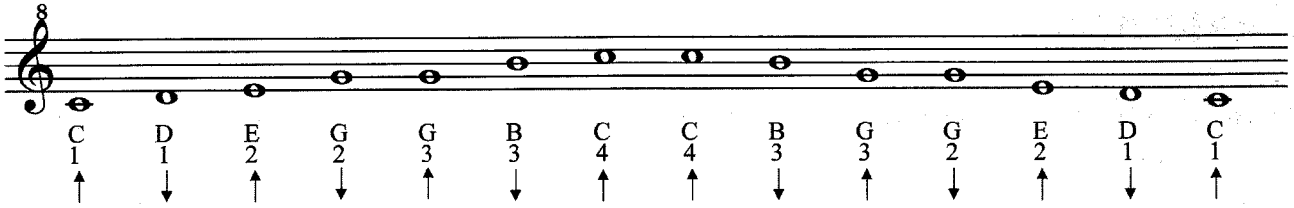
Chords in the lower octave

Track 4



Scale in the lower octave

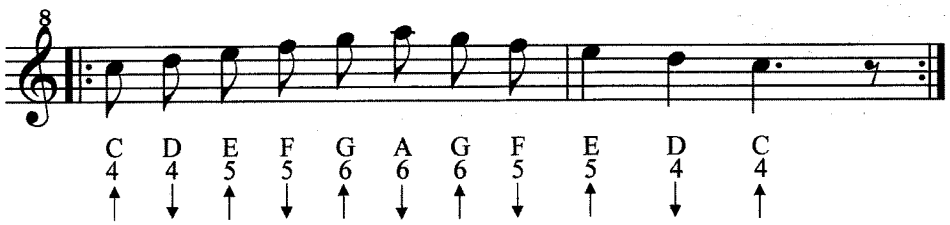
Track 5



We don't need to concern ourselves with the top octave at this stage. As diag. 3 shows, the 7th scale degree is missing, but all other notes are present, though ordered slightly differently than in the central octave. The Richter tuning enables the player to combine simple melodies with appropriate chords and this major key tonality used to be the only way to play the harp, both in Europe and elsewhere. Many simple folk tunes can be played like this without great difficulty (see Track 7) and the popularity of the diatonic harp is largely based on this fact.

Exercise holes 4 - 6

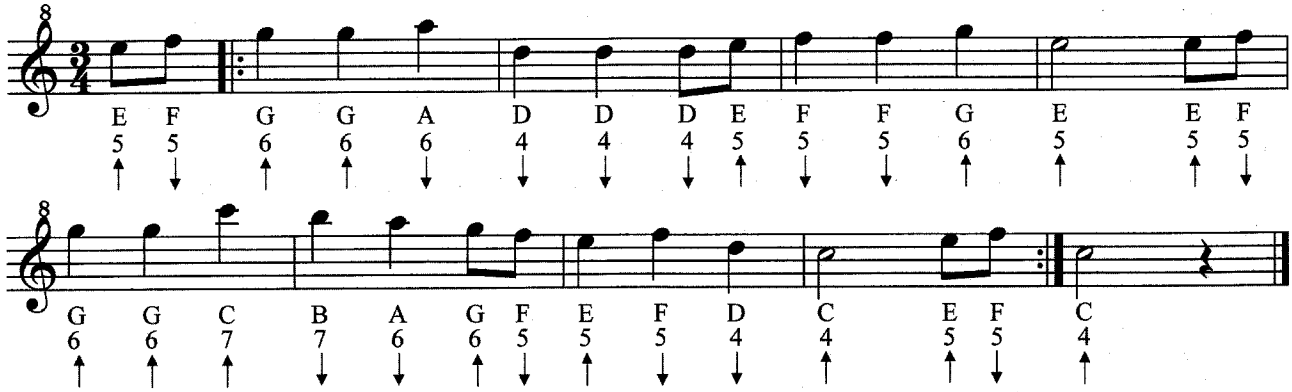
Track 6



This is the musical basis of the blues harp. The exercises are intended to illustrate the harmonic relationships and are not hard to play. Don't worry if you find it difficult to play clean single notes at first – we'll deal with this in the next chapter.

Folk tune "Schneeflöckchen"

Track 7



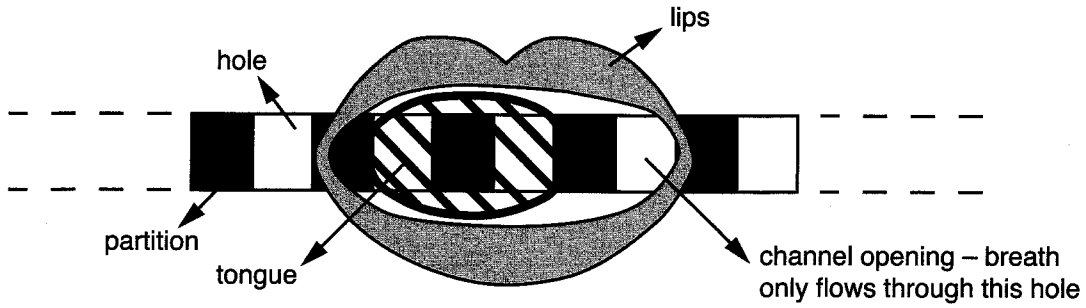
Chapter 2

Single Notes

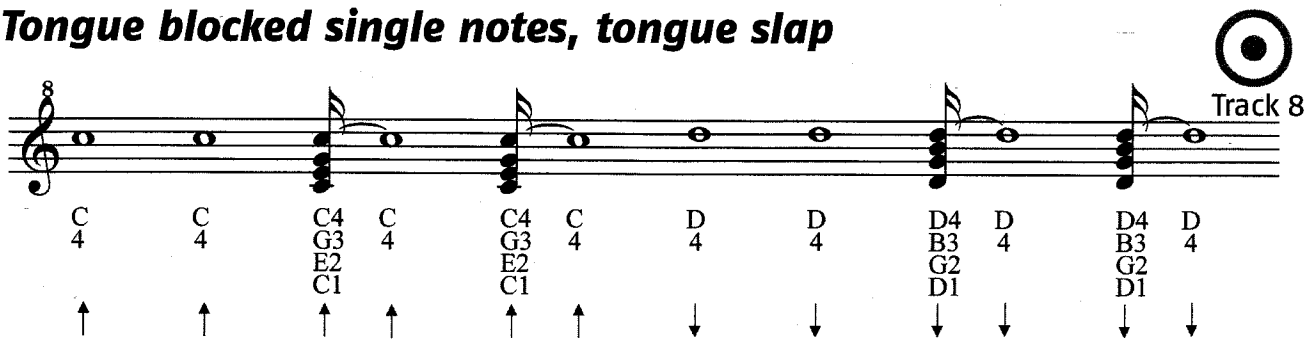
There are two main methods of channeling your breath so that it only flows through a single hole.

Tongue Blocking

Here your lips enclose 3 or 4 holes and the front of the tongue is used to block the openings of all but the highest (right hand) hole. This method also enables players to combine chords with single notes by pulling the tongue back and then placing it over the lower channel openings again ("tongue slap").

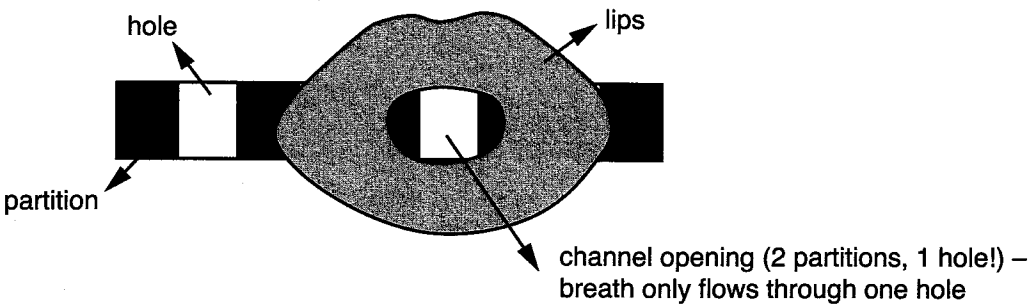


Tongue blocked single notes, tongue slap



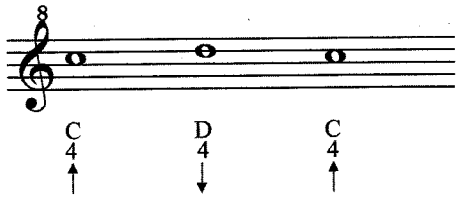
Puckering

It's generally easier for the beginner to form the lips to a pout and enclose a single channel opening. The necessary mouth position is similar to that used when whistling a low note. You literally need to move your lips forwards, otherwise the harp will strike your teeth if you take it far enough into your mouth. Relax!

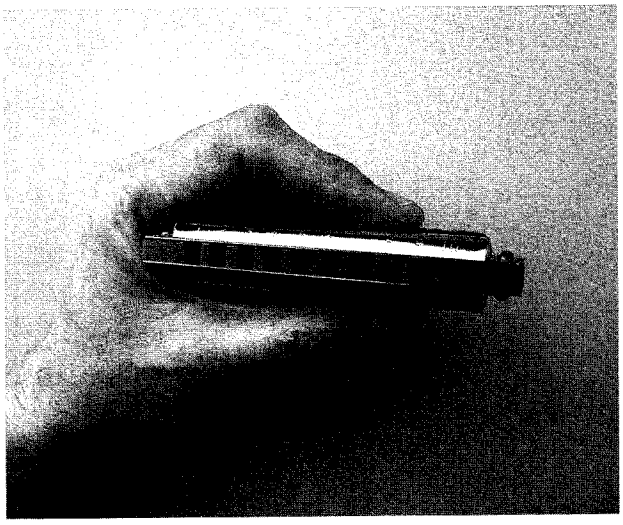


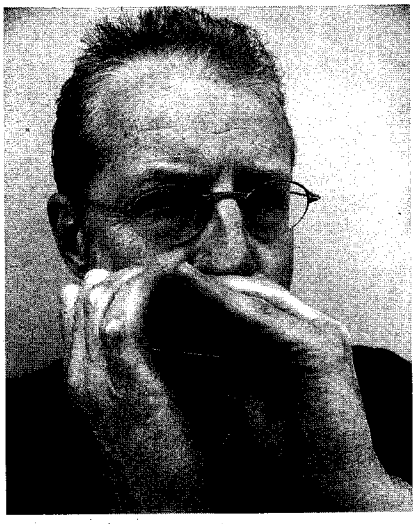
Single notes (pucker)

Track 9



The hole numbers 1 – 10 (from low to high) are generally stamped on the upper reed plate. Grasp the harp gently between slightly bent forefinger and thumb of the left hand, with the low notes to the left. Like this you can see the numbers, which aids orientation. The left hand end of the harp should rest against the point where forefinger and thumb meet. I generally hold the harp as far towards the back as possible, to create space for the lips (see photos)

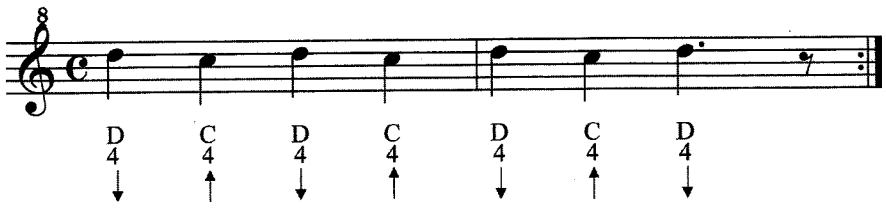




Hold the harp as described in your left hand and form your lips to a relaxed pout, as if you were going to kiss it. Now open your throat (upper & lower jaws apart!) and raise the back of the tongue so that your breath makes a slight panting sound. Like this the air can flow through the harp without hindrance. Breathe gently in and out a few times from the diaphragm. Now fix your eyes on the 4th hole and without looking away, bring the harp to your lips so that they enclose the hole opening. Your lips have to literally surround the front part of the harp so that it's in your mouth, not in front of it. Now continue to breathe gently through the harp, first in and then out. You don't need to use any force whatsoever. Simply allow the air to flow through the harp on its way to and from your lungs and so be transformed into sound.

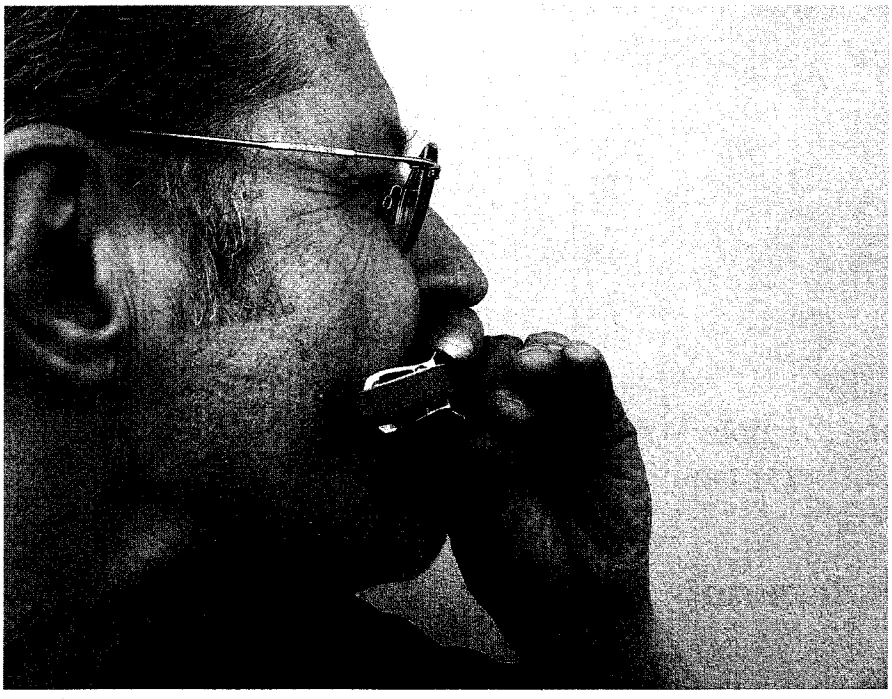
Single note exercise, hole 4

Track 10



Listen closely to the result. Are you hearing single notes (D when you inhale, C when you exhale), or are there more than one? If so, try to adjust the position of harp and lips so that the air can only flow through one channel. Either your lip opening is too wide, or the channel opening is not exactly on centre to your lip opening. Try pulling the corners of your mouth together, and/or carefully move the harp a millimetre or two to one side or the other, without breaking contact between harp and lips, until you can only hear the desired note.

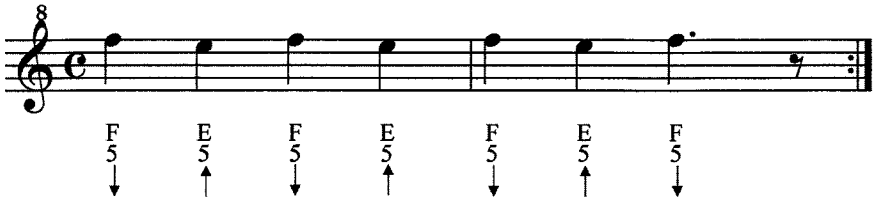
Do you hear the hiss of air flowing past the harp? To eliminate air loss, you have to take the harp deeper into your mouth, so that your lips are in contact with it all the way around. I always play with the harp against the corners of my mouth, and tip the back upwards slightly.



How is the intonation? Are the notes sounding at their correct pitch, or are they too low? Intonation is one of the most important aspects of harp playing and is almost entirely dependent on the form of your vocal tract. The notes have to find space to resonate inside your throat. This means the throat has to adopt a form which corresponds to the wavelength of the note in question. This is exactly what happens when whistling, which is why it's very useful to first whistle notes which you wish to play. When you can play both notes in hole 4, try holes 5 & 6.

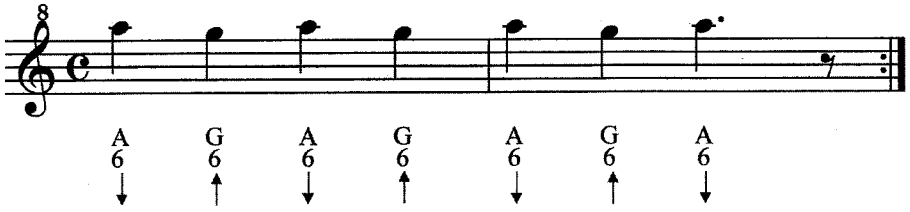
Single note exercise, hole 5

Track 11



Single note exercise, hole 6

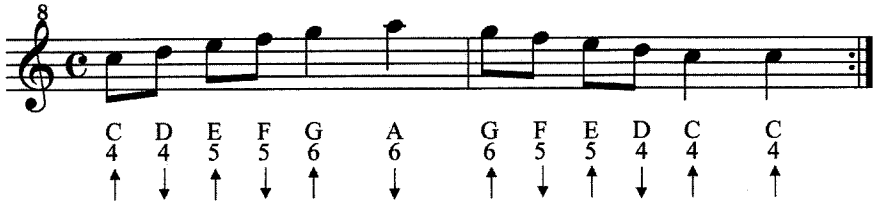
Track 12



The 6 notes which you've played in holes 4 - 6 all belong to the C major scale. They form the first 6 scale degrees when played in sequence from lowest (4-blow) to highest (6-draw).

Single note exercise C major

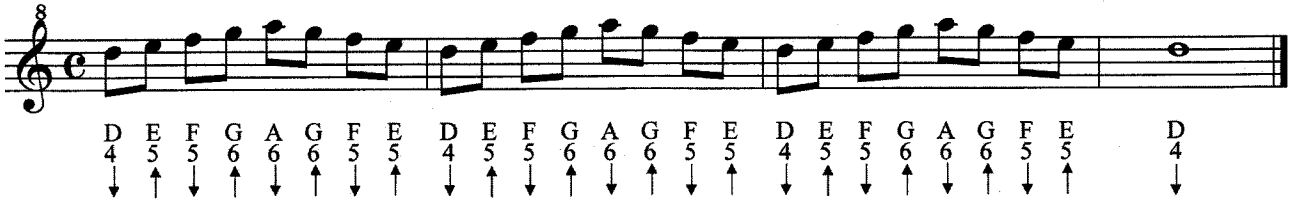
Track 13



However, if you start with the draw note in hole 4 (D), the notes sound quite different. It's possible to play some nice bluesy figures in Dm like this:

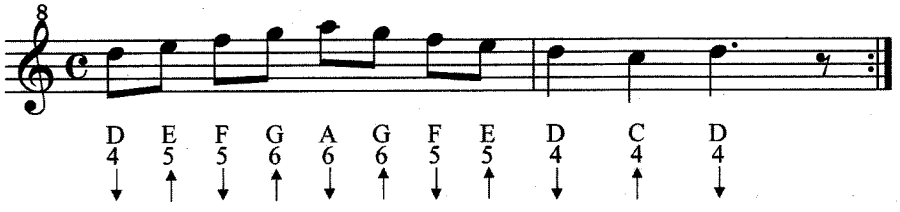
Single note exercise in D minor

Track 14



Single note exercise in D minor

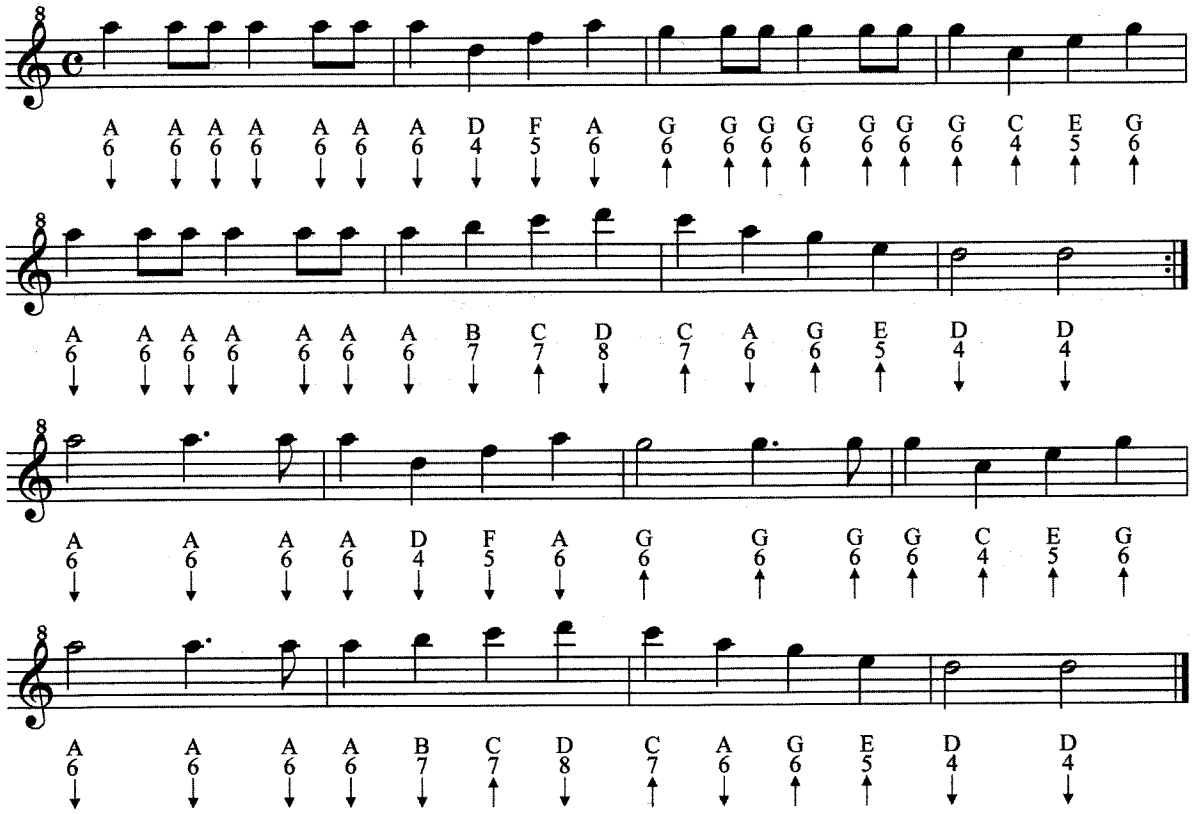
Track 15



The notes in holes 4 - 6 are the easiest of all to play and therefore offer the beginner the best starting point. Take your time and try to find simple melodies in this register. Make sure you are hitting clear single notes and pay attention to your intonation.

What Shall We Do With The Drunken Sailor

Track 16 + 17



Chapter 3

Hear that lonesome whistle blow ...

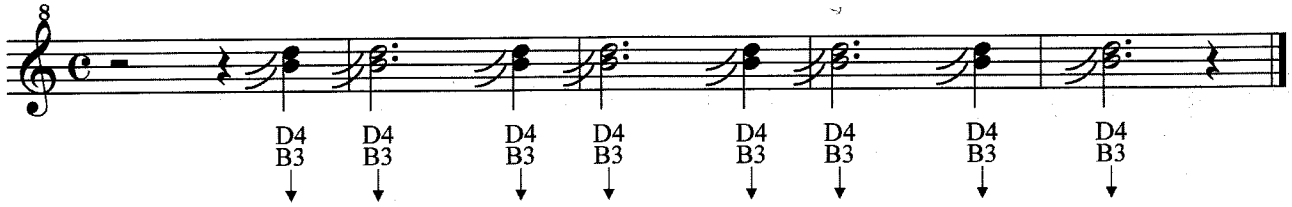
Track 18

In the first two chapters we've looked at the tonal layout and harmonic relationships of the harp, as well as learning how to tickle single notes out of it. The exercises were confined to major and minor key diatonic melodies and have little to do with the typical "bluesy" harp sound.
To create this kind of sound, we need to look at two vital aspects of harp playing: Bending and Cross Harp or 2nd position. Here's a little exercise to get you started:

While keeping your eyes fixed on the partition between them, enclose holes 3 & 4 with your lips and inhale gently. The partition has to be in the centre of your lip opening and your jaws slightly apart. As you do this, try to form a "wah wah" effect by further opening and then almost closing your jaws, without breaking lip contact with the harp or interrupting the airflow. It's a sort of chewing movement. During the "w" the lip opening is smaller, which causes the pitch to drop slightly. During the "ah" the opening gets bigger and the notes can return to their normal pitch. You can also do this by forming the silent syllables "eee-ooh-eee-ooh" in your mouth while inhaling. Try both methods a few times to see how you can best create this effect. It's the basis of the typical "train whistle" sound, as well as the first step towards learning to deliberately alter the pitch of certain notes – "Bending"!

Train whistle exercise, holes 3 & 4

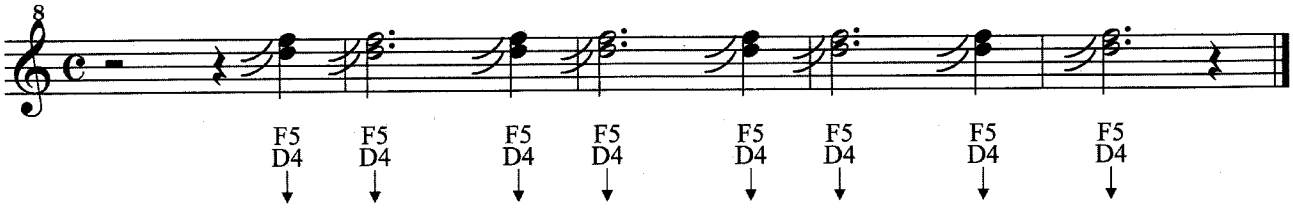
Track 19



Try the same exercise on 4- and 5-draw. The slight alteration in pitch caused by the smaller lip opening on "w" or "ooh" isn't really a proper bend, but a preliminary stage or "pre-bend". All the same, this is a useful effect and points in the direction of the true bend, which is controlled by altering the throat shape above the larynx.

Train whistle exercise, holes 4 & 5

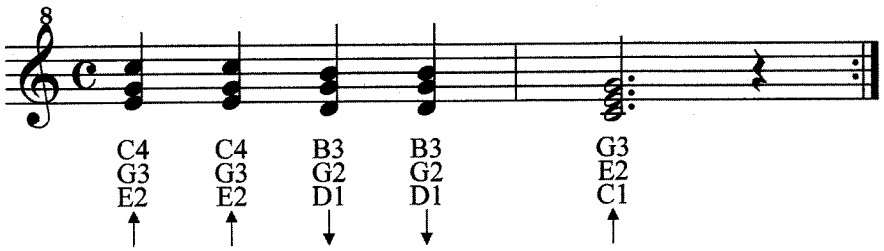
Track 20



Cross Harp

The term "Cross Harp" is used to denote the most common way of playing the harp in a blues context. What it means is this:
When played together, the blow notes of the harp form the tonic (I) chord in the major key to which the instrument is tuned. The draw notes form the dominant 7th (V) chord in the same key. On a C harp, the blow chord is C major and the draw chord is G7/9. This fact is used in folk music to combine simple melodies with suitable chords. Like this, you play on a C harp in the key of C, on an E harp in the key of E and so on. This way of playing is known as "1st position".
However, it's also possible to use the draw chord as the tonic or root (I) chord. Then the blow chord is the subdominant (IV). The only thing that has changed is the starting point – the two chords G7/9 and C major remain the same, but you begin and end on G, using the draw chord as the tonic instead of as the dominant. This means you play a C harp in the key of G. Playing in the key of the draw chord is known as "2nd position" or "cross harp". Although the root note in 2nd position, G, occurs 3 times in the blow chord, it is only found once in the draw chord. Tracks 21 & 22 should help make the differences between 1st and 2nd positions clearer.

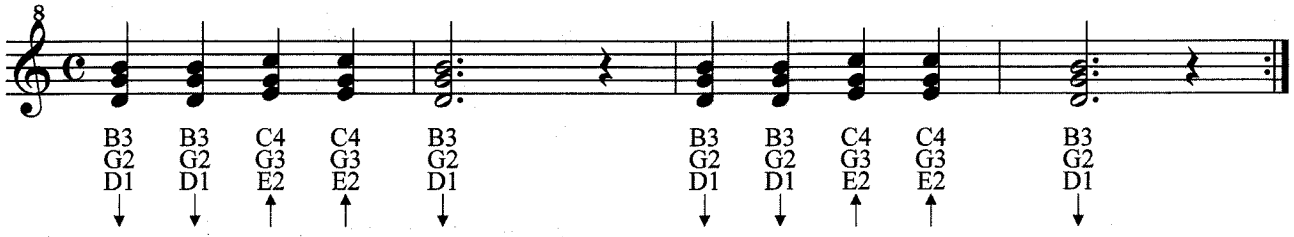
Chords in 1st position



Track 21

Chords in 2nd position

Track 22

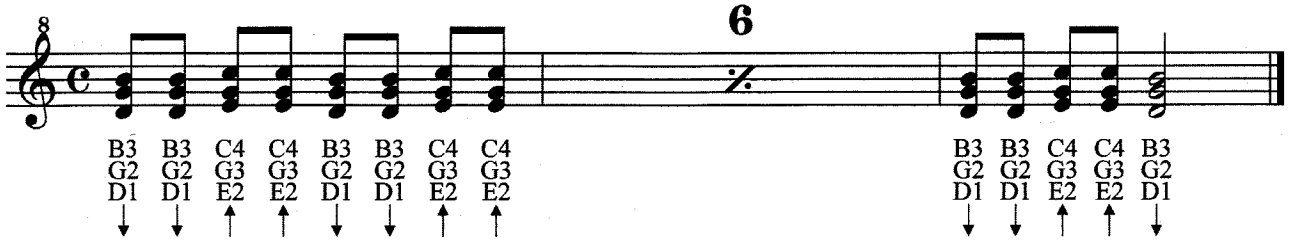


Since the tonal layout of the harp remains the same, these notes produce a different scale when played from the 5th scale degree (here G) as starting point. Instead of the C major scale C D E F G A B C with the sequence of intervals 2 2 1 2 2 2 1, you get a mixolydian scale G A B C D E F G with the interval sequence 2 2 1 2 2 1 2. In G, F is the minor 7th, a so-called "blue note". This makes the scale sound less major, as the minor 7th gives a "bluesy" feel.

The following chord exercise requires a wide mouth opening. As with all other exercises it's important to breathe from the diaphragm and not to suck. You may find you get out of breath at first. Harp playing is fantastic breath training, though, and if you just practice a couple of minutes a day, you'll soon notice how your staying power increases.

Cross harp rhythm

Track 23

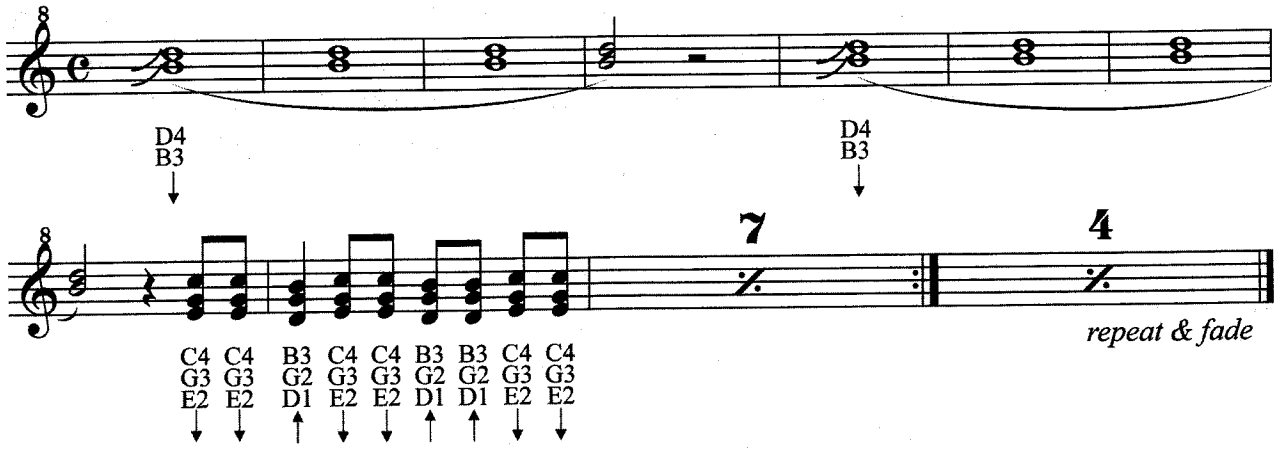


The concept of the "tonal centre" is very useful when playing cross harp. The whole thing revolves around the draw chord and its root note 2-draw. That's the tonal centre, the point where everything begins and ends. Of course the blow notes also play a vital role, but they're all in the subdominant chord and are therefore mostly (with the exception of the root note G in 3-, 6- and 9-blow) used as transitional tones to lead to one of the notes of the draw chord.

Remember that the notes have to find enough space to resonate within your vocal tract, otherwise they may get bent down unintentionally. The lower the note, the more space it requires, because its wavelength is longer. This especially applies to 2-draw. It's therefore really important to create as large a space as possible in your mouth and throat when playing draw chords or low draw notes. Keep your throat open. Try playing and holding the draw chord in holes 1 - 3, retaining a constant pitch. Pay attention to the intonation (2-draw should be the same pitch as 3-blow) and always relax and breathe from the diaphragm. Here's a great exercise which combines the figures from tracks 19 and 23.

Cross Harp Train Exercise

Track 24 + 25



Chapter 4

What is Blues?

Even though we've been talking the whole time about the "Blues Harp", we haven't even mentioned the music which lent the instrument its name. Blues is a generic term for a range of musical styles which emerged in the USA and which combine elements primarily from Afro-American music with the folk music of white European settlers. The blues has had a formative influence on the development of almost every subsequent style of music and is a major stylistic element in popular music today. Its influence can be heard in such diverse areas as pop, rock & roll, jazz, folk, soul, funk, rock, R&B or rap.

Blues in G

Track 26 + 27

At its simplest, blues consists of the 12-bar verse form. This in turn consists of three 4-bar lines, accompanied by a simple chord sequence. This verse form can be repeated endlessly (at least, sometimes it seems like that).

Diag. 6: 12 bar verse form

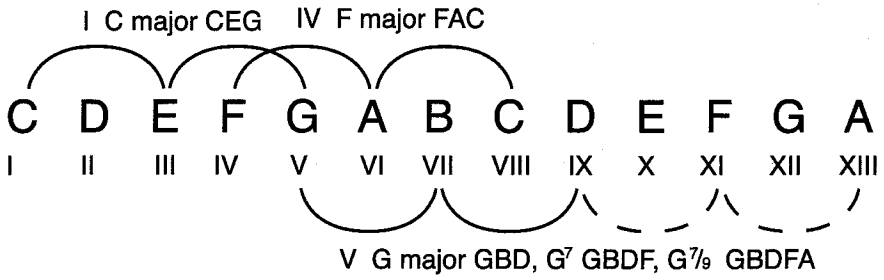
I = tonic IV = subdominant V = dominant

I	/	I (IV)	/	I	/	I	/	(A)
IV	/	IV	/	I	/	I	/	(A)
V	/	IV	/	I	/	V	/	(B)

The present day conception of blues is often dominated by the idea of the endless guitar solo, invented by white blues-rockers in the 1960s. Originally most blues tunes

were vocal numbers and the lyrics were frequently either funny or suggestive. Usually the first line introduces the theme. This is then repeated in the second line, but as the accompanying chord changes (IV instead of I) it sounds different. In the third line the theme is completed or resolved over the dominant and often a "turnaround" is used to lead into the next verse. This gives the three 4-bar lines a structure you could call AAB. The 12-bar form is a wonderful basis for improvisation. In order to use it, you need to internalize the sound of this chord progression and grasp the underlying harmonic relationships.

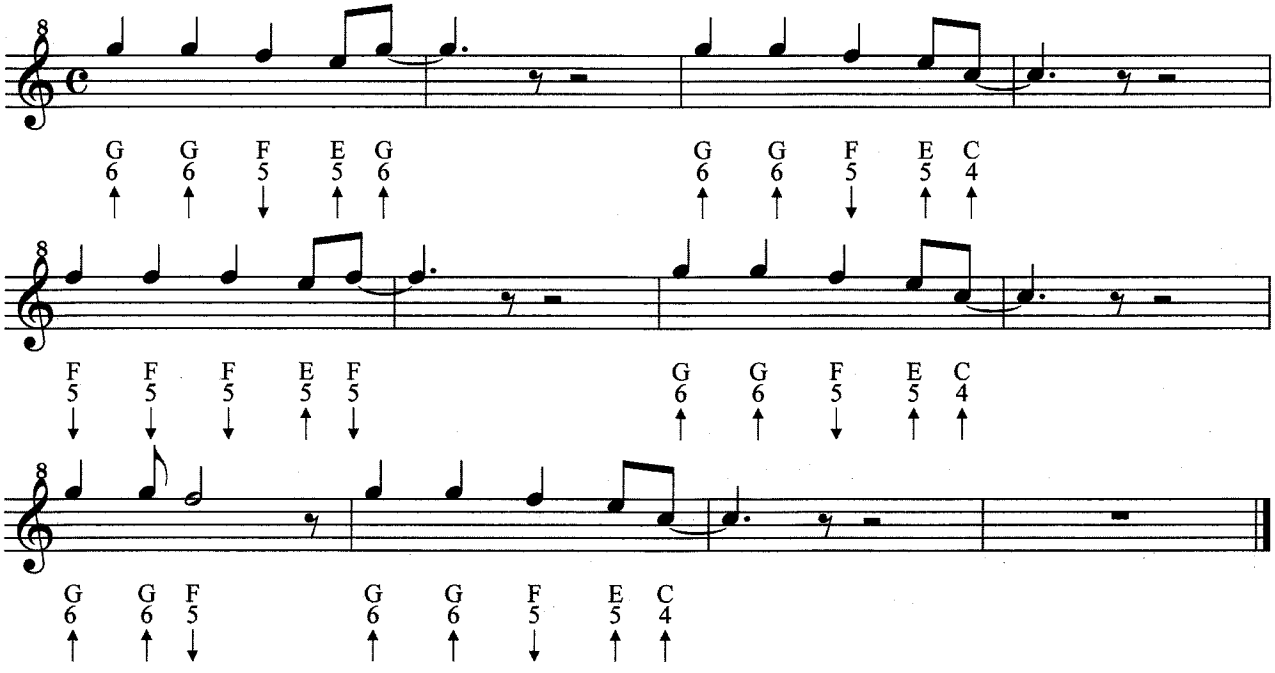
The three chords tonic, subdominant and dominant are derived as follows from the notes of the major scale:



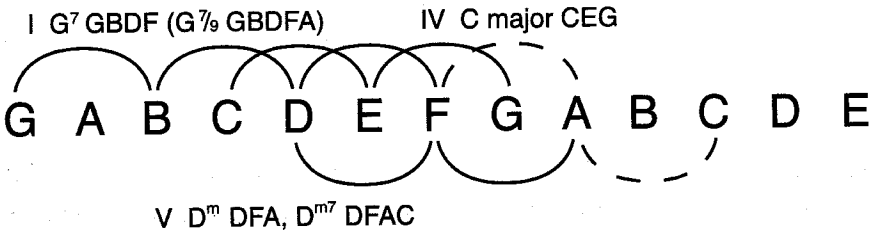
Diag. 7: I, IV & V chords derived from C major scale

Easy Blues Exercise #1 in C, 1st position

Track 28 + 29



These three chords form the harmonic basis for almost all kinds of Western music, from folk to pop and classical to jazz. In blues they're often played as 7th chords. The cross harp tonality fits very well to this, as the tonic on a C harp is then G7. This is another reason why cross harp is so widespread in blues.

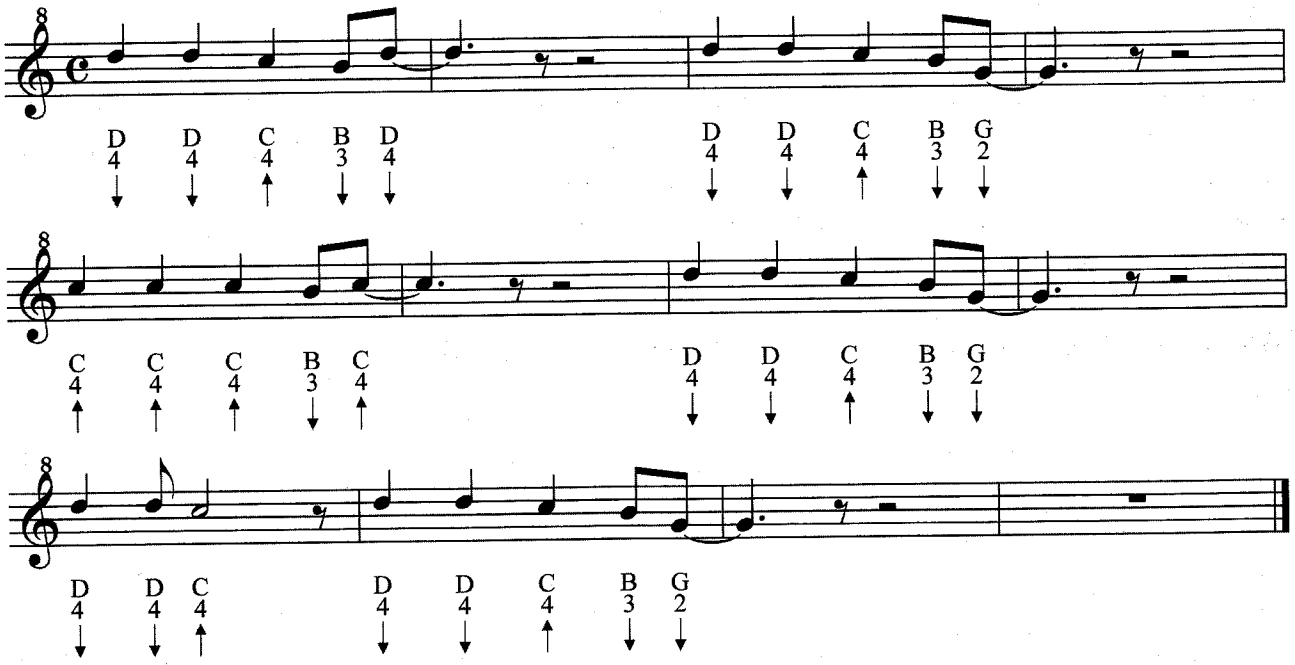


Diag. 8: I, IV & V chords derived from G mixolydian scale

Here the dominant is a minor chord Dm. However, it's common in blues to play minor thirds over 7th chords containing major thirds. Often the third is played as a moving note, sliding from minor in the direction of the major third. The F in 5-draw can be seen both as the 7th in the tonic G7 and as the third in the dominant D7.

Easy Blues Exercise #2 in G, 2nd position

Track 30 + 31



An important characteristic of blues tunes is the use of the so-called "blue notes" minor 3rd, flat 5th and minor 7th. We have already encountered one of these – the F in 5-draw is the minor 7th in the tonic chord G in 2nd position. The other blue notes in G (minor 3rd Bb, flat 5th Db) require a mastery of bending and will be covered in a later volume.

Anyone who wants to learn blues harp needs to acquire at least a passing familiarity with some of the great harp players. You have to have heard Little Walter, Walter Horton and Sonny Boy Williamsons 1 & 2. All of Muddy Waters' early recordings feature brilliant harp players. There are mail order companies which specialize in this material and The Harp Handbook (Steve Baker, Music Sales) includes a comprehensive overview of styles and stylists.

Chapter 5

Cross Harp Scales

As we saw in chapter 3, the harp is often played in the key of the dominant of the major key given on the instrument. This has been the cause of much confusion, as it means that you need for example a harp in A to play in E. The following table should help:

Key of harp	A	Bb	B	C	Db	D	Eb	E	F	F#	G	Ab
Key of song	E	F	F#	G	Ab	A	Bb	B	C	C#	D	Eb

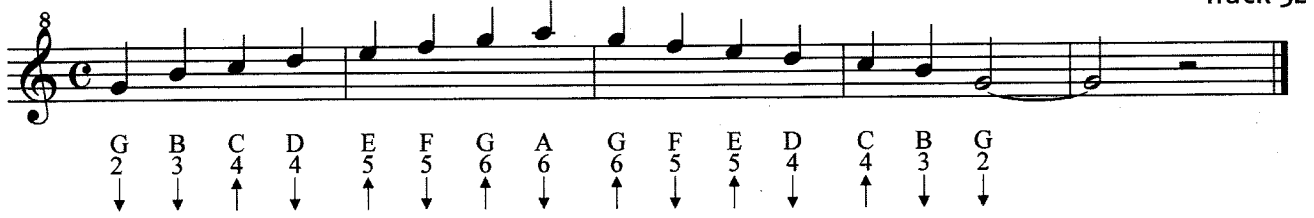
Diag. 9: Cross Harp or 2nd Position: Which harp for which key?

Although all exercises and examples here refer to a C harp, it's definitely a good idea to own a harp in at least one other key. After C, the most popular keys are A, D, F & G, to play in E, A, C and D respectively in 2nd position.

As we have seen, due to the tonal layout two important notes are missing in the bottom octave: F and A (chapter 1, diag. 3). This means that when playing in the cross harp key (here G), the 2nd scale degree A is not present as a natural note. It can be produced by bending, but you'll need to practise a bit first. At this stage we'll stick to the notes which can be played without bending.

Cross harp scale, holes 2 - 6 (without bends)

Track 32



Here we're basically playing a mixolydian scale in G. The 2nd scale degree A is missing at the bottom, but is found as a 9th in 6-draw. The first and last note of the exercise, G, can be played both as a draw note in hole 2 and as a blow note in hole 3, but I suggest that you use the draw note. It's more difficult to play this with correct intonation, but it has the advantage of being embedded in the draw (tonic) chord. The G in 3-blow is equally embedded in the blow (subdominant) chord, which means that it may sound wrong if you don't hit it accurately.

As I said in chapter 3, 2-draw is the most important note on the entire instrument. It's also one of the most difficult to play, because it can easily be bent down unintentionally, so that it sounds flat. The best way to avoid this is to whistle the note before playing it. Then your mouth automatically adopts a form which corresponds to the frequency and wavelength of the note. It's important to whistle the note at the correct pitch and not an octave higher (much simpler!). Often it's easier to whistle low notes when inhaling

rather than exhaling. Try to accustom yourself to these mouth and throat positions. This is essential in order to play the note with good intonation. Track 34 shows how to do this and also demonstrates what will happen if you don't have the right mouth and throat form.

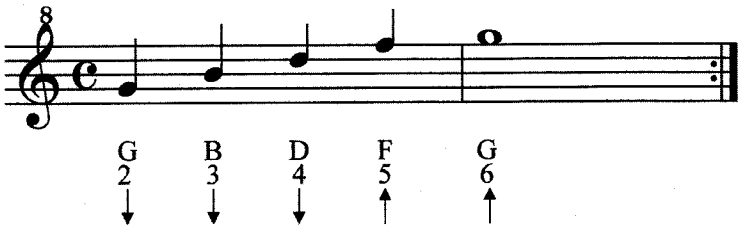
2-draw with and without harp, right and wrong

Track 33

A number of bluesy licks which may well sound familiar to you can be played on the notes in holes 2 - 6. Try the following exercises:

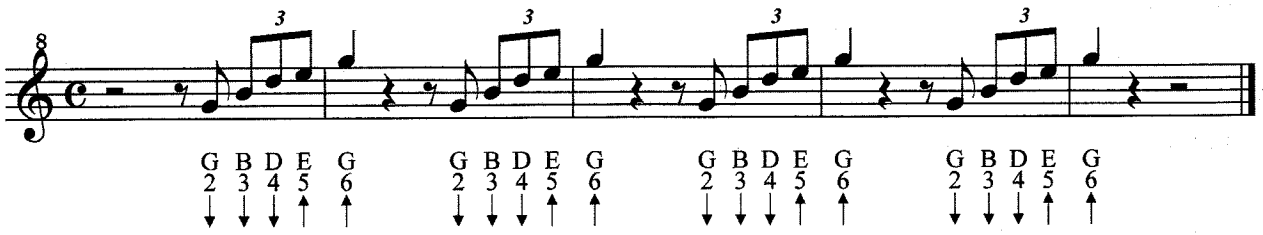
Cross harp exercise 1

Track 34



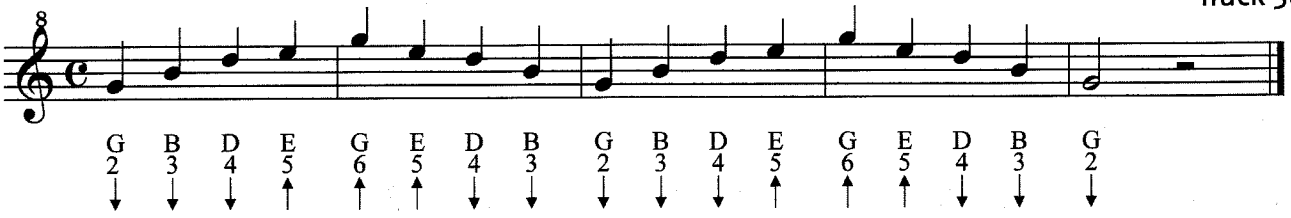
Cross harp exercise 2

Track 35



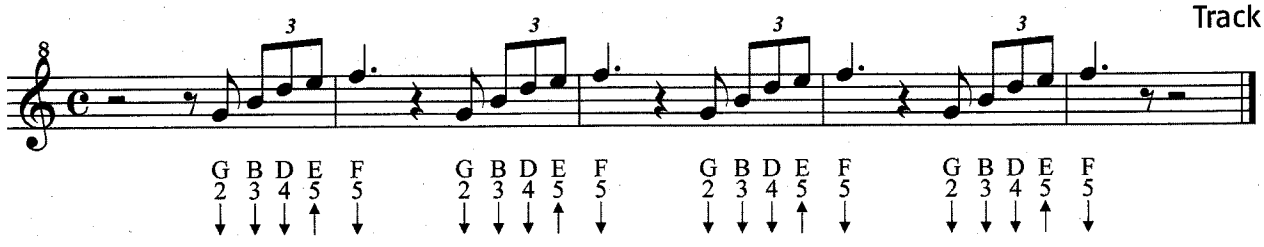
Cross harp exercise 3

Track 36



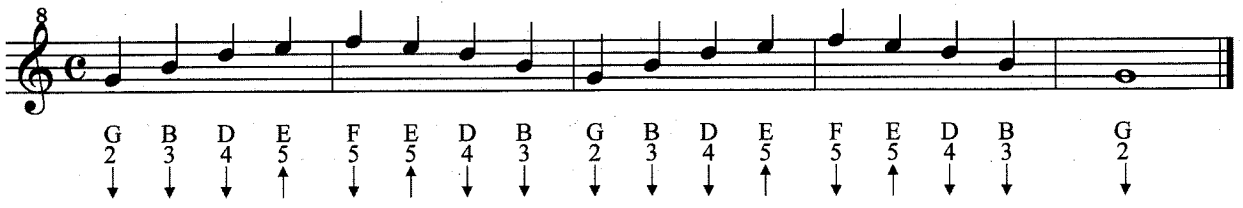
Cross harp exercise 4

Track 37



Cross harp exercise 5

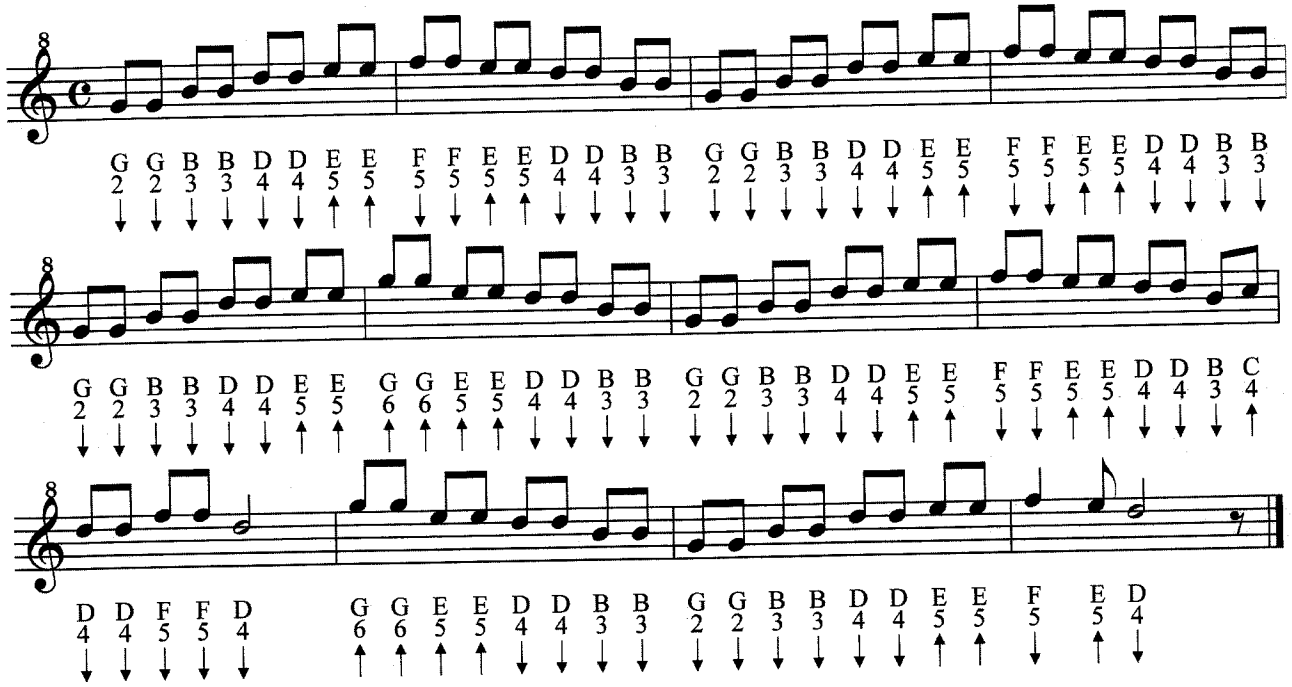
Track 38



Numerous riffs can be created out of these simple building blocks without having to bend notes. In all the above exercises, you need to hit the draw notes in holes 2, 3 & 4 in quick succession without playing a single blow note. The best way to do this is to move the harp across your mouth opening from right to left, without interrupting your airflow. Just keep breathing while you move the desired channels in front of your mouth opening.

Cross harp boogie exercise in G

Track 39 + 40



Chapter 6

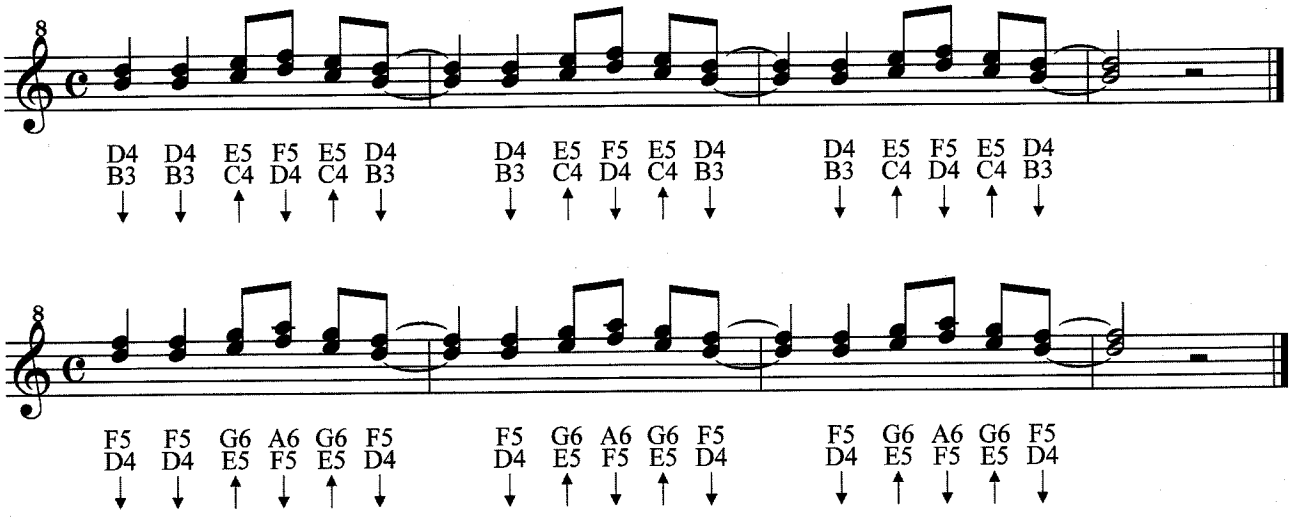
Cross Harp in Songs: Riffs and Double Notes

To use the harp effectively in your music, it's important to choose lines and melodies which you can play clearly and with the right intonation. Simple, well chosen phrases which fit to the song will add far more to it than a load of notes which may be out of tune or out of time.

Pop music provides some excellent examples of this. The early Beatles hits, where John Lennon used the harp very effectively, are a case in point. Lennon wasn't especially interested in playing blues on the harmonica. He was more interested in the sound and the possibility of using it as a hook in his songs. The harmonica plays a central role in the Beatles first three hits in Great Britain ("Love Me Do", "Please Please Me" and "From Me To You"). He used the cross harp tonality to play simple, effective phrases which lent the songs character and made them instantly recognizable. A nice example, which is also quite easy to play, can be heard in "I Should Have Known Better". The original is in F, but here I've transposed it to G so that it can be played on a C harp.

Harpriff Beatles

Track 41 + 42



This phrase is used both as an intro and as a recurring theme during the song. It consists entirely of double notes taken from the basic chords of the harp in 2nd position. Your lip aperture needs to be slightly wider than for playing single notes, but shouldn't be any wider than is required to enclose two holes, otherwise the figure will sound messy. When switching from holes 3 & 4 to holes 4 & 5, it's important to move the harp in your mouth, rather than turn your head. In each phrase you only need to move the harp once slightly to the left and then back again.

The timing is important here, because the tonic chord comes slightly before the beat on the repeat of the phrase, which gives the whole figure drive. As always, try not to suck the notes out of the harp! You need to keep your throat open and breathe them in and out. It can be a help to accent the first double note (B & D) of each phrase with the silent syllable "kah" to give it more attack, but be careful not to bend the notes down by mistake.

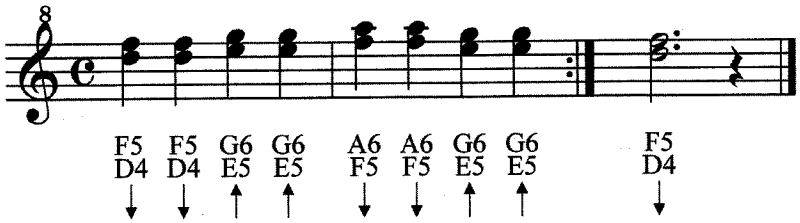
Harpriff Beatles played with "kah"

Track 43

Here are two other riffs which make use of the cross harp tonality. They don't contain any bent notes and can be played either as double or as single notes (the lower of the two). The first is a simple R & B lick that would fit well to a song like "Everybody Needs Somebody" (remember the Blues Brothers movie?):

Harpriff Rhythm & Blues

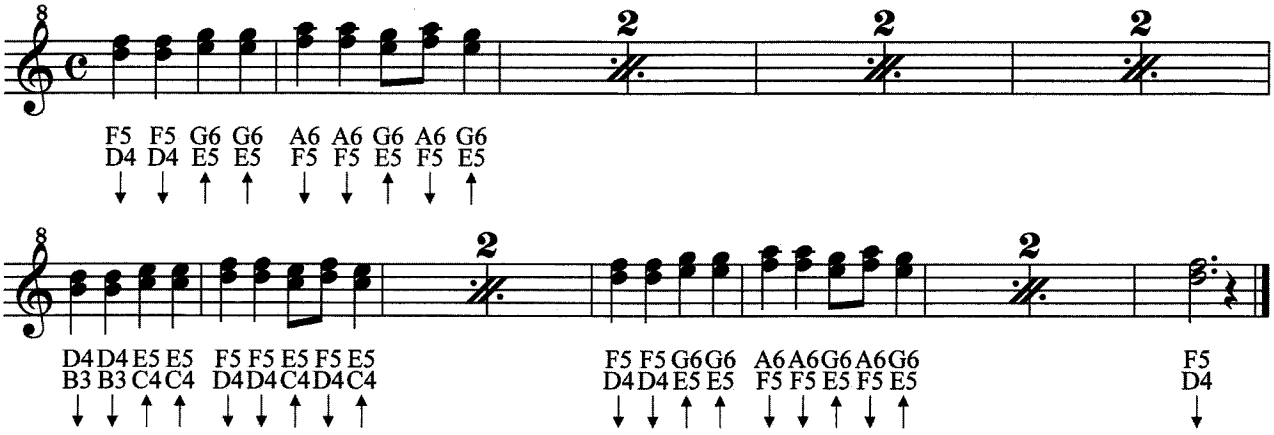
Track 44 + 45



A slight variation on this gives the so-called Detroit Boogie rhythm:

Harpriff Detroit Boogie

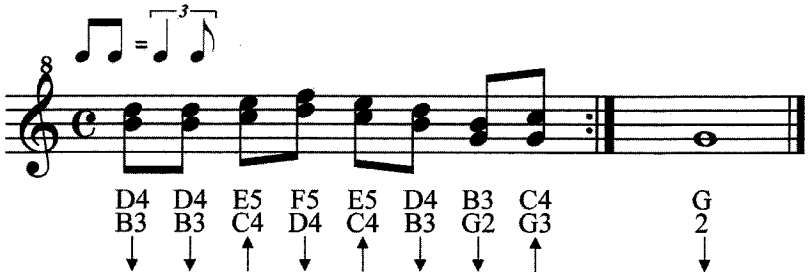
Track 46 + 47



The next exercise is played in a fast shuffle rhythm. This means the first note of each pair of eighth notes is played twice as long as the second one.

Harpriff shuffle

Track 48 + 49



The switch from 2-draw to 3-blow at the end of the figure gives your breathing a rhythmic quality and makes the phrase easier to play for sustained periods, as it allows you to get rid of excess air.

To play phrases as double notes, you make your mouth opening slightly wider than when playing single notes, so that some of the air goes through the next hole up. As with singing, a second voice generally sounds better when it's higher than the first voice. On the harp, notes in adjacent channels are usually either a minor or a major third apart and thus sound pleasant if you play them together. Many harp players use double notes a lot of the time, as this fattens up the sound. The trick is to direct most of the air through the lower of the two, so that this note is louder than the "harmony voice" in the next hole up.

If you still have difficulty hitting clear single notes, don't worry. Just try to make sure that the additional note is not the lower one to the left of the desired channel, but the higher one to the right. Try this on the previous exercises.

Chapter 7

Bending

The most important characteristic of the sound of the blues harp is the wailing glissando which players refer to as "bending". This unique sound has an emotional impact which has been used countless times in popular music, whether as a special effect or as a technique integrated into the style of playing.

Examples of bending

Track 50

From the outside, it's not easy to grasp how bending works. However, there is a simple rule which describes exactly which notes can be bent and by how much:

Only the higher of the two notes in any given hole can be bent (i.e. the draw notes in holes 1 - 6 and the blow notes in holes 7 - 10). The pitch of the higher note can be lowered to a fixed point which lies just under a semitone above the deeper note in the same hole. It cannot be bent any further! The lower of the two notes in each hole (1 - 6 blow, 7 - 10 draw) cannot be bent.

Diagram 10 shows the tabulature symbols for bent notes. On the basis of a C harp, diagram 11 shows which notes can be bent and which additional notes can be created in this way. This applies to all Richter harp models in all keys.

↓ DRAW

↙ SEMITONE BEND, DRAW

↙ WHOLE TONE BEND, DRAW

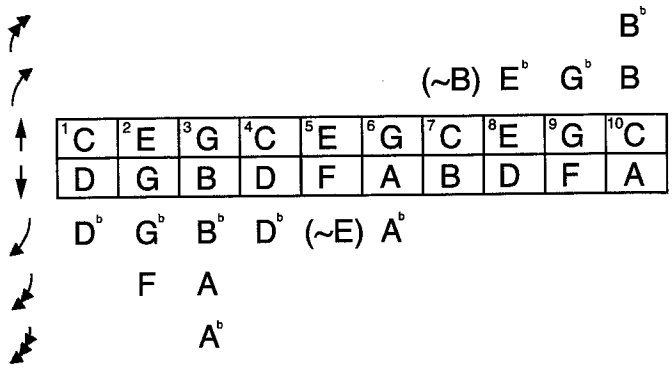
↙ THREE SEMITONE BEND, DRAW

↑ BLOW

↗ SEMITONE BEND, BLOW

↗ WHOLE TONE BEND, BLOW

Diag. 10: Tabulature for bends



Diag. 11: All bendable notes, C harp

On the accompanying CD I play the bends first as slides (glissandi) and then as semitone intervals. We'll deal with the use of this technique in a future volume. For now it's a question of getting started.

All bends as slides and semitone intervals


Track 51

The pitch of a bent note always lies between the two natural (unbent) notes in that hole. The deepest point of the bend is just under a semitone above the lower of the two, irrespective of how much pressure you exert. That allows the player to hit bent notes directly. Once you've mastered this technique, every bend can be played at will, just like the natural notes of the harp. Track 52 shows some examples.

Direct bends in holes 2 - 4


Track 52

Bent notes are actually produced by the interaction of both blow and draw reed in the same airstream. For a detailed explanation see "The Harp Handbook" (Music Sales) or "Interactive Blues Harp workshop" (Voggenreiter) by this author.

How to do it

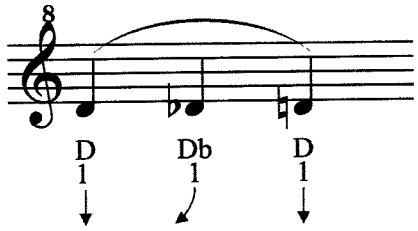
The best place to start is with draw bends, on a hole where the interval between the two notes is a whole tone: 1-, 4- or 6-draw. The bends in 2- and 3-draw are more difficult, because the interval between blow and draw note is larger.

When bending, the player alters the shape (and thus the resonance frequency) of the vocal tract to correspond to the pitch of the bent note. Similar changes occur with the vowel sounds E A I O U, which originate in different areas of the mouth and throat. An analogy I often use to describe bending is the change from the vowel AAAH to OOOH. The latter is created deeper in the throat. AAAH corresponds to the natural note and OOOH to the bent note. These vowel sounds are not voiced but simply formed in the vocal tract. During the OOOH the middle part of the tongue rises towards the roof of the mouth and the soft palate is extended backwards to create more space in the back of the mouth. The throat has to be open. On the CD you can hear what this sounds like without the harp. It won't help if you draw harder and try to suck the bent notes out of the harp. The right throat shape is the decisive factor.

Try forming the vowels AAAH and OOOH, while inhaling evenly and with an open throat through hole 1. Don't suck! Just breathe in a relaxed way from the diaphragm. When you find the right throat shape, the note will drop about a semitone in pitch when you form the OOOH and will return to its natural pitch when you go back to AAAH. The change may well be less at first, the main thing is that you manage to get the pitch to alter.

Bends in 1-draw, with & without harp

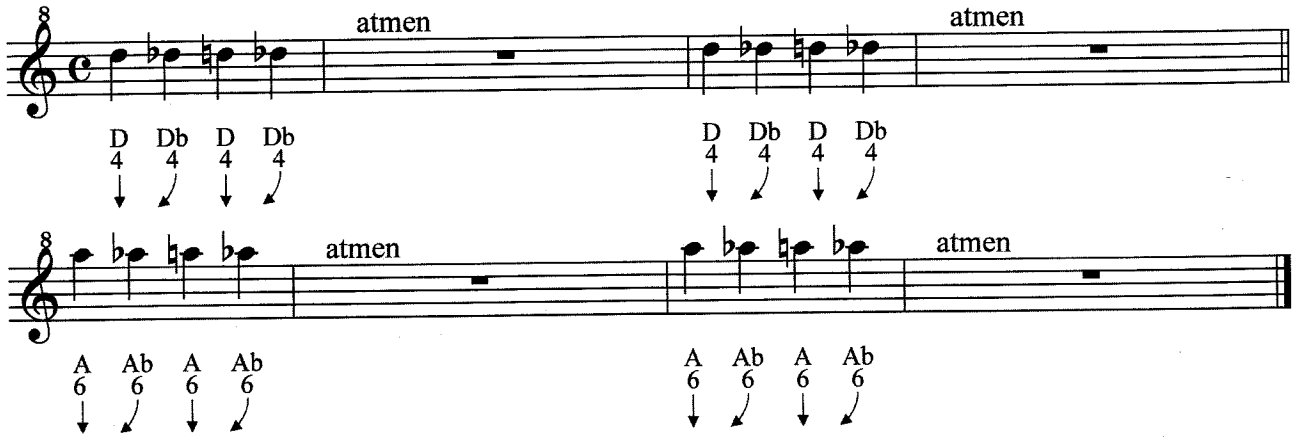
Track 53



The bends on the draw notes in holes 4 & 6 can be played the same way, but you'll need to make the throat shapes smaller, as higher notes have shorter wavelengths and therefore require less space.

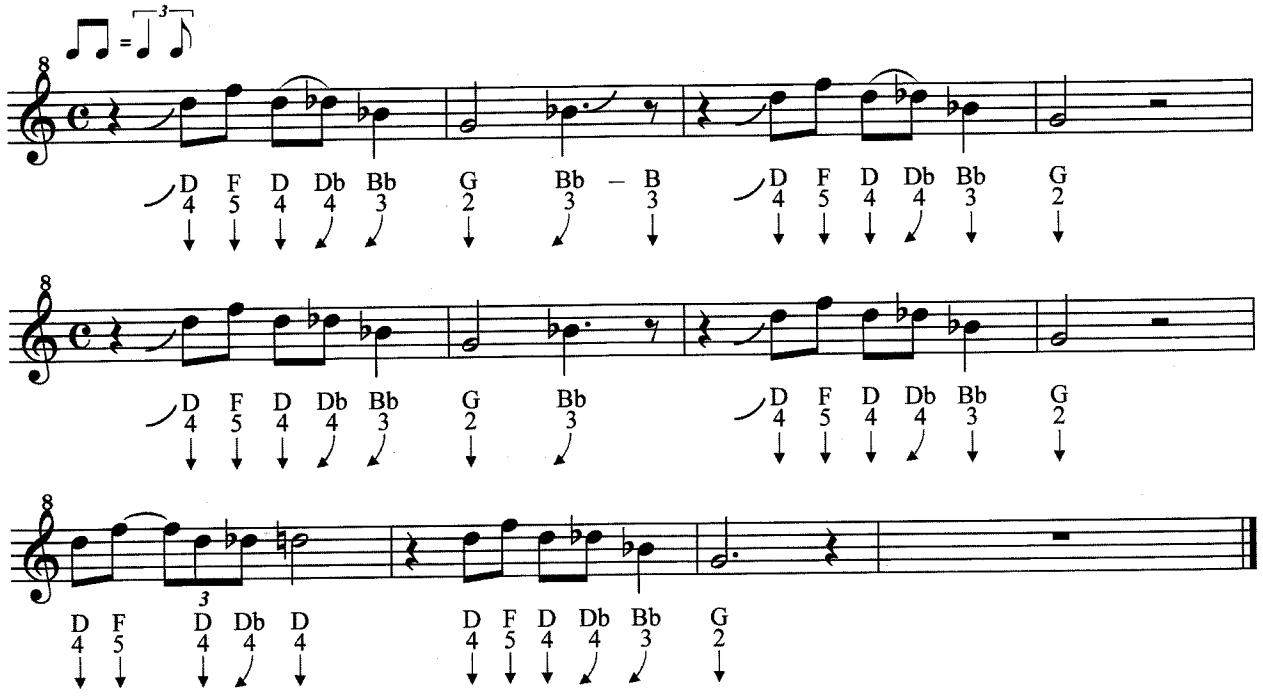
Bends in 4- & 6-draw, with & without harp

Track 54



Bending blues exercise in G

Track 55 + 56



TRACK LISTING

Chapter 1

1. The sound of the blues harp
2. C major scale, central ovtave, slow & fast
3. Chords central octave: blow C major, draw Dm
4. Chords lower octave: tonic & dominant
5. Scale lower octave
6. Exercise holes 4-6
7. Folk song Schneeflöckchen

Chapter 2

8. Tongue blocked single notes, tongue slap
9. Single notes w. pucker
10. Single note exercise, hole 4
11. Single note exercise, hole 5
12. Single note exercise, hole 6
13. Single note exercise, C major
14. Single note exercise, D minor
15. Single note exercise, D minor
16. What shall we do with the drunken sailor?
17. Guitar playback for 16

Chapter 3

18. Lonesome whistle
19. Train whistle exercise, holes 3&4
20. Train whistle exercise, holes 4&5
21. Chords in 1st position ("straight")
22. Chords in 2nd position ("cross harp")
23. Cross harp rhythm
24. Cross harp train exercise in G
25. Guitar playback for 24

Chapter 4

26. Blues in G
27. Guitar playback for 26
28. Easy blues exercise #1 in C, 1st position
29. Guitar playback for 28
30. Easy blues exercise #2 in G, 2nd position
31. Guitar playback for 30

Chapter 5

32. Cross harp scale in holes 2-6
33. 2-draw with & without harp, right and wrong mouth forms
34. Cross harp exercise 1
35. Cross harp exercise 2
36. Cross harp exercise 3
37. Cross harp exercise 4
38. Cross harp exercise 5
39. Cross harp boogie exercise in G
40. Guitar playback for 39

Chapter 6

41. Harpriff Beatles
42. Guitar playback for 41
43. Harpriff Beatles played with "kah"
44. Harpriff rhythm & blues
45. Guitar playback for 44
46. Harpriff Detroit boogie
47. Guitar playback for 46
48. Harpriff shuffle
49. Guitar playback for 48

Chapter 7

50. Various bends
51. All bends as slides and as semitone intervals
52. Direct bends in 2-, 3- and 4-draw
53. Bend in 1-draw, with & without harp
54. Bends in 4- & 6-draw, with & without harp
55. Bending blues exercise in G
56. Guitar playback for 55

MS

BIG RIVER HARP

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