



Bent Over Overbends

By Allen Holmes, Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine

I've heard overbends sound bad, piercing, like an animal in pain. I've heard players use overbends because they can, at the expense of musicality. Players have said, "Overbends are not part of the blues tradition." "Why don't you just play the chromatic." "I always can tell when a player is using the overbends because their tone is harsh." "The overbends don't blend with the other notes on the harmonica." "Overbends are too difficult to obtain, unless you are Howard Levy."

Many of these concerns are legitimate; however, by the time you finish reading this article, you will love overbends and want to use them! If Little Walter was alive today, he undoubtedly would be an overbender and...

My purpose in writing this article is to dispel some myths about overbends and get people excited and passionate about expressing themselves musically with the harmonica.

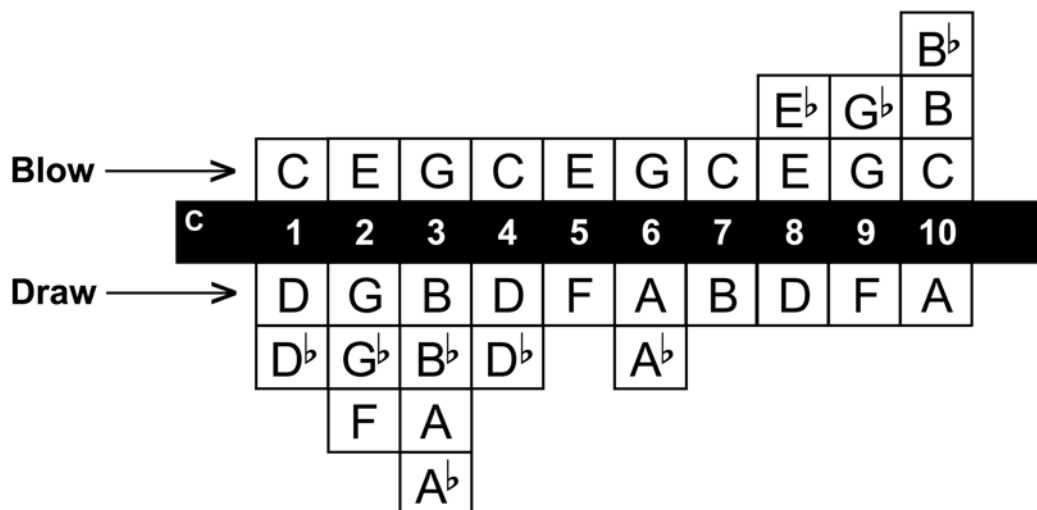
The diatonic harmonica is a miraculous accident. The instrument was initially designed to play diatonic melodies with basic chordal accompaniment. Its note bending capability was happenstance. Because blow and draw reeds share the same chamber, bending notes was possible through an interaction of the reeds. Overbends are different in that just one reed works as the note is played and bent.

Before delving into the overbends, let's discuss how standard bending works on the harmonica. But before discussing standard bends, let's discuss how the tone of the harmonica is made. Have you ever removed the cover plates and plucked one of the reeds? Try it and you'll hear a soft ting as the reed begins to vibrate. This ting sounds nothing like the harmonica! It is important to understand that the reed by itself does not make the sound of the harmonica. The pitch of the reed is produced by the reed traveling in and out of the reed plate slot. The player's breath in combination with the head and the hands makes the resonant tone when playing harmonica.

The length of each of the 20 reeds varies to create different pitches. Longer reeds are lower in pitch and vibrate more slowly. Shorter reeds are higher in pitch and vibrate more quickly. While bending a draw note, the tongue moves back slightly, lowering the resonant pitch of the mouth. The same concept applies to bending a pitch while whistling. Try whistling a high note and then slowly slide the pitch down to the lowest note you are able to whistle. Your tongue should start near your upper set of teeth and then, as your whistle descends in pitch, the tongue moves back and lower in the mouth. The tongue and shape of the mouth move in a similar way when bending notes on the harmonica.

The standard bends on the harmonica involve an interaction between both the draw and blow reeds. For example, on the 3 draw note, only the draw reed is working. As the pitch is bent downward, the blow reed begins to work with the draw reed. When the 3 draw is bent all the way down, the draw reed stops working and only the blow reed works. The interval between each set of draw and blow reeds dictates how far a note can be bent.

The notes available from standard bending are diagrammed below.



The 1 draw is D and the 1 blow is C. With bending you can obtain any note between these two pitches and, in this case, the D-flat is the only note available. It is possible to bend the pitch slightly below the D-flat, but not all the way down to the C. The largest range of pitch using standard bends is on the 3 hole. The 3 blow is G and the 3 draw is B. Therefore, it is possible to bend and obtain all of the notes between these pitches, B-flat, A and A-flat. The E on the blow 5 is harmonically 1/2 step below or right next to the F on the 5 draw. There is no note between and E and an F and thus no bend. It is possible to draw bend the 5 hole and play a flat F, but it is still an F and not a new note.

At the seventh hole the harmonica changes from draws being higher than blows to blows being higher than draws. This is where the harmonica flip flops and becomes confusing for us dyslexics. I blame Richter. We must switch to blow bending and, again, the bent notes available are the pitches between the blow and draw notes.

The overbends are obtained through altering the embouchure, redirecting the air stream, and providing more support or pressure from the diaphragm to play the note. Overbends may be played puckering or by tongue blocking. The beauty of these notes is that they are bends and contain a range of pitch. The 6 hole overblow has the largest range of pitch of any note on the harmonica, including the 3 draw bend.

When overbending, the process is different than when playing standard bends. Only one reed works when the overblow is played. The 6 blow is G and the 6 draw is A. The A is higher in pitch than the G. When overblowing on the 6 blow, the pitch doesn't go down, it goes up. The note that sounds is the pitch of the draw reed, but a half step higher to B-flat. This is diagrammed below. Overbends are shown in the colored boxes.

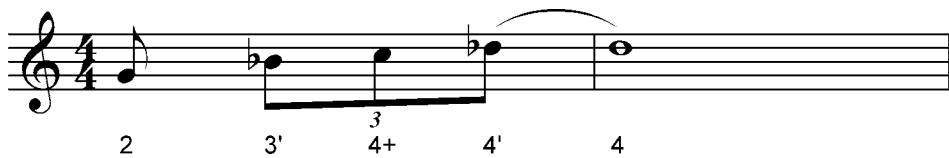
										B ^b
	E ^b	A ^b	C	E ^b	F [#]	B ^b		E ^b	G ^b	B
	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	E	G	C
c	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	D	G	B	D	F	A	B	D	F	A
	D ^b	G ^b	B ^b	D ^b		A ^b	D ^b	F	A ^b	D ^b
		F	A							
			A ^b							

A complete overbend chart is diagrammed below. Notice that overbends can continue to be bent (bending the overbends) to create more pitches.

Overbends include overblows and overdraws. The overbends are no more difficult to obtain than the standard bends, especially on a properly adjusted harmonica. It is possible to play overbends on stock harmonicas; however, modifications which increase the air tightness of the harmonica have enabled players to obtain the overbends more easily and to increase the range of the bends. The most basic of these modifications involves reducing the gap between the reeds and the reed plate.

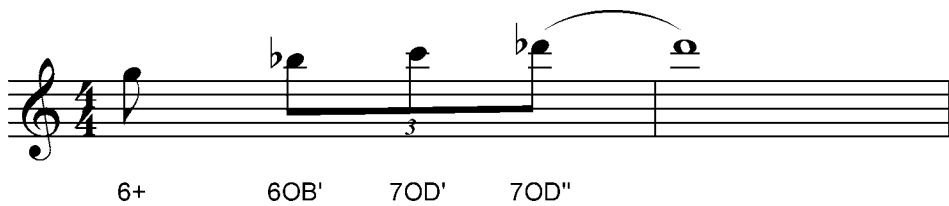
To gap the reeds, remove the cover plates and gently push each blow and draw reed down into the reed plate. If pushed too far, the corresponding blow or draw note will "stick" or hesitate when played and the reed will remain in its slot, cutting off the air stream and the sound. The reed gap then must be increased by gently pushing the reed away from the reed plate. Through trial and error, a reed offset can be obtained conducive to playing the overbends, yet not compromising the standard blow and draw notes. In addition to making the overbends more playable, gapping also improves the response of the standard draw and blow bends.

Blues Birdhead recorded the first overblow in October of 1929. It was close to 40 years later that the instrument was played chromatically by Howard Levy, who coined the term overblow. It is true that overbends have not been part of the blues tradition, but they work so well for the blues, especially in cross harp. The following common cross harp blues lick is notated and played on a C harmonica in the key of G. If the tablature system below is unfamiliar, refer to the notation key at the end of this article.

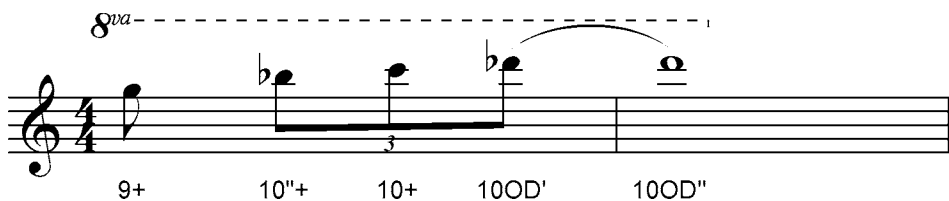


This lick, which goes right up the blues scale, cannot be duplicated with the use of standard bending in the middle and high octaves of the harmonica. With the use of overbends, it can be played in all 3 octaves.

The middle octave would be:



The high octave would be:



By bending the overbends, it is possible to obtain the blue notes, which are ranges of pitch and essential for the blues.

The tone of the overbends is unique. The tone 6 overblow is piercing and powerful. I often mute the note with my hands to reduce its bite. The 7 overdraw has an airy, unstable quality in tone which is beautiful and especially fitting for the blues. Rather than focusing on how the overbends don't blend with the other notes, find ways to embrace their tonal uniqueness, just as there is uniqueness in every note on the harmonica. The blows sound different than the draws and the bent notes sound different than the unbent notes.

Initially, overbends were used to play the 'missing' notes on the harmonica or notes not available through blow, draw and standard bending. However, through bending the overbends, other pitches may be played. In other words, it is possible to play the first overbend that is produced and then bend the note sharper to create more pitches. Diagrammed below again is the complete overbend chart (C major diatonic harmonica) for your reference.

Blow, draw and notes achieved through standard bending are in white boxes. The notes achieved through overbending are in the colored boxes. It is possible to play a full chromatic scale on just holes 4 and 5 of the harmonica! There are as many notes available overbending as there are blowing, drawing and standard bending combined! Moreover, I believe this chart is incomplete. I think it is possible to bend the overbends farther than the notes listed on the above diagram. Recently, I learned it is also possible to overdraw holes 1-6 and overblow holes 7-10. The overbend pitch ranges will fluctuate depending on the key of the harmonica. On low harps, for example, it is difficult to overblow holes 1-4, but the overdraws on holes 7-10 are much easier to play and bend.

I am astounded daily by the diatonic harmonica. This instrument is full of undiscovered possibilities. Recently, I learned how to play the 3 draw and the 3 draw full bend simultaneously. The harmonica opens up new doors for musical expression to the point where I am compelled to quit my day job and make music my life's work. I look forward to writing my next article and discussing how to approach a tune on the harmonica. I'll cover options for playing the melody and approaches to improvisation.

Notation key

The notation key illustrates various techniques on a single staff. The notes and their corresponding labels are as follows:

- 4 Draw
- 4+ Blow
- 3' Whole Step Bend
- 3'' Half Step Bend
- 3''' Minor Third Bend
- 6OB' 6 Overblow (1st Degree)
- 6OB'' 6 Overblow (2nd Degree)
- 7OD' 7 Overdraw (1st Degree)
- 7OD'' 7 Overdraw (2nd Degree)
- 4 Dip
- 5/4 Shake