



Mark Hummel Interview

by Dennis Carelli, www.harmonicassessions.com

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DC: **We are going to start with the evitable boring questions. When were you born?**

MH: '55, December 15th

DC: **On the east coast?**

MH: Yeah, Connecticut

DC: **Then you migrated?**

MH: Well I didn't, my Mom did

DC: **Were you very young?**

MH: Yeah, I was a year old

DC: **How old were you when you started playing the harmonica?**

MH: About fourteen I think

DC: **Who or what inspired you to do that (play the harmonica)?**

MH: I started playing in high school. A lot of my friends were serious about the guitar, but not very serious about the harmonica even though a lot of them played it. But they didn't play it very well. So since I felt kind of backwards on that and I was not very good on the guitar, I thought maybe I can get good on the harmonica. The harmonica just felt like a natural fit compared to the guitar.

DC: **When did you start playing professionally?**

MH: That's kind of a loose definition. I started playing in bands in high school so by the time I was sixteen I was playing in bands. But I didn't do any paying gigs I don't think until I moved up to the Bay Area, probably 1973, something like that.

DC: **Was that blues or was that more rock at that time for you, those first paying gigs?**

MH: It was blues and rock, but definitely blues was what I felt kind of more comfortable on. I played everything. Back then the popular stuff was everything from J. Geils to War, Led Zeppelin...

DC: **Stones?**

MH: Stones, whatever they would let me play on I would play on.

DC: **Do you play any other instruments?**

MH: I goof around on the guitar, but I'm not very good at it.

DC: **In the privacy of your own home?**

MH: Sometimes on stage. When I am in a jam session or something, sometimes I'll go up there and make a fool of myself on the guitar.

DC: **Who are the artists that you would say had the largest influence on you as a player?**

MH: Oh, mainly the Chicago blues guys: Little Walter, Muddy Waters, Otis Rush, Sonny Boy Williamson, Jimmy Reed. But it really goes pretty far out there as far as what I listen to. I listen to a tons of jazz. I listen to a lot of players...

DC: **Saxophone players?**

MH: Well, saxophone players, but singers as well. I love Billy Holiday. She's a huge favorite of mine. I love Count Basie and all the people in his band; Lester Young. I like Buddy and Ella Johnson. I have quite an array of stuff that I listen to. I listen to everything from old country and western to...

DC: **Real country and western.**

MH: Yeah, the real stuff, Lefty Frizzell and stuff like that. I listen to rock sometimes too. The old psychedelic rock stuff is the stuff I've been listening to lately. So I'm out there.

DC: **What brand of harps do you play and do you modify them at all?**

MH: I mainly play Marine Bands. And I have a guy in Brazil that has been modifying a bunch of harps for me, Marcio Abdo.

DC: **So what does he do? Does he change the gap?**

MH: He gaps them, coats the combs, the whole thing. Bolts them. (Joe) Filisko has done a lot of harps for me too. Not a lot, but he's done a number of harps for me.

DC: **Microphones? I know you use a Ruskin at one time. Do you still play that?**

MH: I don't play the Ruskin as much lately. I've been playing the Astatic more lately, the JT-30. But I kind of go back and forth on the Ruskin and play that sometimes. It just varies. I have a Turner with a CR (controlled reluctance) element in it that I play once and awhile. So there are quite a few different mics I use. I kind of go between about three or four different mics.

DC: **The amps I think I know, but...**

MH: What do you think it is?

DC: **Two, you have two Bassmans**

MH: I have a Victoria Bassman and I have an Original Bassman.

DC: **You daisy-chaining when you play large gigs?**

MH: Sometimes, but most of the times now I'm playing the Victoria because I don't really want to bring the Original on the road.

DC: **That would make sense.**

MH: Yeah.

DC: **How much 1st and 3rd positions do you usually play in your on-going performances?**

MH: Man, I play I'd say at least three or four ones in first every night and I usually play at least three or four in third every night.

DC: **And chromatic?**

MH: And then probably four or five on chromatic.

DC: **Who are your band members and how long have they been with you?**

MH: Charles Wheal is the guitar player. He's been with me it will be six years I think next month, in June. The bass player, Steve Wolf is going on four years. And the drummer, actually, the bass player is going on five years. And then the drummer will be going on four years, Marty Dodson.

DC: **How much does your band practice?**

MH: We don't. The only time practice is if we have a recording and we might practice in the studio just to learn a song in the studio. Occasionally we'll learn something on the sound check. But that's about it. Usually our practices are sound checks. That's a typical practice is a sound check.

DC: **The band members have been around for a while. But what do you look if you had to replace a member of the band? What do you look for in that new player?**

MH: I think attitude is probably the hugest one, a good attitude. I mean that's how you get people to stay with you. If they have a good attitude it's a lot easier to get them to stay. If they have a bad attitude it's very hard to get them to stay. But abilities, number one they

got to be into the blues in a certain kind way. That's essential. But attitude is about 90% of it. And ability is a huge part of it too.

DC: I know you travel a lot, but is it about 200 days a year?

MH: It's about 150 to 200.

DC: Is that down from the past?

MH: That's a little bit down from the past.

DC: What kind of changes have you seen in the clubs and audiences over the years of all this traveling?

MH: The big change is just the audience is getting older and there doesn't seem to be as quick a younger audience taking its place. We're kind of filling in the gap there. It seems like most of the audience seems to be in their late 30's to 50's. It's going to be necessary for a younger audience to come in and pick up on the music. The problem is people our age only go out so many nights a week. If you are out on the road, you need people to be coming out on the Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. And it's real hard a lot of time to get the older crowd out on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday.

DC: I suppose part of that is the cyclical nature of the blues in the sense that it seems to have up times and down times.

MH: Blues very much has the "ups" and "downs". An up and down cyclical nature.

DC: What are some of your favorite, if you have some outside the Bay Area, towns and clubs/venues that you like to visit?

MH: We love the Zoo Bar in Lincoln, Nebraska. That's always a great bar. There are a lot of places. Montana has been actually a fairly good strong area for us. The Mid-West has always been a fairly good area for us. We've been playing in Florida more often and that's starting to go a little better. East Coast has been a real tough one. I've been playing the East Coast now for about 12 years and it's still a hard one for me to get consistently good crowds.

DC: Do you get to Europe every year?

MH: We get to Scandinavia it seems like every year. But Europe I haven't played in quite some time. But Scandinavia we been playing, this is the third year in a row.

DC: That's right you are going in June?

MH: I'm going in August to the Notoddon Blues Festival. Then we're going back in October and November for a longer tour in Scandinavia. I've been playing Europe over a long period of time, but not consistently. Not with any kind of real consistency and that's made it tough in terms of building something there. It's never been a thing where we go every year. I've been to Italy probably six times within a four-year period of time and I haven't been back for probably seven years. Or I haven't been to Holland. I've think I've been there three times in the last ten years.

DC: All right, the mysteries; songwriting. Do you usually start with the lyrics or the music? Or does it come both ways?

MH: A lot of time the lyrics and the melody seem to come together. A lot of time I'll get a lyric in my head and it will already have melody that seems to go with it.

DC: Do you set aside time to say I'm going to write a song today or does it just follow along inspiration? When the time comes you just jot something down.

MH: It seems like it usually more like that (inspiration). An example would be early in the morning, I seem to get my best songs out. Sometimes at the gym I'll get a good song. It's weird stuff. It used to be when I was swimming I'd get great songs. But I have to write them down right away. If I don't write them down right away I loose them.

DC: I understand that.

MH: It seems like there is that period where it almost in your subconscious. And it comes out. You get the idea and you have to write it down right away or it's gone. I've lost a lot of good songs that way. (Laughter) *Joking " Oh, I'll just write when I get up. It's GONE"*

DC: **You mentioned Billy Holliday and some others, what other artists...**

MH: There is a ton of great vocalists that I love listening to. It's quite a stretch. Like I said I've been listening to things like old Fleetwood Mac, Peter Green Fleetwood Mac. Over the last two years REAL heavily.

DC: **Do they bring out inspiration for song writing? Or do you listen to them to hear song structures?**

MH: It's more just for my own enjoyment. Nowadays I just listen to music just because I love it. I don't listen to it because I'm going to take this and put that in here type of thing. I do one Fleetwood Mac song of Peter Green and that's it. So there's someone I listen to all the time, but it doesn't mean that I'm going to necessarily incorporate that. If they are incorporated in there, I don't even know about. (Laughter)

DC: **That's probably the best way**

MH: That to me is what is happening. That's the same with Billy. I listen to tons of Billy Holliday over the last ten years, or five years. But the thing is I've only recorded maybe one of her songs. It's not necessarily something I try to make. I don't try to make the connections necessarily.

DC: **You don't consciously ever make the connection. But if it happens it's because it's buried and falls into the inspiration of the moment.**

MH: Right.

DC: **Speaking of recording, how much preparation/arranging do you do for recordings? Do you do a lot of charting out?**

MH: No, we don't do any charting out. Generally, what you do with an arrangement is come up with something. You go: OK, we're going to do the head twice; we're going to do a solo here; we're going to come back to the head; we're going to do another solo, blah, blah, blah. That kind of how you chart it out. You figure it out before you turn the microphones on. (Laughter) That's essentially what you are doing. For example my last recording I recorded that with my band. And so we had already worked on a lot of these songs for a while. And we did a "crib" arrangement when we actually recorded it. So we said OK we are going to keep the solos down to such and such a length. Two times around and go back to the vocal verse.

DC: **What do you do differently, if anything, when you record with other musicians as you did "Heart of Chicago" album?**

MH: It's essentially the same formula. Heart of Chicago was a really great album to do and it was a really fun album to do. But in a lot of ways it was one of the looser albums I've ever recorded. In a sense in that we hadn't played together. That was the first time I'd ever played with someone like Big Eyes or Robert Stroger in the studio. So it was not like we knew each other's style all that well. But those guys have been doing it for so long it's like second nature for them to come in and play a shuffle or a slow blues or whatever. It's not a big deal to them. In a sense that wasn't maybe some of the chemistry that I would have had with someone like Jr. Watson who I've played with a lot over the years. Or somebody in my own band like Charles Wheal. Or Rusty Zinn or someone that I've played a lot with. There's a big difference between the two things.

DC: **Can you share any "secrets" that you use for your recordings?**

MH: Sure. One thing is when I mic the harp. I've really worked on micing the harp over the twenty odd years I've been recording and I've come up with a few different ways of doing it. One is putting it in a very ambient type of room. Whether it is a bathroom. Or a hallway. Or a room with hard surfaces. The last recording for example we mic'ed it in the

garage. In other words, there was a studio in the half of the garage and the other part of the garage was still a garage. So we ran long cords with the microphones into the garage that had the harmonica amp and guitar amp. Baffled a little bit with microphones that were both in front and in back of the amp by three to five feet. So we had three actual mics on the harmonica amp. One right up on it, maybe a foot away. One maybe three feet away and another one five feet away. And in that way we could mix all those mics together to get a sound. And I also use different mics, different harmonica mics. Every harmonica mic sounds different. Every amplifier sounds different. None of them sound the same and they all sound different according to the room they play in. Just because it sounds good in one room, doesn't mean it's going to sound good in another.

DC: OK, lastly. Words of advise. What helpful words of advice would you give a beginning, intermediate and advanced player?

MH: The big thing I'm really going to "HARP" on (Laughs) with a lot of students that I have is taking the time, putting in the time with harmonica records. Like a "Another of the Greats"; Like Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, Big Walter Horton, George "Harmonica" Smith, James Cotton, Jr. Wells. Putting in that time to actually sit down and work with those records. Because what I'm finding more and more with people who take harmonica lessons from me is that they don't seem to want to invest the time to study the greats. Or to study a lick and learn the lick. They want to just have you show them exactly how to play the lick instead of actually developing their ear to learn to play those licks. I mean harmonica, blues harmonica, is an ear instrument. If you don't develop your ear you are not really going to get it. And the only way you develop your ear is too constantly listen to those licks. That's what I had to do. That's what everybody else of my generation certainly had to do. People like Kim Wilson, Rod Piazza and Rick Estrin. They all sat down and worked with records to learn this stuff. And if they hadn't of done that they wouldn't be the players they are today. That's a must. I think a lot of younger harp players or beginning and intermediate harp players are not investing the kind of time they need to invest to really develop. And here's the constant one I hear, "I'm trying to get my own style man". Well, you can't get your own style until you learn some other styles to put something together of your own. Because it doesn't come out of thin air.

DC: Thank you Mark. We appreciate you taking the time to sit down with us for the first edition of harmonicasessions.com. We all look forward to hearing perform again soon.

Recording Discography (Release Date, Album Title & Label)

1985 -- **Playin' In Your Town**, *Rockinitus*

1987 -- **Harmonica Party**, *Double Trouble*

1987 -- **High Steppin'**, *Double Trouble*

1988 -- **Up And Jumpin'**, *Rockinitus*

1990 -- **Sunny Day Blues**, *Deluxe (Italy)*

1992 -- **Hard Lovin' 90's**, *Double Trouble*

1994 -- **Feel Like Rockin'**, *Flying Fish*

1995 -- **Married To The Blues**, *Flying Fish*

1997 -- **Heart Of Chicago**, *Tone-Cool*

1998 -- **Lowdown To Uptown**, *Tone-Cool*

1999 -- **Harmonica Party**, *Mountain Top (reissue, with added tracks)*

2003 -- **Golden State Blues**, *Electro-Fi Records*

Anthologies:

Got Harp If You Want It, Blue Rokit

Blues Harp Greats, Rycodisk

Blues Harp Meltdown, Mountain Top