



Warm-up Exercises

By David Barrett, Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine

June 2007

Before we dig into my suggested warm-up exercises, I want to bring up the fact that the diatonic harmonica is an instrument that doesn't really require warm-up, either of the instrument or the player! This article is more focused on helping you start a good habit of working on some areas that many players overlook. If you are disciplined and enjoy having a "task list," then every time you sit down to practice think about the following...

The main body of your practice time should be divided into three areas.

1) Develop New Technique:

I'm currently working on blow bending in a tongue block. When I start my practice I'll put on a jam track in the key of G and grab my G harmonica to play in first position. I'll play to the jam track a couple times and that's plenty of time to continue the development of this new technique for me. A new technique could take the form of a standard technique (bending, tongue blocking, hand use, etc) or could be something like playing in a new position... anything that challenges you in a new way.

2) Work on a Song:

This will most commonly take the form of a song that exercises the technique(s) you're working on. If you're working on tongue block slaps, pulls and octaves, you would work on a song like "Walter's Boogie" by Big Walter Horton. If you're working on your tone and slow blues licks you would work on a song like "Blue Midnight" by Little Walter. There's always a better player than you out there, or at least a player that moves differently than you, that can help round out your playing. Even at my high level of playing skill there's always something out there for me to study. Keep in mind that sometimes you'll want to work on writing an original song. The exploration and experimentation that it takes to write something original will also take your playing to the next level.

3) Finish the Practice Session with a Jam Track:

Put on a jam track and play! You could just jam and see what happens, or try to use some of the licks in the song you're working on, or focus on the technique you're currently working on. Place what you learn into context... the twelve bar blues!

With all of that said... some students like to have a five-minute ritual (like stretching before exercise) at the start of every session, that will help to exercise and develop memorization of important concepts. This can definitely be a positive thing. The following series of exercises would make a good warm-up habit. The bending practice will develop strong bending skills (make sure you practice with an accurate pitch-generating device such as a piano). Within this warm-up I have also included music theory you should memorize. You may not know you need it now, but as your skills advance, this information will be highly helpful in making you a better soloist and accompanist.

Bending Exercises – Agility

Ex. 1 – Start slow and build speed

4' 4 5 4 4' 3 3'' 3 4 3 3'' 2 2'' 2 3 2 2'' 1

Ex. 2 – Start slow and build speed

8'+ 8+ 9+ 8+ 8'+ 7+ 9'+ 9+ 10+ 9+ 9'+ 8+ 10+ 10''+ 9+ 10+ 10''+ 9+

Bending Exercises – Scales NA = Not Available

Ex. 3 - Chromatic

4+ 3 3' 3'' 3''' 2 2' 2'' 2+ NA 1 1' 1+

Ex. 4 – C Major

1+ 1 2+ 2'' 2 3'' 3 4+ 4+ 4 5+ 5 6+ 6 7 7+ 7+ 8 8+ 9 9+ 10 10'+ 10+

Ex. 5 – G Major

1+ 1 2+ 2' 2 2 3'' 3 4+ 4 5+ NA 6+ 6+ 6 7 7+ 8 8+ 9'+ 9+

Ex. 6 – G Blues

Ex. 7 – C Blues

Ex. 8 – D Blues

Memorization

- 1) Harmonica Pitch Set - Example questions to ask yourself:
 - a) Question: "What is the 4 draw?" Answer: "D"
 - b) Question: "Where are all of the F's?" Answer: "2", 5 and 9"

		Whole Step Bend (") →							B ^b		
		½ Step Bend (') →						E ^b	G ^b	B	
BLOW →	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	E	G	C	
	C	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
DRAW →	D	G	B	D	F	A	B	D	F	A	
½ Step Bend (') →	D ^b	G ^b	B ^b	D ^b		A ^b					
Whole Step Bend (") →	F	A									
1-½ Step Bend ("" →	A ^b										

2) 12 Bar Blues Chords

- a) I7 = G B D F
- b) IV7 = C E G B-flat
- c) V7 = D F# A C

Quick Warm-up Sheet

Play all scales and arpeggios ascending and descending

- Tone
 - Play 4+ warm, in a yawn-like embouchure.
 - Play 4 warm, in a yawn-like embouchure.
- Vibrato
 - Same as above w/vibrato
 - Same as above swelled (start quiet, build in volume and finish quiet)
 - Same as above w/shake
- C Scale: 4+ 4 5+ 5 6+ 6 7 7+ (Major)
 - Pucker
 - Tongue Blocked
 - Tongue Slapped
 - Octaves
- Bends (Slurred)
 - 6 6' 6, 5 5' 5, 4 4' 4, 3 3" 3, 2 2" 2, 1 1' 1
 - Focus: Slide evenly from unbent to bent.
 - 6 6', 5 5', 4 4', 3 3", 2 2", 1 1'
 - Focus: Stop at bottom with no raise in pitch.
 - 6 6' 5, 5 5' 4, 4 4' 3, 3 3" 2, 2 2" 1, 1 1' 1+
 - Focus: Stop at bottom with no raise, and final note not flat.
 - 6' 6, 5' 5, 4' 4, 3" 3, 2" 2, 1' 1
 - Focus: Start deep. This develops muscle memory of where the bends are.
- Chromatic Bending:
 - 4 4' 4+ 3 3' 3" 3"" 2 2' 2" 2+ 1 1' 1+
 - 4(D), 4'(D-flat), 4+(C), 3(B) 3'(B-flat), 3"(A), 3""(A-flat), 2(G), 2'(G-flat), 2"(F), 2+(E), 1(D), 1'(D-flat), 1+ (C).
- Blues Scale: Root note is in bold and substitution notes are in grey.
 - G: 1+ 1' 1 2" **2** 3' 4+ 4' 4 5 **6+** **6'** **6** 7+ 8 9 **9+**
 - G Major Soloing Scale: 1+ 1 2+ **2** 3" 3 4+ 4 5+ **6+** 6 7 7+ 8 8+ 9+
 - D: 1 2" 2 3"" 3" 4+ **4** 5 6+ 6' 6 7+ **8** 9 9+ 10 10+
 - C: **1+** **2+** 2" 2' 2 3' **4+** / **7+** 8+ 9 9'+ 9+ 10"+ **10+**
- Arpeggios: (Broken chords)
 - G: 1 2" **2** 3 4 5 **6+** 7 8 9 **9+**
 - D: 1+ **1** 2' 3" 4+ **4** 5 6 7+ **8** 9 10 10+
 - C: **1+** 2+ 3+ 3' **4+** 5+ 6+ **7+** 8+ 9+ 10"+ **10+**
- Agility
 - 3 2 3, 4+ 3+ 4+, 4 3 4, 5+ 4+ 5+, 5 4 5, 6+ 5+ 6+, 6 5 6, 7 6 7, 7+ 6+ 7+, 8 7 8, 8+ 7+ 8+, 9 8 9, 9+ 8+ 9+, 9+ and back down.
 - 4+ 4 5+ 4+, 4 5+ 5 4, 5+ 5 6+ 5+, 5 6+ 6 5, etc.

Example Practice - Based on one hour

5m Warm-up

10m Current Technique

35m Current Licks, Phrases, Rhythm, etc. (working on a song)

10m Play with Jam Track

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