

BLUES HARP & MARINE BAND

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Foreword

Before I started to write this book, I researched everything I could find that had been written about the *Blues Harp* and *Marine Band* harmonicas. There were many different books, and they came in all shapes, colors, and sizes. Some which were written a long time ago were simply out of date and old-fashioned. Others, surprisingly, were downright incorrect. Then there were books that were so complicated it would take a college degree in music to understand them, much less learn from them!

In all fairness, however, some books were well written, and made an honest and sincere effort to teach. In my opinion, however, these did not go far enough, so that a good deal of useful and even necessary information was left out. For instance, none of the books I checked out answered the questions I am most often asked by harmonica players. Not one has a "How-to" chapter that *really* explained repair and maintenance of the harmonica. Each of the books used its own symbols for BLOW and DRAW. This became very confusing. Some books used circles around the numbers. Some used the letters B and D, and still others used the arrow system, and even then they didn't agree. One book used an UP ↑ arrow for BLOW, and another used a DOWN ↓ arrow for the *same thing*. The method, incidentally, which is now universally accepted is an UP ↑ arrow for BLOW and a DOWN ↓ arrow for DRAW.

It soon became apparent that a need existed for a book that would answer *all* of your questions-that would "tell it like it is," and that would teach you how to fix your harmonica when it needed fixing (assuming, of course, that it's not a basket case).

Most important of all, the book should *teach you to play*, or if you already know how, should make a much better player out of you. Hopefully, this book will fill that need.

Many thanks to the Hohner Harmonica Company for their co-operation in the preparation of this book.

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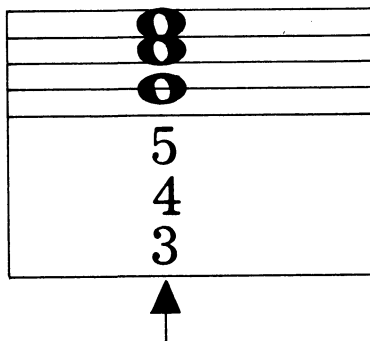
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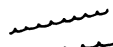
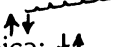
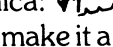
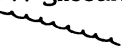
The music in this book is arranged specifically for the 10 hole diatonic *Marine Band* or *Blues Harp* type of harmonica in which sharps and flats *do not* naturally occur. However, the chapter on *Blues Harp* will describe how to produce your own half-steps by “bending” various notes.

It is not necessary to read music to play the melodies in this book. In addition to the musical notation, a simplified number system is provided. The number indicates the *exact* note to be played. If the arrow points up ↑ it means **BLOW** that note; should the arrow point down ↓ it means **DRAW**, or inhale. In many cases, lyrics are provided to help with the phrasing, and interpretation.

Since the 1-to-10 number system is universal for all *Marine Band* type instruments, harmonicas in *any* key can be used. It is suggested, however, that the key of **C** mouth organ be favored, since the accompaniment for guitar or piano will then be correct. If a harmonica in another key is used, the guitar or piano will have to transpose accordingly. Later on we’ll explain about playing in different keys.

Whenever several numbers appear together in the music, it indicates that all of the notes are to be played simultaneously to produce a chord. The top note, which is the highest number, will always be the melody note, and should predominate.



Glissando effects are very easily obtained on the harmonica, and are especially useful for flourishes and endings. They also sound professional! A glissando, or gliss, as musicians call it, is produced by starting on a low note, and rapidly sliding up to a high note. It is indicated by a wavy line: . If it starts at the top of the arrow, it means start the slide upwards from the note you have just played: . If it starts at the bottom of the arrow, it means to start your gliss from the bottom note of the harmonica: . If the gliss ends on a BLOW note, it will usually be a BLOW glissando. If ending on a DRAW note, make it a DRAW glissando. These effects can also start high, and end low: . The same rules apply. Experiment!

The chapter on Special Effects will explain many many more useful devices that will help your playing.

I would strongly suggest that you read the chapter on Questions and Answers before starting the actual playing.

Questions

Most Often Asked About the Harmonica

Q. What exactly is the *Blues Harp*?

A. The *Blues Harp* can be any 10 hole, single reed, diatonic scale harmonica of the *Marine Band* category. Actually there is a harmonica specifically named the *Blues Harp*. In reality, it's a glorified *Marine Band*. It does, however, have slightly thinner reeds which are also offset somewhat more than usual, so that the player doesn't have to blow as hard. Theoretically, these reeds should bend for half-steps with less effort.

Q. So why then is the *Blues Harp* considered *different* from the *Marine Band* type harmonicas?

A. It *isn't* different, but the *manner* in which it is played is. It involves an approach which is quite unlike that of traditional harmonica playing. (This will be explained later on in the book.)

Q. Does "breaking in" a harmonica mean it has to be babied, and treated very delicately at first?

A. No, it really does not. Some books have been written which insist that the harmonica be coddled when you first play it, and even for a while afterwards. There is no scientific basis for this. Of course, I don't expect you to abuse the instrument, but if you play it as you normally would, it should give good service right from the start.

The reasons for this are easily explained. For instance, the reeds are set at the factory to vibrate at pre-determined rates. Babying doesn't change that. What does happen, however, is that moisture from your breath condenses on the wooden comb as you play. This causes it to swell slightly. Saliva, too, contributes by seeping into tiny spaces and crevices, creating a gasket-like effect which virtually eliminates any air leaks. The net result is that the instrument then "feels" better: It is more responsive, blows much easier, and the notes "bend" with less effort. This is what *really* happens when a harmonica is said to be "broken in."

Q. Is it O.K. to boil my harmonica to clean it?



A. No! Not ever! Nothing is gained by boiling. This is purely a myth that got started years ago, and has been handed down from player to player. All it does is create problems. The wooden comb swells much more than is good for the instrument. Usually, the paint peels as well, which generally results in *clogging* the reeds, which is the problem you were trying to cure in the first place. Then, too, the reeds are not too happy about the alternate heating, and cooling. So what does it accomplish? Absolutely nothing good! When the harmonica dries out, as it eventually must, it generally warps, and sometimes it even splits, ruining the instrument.

As a matter of fact, the Hohner Company (largest manufacturer of harmonicas in the world) strongly discourages the practice of boiling or soaking, and they should know. After all, the more harmonicas you boil, the more you'll buy, so when they say "Don't boil!" you can be sure it's honest advice.

Q. If I can't boil the harmonica, how DO I keep it clean?

A. By using simple common sense. Never play while chewing or eating. Try not to blow saliva into the reeds. Always tap the harmonica firmly against the palm of your hand after playing, being sure to keep the holes facing downward. This will generally clear the instrument of excess saliva, or foreign particles. Be sure to wipe the harmonica clean after using it, keeping the holes facing down, so that no lint gets into the reeds. If the harmonica is not being played, keep it in its box, case, or even wrapped in plastic.

Q. What do I do if the harmonica gets "stuck" and tapping doesn't help?

A. Good question. This happens fairly often. Generally it's caused by a speck of dust, or foreign matter jamming the reed. In most cases, it can be cleared with no harm to the harmonica, as described in the chapter on repairs.

Q. Do I have to know how to read music in order to learn to play?

A. I suppose I've been asked this question more often than any other, and the answer is an unqualified No! As a matter of fact, many of the professionals I know couldn't read a note when they started. Then again, this book uses the universally accepted arrow and number method, which is a simple, yet direct way of teaching the harmonica. If you can read music, however, it's a big help! The more you know, the better. This book will explain the fundamentals of reading music, but let's face it, learning to read is best accomplished with the aid of a qualified teacher.

Q. Why, then, do you use musical notation in addition to the numbers and arrows.

A. The answer to this is a simple one. Suppose you're not sure how long to hold a given note? Suppose you're not even sure it's the right one? You can then ask anyone who reads music on any instrument, and he, or she, can clear it up for you as easily as you read this paragraph. In addition, if someone wants to play along with you, and they do read music, it's all there.

Q. How long should it take me to *really* learn to play?

A. Well, now you've stumped the answer man. Of course, I could say that you'll play like an angel in "three easy lessons" but that would be stretching the truth a bit. You *should* be able to recognize simple tunes very quickly, but if you want to develop real expertise, much will depend on how often you practice, how musical a person you are, and how fast you learn. A Heifetz you won't become overnight, that's for sure! But if you stick with it, you *will* learn. The more you practice, the faster the progress.

Q. Do I need a lot of wind?



A. No, you don't. The mouth organ (or harmonica, if you prefer) is the only instrument which is played by both *blowing* and *drawing*, so that you're automatically breathing as you play. There are occasions where you may encounter a whole series of **DRAW** notes, in which case you have to learn to let some of that air escape without interfering with your playing. Sometimes the opposite will occur with a continuation of all **BLOW** tones. This is a problem that continually faces brass and woodwind players. Luckily this does not happen very often on the harmonica.

Q. Must I have a good "ear"?

A. By a good "ear" I assume you mean the ability to tell one note from another - or to put it another way, being able to sing, hum, or whistle a tune. Actually, it is not necessary at all! As a matter of fact, I recently read an article about a deaf mute who had learned to play simple tunes on the harmonica. He had accomplished this entirely by rote!

Most mouth organ players I know, however, do have excellent "ears". My own feeling is that this ability developed as they learned to play, and then became much more acute the more they practiced.

Q. Can the harmonica be tuned?

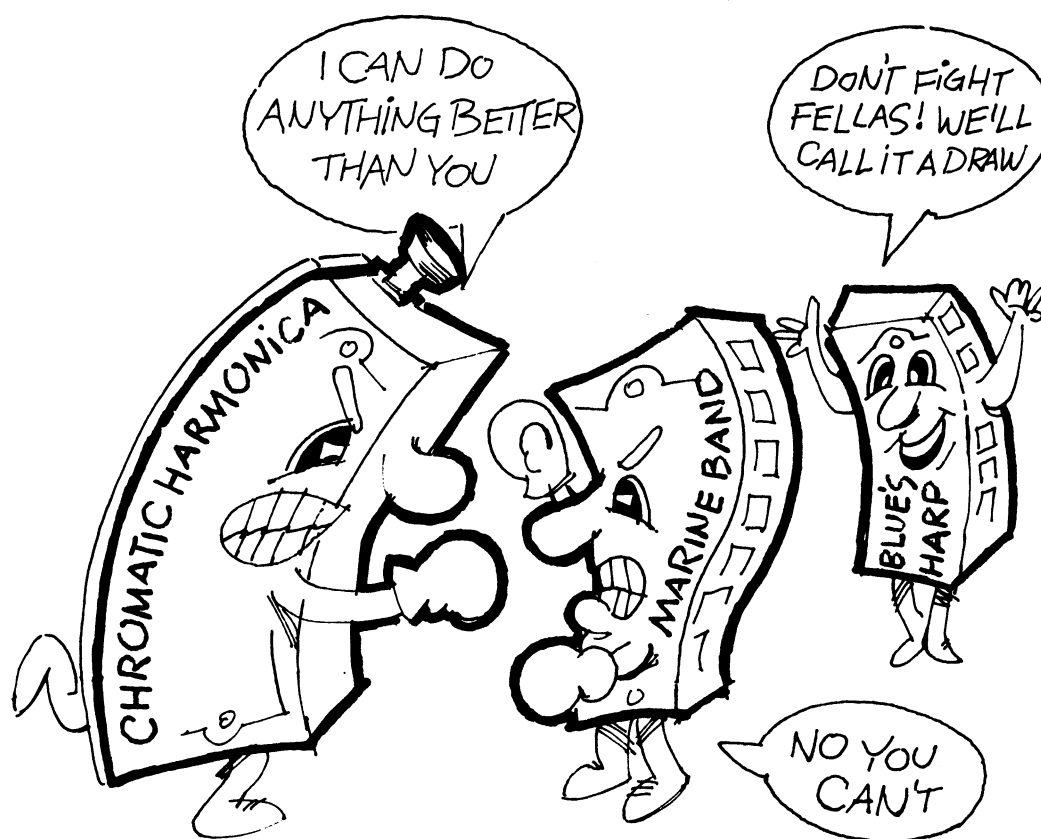
A. Theoretically, Yes. From a practical standpoint, No. Let me try to explain. We know the harmonicas have to be tuned at the factory, so that's the "Yes" part of the answer. It *can* be done, but, unfortunately, not in the same way one tunes a clarinet or trumpet.

The tuning of the harmonica reeds is a very elaborate and laborious process which requires a great deal of expertise. Special tools are required, and a set of jewelers files are a must. Then too, magnification of some sort is usually necessary in order to see what you're doing. So, for all practical purposes, the answer has to be No! Not really!

Sometimes, however, when a note drops slightly in pitch, a "touch up" is possible. This is explained fully in the chapter on repairs. It also describes exactly how reeds are tuned, should you want to try.

If you must experiment, it would be wise to use an old harmonica which has seen happier days, since at best, for the novice, tuning reeds is a calculated risk.

Q. Which is better, the *Chromatic Harmonica*, or the *Blues Harp*?



A. Well! Now you're asking about apples and oranges. You really can't compare the two. They're distinctly different. Even the sounds produced are not quite the same. For instance the *Harp* has a somewhat thinner tone than that of the chromatic, the sound of which is generally rounder and more full "Mellow" might best describe it. Then, too, notes on the *Blues Harp* are easier to bend and have a "funky" quality. The overall result is a sound that is quite different from that of the chromatic harmonica. (I find it no problem to tell them apart.)

The *Harp* is purely diatonic in nature, the scale of which consists of but seven notes, while its chromatic brother boasts twelve. Even if we consider adding the extra notes on the *Harp* which are obtained by bending, the instrument must still be limited to certain types of music. This should not be considered a handicap, however, since the diatonic harmonica lends itself admirably to the simple, honest, unpretentious kind of music which is so popular today. It also requires much less expertise, and is much easier to master and to play. The chromatic harmonica, on the other hand, is a complete musical instrument, capable of tone colors and effects not easily duplicated on any other single instrument, regardless of size. With it, a skilled player can play almost anything, and in any key. If he (or she) has really done his homework, he can read music at sight, as easily as you read this. The possibilities are only limited by the player himself. The instrument can just about do it all! So you see, it's not reasonable to compare the two. I consider them distinctly different instruments. A chapter in this book is devoted entirely to the chromatic harmonica. It explains in much more detail.

Q. What are harmonica reeds made of?

A. A special alloy of brass designed specifically for this purpose.

Q. Why don't they make the reeds of steel, or some of the new very strong plastics? Wouldn't they last longer?

A. In the case of plastics, the answer is an unqualified No. Many plastic reeds have been tried. None have held up nearly so well as what we now utilize. They fail in tone quality, as well as resiliency. As for steel, it's strong all right. Too strong! Those that have been tried have been much too hard to blow, and besides, *they rust!* So why not *stainless steel*? Not nearly flexible enough. Then, too, there are technical limitations pertaining to the size of the reeds, metalurgical considerations and so forth. So for the immediate future, brass seems to be our best bet.

When one considers the speed at which reeds vibrate, it's remarkable that they hold up as well as they do. For example, **A** above middle **C** vibrates at 440 CPS (cycles per second). As we ascend the scale, the speed of the vibrations increase in a direct mathematical ratio, so that the octave above **A** when sounded, oscillates at 880 times a second. If we go still further up the scale, say to the high **C** on the *Marine Band* harmonica, and activate that reed, it will be found to vibrate at the incredible rate of *2093 times per second!* Really amazing!

Q. Are harmonicas guaranteed?

A. Yes, but not against *usage*. They are warranted to be free from manufacturing defects or other noticeable imperfections at the time of purchase. This also applies to the tuning of the instrument. If it's out of tune when you get it, the factory should repair or replace the harmonica at no cost to the purchaser.

Q. How long should a harmonica last?

A. I couldn't possibly answer that. There are so many variables. Some harmonicas last for years. Others sometimes fail prematurely. If you play very hard, or very loud, and do a lot of bending of notes, don't expect your *Harp* to last as long as the mouth organ of a player who plays softly, and with sensitivity.

Q. Do the harmonica companies repair *used* harmonicas?

A. Hohner Company does this, but I don't know about other manufacturers. The usual procedure is to send the harmonica to the factory, enclosing a note to explain the problem. They will then advise what charges are involved, and await your decision as to whether you want it returned "as is" or repaired. Sometimes only a slight adjustment is necessary. In that case, the harp will be returned free of charge. Most of the time the difficulties are of a minor nature, and, if the user knows what to look for, easily corrected.

Q. Do manufacturers sell individual spare parts?

A. No, they do not.

Q. Must I learn to play straight harmonica before I can play *Blues Harp*?

A. Absolutely!!! You can't run before you can walk, and playing blues is merely a variation of the normal function of the harmonica. The playing *technique* is basically the same.

Q. In what keys are the *Marine Band* harmonicas made?

A. They are now available in *all* the keys. (**A, Bb, C, Db, D, Eb, E, F, F#, G, and Ab**)

Q. Why so many keys? Trumpets and clarinets don't come in twelve keys.

A. True. But because of the diatonic nature of the *Harp* (a 7-tone scale without chromatic intervals,) you can only play straight *Harp* in the key to which your harmonica is tuned. Therefore, if you want to play in the key of **Db**, you would normally require a **Db Harp**. The trumpet and clarinet are *chromatic* in nature (they provide all of the half-steps necessary), so you can play in *any* key on the instrument. This is also true for the *chromatic* harmonica. It, too, can play in any key.

Q. Are there any other harmonicas I should know about in the *Marine Band* category?

A. Yes. There are two brand new harmonicas, respectively called *Golden Melody* and *Special 20*. Both of these harps have a plastic body. This feature completely eliminates the problem of wood swelling. In addition, compression on both harps is excellent, which makes for easy bending. They are available in all the keys, and are priced slightly higher than the *Marine Band*. Players who play with a very wet mouth should certainly find these harps very helpful. Preliminary response both by amateurs and professionals, has been very enthusiastic.

Q. What about the Echo harmonicas? Since they have double holes and two reeds tuned to the same note, wouldn't they be better?

A. Again, we're talking about apples and oranges. These harmonicas are fine, and sound something like a French Accordion. They're also somewhat louder. They are not, however, suitable for playing blues, or for bending notes.

Q. Can you quote prices for some of the harmonicas you are writing about?

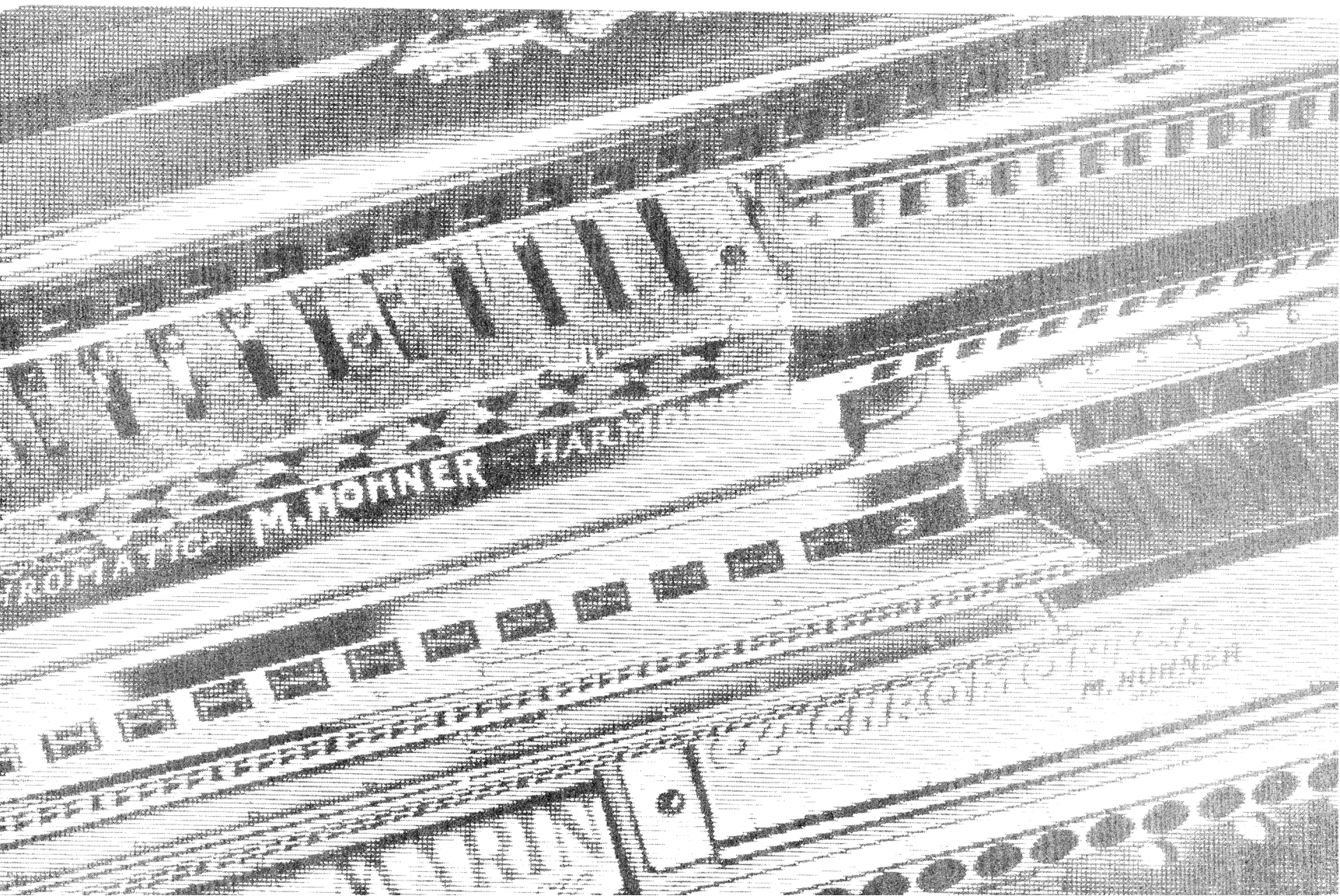
A. Not really! Because of recent world wide economic uncertainties, chances are, by the time you read this, any prices I might give would be out of date. Shop around! Many stores give discounts.

Q. Can I test a harmonica in the store *before* I buy it?

A. An excellent question! Especially since this has caused problems both for the storekeeper and the player. The answer is Yes, but *not by playing the harmonica!* Once you take a harmonica into your mouth to play it, you've bought it! Most stores, however have a special harmonica tester that works by bellows action. It can check out a harmonica quite efficiently. If by chance you should get a faulty harmonica, don't get mad at the guy who sold it to you. It's not his fault, and he *can't* change it for you. All he can do is send it back to the factory, and you'd be better off doing that yourself. It's a lot faster. Just describe the problem. The factory wants you to be happy, and they'll bend over backward to keep you that way. Don't try sending them a beat up old harp, and claim you just bought it. They're experts! Incidentally, the chances of getting a *bad* harmonica are very slight, especially if you use the bellows tester.

Q. Is there any difference between the terms *Harp*, *Mouth Organ*, and *Harmonica*?

A. No. They all mean exactly the same thing.



Learning to Play the Harmonica

Introduction

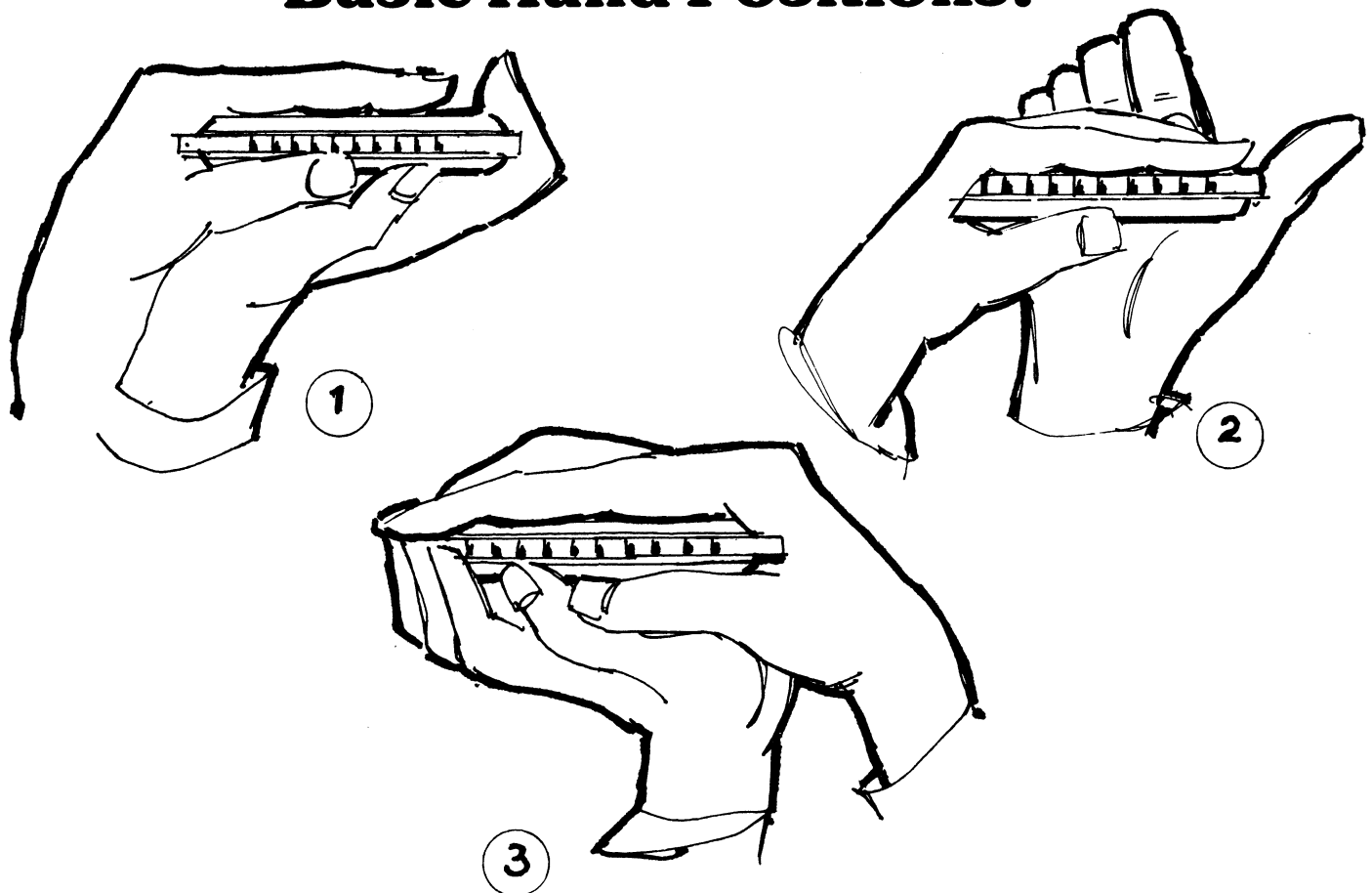
A few pertinent comments before we actually start to learn: Your harmonica, although tiny, is very cleverly constructed. The notes are already in tune, and arranged in such a way that just blowing into the *Harp* in any position results in a perfectly fine chord. It is literally impossible to create a discord. If you've ever tried to play a trumpet, clarinet, or violin you can appreciate what this means. No long period of time is required to learn to "make" the notes. They are already on the mouth organ, just waiting to be sounded. Play them in proper sequence, and you have music!

Your harmonica has one other important advantage: It is really portable. You can enjoy it wherever you go, and when you consider the fun you'll get from it, you can appreciate that any time you may spend learning to play will more than pay off in pleasure derived.

Holding The Harmonica

The first thing to learn about the harmonica is the correct way to hold it. The low notes should *always* be on your left as you play. (You can check this simply by blowing into the harmonica.) The basic position will never vary, although how the harmonica is held in your hands depends on what is most comfortable and natural for you. No two players hold their *Harps* exactly alike. Generally though, the harmonica is held in the left hand, while the right hand takes care of the vibrato, tremolo, or even cupping effects. The accompanying sketches suggest several possibilities. Try them! Then pick the one that suits you best.

Basic Hand Positions:



Holding your *Harp*, easily and naturally, blow and draw on it lightly. You will hear several pleasant sounding chords. You might keep this up for a few moments just to get the "feel" of the harmonica. However, sounding a full chord (several notes at the same time) is *not* your goal at this point. Instead, the most important first step is learning to play but one note at a time. This sometimes gives beginners a bit of trouble, but once this step is mastered, everything else falls into place much more easily.

Bending Notes

The foregoing example sounds perfectly OK in the 1st position (Straight Harp), but you'll notice that we're pretty well limited to single notes above hole 4 except for the chord glissando at the end, which is nothing more than window dressing. The reason for this is that from hole 4 upwards, we have a complete scale, while in the lower register, the **F** and the **A** are *missing*, and since we needed those notes, we were forced to stay in the upper register. Later on, you'll learn how to "make" those missing notes, and more, by bending. Another reason why "Straight Harp" doesn't quite make it for Blues is that some of the notes we most want to bend happen to be BLOW notes, and they're very very difficult to bend, especially below hole 7. On the other hand, most DRAW tones are relatively easy. Then, too, in Cross Harp (2nd position) when you draw a mouthful of notes, (holes 2, 3, 4 and 5) you automatically hear the Tonic chord with an added 7th, which happens to be a very convenient, built in, Blues sound, and quite impossible in the first position. So, now that you know some of the reasons why, lets work on Cross Harp, 2nd position.

(There seems to be some confusion among players, and books as well, about which position is 1st, and which is 2nd. Some books refer to 2nd position as 1st position Cross Harp. Logically, 1st position is key of **C** on a **C** harmonica, which is, of course, Straight Harp, as we've explained. Anyway, it doesn't matter what you call it, as long as you know how to play it!)

Since we're going to start "bending" notes in the next example, I may as well explain exactly what it all means, and how it's done.

A note is bent by changing your mouth position in such a way that you *lower* the natural pitch of a note. Lower it slightly and you can produce a "wah-wah" effect. Pulsate it that way, and you have a vibrato. Lower it more, and you'll actually "make" a note that doesn't really exist on the instrument. Some notes can be bent as much as 3 half steps *lower* than normal, while others can't be bent at all, or at least not without great difficulty.

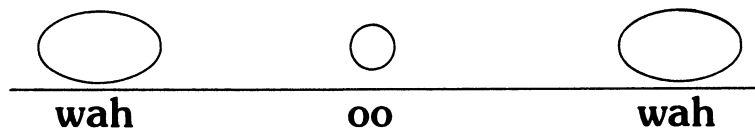
Notes can only be *lowered* from their natural pitch. They *cannot be raised*. You can make a note seem to bend up however, by starting it in the bent position, and letting it come up to its natural pitch.

So much for explanations. Now how do you do it? Easy! A good note to start on is DRAW 4. Use the "lipping" position, since it's easier than tongue blocking for most people. As you DRAW, silently form the word "wah-oo-wah". This produces the simple "wah-wah" effect, and is actually the basis for all bending. Now let's break it down!

As you say "wah", your hand should be in an *open* position. When you say "oo", you *cup* your hands, then open them again for the last "wah". This all takes place as fast as you can say wahoowah! Think of it as this way:

wah	oo	wah
<hr style="width: 100%;"/>	<hr style="width: 100%;"/>	<hr style="width: 100%;"/>
open	cupped	open

When you form the oo sound, your lips should jut forward a little. At the same time, your cheeks should tighten up, so that the air chamber in your mouth is reduced, and the opening between your lips should become much smaller, (something like sucking on a straw when something suddenly clogs it). If I were to draw an exaggerated diagram of the lip opening, it might look like this:



It is *not* necessary to force the breath, or to draw very hard, since this can be accomplished softly, as well as with more volume.

That's really all there is to it, but it will require patience, so don't become discouraged. You *will* succeed!