



Will the Real Marine Band Please Step Up to the Bandstand

“Monster Harmonica Workbench” with Kinya Pollard
Mel Bay’s HarmonicaSessions® eZine

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I first had an opportunity to play the new Hohner Marine Band Deluxe 2005 harmonica at the January 2005 NAMM convention in Anaheim, California. Not until recently; however, was I able to place an order for the new model. I felt like a little kid at Christmas time when the package arrived from the Best Li'l Harp House (Keys of A and C).

From the perspective of a diatonic harmonica customizer, I wanted to provide our readers with my “out of the box” experience and assessment of the new Marine Band Deluxe 2005 and how it compares to the traditional Marine Band 1896.

How does it look?

The top of the box with Silver on Black printing proudly announces that there is a new Marine Band in town and beckons the player. The red faux interior fitted against the black makes for an initial impressive presentation.



The durable and non-tarnishing chrome cover plates display the new markings of the Marine Band DELUXE no.2005. Gone are the cover plate nails. Replaced with four (two on each side) high quality brass “straight slotted binding posts” it gives the illusion that the cover plates are screwed onto the comb. Examining the rear of the harmonica reveals the folds, or break of the cover plates, bent inward to strengthen and minimize the famous Marine Band CF (crush factor). Most importantly, this, along with the rear crest of the cover plate arching steeper, further “opens” the back of the harmonica and maximizes sound projection.



The pear wood comb has been significantly modified with the sharp edges of the mouthpiece (tines) rounded off and the four corners beveled. While the perimeter and ten chambers of the comb have been sealed to prevent swelling, the top and bottom surfaces of the comb have not to preserve the natural density of the pear wood material. Hohner experts would support this to be a key ingredient of the traditional Marine Band experience.

The reed plates are *stock* Marine Band 1896, with exception to the method of attachment to the comb. Replacing the fourteen nails are three brass bolts. From a maintenance position, this is a major improvement.

How does the Marine Band 2005 play and feel?

Both MB2005 harmonicas played consistently well across the entire range of the instrument. Fans of the original Marine Band 1896 will enjoy the familiar tones and nuances. In my mouth, the sealed comb with rounded edges, felt almost as comfortable as the plastic comb from the Hohner Special 20.

How does the MB2005 compare to the MB1896?

Discomfort issues aside (the sharp corners of the stock comb tines are not user friendly), my first sample MB1896a played quite well. In fact, recordings of the same passage played on both the MB2005 and MB1896a were indiscernible to my ears. The second sample MB1896b; however, was a different experience. MB1896b was extremely “leaky,” making the harmonica difficult to play.

Eureka!

By now many readers are probably wondering how an “out of the box” Marine Band 1896 can play as well as the new Marine Band 2005 – costing three times as much.

The Devil is in the details. I examined the reed set calibrations for both the MB1896, as well as the MB2005, with 4x magnification. The MB1896a was adjusted with optimum offsets. The MB1896b, on the other hand, was not adjusted properly. Most revealing about both MB2005 harmonicas was an elevated level of care and attention to the reed offset process.

By simple deduction, the reed plates clearly are the “heart & soul” of your harmonica. The variance in playability between our sample Marine Band harmonicas pointed squarely to reed calibration (i.e. gapping, offset). *Readers of past issues know all to well that proper reed calibration makes the difference between an instrument you play and one you keep in the box.*

Final Thoughts

If your desire is to “supercharge” your Marine Band playing experience and bring it up to the performance levels of a customized harmonica (the ultimate in effortless harmonica navigation) you have two viable options:

1. With the Marine Band Deluxe 2005 (\$55.96 Best Li'l Harp House) you have only the reed plates to modify, e.g. reed slot sizing (embossing), reed curling, etc. The cover plates and combs have been taken care of for you.
2. With the Marine Band 1896 (\$17.65 Best Li'l Harp House), you will have to modify all three major component: comb, cover plates and reed plates

Only you can measure the value of your time to justify the economics.

On the other hand, if you simply want to play a good “out of the box” harmonica with a predictably dependable experience, you may want to answer the question: “How many Marine Band 1896 harmonicas do I have to buy to find one good one”? If the answer is more than three, the clear winner is the Marine Band Deluxe 2005.

“Hit it and Quit it”!

Kinya Pollard
The Harpsmith

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