

# Essential Blues Harmonica Listening

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When I started the harmonica at age fourteen I didn't know what blues was: I was never exposed to it. After playing the saxophone and trumpet I wanted to stop playing in the school band but I didn't want to give up music. I went to my local music store and looked around and the harmonica is what I walked out with. I purchased a Hohner harmonica and a Mel Bay book/tape by author Phil Duncan. I swiftly worked through the book and enjoyed it. I first heard blues harmonica in a movie and it really grabbed me. I took a tape recorder and placed it in front of the TV set and recorded all the harmonica parts in the movie. I went into the front room and proceeded to learn the harmonica parts note-for-note but noticed that I wasn't matching. I went back to the music store and bought some other keys. After learning those songs I wanted more, and that started my journey for the search of all that was blues harmonica.

At that time nobody knew anything about blues harmonica in my little town and there was no Internet to use for research. I really was on my own (as all other blues harmonica players were at that time) to find out how to play blues harmonica. The local library helped by having early blues recordings and so did the local antique shop Lost Mine Antiques. I can still smell the cleaner the old man used to polish the records. Whenever I walked in he would be there at his desk cleaning records. I stopped by the store as often as possible to ask him what he had in that was new. The majority of my collection was from this antique store and what reissue records that I could special order from the local music store.

After playing the harmonica for almost two years I had yet to hear about a white harmonica player. Since all the albums I had were older vintage or reissues, blues harmonica to me was Little Walter, Big Walter Horton, Sonny Boy Williamson, George Harmonica Smith, etc. Now that I think of it, the study of the old masters helped me to appreciate (or not appreciate) what the newer players had to offer. It wasn't until I started studying with harmonica player and teacher Gary Smith at sixteen that I heard of players like Paul Butterfield, William Clarke and Rod Piazza. I really liked these players because the music felt fresh and new. I remember hearing a Rod Piazza album for the first time (I think it was Harp Burn... a great album) and I was upset that I didn't hear of him earlier.

Now with the Internet, information is a lot easier to come by. To a certain degree there is almost too much to choose from. This is the focus of this article, to shed light on which artists are essential listening and studying for your growth as a player.

Listening and studying players is HUGELY important to the growth of all musicians. Studying blues harmonica means that you are studying the language of the blues; the licks, movement, phrasing and articulation that speaks the sound and feel of the music. This is accomplished in one way, studying the masters. The more artists you study, the more your sound will be diverse and unique. Along with essential fathers of blues harmonicas I will also mention modern players that are pushing the envelope of the traditional sound.

Start your collection with the fathers of blues harmonica and continue to modern day players. I would recommend purchasing recordings in the general order they are listed (though any combination of artists in a grouping is fine) and pick up box sets when available. Look at the dates of each recording as you listen to get an idea of their place in history. Though it is not mentioned, most of the artists were also great singers and songwriters.

This list starts with post war players, though Sonny Boy Williamson (who recorded from 1937 to 1947) was so influential to the players that followed him (many literally followed him gig to gig to learn harmonica) that he needs to be on the list. If you are interested in pre-war blues, check out *Harmonica Masters "Classic Recordings from the 1920's and 30's"* (YaZoo 2019) and *Harmonica Blues "Great Harmonica Performances of the 1920's and 30's"* (YaZoo 1053). These albums feature important players such as Jazz Gillum, Jaybird Coleman and De Ford Bailey.

Next to the artist's name are CDs I am familiar with and you might enjoy as well. Though there are of course more CDs for each artist, this should get you started. If you find a player you like, research the albums available. There's a good chance they recorded over a long period of time and there are some gems out there. In some cases these CDs have gone out of print, though they are still available from specialty sellers. A music seller I commonly use is <http://www.bluebeatmusic.com/>, they tend to have hard-to-find blues harmonica recordings.

Please keep in mind that everything within this list is my personal opinion and my opinion changes as new recordings and information comes my way. These are players I am familiar with now, though I am sure there are many great players out there (past and present) that I have not heard of, so the list should be updated. I have already spent a lot of time gathering information for this listing and feel it's strong. I am currently speaking with other respected artists for their recommended additions and changes and will update this listing for the next issue of HarmonicaSessions.com. As an added bonus next issue I will also include a listing of essential harmonica instrumentals to listen to and study.

### **Grandfather of Blues Harmonica**

- Sonny Boy Williamson I (John Lee Williamson) – Played acoustic harmonic and really defined the style for all players after him. Document Records has a complete recorded works series (DOCD-5055 through DOCD-5059)

**Fathers of Blues Harmonica** – All these players were pioneers and true masters of the instrument.

- Big Walter Horton – Though rough around the edges at times, Big Walter played a very powerful harp (acoustic and amplified). He backed players (Muddy Waters and Jimmy Rogers to name two) often in Chicago. He recorded and performed for many years playing a variety of styles within the blues from classic full band vocal tunes, instrumentals, and mesmerizing harp only tunes. Album: *Can't Keep Lovin' You* (Blind Pig BP71484) or *Fine Cuts* (Blind Pig BP 70678)
- Little Walter – The innovator of amplified harmonica (some call him the king of the blues harmonica). Early recordings have him playing with Muddy Waters acoustic with his own material coming soon after both acoustic and amplified. The amplified work really

set him apart. His 1953 recording *Juke* placed him on the music charts and changed the blues harmonica sound forever. Along with vocal tunes, he recorded many instrumental tunes (*Juke*, *Off the Wall*, *Roller Coaster*, *Boogie*, *Rocker*, etc.) that stand to this day as some of the best amplified playing ever. His phrasing is especially a focus of study for students wanting to play instrumentals. Album: *The Essential Little Walter* (Chess/MCA CHD2-9342 - 2 CD set) & *Confessin' The Blues* (Chess MCD 09366)

- Sonny Boy Williamson II (Rice Miller) – Not to be confused with the original John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson, Rice Miller was also a harmonica powerhouse. Miller played acoustic harp and rarely did instrumentals. Album: *The Essential Sonny Boy Williamson* (Chess/MCA CHD2-9343 - 2 CD set)

**More Classic Players** all of these players can be considered fathers of blues harmonica as well, though they came after the above artists or were not as prolific in the playing skills.

- James Cotton – Known as Mr. Super Harp his playing is very strong with a performance career spanning almost 50 years. His best-known harmonica tune is *Creeper*, which is still performed regularly today as a showstopper. Album: *Best of the Verve Years* (Verve D108381)
- Jimmy Reed – Known as the master of the 1<sup>st</sup> Position high end. He didn't have any more technique skill than other players of that time on high-end 1<sup>st</sup> Position playing, but he did it a lot of it. His phrasing is sparse and very melodic. A great study for his 1<sup>st</sup> Position and 2<sup>nd</sup> Position work. Album: *The Very Best of Jimmy Reed* (Rhino R2 79802)
- George Harmonica Smith – Player who moved to California and directly influenced the playing of Rod Piazza, William Clarke, and many others. Though his diatonic harmonica work was fantastic he's most known for his chromatic work. His song *Blues in the Dark* is a benchmark for all chromatic players to play. Album: *Little George Smith, Harmonica Ace, The Modern Masters Collection* (Ace CDCHD 337)
- Junior Wells – Another heavy hitter of blues harmonica, Wells really came into his own in the 1965 recording *Hoochie Coochie Man* where his funky harmonica style really jumps out. *Messin' with the Kid* (Chicago *The Blues Today*, Vol. 1, Vanguard #9213, 1966) is regarded as a great harmonica piece. Album: *Junior Wells Hoodoo Man Blues* (Delmark DD-612)
- Howlin' Wolf – Though basic in approach, his presentation was bold with a strong vibrato. Album: *His Best* (Chess Anniversary Collection)

**More Classic Players** players that you might not of heard of, but should take a listen to.

- Slim Harpo – Very musical player (good phrasing) who recorded for many years. Best know song is *Baby Scratch My Back*. Album: *The Best Of* (Excello)
- Lazy Lester – Very tasty playing. Album: *I Hear You Knockin'!!!* (Excello)
- Jerry McCain – Jerry recorded very early in his career and stopped music for many years to come back to it late on life. His most well known recording is *Easy*. Album: *That's What They Want: The Best of Jerry McCain* (Excello) or *Blues Masters The Essential Collection, V4 Harmonica Classics* (Rhino R2 71124)
- Junior Parker – Parker started off as a harmonica player with vocals soon taking over the spotlight. Though not known as a harmonica player's harmonica player everything he played was tasty. Album: *Junior's Blues/The Duke Recordings V1* (MCA MCAD 10669)

**More Classic Players Still Alive** - Traditional players with recordings readily available on the market.

- Billy Boy Arnold – Album: Eldorado Cadillac (Alligator Records)
- Carey Bell – Album: Deep Down (Alligator Records)
- Johnny Dyer – Album: Jukin' (Blind Pig)
- Sam Myers – Album: Change in my Pocket (Bullseye Blues)
- Snooky Pryor – Album: Snooky Pryor & His Mississippi Wrecking Crew (Electro-Fi Records)

### **Country Blues**

- Sonny Terry – Terry's playing style was so distinct that you can't really group him with other players. He did much solo work, but was best known with partner Brownie McGhee. Many of today's players state that Sonny Terry's style was very influential in their playing. Album: Absolutely the Best (Varese Records)

**Moving from Chicago** both of these players were very influential in turning on the next generation of harmonica players to the music. Though neither of these players are (Butterfield has passed away) very "classic" in sound, they definitely embody what we know of as the blues. Both were diverse players spending a period of their performance and recording careers in the early rock movement.

- Paul Butterfield – Album: Paul Butterfield Blues Band (Elektra/Asylum)
- Charlie Musselwhite – Album: Ace of Harps (Alligator Records)

**Today's Masters** the three artists below are separated because of their pure mastery of the instrument and the breadth of their performance and recording careers. There's too many great things to say about these player, just go out and listen for yourself. Note that William Clarke is no longer with us, but his legacy lives on.

- William Clarke – Album: Serious Intentions (Alligator ALCD 4806)
- Rod Piazza – Album: Harp Burn (Black Top Records CD BT-1087)
- Kim Wilson – Album: Tiger Man (Antone's ANT 0023)

### **More Great Players**

- Tom Ball – Great primarily acoustic player in the school of Sonny Terry who is best known for his work with Kenny Sultan. Album: Filthy Rich (Flying Fish)
- "Big" Al Blake – Best know for his work with the Hollywood Fats band. Album: Mr. Blake's Blues (Blue Collar BCM7108-2)
- Sugar Blue – The modern-day Chicago player. Fast, but tasty player who often uses 3<sup>rd</sup> Position. Album: In Your Eyes (Alligator ALCD 4831)
- Billy Branch – Great modern Chicago player. Album: Satisfy Me (House of Blues)
- Norton Buffalo – Both known for his acoustic work with Roy Rogers and his diverse playing style that ventures out of blues time to time. Album: King of the Highway (Blind Pig)
- Paul deLay – A very, very fresh diatonic and chromatic player. If you like blues with a little different slant, check him out. Album: Heavy Rotation (Evidence)

- Magic Dick – Best known from the J. Geils Band, he has also released albums under the band Bluestime. Helped to define blues-based Rock harmonica (along with Huey Lewis) Album: Bluestime (Rounder) or Full House (Atlantic)
- Rick Estrin – Best known working with Little Charlie and the Nightcats. Album: That's Big (Alligator ALCD 4883)
- Steve Guyger – Well-known player who has done side work for many musicians. Album: Past Life Blues Severn (CD-0002)
- James Harman – Great internationally known player. Album: Mo' Na'Kins, Please! (Cannonball)
- Mark Hummel – Great internationally known player; one my favorites. Album: Golden State Blues (Electro-Fi 3375)
- John "Juke" Logan – Well-known player who has done side work for many musicians. Album: Juke Rhythm (Mocomb)
- Mitch Kashmar – Great player with Pontiax and I believe recently Room Full of Blues. Album: Crazy Mixed Up World (Thumbs Up)
- Lee McBee – Great internationally known player known for his work with Mike Morgan. Album: 44 (Red Hot)
- "Sugar" Ray Norcia – Solo and work with Room Full of Blues. Album: Sweet & Swingin' (Bullseye Blues)
- Jerry Portnoy – Traditional player who backed both Muddy Waters and Eric Clapton. I like his work with Waters and Clapton the best, though he did record some solo albums and many albums with the Legendary Blues Band.
- Gary Primich – Great internationally known player. Album: Mr. Freeze (Flying Fish FF 70649)
- Annie Raines – Great all around blues player who is best known for her work with Paul Rishell. Album: I Want You to Know (Tone Cool)
- Curtis Salgado – Solo and work with Room Full of Blues and major influence on the Blues Brothers. Album: Wiggle Out of This (Shanachie)
- Phil Wiggins – Piedmont blues player best known for his work with John Cephas. Album: Homemade (Alligator)

### **Lesser Known Players**

- Dennis Gruenling – Great third position player who uses low-tuned harps for a very horn-like sound in his more swing style. Album: Dennis Gruenling & Jump Time (BackBender BBR 701)
- Carlos del Junco – Overbend player in blues. Album: Big Boy (Big Reed)
- Michael Peloquin – Overbend player in blues. Album: House of Cards (Globe)
- R.J. Mischo – Great player, vocalist and performer. Album: Gonna Rock Tonight (Blue Loon)
- Gary Smith – My mentor; huge tone! Traditional blues harmonica with a FAT tone. Album: Blues for Mr. B (Mountain Top)
- Mark Ford – Known for his work in the Ford blues band with brothers Pat (drums) and Robin (guitar). Traditional player with a more horn like tone and sophisticated phrasing. Album: Mark Ford & The Blue Line (Blue Rock'it BRCD 129)
- Andy Just – Blues player with a rocker's soul. Album: Don't Cry (Blue Rock'it BRCD 117)

### **Compilations**

Here are some compellations well worth having in your collection.

- Blues Masters The Essential Collection, V4 Harmonica Classics (Rhino R2 71124)
- Blues Masters The Essential Collection, V16 More Harmonica Classics (Rhino)
- Essential Blues Harmonica (HOB 51415 1300 2)
- Got Harp If You Want It "The Best of the West Coast Blues Harp Players" (Blue Rock'it BRCD 111)
- Legends of Harmonica (Rhino R2 78265)
- Masters of the Chicago Blues Harp – Book & Transcription (Mel Bay MB96476BCD)
- Blues Harp Greats – Book & Transcription (Mel Bay MB97324BCD)
- Blues Harp Meltdown (Mountain Top)
- This is the Blues Harmonica (Delmark)

For a listing of artists, their albums, songs, keys of songs, harmonicas and positions used, visit the Harmonica Masterclass Website at:

[http://www.harmonicamasterclass.com/artist\\_listing.htm](http://www.harmonicamasterclass.com/artist_listing.htm).

**About the Author David Barrett**

<http://www.harmonicamasterclass.com/david.htm>