



## Gary Smith

by Dennis Carelli, [www.harmonicassessions.com](http://www.harmonicassessions.com),  
Photo by Mark Fenichel

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**DC:** You have been associated with the South Bay ever since I've known about your playing, were you born in San Jose or were you born in Sunnyvale?

**GS:** I was actually born in San Francisco, but we lived in Sunnyvale. Just by the way things happened, my mother was visiting some relatives up in San Francisco when it was time to have me. So I was born up there. Yeah, I'm "Sunnyvale Slim".

**DC:** I remember that one article in the local paper about your ad in Rolling Stone about a "harp player wanting to get out of Sunnyvale".

**GS:** Right. We came and went a little bit, but for most of my life I've been in the South Bay and a lot of that time in Sunnyvale.

**DC:** Was your mother or father interested in music? Did they play any instruments?

**GS:** My dad played a little bit of piano. I was born in 1951, so they were rock 'n roll era people. Their tastes ran from my mom being a Dinah Washington fan, Platters, Roy Hamilton and those kinds of people. And my dad was a HUGE Ray Charles fan. And Ray Charles was always going in our house.

**DC:** So you had a subliminal "bug" planted early?

**GS:** Right, right.

**DC:** When did you actually start playing the harmonica?

**GS:** I started playing music when I was in junior high school; I played drums. I continued to play drums in little garage bands in San Jose multi-ethnic bands, some white guys and some Mexican guys. We played Richie Valens and Buddy Holly stuff. Jimmy Reed kind of snuck in there too. But I actually switched to the harmonica in 1968 because blues was having the "blues revival", what they called it at that time. I was actually playing in blues bands at that point, playing drums. There were no harp players. There was nobody that could even do it. I just got more and more into it. The day I threw away the drumsticks and picked up the harmonica was (when) I went to see the Monterey Jazz Festival Blues Day in 1968. I saw Muddy (Waters) and George Smith was the harmonica player. And that was it!

**DC:** There is usually something like that for just about everyone I talk to. There's either a song they heard or a performance they saw that reaches out and grabs a hold of them. After that, they're gone. They are on the blues journey and no turning back.

**GS:** Yep, that's it. That was that turning point. (Charlie) Musselwhite and (Paul) Butterfield were both out here and they were real big. I saw both of those guys right about that same time. I saw (James) Cotton. His band came out with Luther Tucker, Alberto

Gianquinto, Francis Clay and Bob Anderson. That was another turning point. When I saw that Cotton band live, with that sound and that tone. I had never heard anything like that in my life.

**DC:** Speaking about tone, as long I've lived in the Bay Area gone to live blues performances and listened to other harmonica players, when it comes to tone your name is right after the word. As far as people in the Bay Area are concerned, and hopefully beyond this geography, you have one of the biggest, fattest, best tone that we all try to emulate. Did you come upon that yourself listening to records? Or did someone show you a few things over time?

**GS:** Kind of both. I got captivated by that fact. Musselwhite had good tone and Butterfield had good tone. But it wasn't like Cotton or George (Smith) or Jr. (Wells). It was just a different tone. After I had been trying to learn how to play for a little while, I just said if there is one thing I'm going to do, I don't care if I'm not the smartest or the most technical harp player, but I'm gong to get that tone. So I tried to pursue it. And got a lot of pointers along the way from a lot of different guys, too. Musselwhite and I became good friends about 1970/1971. At that time I was playing with Robben and Pat Ford, and we started opening for him. We opened for him at a couple different shows and he ended up snagging Robben and Pat out of the band. So that was the end of that band. (Laughs) But I got to hang out and I got to speak pretty close to Musselwhite. He gave me a lot of early instructions on tone and tongue blocking.

**DC:** There's part of that (tone) "magic"; tongue blocking. You can't get it without that.

**GS:** Absolutely. That's the number one fundamental thing when you put the harp in your mouth.

**DC:** The word tone as much as it is used, it's like the word "love". You know it when you have it, but hard to define. How would you define that? What is good tone to you?

**GS:** When I think of tone, I think of the combination of sound of big and open. It's a muted sound but it's a breathy sound at the same time. It's kind of the sound of the hands around the harp as much as it is the sound that resonates up and out of your chest through your throat. It's that and some substance of it that comes from the cupping of a microphone. The Little Walter style of putting your hands around the mic. You get that mute that come from the palms of your hands combined with what it does when you do it around a microphone. And it ends up at the other end of the cord coming through a tube amp. That's to me what I think of when I think of tone. When I think of tone, I think of those three, four or five things in combination

**DC:** You mentioned the band with Robben and Pat Ford, how old were you when you were in that band?

**GS:** I was eighteen. Let me see. No, I must have been nineteen because the reason the band started was because Robben graduated from high school and he was a year younger than me. They moved down to my house as soon as Momma let him leave home. They came down from Ukiah (CA) and we moved into a house and that's how that band got started.

**DC:** With that band and then your own blues band playing around the Bay Area, were you ever a "road warrior" like Mark Hummel, picking up and going away for several weeks at a time, comes back and then goes away again?

**GS:** Not really in that frequency. I've done out of town stuff and a few out of state and out of the country. I went to Europe once. I've never really been a "touring dog". Not really by choice, but it just never really developed that way. I pretty much played locally and on the West Coast. We would drive down to Los Angeles when there was a blues club down there. Go to Eugene or Portland, Oregon for a special show. And I've done a couple of little, tiny tours when we went to the Midwest and played in Chicago.

**DC:** You spent some time in Chicago? A couple of months or something?

**GS:** Yeah, we did. The late Alberto Giuanquinto, Cotton's piano player, then he was in B.B.'s (King) band for a while. And Santana's band for a while, too. We ran across him in Los Angeles when we had gone down to hang with Robben (Ford) who was living there at that time. And Alberto just kind of fell by. We hooked up. He had all these connections from Cotton's crowd. We went back to Minneapolis, Madison, Wisconsin and Chicago. We had a few dates booked and we hung around long enough to get some more gigs. We did that for a little while until a real good gig came up. When ski season opened we had a chance to do a couple of weeks in Aspen, Colorado so we left the Midwest and went to Aspen and hung out with the ski bunnies for a while. That was a good band too. That was Alberto on piano, Mike Watson, Jr. Watson, on guitar and Steve Gomes, a great bass player, who went on to play with a lot of the guys on the East Coast like Ronnie Earl, Darryl Nulisch and Room Full of Blues. That was a good band.

**DC:** Was that a time when Jr. Watson was still known as Mike Watson?

**GS:** Yeah, the Jr. thing didn't happen until he was with (Rod) Piazza.

**DC:** Your sort of a traditionalist in that you play Marine bands?

**GS:** I always played Marine Bands until about six years ago when they got so bad. I finally said, 'If I can't find something good, I'm going to at least buy something cheap.' So I started playing the Big Rivers. If I can find a good Marine Band, I prefer those. I'm having Rupert Oysler make me up a really nice one.

**DC:** And your standard mic?

**GS:** I have a few that I like. They're all the bullet style. One of my oldest that I managed to hang on to, is a old original Astatic crystal mic. I like that if I'm playing through a small amp. For the stage I usually use one that I put together myself which is a chromed Astatic case with a green bullet cartridge. That's got more of a bigger tone for playing with louder bands through bigger amps.

**DC:** Through your Bassman?

**GS:** Yeah.

**DC:** I saw you once at JJ's and you had, I suppose, a vintage Reverb tank. But then I saw you some months later and you had the little Danelectro Delay pedal.

**GS:** Yeah, I got excited when I saw that Danelectro was putting out what they called the "perfect" reproduction of 50's Echoplex. Which is not, at all. But I went out and got one just for the helluve of it. I don't really like it that much. I really like a little echo. But if it doesn't sound right in a live setting, I'll just do without it and I'll hang with the reverb.

**DC:** Do you do anything differently with your amps when you record? Do you use different amps for different songs?

**GS:** Yeah, on my most recent CD, Blues For Mr. B, I tried a few different combinations. What I found works, I don't even know where I first heard of it but somebody had discussed doing it, maybe in reference to Kim Wilson or something. I started trying on that record and a couple of the other Mountain Top sessions that I did in the studio, I'll bring a Bassman, preferably a real Bassman because they do sound a little different than the replicas, and I'll use that one in conjunction with the tiniest little tweed Princeton that I can get with the "rattiest" little sound. Then mic them and put them on different tracks. Then mix them down back together and it comes out really big.

**DC:** Sort of what Dave Barrett did on his recent CD?

**GS:** Yeah I gave him that little pointer.

**DC:** Yeah, he did that and a bunch of microphones, front, back and different distances.

**GS:** Yeah, that works good too to have a bunch of tracks and have both amps closed-miked and have an ambient mic. Then you get a real, little ghostly (sound), not an echo, but a different room sound to go with it.

**DC:** I don't think I've ever seen you play chromatic. Do you play chromatic at all?

**GS:** I do play chromatic. Not like Rod (Piazza), or William Clarke or (Mark) Hummel. They play a lot of chromatic. I'll break it out a couple times a night. I'll play Blues In The Dark, instrumental shuffle and then play a minor slow blues with it. I'm a little more confident on it now than I used to be. I've been liking playing it more.

**DC:** Do you have a big 280 (16 hole chromatic)?

**GS:** I have a few chromatics but the one I usually play on stage is, what do they call it, the CX. A funny looking Martian thing. Yeah that one.

**DC:** Any one of them is a real honker. You got to swallow the darn thing.

**GS:** Yeah you do.

**DC:** When you gig as you occasionally do at JJ's, do you arrange your own backup band or do you fall into what the club arranges for you?

**GS:** I have some guys that I been playing with off and on since the old days.

**DC:** Like Sammy (Varela) and people like that?

**GS:** Sammy and Mike Magello have both been with me, off and on, since the 70's. Tim Richards is the guy I like to use on drums and Jerry Bradley the bass player. But I've been having a lot fun doing casuals lately with Johnny Cat and Mike Phillips on up-right bass and some of the more traditional guys. In my old age I really like to get back to that.

**DC:** Speaking of back to the roots, you mentioned Musselwhite and Butterfield in terms of people you heard and that put you on the road, would they be your significant influences for you? Or is it Cotton, Little Walter and Sonny Boy (Williamson)?

**GS:** When I first started I'd have to say that Butterfield, Musselwhite, Cotton, Jr. Wells and George (Smith) were my main influences. But somewhere about the time when I meet Rick Estrin around the first San Francisco blue festival whatever year that was - he (Rick) was already doing pretty much straight Cotton. He had eliminated or never got any of those other guys influencing him especially the white guys. From that point on I tried to step away from that even though there is a certain basis of my style that still has a little bit of that influence in it. I really like the old guys the best. Little Walter, of course, most of all.

**DC:** When you are recording an instrumental, do you think out, prior to the session, the head and improvise on the body as you go along or do you chart it more deeply than that? Or are you like R.J. who says just turn it (tape) on and goes from nothing?

**GS:** I kind of go mostly right off the top of my head point of view. I like to play Off The Wall, Juke and Blues in the Dark. I like a lot of the big tunes. They are hardly hits, but the big influential instrumentals.

**DC:** To us harp players they are hits.

**GS:** Yeah, really. But then there is something to be said about just using your own improvisational skills too. Just going for it and trying keep it in that idiom.

**DC:** Do you listen to jazz and other musical styles to fill in some musical holes in your head? Or are you pretty much a blues guy?

**GS:** My wife is a big music listener too, so we have different kinds of stuff going in the house. If I'm picking 'em, I'll usually pick the Muddy, Walter, Sonny Boy, (Howlin') Wolf or something. We are big Louie Armstrong fans. We listen to a lot of jazz, Oscar Peterson and a lot of the swing guys. And bop stuff. I like to listen to lot of different kind of stuff. I have a fondness for reggae as well. There was a reggae chapter in this whole story. It wasn't a harmonica chapter, but I did play in some reggae bands in the 70's.

**DC:** Maybe that works into your rumbas, cha chas and your off-shuffle rhythms.

**GS:** A little bit. You know the most instructional thing about that music is that you learn about melody. You learn about a different interpretation using basically the same elements that are in blues. A lot of the early reggae "Rock Steady" stuff was all I-IV-V (chords). Or I chord to the minor II chord. A lot of interpretations of gospel progressions got "reggaeized" in the early 70's and late 60's.

**DC:** What advise would you give a beginning harmonica player? Someone who meets you meet at a JJ's and says, "I haven't been playing a long time. I just started 3 or 4 months ago and I want to go for it." What would you tell someone like that?

**GS:** That question comes up a lot. I try to tell the guy, if he knows what he likes already, to buy as much of that kind of recorded material and just stuff it all into his brain. Just to start to have a frame of reference to start learning how to play, to absorb all that music that you can. So as your physical skills improve then you can say, 'Now I can learn this.', cause it is something you are already familiar with. I would say stuff your head full of the stuff you are trying to learn and listen to it constantly. And try to learn the basic fundamentals of rhythm and melody. Rhythm probably more important than anything else for a beginner. Cause if they ain't got it, (laughs). A lot of guys, especially harmonica players since it's such an odd-ball instrument to learn, learn about harp and learn how to work around the ten-hole harp, but don't necessarily know what the blues is comprised of, what music is made up of. Try to find a basic knowledge of the components of the music. By the time your physical skills improve, you are more of a musician. As far as the harp goes, I always tell my students, it's very hard to teach somebody harmonica because it's the only instrument you can't see while you play. The original blues players were all completely self-taught for the most part, maybe hung around with other guys to learn how to play. But you got to just try and figure it out. You have to teach yourself how to bend notes. I can tell you what my mouth does, but you have to train your mouth. I often refer to it as learning a foreign language. You have to learn the mouth sounds and you have to do that yourself. Once you can bend the notes, and have a little bit of control over the ins

and outs, bends and half-bends, the other techniques are just a matter a learning a few more things; the sounds of the blues, the trills, the vibratos, that kind of stuff. Layer by layer, you layer it on and, by God, pretty soon you're playing.

**DC:** The last question is the flip side of that. Someone is a more advanced player, been playing in a band a while, pretty decent, has techniques but then says, 'You know, I'm missing something. There is something about the music where I need go further'. You hear them play and they produce the sounds, but something is missing. What would you tell them?

**GS:** That comes up pretty often too. I get those kind of students quite often too. What I find most of all, not in all cases, when they say, 'I can play but something is missing.' what really missing is that they haven't done those things that I just described. They haven't gotten the fundamental mastery over all of the notes that are available on the harp. They don't know how to bend the 3 (hole) and 2 (hole) and stuff like that. They think they do, but when you nail them down and ask for hole number 2 bent, it's not really there. But if that's not the case and they are a half way decent player and something kind of missing still, you have to listen to them and figure what it is. Sometimes it's a "brain" thing; sometimes they are not a sophisticated mental musician. A lot of harmonica players aren't, which is OK. George Smith wasn't a classically trained player, but he was a genius. So if something is missing try and figure out what it is by getting some lessons, or a teacher, or an advisor. Try and nail it down to what is missing. Usually it's just lack of experience of playing with a band. They sound OK in the bedroom but when they try and collaborate with somebody it doesn't come out right.

**DC:** That's another set of skills, to play live with somebody else or a whole band and interact with a singer and other musicians doing their thing.

**GS:** Right.

**DC:** Gary, thanks so much. I appreciate you taking some time to talk and contribute to our next edition of HarmonicaSessions. I look forward to your hear you at your upcoming gigs.

### **Recording Discography (Release Date, Album Title & Label)**

2003            **Blues For Mr. B**, Mountain Top Records

1974            **Up The Line'**, Messaround Records

### **Guest appearances and anthologies include:**

**I Don't Want My Blues Colored Bright** (Sonny Rhodes, Advent)

**Blues Harp Meltdown**, Mountain Top Records

**West Coast Blues Sessions**, Mountain Top Records

**Bay Blues, An Anthology of San Francisco Blues**, label unknown

**Live at 1976 The San Francisco Blues Festival**, Jefferson Records