



## R.J. Mischo

by Dennis Carelli, [www.harmonicassessions.com](http://www.harmonicassessions.com)

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**DC:** As I remember your bio R.J., you were born in Minneapolis?

**R.J.:** I was born in eastern Wisconsin. But I pretty much grew up in Minneapolis in the Twin cities.

**DC:** Was it a musical family? Your mother or father interested in music? Did they play it around the house?

**R.J.:** My mom always had a piano in the house and she was playing piano. When I was really young in Wisconsin I grew up in a house with a lot of singing and that kind of thing, but not really too much music. My oldest brother played harmonica and guitar so I heard it from him a lot too. Not a whole lot. No professionals.

**DC:** Any other siblings?

**R.J.:** One of my other brothers had a banjo, but he spent more time just drawing on the cover. Those guys turned out to be pretty active artists in the painting and drawing field.

**DC:** In your recent song "My Muddy Story" from your recent album "Meet Me On the Coast", you talk about seeing a Muddy Waters' performance, were you playing harmonica at that time?

**R.J.:** Yeah, I was playing harmonica at that time and didn't have a real direction on exactly how to apply it. Other stuff I was listening too, just ridiculous stuff, like Black Oak Arkansas. Stuff like that. Then I saw Muddy Waters and did a 360 on my taste as far as what I was listening to

**DC:** How old were you then?

**R.J.:** Sixteen.

**DC:** Sixteen, very impressionable sixteen. And at what age did you have your first band?

**R.J.:** About seventeen or something like that in high school.

**DC:** When did you get hooked up with Teddy Morgan? Was that your first professional band?

**R.J.:** No, no. I had many, many bands before that. That was like 1990.

**DC:** Was he also in the Minneapolis music scene?

**R.J.:** Yeah, Teddy was with this band, Lamont Cranston.

**DC:** Oh, yeah I 've heard of them.

**R.J.:** Real young Teddy. He was nineteen or something when he was with Lamont Cranston. Then he and I hooked up and formed a band on the side. We had (a gig) every Sunday night at a place called The Five Corners Saloon. That kind of started that band although we didn't really perform much out as "R.J. and the Kid Band". That was what we called him back then, was "The Kid". Our house gig was Sundays. It was a pretty cool gig man, a place where all the not-working guys would go on Sundays. A lot of times touring guys that would come through and would have a Sunday off would stay and hang around. I remember (James) Harman coming down there. And (Jr.) Watson coming down there. Dan Ackroyd was down there one time. All kinds of other guys. I can't even think of all the names right now.

**DC:** That would be a cool gig. Lots of exposure to a variety of people. A gig like that.

**R.J.:** Yeah, a lot of touring acts, blues guys, that would be there on the weekend that we were acquainted with. They would come over on Sunday.

**DC:** As a result of that band you and he did the "Ready to Go" album on Blue Loon. Was Blue Loon a local record label?

**R.J.:** Yeah, Blue Loon was a local record label. I don't know if we were that first record, that "Ready to Go" record, on his label or not. I think we were the first CD. Us and Sonny Rogers and Mojo Buford all put out a record on that label at the same time. He started with the three of us.

**DC:** That album was my first knowledge of you when I heard that album on the radio. Would it be fair to say that early on, once you decided to go in the direction of the blues, that you buried yourself with a bunch of records and started to listen and tried to play what you heard on the records? Seemingly that was the way to learn back when you started. There weren't Dave Barretts back then.

**R.J.:** No, it's a lot easier now with videos and CDs and just all the people that are into it. Yeah that was it. Your right. Anything that had a blues sounding harmonica on it, I wanted to get.

**DC:** Was there any one harmonica player over time that showed you some things? Or did you just pick it up as you went along?

**R.J.:** Well at that time Lynwood Slim was playing in the Twin Cities. He was active and doing pretty well. He was really the guy that was most accessible to me that I actually hung out with. There were other guys such as Mojo (Buford). I used to hang out with Mojo, but we never really sat down and talked harmonica. I just kind of absorbed more lifestyle and vibe stuff from Mojo. But actually with Lynwood Slim at a young age, he sat down and showed me the tongue blocking technique. Really I have to credit him for that.

**DC:** I know after Blue Loon you ended up signing with CrossCut Records in Europe. How did you get from Minneapolis and the small Blue Loon record label to signing with CrossCut? That's a pretty significant jump.

**R.J.:** Well, I did two records on Blue Loon there was another one after "Ready To Go".

**DC:** Yeah, "Gonna Rock Tonight".

**R.J.:** At that point an agent in Holland had picked me up because he was a fan of those records. Then he had booked me on this event in Bremen, Germany called Bremenalla. This agent was a friend of a guy from CrossCut. So he suggested to CrossCut that I might

be kind of a new and upcoming guy. I guess that was what they considered. They were looking for someone to be discovered. So that was kind of it right there. An agent in Holland that had the Blue Loon stuff that hooked me up with CrossCut.

**DC:** And you pretty much tour Europe every year now?

**R.J.:** Yeah, it used to be more actually. But I go at least once a year.

**DC:** Has the club venue and festival scene changed significantly over the time you've been touring there?

**R.J.:** In Europe?

**DC:** Yeah.

**R.J.:** There's more. It's a little over saturated. And there are more European bands. And they are getting better. Now we are competing against good European players.

**DC:** Is it fair to say blues harmonica is as loved there as it here in the U.S.? The blues harmonica sound is pretty appealing to European audiences?

**R.J.:** Yeah, yeah. I find certain areas actually better. I find the little country of Belgium to have a lot of harmonica freaks there. Of course, it's the home of Toots Thielemans. Maybe that's it, but there are a lot of harp freaks in Belgium. Germany is good. Holland is more into the rock-blues guitar players. Walter Trout is just God there. But there are a lot of very inquisitive harmonica players.

**DC:** How about England?

**R.J.:** England is very good. England is great man. I played on the great British Rhythm and Blues Festival a few years ago. And the MC on that thing was the same MC that had MC'd Sonny Boy Williamson shows. He was telling me about Sonny Boy Williamson shows. That was pretty cool. He told me that he had a harmonica that Sonny Boy had left one time. He brought it down, showed it to Kim Wilson and tried to get Kim to play it. Kim didn't even want to touch it.

**DC:** Speaking of harps, what kind of harps do you play? Marine Bands?

**R.J.:** Yeah, just stock Marine Bands

**DC:** And the Astatic is your standard mic?

**R.J.:** Yeah. I go between different microphones. Mainly the Astatic. Sometimes I play an old Paul Butterfield looking mic, an old SM57.

**DC:** What amps do you usually play with when you play live?

**R.J.:** I go between a reissue Bassman and a Concert, a '61 Concert. Although lately I've doing a series of duets and I've been taking a Gibson Hawk. That's got tremolo and great reverb on it. You can get the sound of those Little Walter records where he uses tremolo with his amp. It's immaculate. It's a great amp.

**DC:** Do you anything differently when you record? Do you use the same amps?

**R.J.:** Different amps. I'll bring in an assortment of amplifiers.

**DC:** Depending on the sound you are going for?

**R.J.:** Yeah. And a lot of times I just change amps without even really taking that much time on mic placement. Which is something I am going to change in the future. I'm going to

spend time with mic placement and that kind of thing. But a lot of time I'll just bring in different amps and play a cut with one amp. Then tell the engineer "OK. I'm going to change amps." Not even knowing really what it's going to sound like. I'll just change amps and cut a couple tapes that way. And just hope that there is a change and that their all going to be good.

**DC:** When you perform do you do much in 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> position?

**R.J.:** It really depends on what the material is. I definitely play some 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> position every gig. More 1<sup>st</sup> position than 3<sup>rd</sup> position. But not a great percentage. Most of the night is crosssharp on a diatonic.

**DC:** Yeah, and you go back and forth between playing through your amp and playing through your vocal mic. That also changes it up for you and for the audience too.

**R.J.:** Yeah everything from a lower pitched harp and pulling the vocal mic off the stand and cup it like your playing electric. And with the higher keyed ones play it acoustic off mic in Sonny Boy style. I try to interchange my sound with what I have on a live show as much as I can.

**DC:** 1997?. Was it 1997 when you moved to California? What prompted that move?

**R.J.:** A change. I had lived in Minnesota and the Midwest all my life and my girlfriend had a good job offer out here. So she had moved out here. So about six months later after she had moved out here I decided to move. Obviously she was going to stay and this position was going to work out for her. We've been knowing each other for a long time so I decided to give it a shot. I moved out here and decided it was the place for me. And now we married

**DC:** Seems like the right choice.

**R.J.:** So it was the right choice.

**DC:** How much traveling do you do each year? The festival scene in the summer; the tour in Europe. Are you out on the road a lot?

**R.J.:** Well not as much as some guys. I don't think I travel as much as Gary (Primich) or (Mark) Hummel do by any means. But it's becoming more. I would say I go on the road probably about two months a year in the U.S. and anywhere between two to four weeks a year in Europe. So actual touring dates on the road between the U.S. and Europe is two to four months.

**DC:** Not in the road warrior status of Hummel who is burning up the miles?

**R.J.:** I don't know how much more Mark does than that. I think he does like a tour twice a year, a spring and fall tour. And then probably goes to Europe once a year. It's probably about the same. Cumulative if you put all together it's more. I mean tomorrow I'm going on the road. I'm going down to a little festival in central California in the mountains outside of Fresno. If you add all that up, it's a lot more, but actually doing a tour it's about three months a year.

**DC:** When you go on your gig tomorrow and other dates, do you go with a regular band or do you play with pickup groups?

**R.J.:** Chris Anderson on bass and I got Frank Goldwasser coming up from Santa Barbara and the drummer that I'll be using is going to be on the festival with Ron Thompson already.

**DC:** The guitar player was Frank Goldwasser?

**R.J.:** Goldwasser, yes. Also known as Paris Slim. But the thing that I am starting to get in the last few years is really cool man, is “fly-ins”. I was just recently in Cincinnati and I did a performance on the Cincinnati Blues Festival, called the Queens City Blues Festival, as well as I did a harmonica workshop. And it was great because it was bringing me in with my briefcase full of harmonicas and played with a regional band on the festival. I’m doing one of those up by Portland. There’s a thing called Blues By The Sea, it’s a festival. In a couple of weeks they are flying me up just by myself and I’ll play with a local band that they will assemble. I got another one coming up in October, a harp show up near Boise. It’s me, this guy John Nemeth and Paul DeLay.

**DC:** Yeah, I heard about that one. I understand it’s pretty good.

**R.J.:** Yeah, so I’m starting to get those deals that are pretty cool where they just bring me in. And that’s kind of one of the advantages of not having a steady lineup of players that are employed by me. A lot of that kind of stuff I would have to turn down because it just would not be fair.

**DC:** Now when you go to Europe, does the agent take care of all that booking for you and you just pack up and go? Or do you go with a band?

**R.J.:** I used to go with a band, but now for the last several years I’ve just been going over there and playing with whatever accompaniment is there. And I’ve got to know so many guys over there in the scene that now I can talk to the agent and say, “get so and so. And get this guy” and see if they are available for the dates.

**DC:** There’s a little more comfort if you played with somebody before. You can do things with somebody you played with before that maybe you can’t do with a pickup band.

**R.J.:** Well, yeah that’s true. But it’s all going to be pretty basic. I don’t even know what I’m going to do myself.

**DC:** (Laughs) Maybe I should keep that out.

**R.J.:** No, I don’t mind that. I’m proud of that. I’m proud of the fact that I am very uncalculated.

**DC:** Improvisational. In the moment.

**R.J.:** Yeah, I’m very proud of that because I think that something that really, REALLY, lacks in today’s blues music. People seem to want to have such calculated performances and that kind of thing.

**DC:** I really agree. I think that the pop scene and other musical genres are very calculated and very staged. Jazz and blues are the two that are based strongly on improvisation and if they were to fall into that same regimented, calculated pattern, a lot would be lost.

**R.J.:** Right, right. And it’s music about feeling. I mean I think a guy should be able to, in front of any sized audience and no matter what the event is, even if it’s some big, huge important festival or whatever, be able to make up a song on the spot. And it be strong enough so that’s it’s acceptable as good music.

**DC:** Thinking of songs and music, do you usually write words or music first? Or is it that somethings come to you sometimes and other things come other times.

**R.J.:** What you said the second time; other things come other times.

**DC:** So sometimes the words come and the music follows. Sometimes the music comes and the words follow

**R.J.:** Right. It's usually words first. I just wrote a song last night that fell right out. It came right out. A lot of times it will be inspired by a pre-existing lyric. And the music will be inspired by a pre-existing riff.

**DC:** Do you have any other songwriters as inspiration or role models where you like the kind of things that they do and they lead you down a certain path?

**R.J.:** Well for sure Sonny Boy Williamson.

**DC:** Sonny Boy II?

**R.J.:** Yeah, without a doubt. He is probably one. Kind of indirectly because I didn't just study any one guy or just study him. But if I think about all the years that have inspired me the most and who I dug into the most, it would be him. As far as just everything: the total approach to playing and songwriting and just the whole spirit of blues harmonica.

**DC:** If you were going to record an instrumental tune, would just focus on writing the head and then go into the studio and let it flow? Or do you scope out much more than that?

**R.J.:** A lot of time no plans. A lot of times, which I want to put more on the next recording, instrumentals just pop off of the cutting floor. One instrumental that was on West Wind Blowin, there are a few spoken lyrics like "R.J. get up. Milk that cow", was literally recorded at the very end of a session when there was still a couple of minutes of tape left. And instead of wasting the tape, the engineer said, "Well hey man there is still like six minutes of tape on this thing if you guys want to use it up." The drummer Walter (Shufflesworth) was literally taking his drums down and I just said to Randy (Bermudes) on the bass, "Randy, play something." He just started playing and I could tell he was in (the key of) A. So I picked up a low harp and just started playing. And Walter just off the top of his head, while he was tearing his drums down saw a cowbell laying there, picked up the cowbell, shook that and yelled, "R.J. get up and milk that cow" or whatever. And that's how that song got its title and everything, just totally unplanned. And people talk and ask about that. There are other ones like that, that are on CDs.

**DC:** That certainly seems like on-the-spot inspiration. Creating a nice comfortable recording atmosphere that just lets it flow and lets it go.

**DC:** Yeah, I like to always leave space and time in the studio where hopefully something like that will happen. Actually there was another one on that same record, that instrumental with the chromatic called South City Fog. Absolutely no plan at all. Charlie Putrice, who has the Mountaintop Records Label, requested that I play some chromatic. And I had no plan at all. I can't even remember how I came into that. I think I was like "OK, key of D" and started counting something. Rusty (Zinn) just put a bunch of tremolo on his guitar and I think Walter picked up claves. I don't even know if there are drums on there. There's just some kind of percussion instrument on there. So instrumentals are usually totally on-the-spot and made up. I don't think I ever pre-mediated any instrumental I've ever done.

**DC:** That must have a fun record given what you said there and your working with Steve Freund and Rusty.

**R.J.:** That was. I just assembled the guys who I wanted to get, totally unrehearsed, got in the studio and pretty much let it go. I mean “Roll the tape, key of A” and from the count obviously everyone can tell what kind of temp it is. Then paint as you go.

**DC:** That’s right. An artist goes out to a certain spot, sets up their canvas and whatever gets in their eye and gets in their mind comes out on the brush.

**R.J.:** That’s exactly it. I find that I listen to CDs of so many of my contemporaries and I listen to them once to find out what people are up to. Nine times out of ten the record is so calculated that I can get through it one time. If there isn’t any mistakes or spontaneous stuff on the artist’s part it doesn’t inspire you to go back and listen to it; “Goddang, what were those guys doing there?”

**DC:** Let’s stop it and do that one bar over again.

**R.J.:** Right, right. I love when you are listening to a blues record and the guy’s voice might do a chord change but some of the instruments do and some of them don’t. But still meshes together and sounds beautiful.

**DC:** Besides listening to other blues recordings, do you listen to jazz and other music styles to “fill out” your musical head?

**R.J.:** Not much. Frankly not much. I would like to. I’ve been told by guys that I respect their opinion, Frank (Goldwasser) being on of them, that I should just go for a couple months and listen to anything except for blues just for the helluva of it. But not much. I have the Miles Davis, “Kind of Blue” record, some country records and some novelty stuff that’s fun to listen to; like Andre Williams or Slim Gallard or something like that. But that stuff is just for fun not to get any kind of material. Not that I’m looking at it for potential material. But then sometimes, “Surprise. Hey that’s kind of cool”.

**DC:** What works for someone doesn’t necessarily work for everyone else. Everyone finds their own road.

**R.J.:** I would like to get more into jazz. I have so many blues records that it’s time to start collecting a different kind of record.

**DC:** What advise would you give to a beginning harmonica player? Someone who you meet at a festival and says, “Hey R.J. that was really good stuff. I want to play like that. What do I do?” And you ask, “Have you been playing a long time?” And he says, “I just started last month”.

**R.J.:** Well to be able to play and try to get a rhythm and everything all by yourself. And of course try to figure out tongue blocking. That’s going to be the biggest thing; trying to figure out tongue blocking.

**DC:** And the last question: What advise would you give to an advanced player? Someone who plays in a local band, he’s pretty good but he says, “I need to go a little further. I’m missing something”. Is it about the music, about techniques or about letting go?

**R.J.:** That’s kind of a hard question. I guess to try to not be calculated and to try to be spontaneous. Not take it so seriously and just have fun. And figure out timing and playing the space. Figure out good places to stop in turnarounds and pick up again.

**DC:** Knowing when not to play can be as important as knowing when to play.

**R.J.:** Yeah, just learning not to play. Again going back to Gary (Primich), I remember him saying one time he was trying to figure out, like a lot of guys, how to get the most satisfaction for yourself and musically with minimalizing. That's a real blues approach.

**DC:** R.J., thanks so much for your time today. Hope your gig goes well tomorrow. I look forward to catching one of your gigs real soon.

### **Recording Discography (Release Date, Album Title & Label)**

2002            **Meet Me On The Coast**, CrossCut Records

1999            **West Wind Blowin'**, CrossCut Records

1997            **Cool Disposition**, CrossCut Records

1996            **Rough "N Tough**, CrossCut Records

1994            **Gonna Rock Tonight**, Blue Loon Records

1992            **Ready To Go**, Blue Loon Records

### **Guest appearances include:**

Mojo Buford's album, **HarpSlinger**

Candy Kane's album, **Whole Lotta Love**

Mountain Top Records, **Blues Harp Meltdown**