



Chromatic for Diatonic Players, Part 2

By Winslow Yerxa, Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine

Tongue Blocking – Why?

In the first article we looked at breathing and learning our way around the notes with simple tunes. What we didn't discuss was embouchure – what you do with your mouth to apply your breath to the harmonica. Tongue blocking is one of several ways to do this, and it offers several unique advantages.

It can be used to play not only single notes:



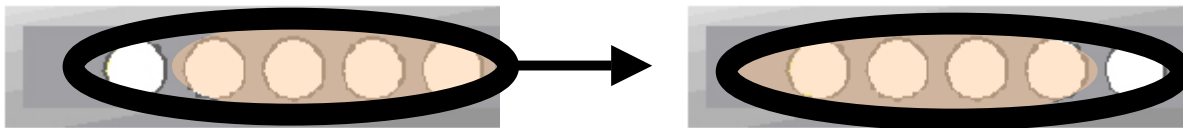
But chords:



Split intervals:

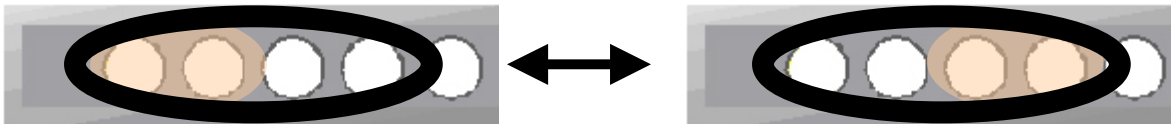


And wide leaps between notes that can be executed rapidly, smoothly, and with accuracy:

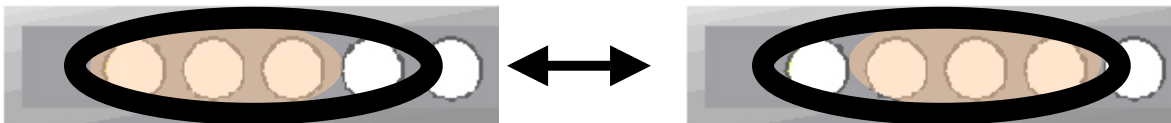


It can also be used to create several textural effects involving rapid alternations between two states:

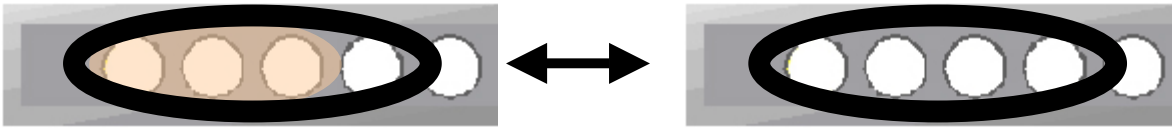
The rake (raking the tongue across several holes):



The shimmer (rapid alternation between notes at right and left corners):



The hammer (a rapid alternation between a single note and a chord):



In a future installment we'll go into these and even more sophisticated tongue blocking techniques more deeply. For now, we'll look at the basics.

Who

Tongue blocking is essential to blues chromatic and is widely used in classical harmonica as well. Modern jazz chromatic players for some reason haven't picked up on it – too bad; they're missing out. Listen to players like Little Walter, George Smith, William Clarke, Rod Piazza, Mark Hummel, and Gary Smith, among others, for blues players who make exemplary use of tongue blocking on the chromatic. Great classical players include Larry Adler, Robert Bonfiglio, Tommy Reilly, and Douglas Tate. Chromatic players in a more popular vein from years back include Jerry Murad (the Harmonicats), George Fields (The Moon River theme), Leo Diamond, and the incomparable Charles Leighton, whose repertoire spans several styles and whose gorgeous sound is one of the better-kept secrets of aficionados.

What

The first thing to understand about tongue blocking is that it involves getting the harmonica deep in your mouth. If the front of the harmonica hasn't penetrated past the front teeth, you need to open your mouth wider and get the whole front line of the harp pushed further back in the mouth. This has two effects:

- It automatically gives you a fuller sound than if you keep the harp waiting out in the cold on the doorstep. You want toasty tone? Bring it in and let it sit down by the fireplace.
- It means that your breath now has access to several holes – you're going to need your tongue to block out any unwanted notes.

Now at this point you may be asking, "Why do I need to open up several holes then block most of them out just to get a single note?" Well, if all you'll ever want in life is single notes that are located close together and the occasional chord, you don't need it. But the harmonica has a vast array of sounds and musical possibilities that go far beyond single notes and simple chords, and tongue blocking is the way to open them up. It's like going from playing piano with one finger to playing with two hands.

The Basic How

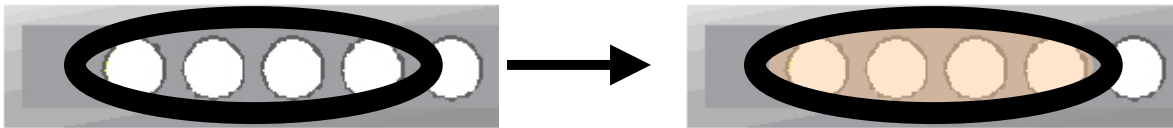
So you've got the harp deep between your jaws. Your lips are forming an airtight seal and directing all the air to the reeds. Now, before you put your tongue on the harp to block out holes, you need to know something: Don't put the tip of your tongue on the harp. Instead, touch the tip of your tongue to your lower front teeth and gently push the tongue forward so that the top of your tongue contacts the harmonica, like this:



Why do this? The tip of your tongue can too easily poke into the holes. When you go to move the harp to the left or right, the tongue will resist and either the harp will bounce back or your tongue will be abraded by the mouthpiece. The broad surface of the top of the tongue will stay outside the holes and allow the harp to glide smoothly from side to side.

First Stage: Total Block

Now, your objective is to make the tongue cover up holes that are now open to your breath. To make it easy, let's try covering ALL the holes so you either hear a chord or nothing at all. Starting with a chord, press your tongue forward so that the tip is down and the top contacts the front of the harp.

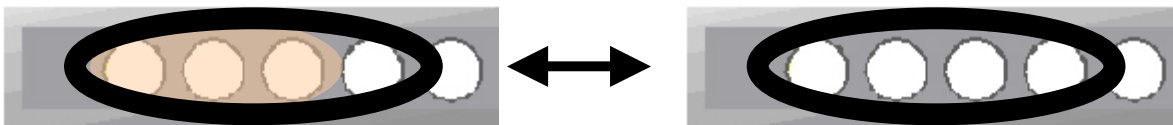


If you can't make the sound stop completely, either press your tongue wider on the harp, or narrow your mouth opening so that it matches the widest spread you can create with your tongue. As this may be new to both your tongue and the rest of your mouth, it may take a little while to figure out a medium that may not be totally comfortable but is at least achievable.

Try alternating between a total block and an open chord until this feels somewhat comfortable.

Second Stage: Single Note

Now that you have a feel for using the tongue to block all the holes, try alternating a single note with a chord.



To isolate a single note you put your tongue down on the mouthpiece. When you do, leave a little space open between the right edge of your tongue and the right corner of your mouth. You might try looking at your mouth in a mirror without a harmonica at first, just to see the idea. When you pick up the harp, first play a chord with the tongue off the instrument, then apply your tongue and try to leave an open air path in the right corner.

Big Hole Means Big Sound

This may take some effort, but the bigger you can make the open path for the single hole, the bigger sound you will get. You still want the tongue and lips to form an airtight seal around the hole and you still want to isolate a single hole.

Work on a single hole of the harmonica, alternating that single hole with a chord. Work on getting a clean single note on both blow and draw notes. Once you get familiar with the feel of this, try doing it on another hole.

Chord Vamping

When you alternate between a chord and a tongue-blocked single note, you're doing what the harmonica was designed for – rhythmic chording with a melody. The invention of the chromatic harmonica was part of a move away from chording in the early 20th century, but it is still a rich resource when used effectively. Blues chromatic makes extensive use of tongue-blocked chording devices.

Third Stage: Progress by Moving Sideways

Once you get comfortable alternating a single note with a chord, try playing single notes without chords. At first, just breathe in and out in one hole and concentrate on getting a clear single note. Make the sound big and rich while breathing easy.

Moving along the mouth piece to the left and right is an essential component in getting around on the harmonica. With a single note tongue block, try sliding the harp freely to the left and right in your mouth. It should glide easily without any drag or resistance. If the harp will move freely, try gliding one octave (five holes) while breathing in or out. This is a medium distance and it's easy to hear when you reach the target. Holes 3 and 7 might be a good place to start, or Holes 6 and 10. Begin and end with clear notes, and glide smoothly in between.

Fourth Stage: Single Note Melodies

Once you can change breath and move sideways while playing single notes, it's time to combine them with simple, familiar melodies. Melodies you can easily pick out in C might include Frère Jacques, Mary Had a Little Lamb, Three Blind Mice, and similar tunes. The tunes you learned in the last installment are all good candidates.

Once you gain confidence playing simple melodies with a tongue block, start on more challenging material. If the backing chords of a tune match the notes that can be played in a chord along with the melody note, then try lifting your tongue and putting it back down rhythmically to accompany the melody.

The Ambidextrous Tongue

As you pick up facility playing single note melodies from the right side of your mouth, why not learn them on the left side as well? One of the biggest advantages of tongue blocked melody playing is the ability to alternate between left and right and to combine them. Learning to play from left side does not come automatically with learning to play on the right. It's a separate skill, but the two will reinforce each other as you learn.

Next time

In future installments we'll look at more tongue blocking techniques. In the next installment we'll start looking at using the slide button.

Notation Key

Please visit <http://www.harmonicassessions.com/feb05/ChromaticTab.pdf> for a notation key.