



Chromatic for Diatonic Players

Multiple Embouchure, Part 3: The Moving Fixed Block

By Winslow Yerxa, Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine

April 2007

Wouldn't it be great to move freely around the harp, leaping to distant holes easily and cleanly, then dashing off leaping in another direction? That's the goal of this series on multiple embouchure, and the technique we're using is switching between the left and right sides of the mouth.

This freedom to leaping smoothly and quickly has three elements:

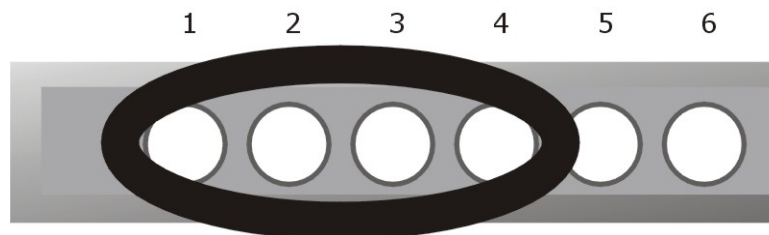
- Embouchure placement
- Embouchure width or compass
- Motion inside the embouchure (switching between left and right sides)

In this installment, the embouchure compass will remain fixed at four holes. So that brings us down to two elements: Shifting the fixed block to a new location and then playing notes out of the right and left sides of the embouchure once we get there.

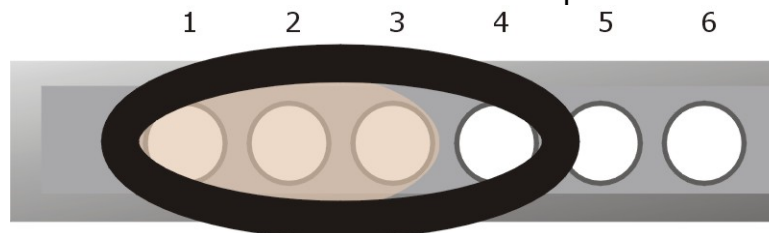
Even this simple set of parameters has a huge number of possibilities and we'll cover only a small portion of them in this installment.

Reviewing Basics

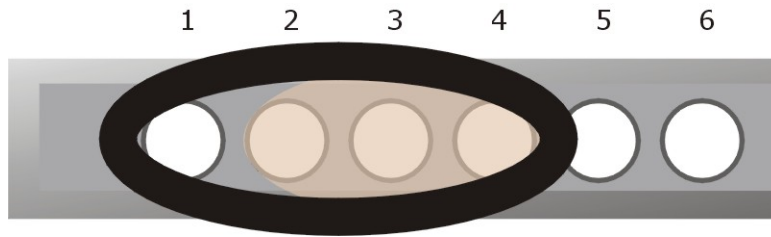
First, let's review the basics of switching. Let's say your mouth encompasses a range of five holes:



The tongue is applied so that all the holes are covered except one:



Here the hole in the right corner of the mouth is open. You can feel the left edge of your tongue touching the left corner of your mouth. Now, slide the tongue to the right so that the right edge of your tongue touches the right corner of your mouth and the left side is open:

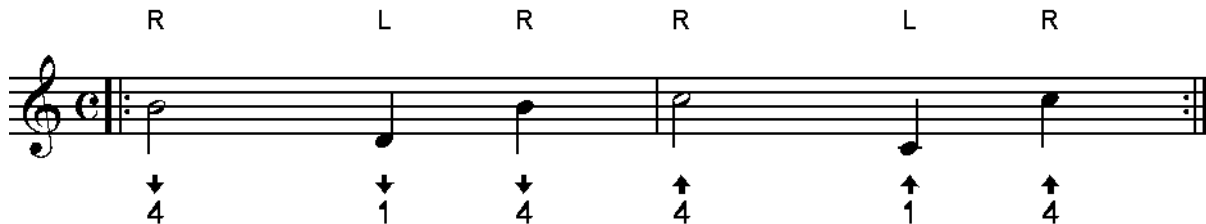


Note that the size of your mouth opening never changes. The size of your tongue block doesn't change, either. It just moves slightly to the left or right.

Helpful hint: Don't poke the tip of your tongue into the harmonica holes. To ensure that it glides on the mouthpiece and not in it, curl the tip of the tongue downward slightly.

Switching with a Breath Change

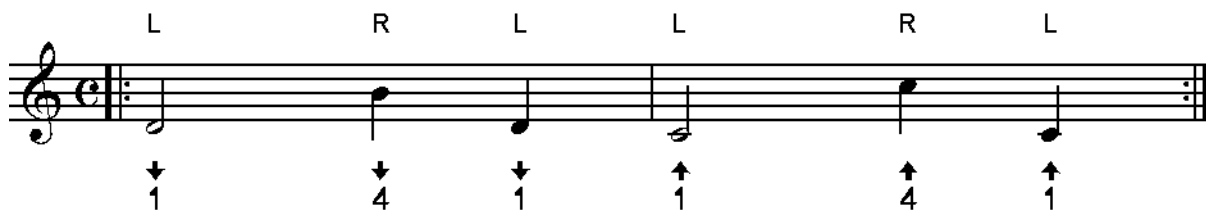
Now, let's try a simple exercise. We'll switch from right to left as shown above, then back to the right side. First we'll do this action with a pair of draw notes, then with a pair of blow notes. Click here to hear what it sounds like [<12-01.mp3>](#) (visit www.harmonicasesions.com for these MP3 examples)



As you switch from blow to draw on the right side, you stay in the same hole. Only one thing changes—the direction of your breath from in to out. The mouth and the tongue don't move—neither do your hands, throat muscles, or anything else.

The Leading Side

Note that in the above example we're leading with the right—starting on the right side. Many leaps start low and jump high, which requires leading with the left. Here's a left-leading version of the same exercise. Click here to listen [<12-02.mp3>](#).

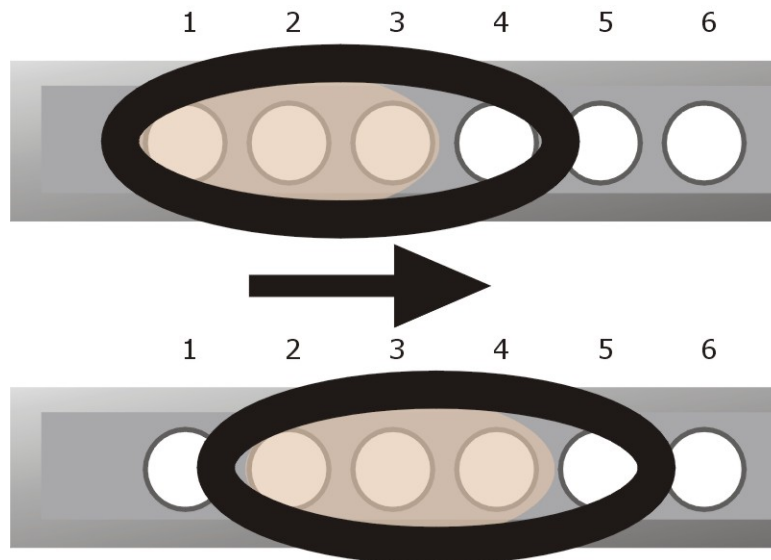


Note that the blow notes form an octave, while the draw intervals don't (they form a sixth). This is one of those oddities of the note arrangement of the chromatic harmonica. The more you get into switching, the more you'll encounter these oddities.

The Embouchure Shift

The embouchure shift occurs when you move the *entire embouchure* to a different location on the harmonica. If you're used to playing melody with a tongue block, you may not think about anything except the hole in the right corner of your mouth. But in fact, every time you change hole, your entire embouchure shifts. This becomes significant when you start switching to the left corner.

When we're using a fixed block, we need to shift the embouchure to the left or to the right without changing its size. Nothing about your mouth or tongue will change as you change holes—you just glide your entire embouchure to a new location. An embouchure shift one hole to the right could be visualized like this:



Let's try it. Playing a draw note on the right side, we can move one hole to the right. Click here to listen. [<12-03.mp3>](#)

Note how the first embouchure placement is noted with a horizontal bracket above the notes, then the second one with another bracket. Where one bracket ends and another begins, an embouchure shift to the left or right is required. You can tell the direction by comparing the high and low hole numbers—if they go up, move to the right. If they go down, move to the left.

Now, let's elaborate on this move. As before, we'll be leading from the right, switching to the left side and back again. Then we shift one hole to the right and do it again. Click here to listen.

[<12-04.mp3>](#)

Note that we've kept the horizontal brackets to indicate embouchure placement but have done away with the word "shift."

Now let's try the same thing but leading with the left. Click here to listen. [<12-05.mp3>](#)

Now let's add a breath change while we move one hole to the right. First let's lead with the right. Click here to listen. [<12-06.mp3>](#)

Now let's change breath and hole while leading from the left. Click here to listen. [<12-07.mp3>](#)

Building a Line

Here's a line built using what we've learned so far. First leading from the right (Click here to listen [<12-08.mp3>](#)):

R L R L R L R

4 1 4 5 2 5 5 2 5 5 2 5

Now leading from the left (click here to listen [<12-09.mp3>](#)):

L R L L R L L R L L R L

1 4 1 2 5 2 2 5 2 2 5 2

Let's take this one step further and extend the line to work with a chord progression. The high notes are played out of the right side, the low notes out of the left. Click here to listen [<12-10.mp3>](#)

G C/G G7 C/G G C/G G7 C/G

1 4 1 2 5 2 2 5 2 2 5 2 1 4 1 2 5 2 2 5 2 2 5 2

5 C F/C C F/C G C/G G7 C/G

2 5 2 2 5 2 3 6 3 2 5 2 1 4 1 2 5 2 2 5 2 3 6 3

9 F C G7 C/G G C G

3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 2 5 2 2 5 2 1 2 1

Adding the Slide

Let's try adding the slide to the action. Click here to listen [<12-16.mp3>](#)

L R L R L R L R L

3 6 3 2 5 2 2 6 2 2 5 2

Here's a tune I wrote called "Sliders" that makes use of this action. Click here to listen [<sliders.mp3>](#) Note how I stay with the notes, but jump back and forth at will between left and right, or even play both notes at once.

If you want to play the tune without harmonica in the track, use this play-along track: [<slidersminus.mp3>](#)

Csus7 C5 Csus7 C5 C7(b5) F Fm C

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R

7 4 7 7 4 7 7 4 7 6 3 6 6 3 6 6 3 6 6 4 7

Csus7 C5 Csus7 C5 C7(b5) F Fm C

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R

5

7 4 7 7 4 7 7 4 7 6 3 6 6 3 6 6 3 6 6 4 7

F Gb F E7(b9) C Dm Ebm Gsus7

L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L

9

3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 3 6 3 4 7 4

Next Time

We started this installment with a simple premise: keep a fixed block and move it up and down. We've run out of space but have hardly scratched the surface. We'll pick up where we left off next time.

Notation Key

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