

How to play the harmonica



<http://www.harmonicacountry.com/>



by Jack Earl

## 1. diatonic or chromatic harmonica?

The diatonic scale harmonicas are for us musical dummies. We don't have to know anything. But we do have to own a separate harmonica for each major key in which we plan to play. We could own as many as 12 harmonicas though I think you will find that 5 or 6 cover just about every song you will ever play. You can easily get by with just a C and a G harmonica if you are not going to be playing with a band.

Think of it like this. If you are looking at a piano keyboard there are both white and black keys. If you play a song in the key of C you will only play on the white keys. However if you play in the key of F you will have to play one black key. A diatonic scale harmonica in the key of F will have this black key already programmed in. You will not have to change the tab numbers to play in the key of F if you are using an F diatonic harmonica.

Musicians who play other instruments require many months, often years, of practice to learn how to transpose a song from one key to another. Not so with the diatonic harmonica players. They just need to pull the proper harmonica out of their pocket.

The chromatic scale harmonicas require a little more knowledge about music theory. If you have ever played another music instrument before, you might find that the chromatic scale harmonica is for you. Even though they are more expensive, you will not need a separate harmonica for each key. There are also many songs that cannot be played on the diatonic scale harmonica, simply because there are missing notes on the diatonic harmonicas. You will be able to play any song on the chromatic scale harmonicas.

## Campfire Songs



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## 2. Harmonica Keys

The lowest key harmonica you can get is in the key of G. The highest key is F (which is extremely shrill). A few manufactures have begun issuing the key of F in a lower octave which is a huge improvement. These are usually called Low F.

People email me all the time asking in which key a song should be played. It is not really that important. You can play any song in any key. I prefer to play in a lower key as it produces a much more mellow sound. If the tab numbers are up in the 7 - 10 holes, then I will use a G or A harmonica. If I use a C harmonica on these songs the sound is quite shrill and irritating. If the tab numbers are down around 2 - 5 then it will sound just fine on a C harmonica.

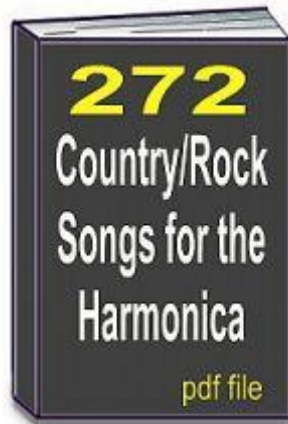
When I throw a harmonica in my pocket, which I always do, it is usually the key of A. Almost any song will sound pleasant when played on an A harmonica.

The only time it is important that you have a particular key harmonica is when you are playing with other musicians. I played along with some guitar players who played everything in D. I guess that was the only key they knew. So I only needed to bring my D harmonica. Most good musicians can play songs in any key so you will need an assortment of harmonicas. You also need to know ahead of time in what key they are playing. If they change keys in the middle of a song you will have to have a second harmonica available in your pocket so you can make the change in the midst of the song.

It is important that you keep in mind that you can play any song, regardless of the key in which it was originally composed, on any diatonic scale harmonica. If the only harmonica you have is in the key of A, then every song you play will be in the key of A. And if you pick up a harmonica in the key of D and play the same numbering system, you are playing the song in the key of D. You do

not have to relearn a song when you change over to another harmonica.

## Country/Rock Songs



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### 3. Harmonica Tabs

If you are using these lessons in a class, then all the students should use the same keyed harmonica. I usually have them use the key of C because most of the cheaper harmonicas only come in the key of C. (You have my permission to make copies of these lessons to distribute to a class or your friends.)

#### My Simple Harmonica Notation System

The numbering system is really quite simple. Over each word or syllable in the lyrics to a song is a number. If that number is a 4 then you blow into hole number 4. However, if it is a -4 then you draw into hole number 4.

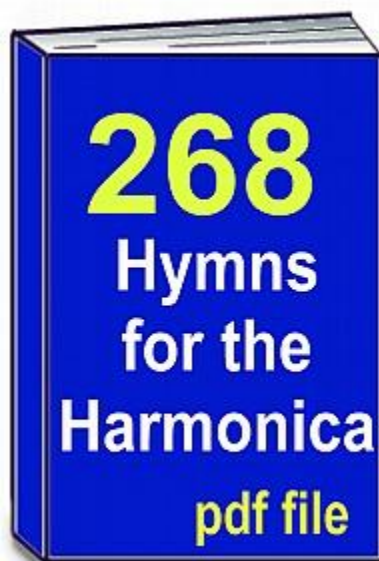
If playing a chromatic harmonica there may be a < sign. This means that you push the lever in on the right side of the instrument to produce a sharp note. This is what enables the chromatic scale harmonica to be able to play any song, regardless of the number of sharps and flats in the song.

#### So What If You Don't Know The Songs?

Only attempt to play familiar tunes. If you can hum it or whistle it, then you can learn to play it fairly soon. In fact, think of yourself as singing the song through your instrument and the reeds of your instrument as a substitute for your vocal chords.

You will soon discover that you do not need the harp tab numbers. Your brain will have imprinted upon itself where the holes are and whether you blow or draw. It will be much like whistling. You will just know automatically where the next note is on your harmonica.

## Hymns



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## 4. Let's begin.

Each lesson will also include a couple practice songs. (the downloaded version of these lessons includes four practice songs) Learn each song before moving on to the next lesson.

Play each line at least five times. Start slowly and increase speed with each repetition. Blow into the hole indicated unless there is a minus sign (-) in front of the number, in which case you draw through that hole.

It is not absolutely necessary that you play clear single notes. When trying to get a blow #4, it is OK if you include holes #3 and #5. Eventually you will want to learn to play single notes. Work at it and it will come to you naturally.

Make sure you practice every day. Your practice does not need to be for long periods of time. It is quite acceptable to practice for just five to ten minutes. In fact, it is possible to practice for too long. It may be counter productive. It is more important to practice every day, then it is to practice for a complete hour once a week.

### **Inserting the harmonica inside your mouth**

Wet those lips and insert the harmonica well inside your mouth. A mistake many beginners make is to try to play their instrument out on the front of their lips. It is almost impossible to get clear single notes and get that bluesy sound. Wrap those lips around the hole you are trying to play. Pucker up as if drawing through a straw. Keep those lips well moistened so your instrument slides easily back and forth.

As you move your harmonica from hole to hole, move the instrument inside your mouth. Do not turn your head to move up to another hole.

Concentrate on quality of tone rather than speed in

changing from note to note. The harmonica sounds great when playing slow emotional tunes. Try to make your music express emotion.

## **5. Sing through your harmonica.**

Most beginners puff from their lungs for each syllable or number. It is much better to use your tongue to break up the syllables and produce rhythm. Try whispering "Taa-Taa-Taa-Taa" through your harmonica into any hole. Just use one gentle steady blow but break up its rhythm with a "taa" sound. Now vary your rhythm pattern much like the old Morse Code. Whisper, "Daa-dit-daa-dit-daa-dit".

Pronounce the words to a song while playing it on your harmonica. Think of it as "singing" through your instrument. It will improve your playing tremendously.

## 40 Stephen Foster Songs



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## 6. Harmonica Tone

How come the professionals sound so much better than you? I am not speaking about technique. But their sound is much different from your harmonica. Is it because they are using a more expensive harmonica?

Most professionals have help. They use special microphones and amplifiers that actually change the natural sound of the harmonica. But in all fairness I should tell you that what you hear from your harmonica is not the same sound that someone standing directly in front of you is hearing. You are hearing it partially from the inside, through your throat, nasal passages and up into your ear canal. For a more realistic sound listen, play your harmonica inside a shower stall (without the water running). Then you will hear more of what others hear as the sound bounces off the walls.

Also everyone has a slightly different harmonica voice. The tone is partially produced inside our mouth. Children, with smaller mouths, will sound different than adults. Men will sound different than women. Big men will sound different than small men. But you can have some control on your tone. In general a gentle blow will have a more pleasant tone than a blast of air. Blowing from deeper in your throat will sound different than puffing from your cheeks. As you can change how your voice sounds, you can also change how your harmonica sounds.

Experiment around a little. See if you can produce noticeably different tones by the way you shape your mouth, jaw and tongue. The experienced harmonica player will have developed his ear to the point that he can tell the difference.

## 12 Bluegrass Songs



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## 7. Using Your Hands

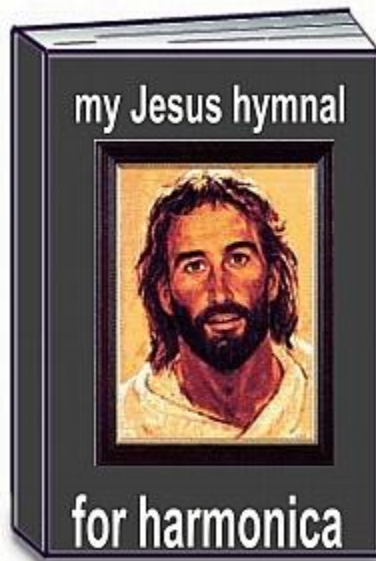
You can use your hands to add effects to your music. Cup your harmonica in your hands in such a way that you can enclose it completely to muffle its sound. Then by opening and closing your hands with each syllable you will be producing a "waa-waa" sound. By rapidly opening and closing your hands you will be producing a tremolo effect. By opening your hands wide and forming a megaphone you will increase the volume.

The effect is much more evident to those standing in front of you. You are behind your harmonica and it is not as pronounced. Try standing in a shower where you can hear the sound waves bouncing off the walls.

### **Do you have to play clear single notes?**

No, not really. At first it is a little difficult to get just one note. Most beginners will play holes 3, 4 and 5 when trying to play hole #4. And that is OK. Many old timers play the harmonica just like that. When you do, you are playing chords. And often it sounds rather nice. However, eventually you will want to be able to get clear single notes. This will come in time. Just keep trying.

## Jesus Hymns



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## 8. Controlling your breathing

How often do you find yourself running out of breathing room in your lungs in the middle of an important note? How do you plan it so that this doesn't happen? And how do you smoothly change from a blow to a draw note? And how do you keep from getting winded as if you had just jogged a mile?

Breathing is an important factor in your harmonica playing. I wish I could give you some steps to improving your breath control. There isn't too much that I can say, other than it comes naturally. Once you have played a song 25 times then you know when you have to fill your lungs. But I can think of a couple helpful tips:

1. Blow gently. It can be downright exhausting to try to increase your volume by increasing the flow of air passing through your instrument. And it can wear your harmonica out faster also. If playing with a band or loud singing it is tempting to compete with the others. Forget it! The harmonica is not a trumpet. It is a soft-toned instrument that sounds best if played the way it was intended.

2. Play single notes. If you are playing 3 holes at a time you are playing chords and you are also using 3 times as much air. This could be why you have to take a breather after playing a few songs.

Improved breathing comes naturally in time.

## **Gospel Blues**



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<http://www.harmonicacountry.com/GospelBlues/GospelBlues.html>

## 9. Bending notes

A bent note is one that is not true to the note the harmonica was designed to play. A draw 4 on a C harmonica should be a true D note. A bent draw 4 is actually playing it in such a way as to produce a note that is just 1/2 step down or a D flat.

This is how some harmonica players are able to play songs that have sharps and flats that are out of their natural position in their keys. It is how they use a diatonic scale harmonica to play notes that are not programmed into their harmonica.

If you are learning to play the chromatic scale harmonica it is recommended that you do not try to bend notes. It will cause the reeds on your expensive chromatic harmonica to wear out much too soon and these are not as easy on the pocket to replace.

It is also how you produce a wavy or bluesy sound on your harmonica. By bending a long drawn out note while playing it you can produce a rather nice sounding emotional expression to your music. Many of the spirituals included in these lessons sound really good if you bend those long drawn out notes. It gives the song a kind of mournful sound.

### How To Bend A Note

1. Only attempt to bend draw notes, not blow notes. For starters stay down on the low end of your harmonica. It is easier to bend a draw 3 than it is to bend a draw 8.
2. Make sure your lips are well moistened and the harmonica is placed well inside your lips.
3. Make sure you have an airtight connection around a single hole.
4. While drawing air through the hole (a good long draw at that) change the air pressure passing through your

harmonica.

a. An easy way to naturally increase the air flow is to drop your jaw while drawing air maintaining an airtight fit around the single hole.

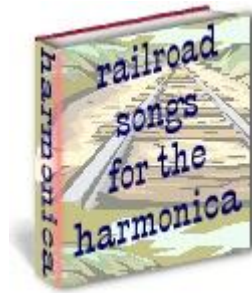
b. I suggest to my students in class that they say the word "Yawwww" while drawing air in, this naturally causes them to drop their jaw.

5. Practice this for a while until you notice the pitch of your tone lowering. Then see if you can cause the pitch to wave up and down.

6. Once you have learned to bend a note comfortably you are then ready to begin including it in your music whenever you feel it is appropriate.

I hope these suggestions help.

## Rail Road Songs



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## 10. Repairing Your Harmonica

Far too many harmonicas end up in the bottom of desk drawers waiting for some magic repairman to come to their aid. Their owners get frustrated with one hole that just doesn't sound right. Is there any hope?

That weird sound coming from that mysterious hole may be the result of any one of a number of things.

1. It may just be one of those difficult holes to produce a clear sweet tone. Actually, every hole requires a little different amount of air to make it sound right. And most reeds are pretty good at making a sound that comes pretty close to what it is supposed to be. But almost always there is one hole that just seems to sound off no matter what we do. Even if we go out and buy a brand new harmonica that same hole seems to give us problems. The problem may not be in the harmonica. It is just that it requires a more precise amount of air pressure than the other holes. Experiment with varying amounts of air pressure to see if that does not make a difference.

2. It may be that your harmonica needs to warm up, this is especially so if it is a new instrument. It may be a little stiff and if it is cold it just makes it even more stiff. If you carry your instrument in your pocket, close to your body, then it will warm up naturally. But if it has been in a purse or cigar box, then you may want to hold it in your closed hand for a few minutes.

3. It may be that a hair or thread has found its way inside your harmonica and is the cause of that weird sound. This happens to me all the time as I carry a harmonica in my shirt pocket everywhere I go. I also carry my comb in the same pocket.

4. Or, it may be that a small drop of moisture that was allowed to remain inside your harmonica actually formed a tiny bit of rust. To knock the moisture out of your

harmonica, pound it in the palm of your hand from time to time to shake any moisture out of it. You should do this between every song if you are playing before a group. Moisture has a way of building up inside your instrument quite often. If you don't knock it out then you may get these weird notes right in the middle of your song. You often see harp players on stage pound their instruments in the palm of their hands. If the crowd sees you doing the same then they will think you must be experienced and know what you are doing.

If your harmonica was constructed with bolts and nuts you can easily do your own repairs. You simply, and carefully, remove the plates to your harmonica and break free stuck reed. Just don't use any pliers or screwdrivers on the reeds. They can easily get bent permanently and then you may as well chuck your harmonica in the trash.

## Hank Williams Songs



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## 11. The 10 hour rule

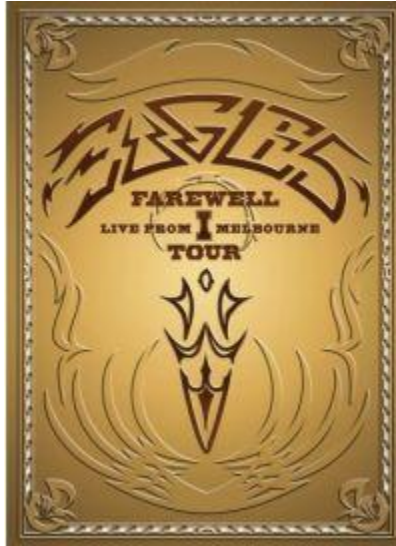
Some have suggested that you can learn just about everything you have to know to play melodies on a harmonica in about 10 hours of actual playing time. After the 10 hours your skills advance very slowly. Possibly your tone and expression improve a little. And your breathing rhythm also gets much better. But for all practical purposes others around you can't tell much difference between you and a more experienced player.

I have heard the statement, "The only difference between the harmonica player who has played 10 hours and the one who has played 10 years is the number of songs they have memorized."

You have probably passed the 10 hour mark by now. If so, consider yourself as having arrived at the master level of skill. From here on out it is just a matter of adding to the number of songs you have memorized.

That joy that you experienced when you first heard yourself playing recognizable songs may soon grow weak. Learning new songs will renew the joy. Also, there are advanced skills that you can work on. You can begin to learn to play in the crosssharp position. Or you may want to move up to the chromatic harmonica.

## Eagles Songs



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<http://www.harmonicacountry.com/Eagles/pdf.html>

## 12. Performing In Public

Sooner or later somebody is going to discover that you can play the harmonica. Eventually you will be asked to play your instrument in public. While you might be reluctant to do so, I encourage you to do it. You might just be encouraging somebody in the audience to learn to play the harmonica. They may think to themselves, "If he can learn to play the harmonica, then surely I can."

I have the following suggestions when you perform in public:

1. Practice a song at least fifty times before performing it in public. This will not only improve your playing, but it will also give you confidence, something you will need.
2. Choose a song with which your audience is familiar.
3. Don't try to show off your skill. Instead, seek to communicate the message of your song. You want the audience to be thinking of the words to your song, not thinking about your awesome musical talent.
4. Use a microphone if playing in front of a large audience. Put the harmonica as close to the mike as you can, even one inch away is not too close. Play gently and let the mike amplify your volume.
5. If you goof up, just continue on playing as if nothing was wrong. They will most likely think you are improvising.
6. If at all possible, find a guitar player who will accompany you. The harmonica sounds 300% better when accompanied by a guitar or banjo. It also reduces some of the pressure on you. It is much easier playing in public as part of a band than as a solo.
7. Only play one or two songs. It is better to leave them wishing you would play more, than wishing you would quit.

## Beatles Songs



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## 13. Confidence

There is no greater skill that you can add to your harmonica playing than that of CONFIDENCE. Once you have acquired the security of confidence, your audience will notice a huge improvement in your music.

### **How to gain confidence?**

You can't fake confidence. You have to earn it. Confidence only comes with playing a song over and over. I have a rule of thumb that I will not play a song in public until I have played it at least twenty five times. And usually I play a song at least fifty times. This is not unreasonable. Most professional musicians have played a song hundreds of times before performing in a concert.

Confidence adds an air of professionalism to your performance. What the audience sees is merely the tip of the iceberg. Before the concert the song has gone through hours and hours of practice.

It is better to know just a few songs really good, than it is to know hundreds of songs on just a surface level.

It is also a good idea to memorize the lyrics. This will insure that you don't miss a portion of the song while the singers are performing. If you suddenly suspect that you have lost your place your confidence will have plummeted.

Only play up to the level that you feel comfortable. You may be trying out some new technique or riff. Do not include your cutting edge skills in your public performance until you feel comfortable with them. Trying to show off your new skills will definitely decrease your confidence.

## **Gospel Harmonica**



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<http://www.jackearl.net/gospelharmonica/index.html>