

**David Barrett's Harmonica Masterclass Workshop
& History of the Blues Harmonica Concert**
Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine August 2007 Special Addition

San Jose, California – May 4-6, 2007 By Brad Kava



Dave Barrett has been giving his Harmonica Masterclass Workshops for more than a decade, but in his latest one, last weekend in San Jose, he seems to have stepped it up a lot and found the best way to teach harmonica techniques to a large group.

I've been taking lessons from him for six years and regularly attended the large classes—but this one was different. It was like entering the college of musical knowledge.

The people who taught alongside Barrett—Joe Filisko, Dennis Gruenling and Kinya Pollard—aren't just top caliber players. They are great communicators who have very different approaches to the instrument and very clear methods for helping beginners and advanced students pick up new ways to play.

I spent most of my time with Filisko, who usually teaches in Chicago. I took his courses in country blues, third position, first position, and tongue blocking. Let me put it this way: in six courses over three days, I got enough to practice for a year. And if I soak it all up by then, it will be just in time for next year's course. I've never played in third position in public, and I think Filisko helped push me out of the too comfortable crosssharp nest. Maybe I'll even try first position too...



Students had choices of where to go for two three-hour courses a day. The best thing was that the classes weren't too crowded. With only 80 students allowed to enroll for the weekend, each class was around 20 people, and there was enough playing time to get evaluated on each new technique.

Filisko's motto was that if you want to learn how to play like the greats, you had to study the greats. He had transcriptions for us to practice and played bits of songs by the Walters, Junior Wells and George "Harmonica" Smith, to have us learn their licks in various positions.

I loved the country blues, which featured the old train imitations and whoops and hollers of the likes of Sonny Terry and DeFord Bailey. That's Filisko's main passion and it was contagious. I kept thinking if I could cadge some of this onto my usual electric blues and rock, it couldn't help but steal a set from a showboat guitarist. It's worth practicing, because this is stuff I'd like to entertain myself in the car with too.



I also took a course with Gruenling, the harp player who pushes furthest into jazz, called "Blues and Beyond" in which he turned students onto studying not scales or notes, but scale positions, so they can better communicate with other musicians and better understand what they are doing and why. One class wasn't enough. I need more. Next year.

The piece de resistance...the 10 blow bend wail, if you will... the real highlight of the weekend, was a four-hour-long concert by the teachers and some friends, that traced the

history of the harmonica. It illustrated what they taught, and to a person, fired up every student beyond their wildest expectations.

Filisko started the show back in the 1920s, at one point literally eating his harp and playing it inside his mouth. Barrett covered the postwar blues, with some help from Gary Smith and a tone authenticity and presence that was so powerful, I wasn't sure that seeing the originals would have been any better. (Certainly the acoustics and equipment was better and the room smoke-free.)

Pollard did such a fantastic Paul Butterfield that if you had your eyes shut, you would have thought he was in the room. Gruenling, representing modern playing, did tandem lines with horn player Michael Peloquin that would have made James Brown proud.



And as icing, Rick Estrin popped in for a jam with all the other players and a band that included guitarists Rusty Zinn and John Garcia, keyboardist Steve Czarnecki, bassist Frank De Rose and drummer Kevin Coggins, who regularly back Barrett.

Although it was a Grateful Dead-length extravaganza, the concert flashed by fast, and many students left a jam session to catch some of it both nights. Luckily, it was recorded for a CD, but I wish they would get this on DVD. I would watch it over and over. There was a lot to learn, but it didn't feel academic. It was plain fun; harp-playing heaven.



There were two highlights on the last day (three days felt like a week, there was so much information and fun crammed in). First was jamming in a circle with the teachers and more guests (Winslow Yerxa; Andy Just, who plays with the Ford Brothers; Mitch Kashmar; Michael Peloquin; and Estrin).

Then, all of them set up in different rooms and held small help groups to answer questions and work on anything students asked them for. That included everything from autographs to breathing exercises and the dreaded overbends. Pollard's workshop on harmonica repair was packed. Filisko even showed how to do the harp in the mouth trick.

This was an amazing chance for one-on-ones with the people I've only seen on stages before this, and if this three hours was the only thing that we got for the weekend, it would have been worth the price. You can't buy this kind of instruction from the masters.



It really nailed the theme of the class: if you want to play like the masters, you have to study the masters. And, we got to learn that up close and personal from the next generation of masters.”

Here are some comments from students of the workshop...

“This is the most valuable, well-rounded, complete, inspirational musical instruction I have every received. Incomparable and inspirational.” Michael "El Diablo" Wilde, Hudson Blues Band

“This workshop turned on numerous light bulbs for me in just a short time. The opportunity to get one-on-one, and small group instruction from master harp players, was incredibly helpful. I also enjoyed meeting and hearing other students play, and learning techniques, etc through networking. Course materials were extremely well written, thorough and well organized. Overall class structure showed great thought and preparation. I can easily see why so many people were return students.” John Lee

"Harmonica Masterclass is a mind-bending, fantastic music experience. Harmonica master players, who are also exceptionally kind teachers, helped us all become better players and aspire to learn more." Dennis Low

"The HMW was a really fabulous and inspiring experience. The instructors are incredible—tremendously skilled at the instrument, and thoughtful, intelligent, and humble teachers. I've played for many years and have never learned so much of use to my playing in such a short period of time. I recommend it to harp players of all levels." George Bisharat

"I am an advanced beginning/intermediate player. I'm hardly perfect. This class was tremendously informative. It gave me a whole new perspective on my strengths and weaknesses and a program to work on. I received tremendous insight and tips on technique. The incredibly supportive environment helped me get through issues of playing in front of others." Andy Hardy

"This weekend's workshop was outstanding. All I can say is WOW! Joe Filisko, David Barrett, Kinya Pollard and Dennis Gruenling are the finest teachers, students and players of the harmonica that I've ever had the privilege to study with. I've been to a few Harmonica Masterclass Workshops and they just keep getting better and better. I was truly inspired by the History of the Blues Concert on Saturday night. What phenomenal players these guys are. This weekend has changed the way I'll approach playing and studying the harmonica from now on. I can't wait until next year." Jon Harl

"Dave, this Masterclass was nothing less than outstanding. The patience of the teaching and support staff was unwavering. This made being a student fun and stressless. As to the teaching, word-class is a description that still understates the quality of education provided. Thanks." Keith Penney

"I enjoyed all my classes and learned a lot. There was enough of a variety of topics that I really feel there was something for everybody. I was able to have a lot of my questions answered and given enough information to really work on my rough spots. The staff was the greatest—not only exceptional players, but great teachers as well." Steve Gardner

"The instructors are knowledgeable and generous instructors who meet each student at his or her level. My third Masterclass Workshop and I'll be back for more. The workshop always inspires me to practice and play." Kim Addonizio