

Cover Up Revisited

“Monster Harmonica Workbench” with Kinya Pollard
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Last year I wrote two articles about cover plates, “Altered States” and “The Big Cover Up.” Unfortunately I did not include photographs for the “Altered States” edition. For the benefit of those readers who requested images, I am revisiting the topic of cover plates.

Standing in front of a classroom of eager Harmonicats, feeling more like a Magician than a Musician, I held up two Hohner Marine Band harmonicas – both in the key of A. I selected the harmonica in my left hand, grabbed the bullet mic, and played a few bars of “Horton’s Boogie.” While the notes still lingered in the air, I switched to the second harmonica and played the progression verbatim. Immediately, my students heard the obvious variations.

I held up the first harmonica and asked the student body to describe what they heard (my amazing rendition of Horton’s Boogie notwithstanding). Responses like: *tinny, bright, reedy, thin, and brassy* were shouted. I then held up the second harmonica, and almost in perfect unison, the class yelled out: *muted (brown), bassy, fat, and in your face!*

The second harmonica had all the positive tonal attributes that my students were desperately striving to achieve. How could the same Marine Band model sound so different? Was it my technique? ...was it my equipment? ...or was it the harmonica? A closer examination of both Marine Band harmonicas revealed that it was not Voodoo, but simply that I had “altered” the cover plates (outer shell of the harmonica).

The design of the cover plates makes a significant impact on the audible characteristics of the instrument.

The first harmonica had stock Hohner Marine Band cover plates (virtually unchanged since Mathias Hohner patented the Marine Band in 1896). Trademark of the Marine Band are the two “vents” (slots) cut into the sides of each of cover plates. The second harmonica had Hering Master Blues cover plates retrofitted on top of the Marine Band harmonica. The Hering Master Blues cover plate is identical in shape of the Marine Band with no vents!



The tendency of a harmonica (particularly amplified) fitted with non-vented cover plates is to sound *muted*, while harmonicas fitted with vented cover plates sound *brighter*.

I spoke to living harmonica legend, Rod Piazza, about his Marine Band harmonica holding techniques. Rod confirmed that when he wants to “fatten” his tone, he would wrap his hands around the sides of the Marine Band to seal off any leakage. In fact, Rod recalled that when he was performing with the late great George “Harmonica” Smith, George would come up behind him and squeeze his grip tighter around the harmonica and bullet mic.

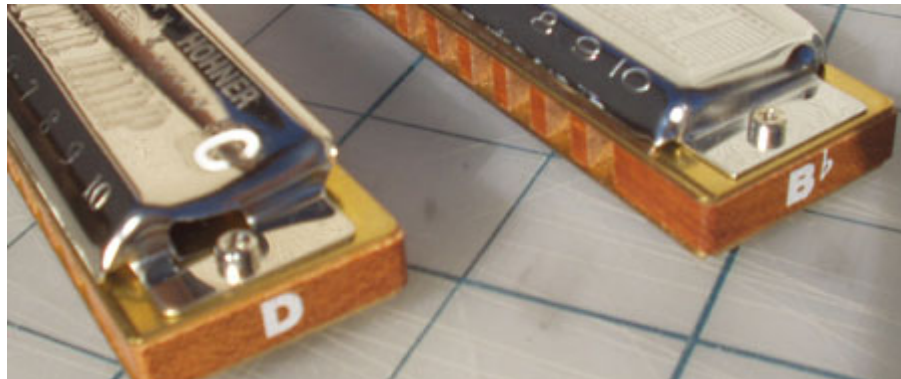
The message here is that if you feel comfortable with vented cover plate type harmonicas, but desire a fatter tone: (a) modify your technique or (b) alter the cover plates:

Modifying Hohner Marine Band Harmonicas

- 1) Carefully insert a quarter into the back opening (nearest the sides), then twist the quarter until the cover plate pops off. Discard the four nails.
- 2) Remove the cover plates from a Hering Blues Master harmonica.
- 3) Lay up the cover plates onto the Marine Band harmonica and mark the centers of both holes. To avoid debris entering the harmonica, carefully cover the reeds plates and mouthpiece with a low tack masking tape.
- 4) Safely clamp the harmonica, drill through the comb two 1/8” holes, then dust off the debris.
- 5) Carefully remove the masking tape, and then reassemble the Hering Blues Master onto the Marine Band, using Special 20 cover plate nuts and bolts or Hohner MS bolts.

Modifying Hohner Big River Harmonicas

- 1) Remove vented Big River cover plates and replace with any of the following; Hohner Blues Harp, Cross Harp, Pro Harp, or Meisterklasse cover plates.
- 2) Or vice versa – install Big River cover plates onto a Hohner Blues Harp for a traditional Marine Band type feel.



Try This Out:

With a little bit of effort (relative term isn't it?), replace the cover plates from your Hohner Special 20 harmonica with Suzuki ProMaster harmonica cover plates. This remarkable fitting combination looks terrific and plays great. When amplified, this hybrid harmonica produces fat and muted tones!



Until next time, keep tinkering and remember:

“Arrange whatever pieces come your way”
- Virginia Woolf

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