

The history of the blues harmonica music essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The harmonica is a free reed instrument; this means that sound is generated as air flows past a thin strip of material and makes it vibrate producing sound. Air pressure is usually generated by breathing or blowing into a hole, cane or pipe. The air flows over one side of the reed, creating an area of low pressure and causing the reed to flex towards the opposite side. The frame enclosing the reed is built so that when it flexes it blocks the air flow, reducing the low pressure area and allowing the reed to bend back.

The harmonica is known to have different names like the Gob Iron, the Tin Sandwich, the Mouth Organ but most commonly the harp, probably because of its mechanism being so similar to the Jew's harp, which consists of a single reed mounted on a frame that is plucked to create a note that resonates in the player's mouth.

The first free reed instruments were invented in the Ancient Far East and were not known in the West until quite recently.

Among these ancient instruments there is the khaen of Laos; which consists of various pipes bound together in a set of rows, very much like a pan pipe, or the shǎ" ng of China and the shǎ_{...} of Japan, which are more of a group of tubes, traditionally inserted into a hollow dried fruit like a gourd, which nowadays is made of steel. (see Illustration x)

These traditional instruments have survived to modern times and are currently used in social music and courtship rituals, and the sheng is still one of the instruments used in Chinese opera.

The metal free reeds system used in the khaen and sheng is thought to be the ancestor of the reeds used in harmonicas in the present.

The sheng was brought to Russia at the end of the 18th century. It seems it inspired a lot of devices in the early 19th century, which was the foundation for the development of the more modern free reeds.

A Czech organ builder named Franz Kirschnek fashioned a new kind of free reed to be used in organ pipes. He might have just adapted an earlier model of free reed or he actually come up with the idea completely independently.

Harmonicas, as we know them today

When we talk about the harmonica as we know it today, it is hard to determine exactly who the inventor was. There were no factories at the time, and it was a case of individual artisans who were trying out new ideas.

At the time, many people tried to construct instruments with free reeds in Vienna, Paris, London, and America, so it's not clear who might have been the first but credit does go to a young German by the name of Friedrich Buschmann, who later on was also known to invent the concertina. He was a clockmaker, and around 1816 he devised an object used as a piano tuner and called it "mundaeoline", which in German means "mouth harp."

What can be determined is that one of the oldest artisans to make harmonicas was Christian Messner. Around the late 1820's he got one of these "little" harmonicas from Vienna, thought it was an interesting instrument, repaired it and awoke an interest in his colleagues, who asked

him to make them one too. He saw it could become a lucrative business and became the first harmonica maker in South-West Germany.

At this point it was only possible to blow into harmonicas; it was later, around 1847 when Johannes Richter added a secondary draw reed plate under the blow plate.

From 1840, Messner's nephew Christian Weiss decided to set up his own small company and began to work on his own designs.

In 1857, another young clockmaker named Matthias Hohner bought and managed to copy one of Buschmann's creations. With this and a bit of espionage from the Weiss Harmonica Company he managed to introduce his own design. He gave the instrument a nicer look, ornamenting its cover plates and displaying his brand name. He was a talented salesman and businessman. He improved production and bought out his competitors.

By the 1870s, mass production began at the Hohner Company and they started an aggressive overseas marketing campaign; the harmonica now looked very much like the ones we know today. The American civil war made the harmonica very popular in the USA. Hohner had already sent harmonicas over and the soldiers found it easy to play and carry. Within a comparatively short space of time, the Hohner Company was shipping millions of Richter "Marine Band" harmonicas to America every year. Around the 1900s, half of the harmonicas made in Germany were sold to the United States. In the 1920s, Hohner was making over 50 million harmonicas every year, and distributing them all over the world. From then on they have been the leading harmonica company.

Up until then, harmonicas could only be played in a major scale (or natural minor), so by blowing naturally, you could not get any half steps or sharps and flats.

For example, a C Major scale would be: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C and that would be the C Diatonic harmonica. It would be like only playing the white keys on a piano.

Hohner then decided to develop a chromatic harmonica that could play all 12 notes of a scale, making it a very versatile instrument which is used for music which requires a great variety of notes. It is specially used in jazz, pop and of course classical music.

Although it allows the possibility to play any scale, in any key, it can't bend notes very well so the player can't really achieve a "bluesy" kind of sound as well as on the diatonic ("bluesy sound" explained further).

In the Seydel Factory in Saxony, they still use the original machines that were used 130 years ago to make their harmonicas and although the parts are mass produced they must still be assembled by hand, someone at some point in the line of production must check and fine tune the harmonica manually. Special small plates and files are used to make precise adjustments to the reeds and it is a task that cannot be undertaken mechanically; every reed must be tuned by hand.

The harmonica is one of the most portable instruments; it fits in any pocket or bag and is easy to carry around. There are endless stories about how harmonicas saved lives; from stopping bullets by being in the soldier's

uniform in the right place at the right time, to other stories of many musicians that made a living out of playing it.

It is a close and intimate instrument, and very personal as players wouldn't let other people play their harmonica (especially for hygienic reasons). Companion of isolated men, from prisoners, soldiers and shepherds to astronauts, as it was the first musical instrument in outer space.

On a Gemini space flight in December 1965, astronaut Wally Schirra reported an unidentified flying object in a polar orbit, “ We have an object, looks like a satellite going from north to south, probably in polar orbit.... Looks like he might be going to re-enter soon.... You just might let me pick up that thing.... I see a command module and eight smaller modules in front. The pilot of the command module is wearing a red suit” and then played “ Jingle Bells” on a four hole, eight-note Little Lady Hohner harmonica that he had managed to smuggle on board.

It is an extraordinary little device, invented as a toy, considered a beautiful instrument and that has now been with us for over 150 years and will still go on for many more.

How do harmonicas work?

Parts and Mechanisms

The harmonica was initially designed to be able to play various notes at the same time in combinations that were harmonic and made intuitive sense because they could automatically support melodious notes. By blowing and sucking the player can easily get the notes sounding right, without the need

to work on getting the notes to sound clearly like on the guitar, it is a bit more like playing keys on the piano.

Anyone can buy a good functional harmonica without having to spend a lot of money, and that is something you can't say about guitars or keyboards. Although usually out of the box harmonicas need a lot of fine tuning and customizing for advanced and professional playing. "...they are raw materials waiting to be formed in to a real instrument". Then again that also happens with most professional instruments.

The basic mechanism is as explained in the previous section about free reed instruments. For the purpose of this analysis from now on when the harmonica is mentioned, it will be referring to the ten hole diatonic, the most commonly used harmonica for folk, rock and of course blues music.

The diatonic harmonica consists of two cover plates, two reed plates and a comb (see illustration x). Cover plates cover the reed-plates and are usually made of metal. There are two types of cover plates: traditional stamped metal open designs like the Hohner Marine Band, and enclosed designs such as the Suzuki Promaster. The first are usually lighter and smaller than the enclosed ones which often are heavier but give out a louder tonal quality.

The comb is the main body of the instrument. It's the central part of the harmonica and it's what everything is bolted or nailed to. It's called a comb because it looks very much like a hair comb.

As air goes through the harmonica, it usually carries saliva, so this inner structure must be made out of a type of material that can resist exposure to

moisture and that way avoid expanding or smelling. Traditionally they are made from pear wood, although they can also be found made out of plastic or metal.

There are two brass reed plates on a diatonic harmonica, each with 10 to 12 reeds riveted on to it. The reeds are shorter for the higher pitch, so the lower the note is, the longer the reed. The top plate is for the blow notes and the bottom is for the draw notes, so the reeds are facing the opposite direction.

After a while reeds do go out of tune, and some notes might lose their brightness, they start to sound flat and inconsistent. That indicates the harmonica needs re-tuning.

Although every hole in the harmonica can easily produce one note as the player blows air in to it, and one as he draws air, there are many more “hidden” notes that can be found by bending (a term used by guitarists, who actually “bend” the strings up or down to create a subtle change in the pitch) or overblowing. (see illustration Bendable Notes Chart)

If while doing a draw note, the airflow is increased, the draw reed over-flexes and the air pressure causes the blow reed from the same hole to vibrate too, making a new note “pop out”, so basically you are drawing air through the blow reed. The best way to understand how air pressure is changed is by whistling and trying to change the pitch of the initial note. The changes your mouth, tongue and throat make are similar to the ones a harmonica player makes when he bends a note.

Bending notes is a tough technique for beginner harmonica players and it is where the secret to getting a “ bluesy sound” lies, because it’s the way to get the flat third, fifth and seventh; the blue notes.

The Bluesy Sound

The term “ the blues” usually refers to melancholy and sadness and is constantly heard in lyrics to describe a depressed mood. Blues is a form of expression and a feeling that is brought to a musical form.

In very technical words, the blues form is characterized by specific chord progressions also found in other genres like folk, jazz, and rock and roll. The twelve-bar blues chord progression is one of the most common, although there are others like the eight-bar, used in songs like “ Key to the highway”, originally by Big Bill Broonzy, or the sixteen-bar as in Ray Charles’ “ Sweet 16 Bars” or in Herby Hancock’s “ Watermelon Man”. The basic twelve-bar framework blues progression has a distinctive form in phrase and chord structure and duration. The structure is based on the Tonic, Subdominant and Dominant chords of the key.

For example:

A blues song in the key of C would have the following structure:

Take the Tonic – Subdominant – Dominant chords and play them in the following order:

T T T T | S S T T | D S T T

So the chords for a blues tune in the key of C would be C, F and G and they would be played in the following order:

C C C C | F F C C | G F C C

Fitting the lyrics in this structure makes them “sing” very much like poetry sound when it is read out loud. The structure consists on an AAB pattern, consisting of a line being sung over the first four bars, in repetitions over the next four bars, and a longer finishing line over the last four bars.

Using Robert Johnson’s “Sweet Home Chicago” as a standard twelve bar Blues example for analysis, we find the following pattern:

Bar – 1

Bar – 2

Bar – 3

Bar – 4

A

Come on,

Baby don’t you want to

go

—

Bar – 5

Bar – 6

Bar – 7

Bar – 8

A

I said, come on,

Baby don't you want to

go

—

Bar – 9

Bar – 10

Bar – 11

Bar – 12

B

To that same old place

Sweet home

Chicago

This progression of chords is the basis of thousands other rock and pop songs that often have a blue sound even without using the traditional twelve-bar arrangement.

The harmonica player has to be very aware of what key and chord the song is in, because he has to fit in that progression or the notes he plays would not sound right. He then also has to know very well when and where to fit in the blue notes that, for expressive reasons are played flattened or gradually bent (minor 3rd to major 3rd, explained further along) in relation to the pitch of the major scale.

After all, the blues is a feeling and although it can be analysed technically as any other musical genre, to play it right it has to be felt. Like Muddy Waters puts it “ when you’ve got no bread and your love sick you’ve got the blues.”

And although people can’t even begin to imagine slavery, working in the cotton fields, or being racially discriminated like it was in those days, they can still feel the romanticism of that feeling in a sense of a “ I’m with them!” support.

The blues is not all just about playing the twelve-bar, like Mick Abrahams from Fleetwood Mac says in the documentary “ Blues Britannia - Can Blue Men Sing the Whites”, “ If you can play one note in the twelve-bar solo and make somebody cry or laugh, or all the lovely emotions that are associated with music, that’s truly to me the blues... it’s almost a prayer”

Nonetheless some blues artists also used the blues as a base for more comical, raunchy lyrics, such as Big Joe Turner's "Rebecca" (Rebecca, Rebecca, get you big legs off me, Rebecca, Rebecca, get you big legs off me. It may be sending you baby, but it's worrying the hell out of me) or Tampa Red's "Tight Like That" (There was a little black rooster met a little brown hen, made a date at the barn about a half past ten).

What got the Harmonica in to blues?

"The main thing that got the harmonica into the blues was its inexpensiveness... which now is a thing of the past" as Paul Jones lead singer and harmonica player for Manfred Mann, says in the documentary "Tin Sandwich Anyone?", and it is because at the time they were an affordable instrument that the African Americans managed to popularise by introducing it to the blues. Little Walter was quoted saying "When I started to play harmonicas, they were a dime! Now they're a dollar and a half! Those people ought to remember who popularised them that way!"

The first harmonica recordings made around 1924 by many unknown musicians totally revolutionised the way the instrument was played, and gave way to the blues harmonica as we know it.

The harmonica allowed for some very visceral, meaningful sounds that almost felt like wails of pain and sorrow. They almost felt like an extension from the voice and were definitely very expressive and profound close intimate instruments. It was amazing how such a small simple instrument was able to communicate so many things and create so many different effects.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-the-blues-harmonica-music-essay/>

Harmonica players at the time discovered that it was possible to lower the pitch of some of the notes by changing the shape of the air space inside his mouth whilst playing: Bending. They also found that drawing instead of blowing, and not playing in the key of the harmonica, but in the key of the dominant 7th chord, they could create sounds that had nothing to do with the major-key folk for which the harmonica was originally intended: the Cross Harp.

Train imitations and fox-chases, or many of the typical blues licks, would have been unimaginable without these two features.

Bending is probably the first way the player starts hearing a bluesy sound coming from this little instrument. Bends are essential for blues and rock harmonica sound, due to the sad and soulful sound the instrument can draw out. That wailing and howling of the blues harmonica is achieved by bending.

Playing the harmonica in the same key as the song is in would mean the player is in the first position or strait. He would be mostly using blow notes and it is the way he would get a melody, or more of a folk sound. The cross harp, or second position, consists on taking the harmonica in a different key from the song (being in the circle of fifths) and mostly playing draw notes.

For example:

Accompanying a guitarist playing a song in A, the harmonica player could play an A harmonica in first position, or a D harmonica in the second position. Both would fit in but the D harmonica would make it sound “ more bluesy” than the A harmonica.

The way the cross harp works is that there are only so many scales one can do on each harmonica. On a piano or a guitar all scales can be played from all keys on the same instrument, but on the harmonica the player has to change keys. This way draw notes can be played easier and so can the “blue notes”.

Usually beginner harmonicas come with a cross harp chart in the box (see illustration. x), where you can see what key you have to be on to sound “bluesy” or “melodic”.

Many other techniques can be also used in combination. Vibrato, commonly used with other instruments, can also be done on the harmonica. Vibrato, as the name indicates, gives the notes a vibrating sound. Usually it is made by contracting the muscles on the throat and varying the airflow. Another typical way to do it is by opening and closing your hands around the instrument freeing more or less air. Vibrato is a very common effect used by singers and other instruments.

Thanks to the way the harmonica is constructed, it also allows the player to play chords. A chord is a set of two or more notes played together harmonically. By stretching the mouth over two, three or four holes and playing them together as one melodic note you can get chords on the harmonica.

By playing chords the player can also get a vamping effect, which is achieved by alternating chords and single notes to accompany himself while playing a song.

The idea of vamping is to fill in the silences in the melody with chords in the right beat. By keeping that beat going, the player can make it sound like two harmonicas are playing; one doing the chords and another one doing the melody.

Little Walter and Sonny Terry were both known for great vamping in their tunes. Usually their sound was very rich and full and the harmonica sounded more powerful.

The Blues Harmonica

Blues Origins and Background

The blues goes back to the 17th century, in the United States. Blues is defined as the folk genre for the African-American population, mainly the Deep South, which originated from their spirituals, work songs, field hollers, shouts and chants, and rhymed simple narrative ballads.

At the time united states were a British colony that brought slaves from Africa who populated most of the south of the country. They worked on the tobacco, cotton and rice plantations and were not allowed to practice their cultures and religions. The first bluesmen were people that used to sing about how their life was to try and relieve the pain. In a way they were trying to send messages that travelled from plantation to plantation, to show what being a slave was.

Blues became, for the African-Americans, a form of expression and a way to tell their stories. It was emotionally deep, straight to the point and full of meaning. John Mayall, from the Blues Breakers says “ the main charm about

the blues is that it has such an authenticity about in the fact that when you listen to it you hear these stories, and visualize that these are real stories". And often they were, as narrative of the lyrics was usually about the cruelty of police officers, oppression at the hands of white people and hard times.

For example, in Blind Lemon Jefferson's " Rising High Water Blues", he tells the story of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 where he lost his girlfriend:

" Black water rising, Southern people can't make no time,

Black water rising, Southern people can't make no time,

And I can't get no hearing from that Memphis girl of mine"

After the war, lyrics became simpler and focused almost entirely on relationship despairs or sexual worries. Themes that recurrently appeared in pre-war blues such as economic depression, farming, gambling, magic, the devil, fires and floods were less common in post-war blues.

Other lyrics by artist like Skip James, Reverend Gary Davis or Blind Willie Johnson were also artist recognized by more religious or spiritual performances, highly influenced by the Christian conversions.

1920's, First Harmonica Recordings

As for the harmonica, Pete Hampton was probably the first African-American harmonica player to be recorded. Despite a productive recording career in the early 1900s with songs like " Nigger Blues", he only seemed to have used the harmonica for one particular song titled " Mouth Organ Coon", where the harmonica probably adopted the term " Mouth Organ". He already

used many effects including vocalising through the harmonica, the use of fox chase and train-like rhythm arrangements and simultaneous whistling.

Hampton used an F diatonic harmonica and he played it in first position.

Soon after that, Henry Whitter was the first to record in the cross harp position. Even though he was a white musician, he had adopted a remarkable African-American influence on his harmonica playing. He claimed to have made test recordings in March 1923 and recorded the final tracks around December 1923 in New York City, recording the first three harmonica solos.

The tunes appear to be in the key of A, and Whitter played in the second position on a D harmonica. He also had a train imitation, this one played in first position in what looked like a key of B although it might have originally been played on a C harp, and slowed down at some point.

Another early country music star was DeFord Bailey who became the first African American performer on the Grand Ole Opry, which was a weekly country music stage concert in Nashville, Tennessee that presented different artists from the genre from 1925. Bailey could play various instruments but he was best known for playing the harmonica and he played every Saturday night for 15 years, after he had to leave because of a dispute with management. He developed the fox-hunt and train techniques and he used a custom made megaphone to amplify the sound from his harmonica.

At the time, music was totally acoustic and the harmonica could be played comfortably and heard perfectly while accompanying a guitar and a singer.

Some players used a glass or a jug to funnel the sound and gain a bit more amplification like DeFord Bailey's custom megaphone. (See Pic XfunnelX)

By then, the harmonica had proved to be an interesting new instrument full of different sounds and effects, radically departing from the manufacturer's intentions of a toy.

1930's, Lomax and the re-discovery

The Emancipation Act of 1863, between 1870 and 1900, which freed the Black communities from slavery and had permitted them to build up the so called " juke joints" as places where Blacks could go to listen to some music, dance or have a gamble after a day's work. Performances were held in places like the Cotton Club in Harlem, New York or many bars along the famous Beale Street in Memphis.

This style was known as the Delta Blues, which consisted of traditional, rural country blues performed acoustically in more of a polished city urban style, also introducing new sounds like the bottle neck slide guitar and the floorboard stomping.

By the end of the twenties, Vaudeville and tent-show singers, circus artists, boogie-woogie pianists, jug and jazz bands were to be heard at some point playing some form of the blues.

Blues was becoming a vehicle for some people to earn a living by playing and entertaining the audiences. It was exclusively race music and the majority of white people didn't really know what it was or nor have the interest to listen to it.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-the-blues-harmonica-music-essay/>

Outside the phonograph stores, black people would stand in line anxious to obtain the latest blues disc and by now there was already a reasonably large archive of blues music given by artists like Lead Belly, Henry Thomas and Big Walter Horton. Many harmonica players were recording in duos with guitarists like Hammie Nixon and Sleepy John Estes, or trios like Sonny Terry, Blind Boy Fuller and Bull City Red.

Around the 1930's, John Lomax, pioneering musicologist and folklorist, together with his son Alan Lomax made a great number of non-commercial recordings for the Archive of American Folk songs. They went around the south of the United States with a mobile recording device, capturing many root songs, field hollers and ring shouts. This contributed in a great way to the blues because they managed to capture, catalogue and generate an archive of traditional and rural sounds.

The instrument's flexibility also captured the attention of classical music during this decade. Although some conservative musicians didn't approve of it and degraded it by considering it a toy, young Larry Adler managed to perform a minuet by Beethoven and later on had works written for the instrument by the composers like Ralph Vaughan Williams, Darius Milhaud, Malcolm Arnold and Arthur Benjamin.

1940's, Pre-war and Post-war Blues

During the war, the United States experienced a shortage of harmonicas mainly because materials like wood and metal that were used to make harmonicas were in short supply due to military demand. Another problem was that Germany and Japan were the primary manufacturers of harmonicas

<https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-the-blues-harmonica-music-essay/>

and of course where the Axis powers opposed to the United States and the allied forces.

Companies like Finn Harkon Magnus, developed a molded plastic harmonica that used plastic combs and far fewer pieces than traditional metal or wood harmonicas, which in a way made the harmonica more hygienic and far more efficient to mass produce. The sound from these harmonicas was inferior to the traditional ones but their inexpensiveness made them become a common toy among children.

Between the late 30's and the 40's, many African-Americans were starting to migrate to other states further north in hope to find more acceptable working conditions. Many musicians based in Memphis moved to big cities like Chicago and New York encouraged by their music and the idea of making a living from entertainment. It was the beginning of what would later be called the Chicago Electric Blues.

1950's Chess Records and the Chicago Blues

The 50's were the beginning of an era of high quality harmonica players. For instance Sonny Boy Williamson II, is one of the most important harmonica players of this era. The blues gradually began to use more electric amplification for the guitar, double bass, and vocals. Using a full blues band, as he usually played backed by a piano or a guitar, a bass and a drummer, Sonny Boy became a popular act in the South with his daily broadcasts when he was hired to play the King Biscuit Time show, advertising the King Biscuit brand of baking flour on the radio. Sonny Boy Williamson II also helped

popularize the cross-harp technique and his way of playing which was very expressive, very sensual and very technical.

Another key factor to this new era of blues harmonica was the Chess brothers. Leonard and Philip Chess were two Jewish immigrants from Poland who came to Chicago in 1928. They owned some bars on the south side of Chicago, their largest establishment being a nightclub called the Macomba.

The Macomba had live performances and many of those were blues entertainers that had migrated to Chicago from the Mississippi delta during the late '30s and '40s. The Chess brothers realized that these artists were not being properly represented or recorded, so they decided to start recording them themselves. They entered into a partnership with Charles and Evelyn Aron in Aristocrat Records who had just opened Aristocrat Records to record blues, jazz and rhythm & blues.

The most important artist they recorded was McKinley Morganfield, who went by the name of Muddy Waters. He had come from Mississippi to Chicago a few years before and had been working on his own until he met the Chess brothers. His first records were of himself accompanied by a guitar or a piano. His deep raw singing style reflected the spirit of the blues and was quite unique. The Chess brothers were able to build Muddy Waters into Chicago's leading blues singer through their connections with radio stations and local clubs.

In late 1949, Leonard and Phil Chess became the sole owners of Aristocrat Records and reorganized the company changing its name to Chess Records.

Historically, the music business had always been dominated by a few major record labels which were Columbia, Victor, Decca, Capitol, Mercury, and MGM. These major labels had paid some attention to the blues and other root genres but had always placed the artists on secondary labels that were focused toward the “race” audience. Chess Records grew in those early days of both rhythm and blues and along with other independent record companies like Atlantic, Aladdin, Specialty, Imperial, Modern and King were giving the public music that they could not get from the established major record companies.

Other young Mississippi bluesmen that were drawn to Chicago joined Muddy Water’s band. One of the most brilliant musicians to play with Muddy was Little Walter Jacobs, whose outstanding harmonica made the band even better.

The young harmonicist revolutionized the instrument by playing the harmonica through a microphone, typically a “Bullet” microphone sold for use by radio taxi dispatchers. He cupped in his hands around it with the harmonica, and tightened the air around the harp. It gave the instrument a “punchy”, mid-range, powerful, distorted sound that could be heard as loud as an electric guitar.

MUCH MORE ABOUT LITTE WALTER - His style, is amps and effects, his solo career.

In 1952, Chess formed a subsidiary label called Checker where Little Walter recorded some of his own work. His first release was an instrumental piece

called “ Juke” which topped the Rhythm and Blues charts for eight weeks. He was able to top the charts again in 1955 with the song “ My Babe”.

A young record producer in Memphis Tennessee named Sam Phillips was recording a 300 pound farm worker named Chester Burnette, who became known as the “ Howlin’ Wolf”. At the time, Phillips, who later established Sun Re