



Preparing a Song and Playing it on Stage

by [David Barrett](#)

This last weekend my school presented it's summer School of the Blues Student Blues Festival. This concert helps student place what they've been studying into context as well as gain valuable stage experience. The instruction process involved in getting a student ready to perform on stage covers more than just learning their song well-being able to communicate to the band before, during and at the end of the song is paramount. Some factors, such as hearing yourself on stage and being able to deal with the excitement/stress of being on stage, cannot be prepared for ahead of time and just take experience playing as much as possible on stage to

conquer.

In this article I'll define the process I use to get students ready to perform a song on stage. This is focused towards playing with a band that you haven't played with before-this is the most difficult situation. This information of course is applicable for songs you play with your band, we'll just place more importance on this due to it being the most common application and most challenging.

Learning Your Song

- 1) Transcription
- 2) Study at Varying Tempos
- 3) Practice with Jam Track(s)

Transcription

If you're going to play a cover song (a song that someone else recorded) you'll want to start by asking yourself "how do I want to perform this song?" One option is to play it the way it was recorded-note-for-note. The other is to play the head (main melody of the song) the same as the recording and harvest some of your favorite licks from the solo(s) for you to use in your improvisation-mixing the recording artists' ideas and yours to make a more "personalized" version of the song.

Either way, whatever part of the song you decide to "copy" you'll want to do well! Right? I have what I call my "Anicity Level" for a song when a student begins a study. If they want to learn the song note-for-note, then I transcribe the song for them and we start the slow, deliberate process of studying the song note-for-note, technique-for-technique, lick-for-lick, dynamic-for-dynamic, etc. If they say that an 80% level is fine, that means that they want to learn the licks but don't care if the player used a 2 draw or 3 blow on the turnaround. Little details get washed away for the quicker learning of the greater picture of the song.

For the most part, everyone chooses to learn the song 100% true to the original and later make slight changes to the song to make it their own. The idea is to learn the song note-for-note to earn the right to change it. I feel this is a good approach for the studying harmonica player.

One of the issues of learning a song without transcribing it (by ear, playing with the recording) is that when playing with the recording you're playing ON TOP of the recording. This leads to missed notes, substituted notes, missed subtleties in texture, etc. The fact is that a lot gets missed. If you decide to learn a song without transcribing it, make sure that you listen to each lick that you learn multiple times before trying it... listen... try... listen... try... etc. This way you minimize missing small details that make the song great.

If you transcribe the song the process is the same, you're just writing it down as you go... open to revision as you continue to work on the song, hearing things you didn't hear before and adding it to your transcription. Which transcription method you use is also open to what you are most comfortable using. I use standard music notation with harmonica TAB below the notes. If a student wants a "quick" transcription the I'll just write the hole numbers for them... it all works.

For the most part, I don't pick up the harmonica when I transcribe a song. Only in the final proofing do I play it with the original to check for stupid errors. It will take you many years before you can do this, but this insures that I don't "play over" something.

Study at Varying Tempos

One of the best inventions for learners of an instrument are "slo-mo" devices that can slow down the tempo of a song without changing the pitch. The looping function (where you can mark a start and stop point-playing that section over and over) is also very helpful when working on individual licks as you go. The Amazing Slowdowner is one example of a software program that does this (<http://www.ronimusic.com/>). This specific program also allows you to save full songs as media files to burn a practice CD. When students study a song I commonly make a CD for them with the song played at 40% slow, another at 30%, another at 20%, another at 10% slow, then finally, the original song at full speed. You study the song at the slower tempo until you can play it well from beginning to end before moving on to the next speed. This slow, methodical approach to study will lead to mastery of the song as well as all of the techniques involved in playing the licks in the song. A nice side benefit of this way of studying is that by the time you can play at full tempo you've played the song hundreds of times... there's no need to work on memorization!

Practice with Jam Track(s)

Your last step is to play with a jam track that's close to tempo and feel with your study song. Remember that you can slow or speed up a jam track and change its key if it has the right feel with the Amazing Slowdowner to make it just right for practice with a specific tune-I do this all the time. On your practice CD make the last track this jam track. Play the original track once and then play to the jam track with your transcription and then again without the transcription. Eventually you should be able to play the entire song with the jam track right off the bat without your sheet music.

I also like to practice to jam tracks that are a little too fast, or too slow or different enough to throw you off. Many times what throws a student off on stage is that what they hear the band play is nothing like what the original song sounded like. Practicing with various jam tracks can help ease that possible problem before hitting the stage.

Preparing Your Song For Performance

Practicing the way I outlined above will take you 80% of the way in being ready to perform your song on stage. What's missing are the final touches:

- 1) Recording Yourself
- 2) Describing the Song & Band Signals

Recording Yourself

The best players and educators of blues harmonica are huge advocates of recording yourself to better your playing. Recordings of your playing will surface errors and general areas of weakness that you couldn't hear while playing. Play your selected tune to a jam track and record yourself (any recording device will do... you don't need high quality for this). Listen back to your recording each time for the following areas:

Rhythm

Your general rhythm and check that you're you hitting all of the changes (chord changes) well.

Tone & Articulation

How's your tone? Is it thin or weak for certain techniques? Is your articulation sharp and in time?

Elements

Never under or overuse the following elements in music. Listen to your recording for each item below.

- A) Texture - Nice mix of single notes, dirty notes (two-note combinations), tongue blocking techniques such as slaps, pulls and octaves, etc.
- B) Range - Are you moving across the range of the harmonica or just staying on the "safe" holes?
- C) Dynamics - Are you playing at the same volume the whole time? Vary the volume of each chorus and each lick for maximum impact.
- D) Rhythm - Do you have a predominant rhythm that you like to use? Don't over use it-mix up the use of different rhythms.
- E) Chorus Forms - Make sure you're mixing up how you use repetition in your soloing.

Describing the Song & Band Signals

We'll go into greater detail on this subject in a moment... but let's quickly go through what you need to listen for on the recording you're copying so that you'll be ready to direct the band on what you need.

- 1) What Key is the Song In?
- 2) What's the Groove?
- 3) Where Does the Song Start (In the Form)?
- 4) Are There Any Breaks in the Song That Need To Be Signaled?
- 5) How Does the Song End?
- 6) Specific Details in the Song That Need Clarification to the Other Instruments?

What Key is the Song In?

If you're playing an "A" harmonica in second position, then you and the band are playing in the key of "E." Never say "I'm playing on an A harmonica and you're in the key of E." One band member hears the "key of A" and the other hears the "key of E" and when the song starts the train has already derailed before it hits full speed!

What's the Groove?

This can be hard for new players with not much experience. The best advice I can give you is to purchase jam tracks (such as Blues Harmonica Jam Tracks & Soloing Concepts #1 and #2 (MB99105BCD and MB99110BCD) that say what the groove is. This will help you to become familiar with what certain grooves sound like, making the recognition of them easier when working on a song.

Where Does the Song Start (In the Form)?

Some songs start "From the I." Starting from the I (one chord) instructs the band to play from the beginning of the form. Some songs start "From the V." Starting from the V (five chord) instructs the band to play from the last four measures of the form as a four-measure intro. Some songs start "From the Turnaround." Starting from the Turnaround instructs the band to play from the last two measures of the form as a two-measure intro. These are the most common ways to open a song. Listen carefully to how your song opens.

Are There Any Breaks in the Song That Need To Be Signaled?

If your song uses a break somewhere (other than the ending break), know where the break happens. Most breaks in the middle of a song are on the beginning of a chorus, with the band coming back in on the IV chord (four measures later). Make sure to practice signaling the band up to two measures prior to the break. The signal can be as simple as raising and lowering your hand steadily one to two measures prior to the break or it can be as specific as raising your hand about a measure before the break and dropping it exactly at the downbeat of the break. If you look back and notice that the band is not paying attention, then you can yell "Break!" a couple beats before the break. Practice these signals every time you practice with the original song and jam track.

How Does the Song End?

The most common area to end a song is to break on the downbeat of the 11th measure (I chord) and play an ending lick. The second most common area to end a song is to break on the downbeat of the 10th measure (IV chord), play a one-measure lick and then play an ending lick with the band. These are standard-no notification of this needs to be made to the band before you start your song, just make sure to signal from one to two measures before the ending is to happen. For the ending you can use the signals spoken of earlier or simply look back at the band around the V chord-making eye contact with as many of the musicians in the band as possible to let them know that the song's coming to an end.

Specific Details in the Song That Need Clarification to the Other Instruments?

Is there something in your song that's not common? If there is, take some time to think about how you would communicate this to the members of the band.

Before You Play

You've now done all of your homework and you're ready to play! As you walk up to the stage to play, follow this mental checklist.

Have These Items

- 1) Back-up Harp
- 2) Water

Frame of Mind

You're there to have a good time. Say to your self, "relax, don't play too hard, play musically, play repetitive (repetition is a good thing) and enjoy yourself!"

Hearing Yourself on Stage

If you can't hear yourself you can't play. If you're playing through someone else's harp rig then pick up the bullet mic and make sure the amp's standby switch is off. Play a lick through the mic to make sure the amp is on and is loud enough. If the amp doesn't seem loud enough, turn it up. In my experience the amplifier can't be too loud- you can always play softer if needed. If you're already playing and you can't hear yourself well, bending over will make it look like you're getting into the music as well as placing your ears at a line more level to where the speakers of the amp are shooting. If that's not enough, go turn the amp up if you can (some songs you'll play ask 100% of your focus-messin' with the amp could throw you off). If the amp feeds back when you turn it up... you're screwed. The best you can do is just keep playing or put the bullet mic in your pocket and play through the PA vocal mic, hoping that you can hear yourself better with the vocal mic.

If you're playing through the PA microphone, go up to it and test it to make sure it's loud enough. If you can't hear yourself well, then ask the sound person to turn your monitor up. If you're already playing and you can't hear yourself, then look at the sound person, point to the monitor and put your thumb out and up to indicate that the level needs to be raised in your monitor. As the level is turned up give the OK signal when it's at the right volume for you. Keep in mind that the vocalist is probably sharing the same monitor or same monitor mix and they don't want your harp blaring over their vocals. My point? If you can hear yourself a little bit, then that's in general just fine.

Hearing yourself is a big issue for harp players. Since we use microphones that feed back at low levels (relative to the other instruments), we can only get so loud on stage. The right environment is especially important for harp players to perform. A loud band is usually the cause of this problem. Asking the band to play softer works sometimes, other times your plea for dynamics get unheard!

Another thing to keep in mind is that the more experience you have on stage the better you'll be able to hear. In the beginning, your brain is working overtime, processing all of the internal and external stimulation that's happening on stage and you're not able to relax enough to hear yourself well. As you play more on stage and you become more comfortable and confident, your mind will be more clear and receptive to hearing well on stage. This is a little-talked about concept, but very true in my opinion.

Communicating to the Band Before the Song

You are the bandleader for you tune. It's entirely up to you that all signals get made that are necessary for the song. Upon entering the stage you'll need to say the following three things...

- 1) Key of the Song - Example: "Key of E"
- 2) Groove - Example: "Shuffle"
- 3) Where the song starts in the form - Example: "From the I" (One chord)

These three things are in general necessary for all songs. If there are any other instructions, they should be made after these three. If there's a specific bass line you would like played, then go ahead and tell the bass player (for example: "Blue Midnight" bass line). Make sure that bass line is famous enough that the chances the bass player knowing the bass line is high. It's a good idea to learn how to play the first measure of the bass line so that you can play them the notes in case they have not heard the song. If you have anything specific that you want to tell the drummer, go ahead and do that. This usually consists of further instructions based on the groove. If you called a "slow blues" you could be more specific and ask the drummer to play with a triplet feel (commonly known as a 12/8 feel) if that was used on the original recording of the song. Continue to make comments to the other musicians as necessary.

Other areas that should be spoken about is if there are any breaks, use of a bridge or anything else that might bring some problems in the performance if it's not made evident in the beginning of the song.

Make a rule-of-thumb of 3+3. The key, groove and where to start is the first three. Any other directions should not add up more than three areas of focus. Any more that you say will cause the band to look at you glassy-eyed and think "this is not a rehearsal... keep it simple." It's a fine art to "say what you need to say" to cover all of the elements needed to make a song go over well with\out over-saying it-making it too detailed can cause musicians to stop listening.

Counting the Band In

After you have said what you need to say to the band, count them in. Before you count them in, play the song in your mind for a moment to arrive at a good tempo. THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE NEW PERFORMERS MAKE IS TO COUNT A SONG IN TO SLOW OR TO FAST. Take this moment to make sure the tempo you're about to count is the right speed. Once you feel good with your tempo start counting in...

"1 . 2 . 1 2 3 4"

The "1 . 2 ." is preparatory. This gets the band focused that the song is going to start. The "1 2 3 4" is what really brings in the song. Make sure you know where in time your first lick begins. Sometimes your lick will start on the downbeat (the first beat of the first measure), but often a pickup is used. A pickup starts before the first measure. Let's take the famous Little Walter instrumental "Juke" as an example. The opening lick is basically "2 3 4 5+ 6+ 6+." The 2 starts on the "and of 3." In other words, the 2 draw starts when your foot is up after you count 3. Therefore, your count will go like this: "1 . 2 . 1 2 3." You don't say 4 because you're busy playing.

Communicating to the Band During the Song

After your solo you'll probably want to hand the solo over to someone else. At the end of your solo, at the turnaround, look at the next soloist to give them some warning that it's their turn to solo, nodding your head confirming you want them to play. Keep that soloist in your peripheral vision. When they're done soloing they'll look back to you in the same turnaround area. It's a good idea to keep track of where they are within the twelve bar blues form while they solo. The signal back to you will also be in the last two measures. At the last two measures focus on making sure you can see them in your peripheral vision to see any signs from them that they are down. Don't look at the musician directly; they may think you want the solo back, thus stealing the full-length of their solo away. You only look at a musician directly when you want something from them, like a solo or an ending.

At the end of the song make sure to signal the end, play the ending and as everyone is holding the very last note, sense where the final stop of the song will be and raise and lower your hand to stop the band.

A side note regarding leading a band... Make a point to watch the bandleader at every live performance you go to. Watch his or her signals to the band to get ideas of what signals you can incorporate when you're leading a band.

If Nerves Get the Better of You

If you find yourself making mistakes during the song, don't get upset at yourself. Remember that whatever you play is played for the first time to the listener. A misplaced lick or a note played one hole too low or high is not a mistake-it's only a mistake to you because you're intimately familiar with your song. To the listener, this is what you meant to play!

If you get lost, then improvise. If you get totally lost... past the point of no return... look at the guitarist (or other soloist) to take a solo. This might not be the exact right spot to hand over a solo, but they'll know that something was up and they should play so that you can catch your composure. Take a drink of water, relax and start to focus on where the soloist is within the form. When the soloist looks back at you to hand off the solo, start your song or solo over again. It will all work out fine.

Lessons for Next Time

Every time you play on stage you'll learn something. Make mental notes after every performance what you need to work on to make the performance better next time.

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