



Chromatic for Diatonic Players

Part 6 – Left Field Embouchure

By Winslow Yerxa, Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine

February 2006

Last time I promised to go more deeply into tongue blocked chordal textures. But first it's time to explore something rarely talked about—the left side of the mouth.

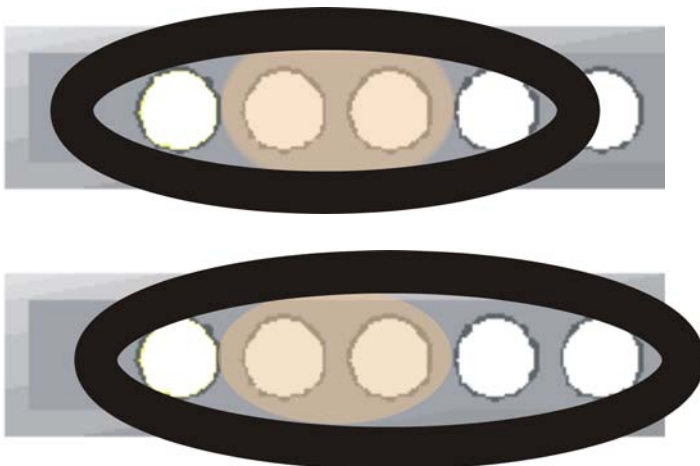
Why?

In the world of tongue blocking the right side of the mouth is the star of the show, with the rest of the mouth as the supporting cast. The right side delivers the melody, while the tongue and the rest of the mouth help isolate notes or add chordal texture. Using the left corner of the mouth for melody is talked about only as a vague concept for playing wide leaps—usually by classical musicians. Yet this supporting player can be a far stronger ally if it's given more screen time.

Basic techniques like octaves and other split intervals require you to play one note out of the right side and the other out of the left. So it follows that learning to play out of the left side is a needed skill. By learning to use your left side, you'll have an easier time with split intervals and will also have another powerful and versatile tool in your bag of techniques.

Split intervals

Split intervals are played at both sides of the mouth at the same time. The tongue blocks the notes in the middle while the left and right sides of the mouth each play either one note or, less commonly, chords of two or more adjacent notes:



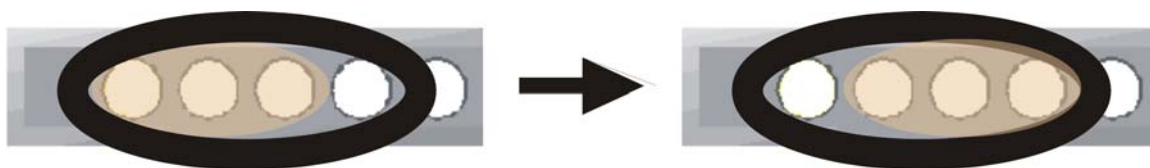
The split can be described by the number of holes blocked with the tongue. For instance, the previous examples are both two-hole splits.

One of the most common problems learning to do a split interval is learning to isolate a single note with the left side of the mouth. Therefore the need to get the left side of your embouchure up to speed. This will be our focus for this installment. We'll go into split intervals in greater detail next time around.

Learning the Left side

To start, simply try playing a tongue blocked single note the usual way, out of the right side of your mouth. Relax and observe the sensations of the harmonica in your mouth, your jaw, tongue, and lips. Play a relaxed single note with full tone. Play a long blow note and a long draw note.

Now simply glide your tongue over to the right so that it blocks the right side of your mouth and opens up a hole at the left side, to play a lower note:



Many things can happen at this point. The ideal thing is that a clean, clear note comes out of the left side of your embouchure. But this may not happen right away. It may simply take some work so that you can develop the motor skills and familiarity required in the tongue and lips. But there may be some bigger adjustments required.

Mirror, Mirror...

Look in a mirror as you play a tongue blocked single note on the right side. Do things look symmetrical or asymmetrical? Is your face all bunched up or pinched on one side, but not the other? Is the harmonica tilted or rotated to one side? If you see these things, they may not be wrong or bad. There are many good reasons for doing whatever is necessary to make the sounds you want come out of the instrument. But, they may require some adjustment so that you can easily access notes with the left side of your mouth.

Our goals here are to:

- 1) Play single notes and melodies with the left corner of the mouth.
- 2) Combine left and right side playing at the same time.

If you have a harp/hands/face configuration that excludes these possibilities, you need to find the adjustments that will allow for them. I'm not suggesting a total and radical realignment of everything you know, just whatever minor adjustments will allow you to play out of the left side of your mouth. Everybody is different, so it's up to you to find them, possibly with in-person coaching from a teacher.

A key point: remember to relax and make small adjustments. Stretch your comfort level, but avoid strain and tension. Find a relaxed central place that allows you to access the harmonica with both sides of your mouth.

Exercises

Just breathing in and out in a relaxed way on a left-blocked single note is a good way to start. Choose a note somewhere in the middle of the instrument. Pay attention to the feeling of playing out of the left side. It's new and different, and it needs to become familiar and assured.

Concentrate on getting a clear single note with relaxation in your hands, jaw, lips and tongue. Once you can do that, just alternate between blow and draw. Listen for tone, and concentrate on allowing the tone to emerge and grow—again in a relaxed way.

Then we can work on simple, familiar material, including melodies and scales. One good place to start is with the material already presented in Part 1 of this series:

<http://harmonicasessions.com/feb05/chromatic.html>

This will take you through simple scales and melodies. Just play them with a left-side tongue block.

Touring The Neighborhood

Ideally, playing out of the left side of your mouth is just a matter of sliding your tongue a few millimeters to the right. Despite that fact, you may feel like you have radically repositioned your hands, head, and the harp. The note is coming out of an unfamiliar place, so your perception of physical placement shifts in proportion.

Again, getting familiar is important. Try playing scales and melodies first in the middle part of the instrument, and then in octaves farther to the left and right. Get familiar with playing out of the left side in all parts of the instrument.

Left-Side Versatility

To encourage you a little, here are audio examples of some of the many things that left-side playing makes possible:

One-hole split harmony: (visit website for 1-block.mp3 example)

This is played with a one-hole block—one hole blocked out between left and right sides.

Two-hole split harmony: (visit website for 2-block.mp3 example)

This is played with a two-hole block—two holes blocked out between left and right sides.

Octaves: (visit website for octaves.mp3 example)

This is played with a three-hole block—three holes blocked out between left and right sides.

Sparkle vamping: (visit website for sparkle.mp3 example)

Alternating melody with chords played to the right side gives a sparkling sound because the chords are higher-pitched than the melody.

Left-right alternations (no example for this)

Wide leaps and back-and-forth motion that would be awkward with a single embouchure can be easy and smooth when alternating left and right sides of the embouchure.

Point-to-point: (visit website for ptp.mp3 example)

Every melody note jumps back and forth between left and right sides.

Right side melody supported by left: (visit website for rtmel.mp3 example)

Left side melody supported by right: (visit website for lmel.mp3 example)

Melody fragments alternating between left and right: (visit website for altmel.mp3 example)

Next Time:

Next time we'll look at integrating right and left side embouchures to play split intervals.

Notation Key

Please visit <http://www.harmonicsessions.com/feb05/ChromaticTab.pdf> for a notation key.