



Gary Primich

by Dennis Carelli, www.harmonicassessions.com

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DC: I know you are not originally from Austin and that you spent some time in Chicago? But where were you born?

GP: I was born in Chicago in 1958. That's where I started to get interested in blues and harmonica music in general. Actually, when I was a kid, when I was first cognizant of the harmonica it was back in the early 60's. The U. S. Postal Service had an ad campaign for "Use Your Zip Code". Back when Zip Codes first starting coming in the forefront of American consciousness. There was a television commercial with Johnny Puleo dancing around a mail drop box. It was a "Use Your Zip code" commercial. And he was my hero. I wanted to be Johnny Puleo. I was a seven year old.

DC: You're the first blues harmonica player that I've heard that had Johnny Puleo as an inspiration.

GP: Yeah, yeah (Laughs). That was short-lived and I gravitated towards the music of Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf. All the Chicago guys. And as it turned out there were still a number of people, such as Big Walter Horton, in Chicago for me to listen and get inspired by.

DC: It's interesting though, born in Chicago, getting into the blues in Chicago, what then prompted you to pick up your roots and go into Austin? Was it a different place to stimulate you? Or was the Austin Music scene attractive to you?

GP: Oh, yeah, the Austin music scene was real attractive to me. Mainly because I was playing around Chicago and really the sound of Chicago blues that I was in love with, the more traditional sound, was and is all but dead there. The musicians had moved on from that style and gone on to something else. So there wasn't a lot of opportunity to play the style of Chicago blues that I loved. So I visited Austin and there was Antone's there. I heard Otis Rush being backed upped by a local band, playing it right. I thought that's the place for me.

DC: When did you take the bold step and decide to become a full-time professional?

GP: Oh, gosh. Back in the early 80's. By the time I was twenty years old I was pretty much making my living, more or less. Sometimes a lot less for a musician.

DC: Hopefully now it's a lot more.

GP: Not exactly a rich man's game. But I do my best.

DC: Besides Sonny Boy and Little Walter and maybe Walter Horton because he was in Chicago when you were there, any other influences early on that you would say you tried to look at and draw from?

GP: Early influences? I always loved jazz music a lot. I loved everything. I like a lot of different kind of styles. I love blues, but I like a lot of different styles. So anything that I thought was good found a way into influencing me. I played with bluegrass guys. I played with old time guys. I played in country bands. So I did whatever I could as an itinerant musician to make a living. So there was a lot of influence from a lot of different styles of music. I have never been one to say, "I'm a blues guy and that's all I do". I like music.

DC: Do you play any other instruments?

GP: Not really. I play a little guitar. I fool with it.

DC: In the privacy of your home?

GP: Yeah, I've actually played on a couple of my records. I play guitar on other people's records. But it's a bold move for them to let me loose on the guitar in the studio.

DC: What brand of harps do you use?

GP: I use Horner Marine Bands that are customized by Joe Filisko.

DC: And Microphones? Astatic?

GP: Just your stock JT-30 with a volume control.

DC: And the last piece of equipment that people are interested in, of course, is amps. Any special one?

GP: I'll go between my Fender Bassman and my Fender Bandmaster.

DC: Do you use those on the road as well as in the studio or do you use different amps in the studio?

GP: I don't really like the sound of a huge amp in the studio. So I'll tend to play with a smaller amp. I've got a late 50's single 10" Silvertone that I'll use in the studio. I'll use my Bandmaster sometimes. I like a little bit lower output amp.

DC: When you are out on your regular gigs, are you playing a lot in 1st and 3rd positions? I should say, how much do you play in 1st and 3rd positions?

GP: It depends on the night really more than anything. Of course I have a number of songs that I do in 1st and a number of songs I do in 3rd. So it really depends on the night.

DC: And that goes for chromatic too?

GP: Yeah, yeah. I don't really play a lot of chromatic. But again it goes with the night.

DC: When you were recently in Colorado and New Mexico, did you travel with your band?

GP: Sure. Oh yeah. Always. My regular touring band is Jim Starboard on drums; Dave Wesselowski on bass; and "Shorty" Lenoir on guitar.

DC: What do you look for if you were to replace a member of the band? What do you look for in that new player?

GP: A sane mind. (Chuckling)

DC: A sane mind. To start with? Would it stay that way?

GP: And hopefully he can play. Of course you got to have somebody who can play. As far as what to look for, they gotta know the style of music. I don't need a guy who went to bed with "The Best of Little Walter" LP for all his life. I don't necessarily need somebody like that in my band. It's nice. But they have to have a working knowledge of the music. But really to be honest, I am on the road a lot so I got to have somebody I get along with. (Chuckling)

DC: How much do you travel each year?

GP: This year is a little harder because the economy is kind of crappy. But I usually try to get about 175 and 220 gigs a year in. Something like that.

DC: Now I know a little later this year, I guess the end of this month, you are going to Spain. Do you usually go to Europe each year?

GP: Yeah, we go to Europe once or twice a year.

DC: When you are out traveling, I don't know if Spain would be part of this, what would you say are your favorite places? A town or a club that you look forward to since there are so many. Some that are "Oh, God. I'm going back there again!" And others that are "Hey great. This will be fun".

GP: Oh, gosh. I'll tell you what. I'm being real honest here. I'm not being a diplomat. Every night is different. I've had great times in places you wouldn't think you'd have a great time. And rotten times in places you would think would be the greatest gig of all time. So if it is a good night, there's a crowd that's into it and the band sounds good; that's where I like to play. And it doesn't matter where it is.

DC: One of the mysteries of performing is songwriting. Do you find yourself starting with the words? Or start with a musical idea in your head that turns into a song?

GP: Normally, I'm working on a lyric and a melody too. Usually working on some sort of lyrical hook that I'm trying to expound on in some way. The melody will kind of take care of itself with me generally. But I'm more interested in crafting the words together.

DC: Have you drawn inspiration from other singer/songwriters?

GP: Yeah, one of my big songwriting influences is Merle Haggard. He is a great songwriter. And other blues songwriters, such as Dave Bartholomew. The great New Orleans songwriter/arranger is one of my big influences. As is Percy Mayfield. Those are some big ones right there. Muddy Waters some too. I think he wrote great songs.

DC: On recordings, how much preparation and arranging do you do before you go into the studio? Or it is mostly an outline of songs?

GP: I do affair amount (of arranging). Especially guitar parts, because I can play a little bit of guitar and bass. I pretty well arrange out. I don't say to the guys you have to play exactly this, but I say, for instance, work out of this sort of rhythm motif. Or use this bass line as your starting point. This motif on bass as the starting point. Or play the song on the ride cymbal, don't use the high hat. That's how I approach at least arranging the parts together in a blues song for a recording. So I have a pretty good idea of what it is I want to

hear, for the most part. I think it is really important to have beforehand have thought out your parts. Especially if you are going to use two guitars and other instruments. You want to leave room sonically. You want to have some range. You don't want everybody playing in the same range. You want to make sure that proper space is taken.

DC: For instrumental tunes, how much of that is created in the studio through improvisation and how much is created beforehand? Do you just create the head and go in and let it rip?

GP: For me most of the instrumentals I write, I've written the head and everything else is improvisational. Just like a be-bop song. Like a Charlie Parker song.

DC: Are there any recording secrets you want to share?

GP: Oh boy (Laughs).

DC: You probably have some secrets, the question is do you want to share them?

GP: No, no, no I don't have any secrets at all. The only secret that I have is get a good engineer who is versatile. The secret is to get a good recording engineer who is versatile, who's not one-dimensional, and who is willing to experiment. That really is the key to getting a good sound in the studio.

DC: Lastly Gary, what words of advice would you give to a beginning harmonica player? To an advanced player?

GP: For a beginner, the main thing is to learn a couple of things. One, you have to learn how to use your ear. You have to learn how to pick things up with your ear. To be able to train your ear to listen to a Sonny Boy Williamson song and say "Oh, that's in cross-harp" and "This is that!". You have to force yourself to use your ear. To me that is one thing I would stress highly to somebody starting out is, it's not about taking something off a piece of paper and regurgitating. You have to learn to use ear. For an advanced player I would say to use your ear to try to imitate the sounds of another instrument and see if you can take an instrumental piece that was done by another instrument and see how they put their notes together. And see if you can gain something from that.

DC: Gary, thank so much for taking the time to talk with us today and sharing your thoughts with our harmonicasessions.com readers.

Recording Discography (Release Date, Album Title & Label)

2002 Dog House Music, Antone's Records
1999 Botheration, Black Top Records
1997 Company Man, Black Top
1995 Mr. Freeze, Flying Fish Records
1994 Travelin' Mood, Flying Fish Records
1992 My Pleasure, Amazing Records
1990 Gary Primich, Amazing Records

Guest appearances include:

Omar & The Howlers -- Muddy Springs Road
Omar & The Howlers -- World Wide Open
Steve James -- Art And Grit
Steve James -- Boom Chang
Steve James -- American Primitive
Tish Hinojosa -- Homeland
Tish Hinojosa -- Culture Swing
Rhino Blues Masters Volume #17 -- "Masters of the Blues Harmonica"
Threadgill's Supper Sessions Volume I and II
Libbi Bosworth -- Outskirts of You
Libbi Bosworth -- Austin Country Nights Compilation
Libbi Bosworth -- Libbiville
Starline Rhythm Boys -- Better Luck Is A Barroom Away