

Accompaniment Playing - Part 4

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So far we have looked at accompaniment from the standpoint of playing bass lines and horn lines (vertical and horizontal). Though these devices have been used since the founders of blues harmonica, these are more modern approaches to accompaniment playing. We'll now journey into the art of what we'll call traditional harmonica accompaniment.

Traditional harmonica accompaniment is what you'd hear Little Walter play when Muddy Waters was singing, or Big Walter Horton backing Johnny Shines or James Cotton backing Otis Spann. This is also what you'd hear when modern players like Rod Piazza accompany a traditional player such as Jimmy Rogers or Jerry Portnoy backing Eric Clapton. This approach is based on interacting with vocals. Let's first spent some time understanding how vocal phrasing works.

Section 1 – Understanding Vocal Phrasing

Let's review the **12 Bar Blues Progression** below.

The diagram shows the 12 Bar Blues Progression in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It is presented in three staves, each with a treble clef. The first staff is labeled 'I' and contains four measures of diagonal slashes. The second staff is labeled 'IV' for the first two measures and 'I' for the last two measures. The third staff is labeled 'V' for the first measure, 'IV' for the second, 'I' for the third, and 'V' for the fourth, which ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

The most common form that blues vocals take on is that the first two measures of each line are sung and the last two measures are used for instrumental fill. Vocal lines commonly follow the **AAB** rhyme scheme. The first line is sung and labeled **A**. The second line repeats (**A**). The third line answers the thought posed in **A** and is labeled **B**. The harp fill after each vocal section should change to add interest. The last fill you will commonly use is a turnaround lick. A diagram of this is shown below. An example of this can be heard on Jimmy Reed's "You Don't Have To Go," first chorus.

A	Harp Fill
A	Harp Fill
B	Harp Fill

The second most common form that blues vocals take on is where the first line (four measures of the I chord) is filled completely with vocals. In this form the harmonica enters for the first time on the 7th measure. A diagram of this is shown below. An example of this can also be heard on Jimmy Reed's "You Don't Have To Go," second chorus.

A	
A	Harp Fill
B	Harp Fill

The third most common form that blues vocals take on doesn't leave much time at all for the soloist, though with a catchy repetitive line played for the harp fills you can do a good job of making it work. An example of this can be heard on Rice Miller's (Sonny Boy Williamson II) "She's My Baby."

A	Harp Fill	A	Harp Fill
A	Harp Fill	A	Harp Fill
B		Harp Fill	

Section 2 – The Art of Fills

Now that you have an idea of how vocals and fills work in time, let's now look at how to approach playing these fill areas. Download the MP3 example file provided on the website. This is John Garcia singing his song "Travelin' Man Blues." You will need an "A" harmonica for these examples.

The first study is to play when John's not singing. Play along with the sample, making up your own fills or play the example demonstrated below.

Ex. 1

4 4 4 3'' 3 4 2 2'' 1 2

2 2 2 2+ 2 2 3'' 3 2

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2'' 1 1

Now play similar lines, but begin as John starts to end his line. As a vocal line finishes, it will commonly start to diminish in volume or the vocalist will hold the last note, giving you a window to start playing your fill. At the end of your fill start to lower your volume and let the last note or two hang over where the vocalist begins again. The focus here is to try to make the transition from vocals to harmonica fill and harmonica fill back to vocals smooth. You can think of this as the technique of overlapping lines. Play along with John again trying this new idea. An example of this is demonstrated below.

Ex. 2

5 4 4 3 4+ 3' 4' 4+ 3' 2 2'' 1

2 2'' 2 2 2+ 2 2 3'' 3 2 2 2+ 2+

2'' 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2'' 1 1

Your main role as an accompaniment player is to support the song. You never want to get in the way of the vocals or another instrument while they're soloing. Play again with John using the previous concept and record yourself. Listen to the recording and focus on how you and the vocals flow. Do you hear any spots where the harmonica comes in too early and disrupts the vocals? How about any spots where the harmonica ends too late and disrupts the start of the vocals? This is the only way to gauge if what you're playing is adding or taking away.

With all of this in mind, let's get a little more active. John leaves a small space in the middle of his line where you can peak your head out and play. Demonstrated below are the same fills as our last example with a two-note lick in that small rest area of his vocals.

Ex. 3

You can hear that your accompaniment is becoming more part of the song, not just a harmonica player jumping in for his two cents worth at every break.

Section 3 – Playing Under the Vocals

Sometimes it's important to keep the sound of the harmonica in the mix all the time. This is especially the case if you're playing in a guitar and harmonica duo. Holding a note or playing a chug (chording) pattern helps to add to the rhythm and texture of the song. This is especially important when the guitar goes to solo; it's your job to keep the rhythm and chord change of the song going, and you can't do that just playing fills.

Let's tread lightly and play a single note under the vocals that matches chord change. For the **I** chord we'll use the root note 2 draw (G on a C harmonica). For the **IV** chord we'll use the same note (it's the 5th of the **IV** chord). When the **V-IV-I Transition** comes we'll use the 1 draw (root note of the **V** chord) to the 1 blow (root note of the **IV** chord) and back into our fills (turnaround) for the last two measures of the **I** chord. Make sure that when playing behind the vocals you play quietly. When speaking to Rod Piazza on the subject he stated, "If you can hear yourself well, you're too loud. You should barely be able to hear yourself." You're melting into the volume of the band, but keeping your sound in the mix. This is demonstrated below.

Ex. 4

Ex. 6

1 2' 3" 3 4+ 3" 3 4 5 5 4 4' 3' 4+ 3+ 3' 2 2" 2 4 4+ 3+ 3' 2 2" 1 1 2 2+ 2 3" 1

2 3 4 2 5 4 4 3' 4+ 3' 4' 4+ 3' 2 2" 1

2 3 4 2 2" 2 2 2 2+ 2 2 3" 3 2 2 2+ 2+ 1

13 1 2' 3" 3 4+ 3" 3 4 5 5 4 4' 3' 4+ 3+ 3' 2 2" 2 4 4+ 3+ 3' 2 2" 1 1 3

Let's go back to some other ways to play under the vocals. Playing a chordal pattern (chug) under the vocals is a great option. Demonstrated below are some patterns you can use.

Ex. 7

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

Ex. 8

3 3 3+ 3+ 2 2 3+ 3+ 3 3 3+ 3+ 2 2 3+ 3+

2 2 2+ 2+ 1 1 2+ 2+ 2 2 2+ 2+ 1 1 2+ 2+

1 1 1+ 1+ 1+ 1+ 1 1 1+ 1+ 1 1 1+ 1+

Ex. 9

2 4+ 4 4+ 2 2 4+ 4 2 4+ 2

3 3 3

Ex. 10

Ex. 11

Here's a full example that uses one of these chordal patterns. Play softly when John is singing.

Ex. 12

A quick side note before we finish. If you're sitting in on a live performance, listen carefully at first to find out if another player (such as the lead guitarist) is going to take the fills. Don't always assume you can play any available hole. Some songs guitar will fill, some harmonica will, some piano will fill, and some a couple players will fill. Just be aware that this is a possible area to step on another players' toes.

That concludes this month's focus. Next issue we'll continue our study of accompaniment playing by looking at how to use reserved soloing backing and hooks to add an intense groove to a song.

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