



David Barrett

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HarmonicaSessions.com

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David Barrett doesn't need much introduction in this reading audience. With this eZine and his accompanying column, his workshops, books, and other writings Dave is familiar to most readers. But I thought it was about time we spent a few minutes with him to learn how all of his blues harmonica passion started and how it has gone on to shape his musical career.

DC: Let's start at the beginning. How old were you when you started playing the harmonica?

DAVE: Fourteen

DC: What or who inspired you to play the harmonica?

DAVE: I played sax in school band for five years, starting with Alto [sax], and then was asked to play Tenor [sax] since there was only one person playing the tenor parts. I was later asked to play Bari [sax]. When I wanted to move back to the Alto a couple of years later, the sax I owned, the band director said that I would have to try out for my old spot. I didn't think that was too fair, so I quit at the end of the year. In summer school I played trumpet and decided then that school band was not for me anymore, but I wanted to stay in music. I went to the local music store and bought a Hohner Blues Harp and a Mel Bay book authored by Phil Duncan called *Blues Harp* and started digging in. Later I found there wasn't any blues in that book, but it had some good tunes and I liked it.

DC: The blues is such a central element of your music life, what put you on that musical path?

DAVE: I was watching the movie *Crossroads* and the harmonica in there just floored me. The harmonica I was familiar with was the folk music taught in the method book and had no idea that the harmonica could sound so cool. I just loved the sound. I took my portable tape recorder and put it up to the speaker of the TV to record the different sections that had harp on it and started to learn how to play them. Quickly I found that I couldn't play it with the harp I had and went back to the local music store to buy different keyed harmonicas. I learned all the parts in the movie the best I could.

That was the start of my life of loving blues harmonica. Before that movie, I was not exposed to blues, or at least I had no reason to notice it. I bought every book I could get my hands on regarding blues harmonica and went to music stores to buy records of the great blues harp players. I had no idea that there were modern-day harp players, especially white players. I was only aware of the fathers of Chicago blues like Sonny Boy, Little Walter, Big Walter... the players that I could find on reissue albums. I remember

having an argument with my uncle one night when he said there was a killer white harp player he saw in a club the other night. I proceeded to argue with him that there were no white harp players! It's funny to think of that now, but I was a kid.

I guess my learning was a bit backwards compared to most players today. Many of my students say that "Whammer Jammer" by Magic Dick or "Room To Move" by John Mayall or some other song influenced them to play. They learned the white players first and later discovered the black originators of the music.

I bought most my records from the Lost Mine Antiques store in the town I lived in at the time, Morgan Hill. I stop by after school on a regular basis and asked what has come in that had blues harmonica on it. He had a lot of records. Sometimes he would recommend something real good and sometimes there was no harp on it at all. That would upset me, because you don't have much money when your fourteen years old. Allowance only goes so far!

Every weekend I would record the blues shows from the radio. KKUP would play blues from midnight to something way past what I could stay up. I would hit "record" on a ninety-minute tape at midnight and turn it over right before I would fall asleep. I would set my alarm for forty minutes later so that I could put another tape in. The next morning I would comb through the tapes for harp songs and work on them through the day. This would repeat for Saturday and Sunday. Needless to say, I didn't get a lot of sleep on the weekends.

To get back to the point—I studied all the fathers of blues harmonica first, because that's all I was aware of. It wasn't until I studied under Gary Smith that I learned there were a whole slew of great players carrying on the tradition.

DC: Speaking of Gary Smith, how did you meet him and how old were you when you started to study with him?

DAVE: I won a pair of tickets on a radio contest to a JJ's Blues Festival when I was sixteen. Gary Smith played and my jaw dropped to the ground. I was awe struck. I noticed that the artists would go out the side gate from the artist area to pick up their free BBQ chicken. I waited for Gary after his set and asked him. He first said no, but I told him that I would be serious and really wanted to learn. He said yes. My mom worked out a deal with me that she would pay half of the cost of the lessons and drive me there.

Gary taught me everything I needed to be a proficient blues player. He taught me how to control bends, play [Paul] Butterfield type licks, vibrato, tongue blocking—he taught me a lot. I worked real hard after each lesson and came back able to play what he taught me. He also took me to my first performance, at JJ's Blues in San Jose. I have the picture of us playing together hanging in the studio at my school.

I took lessons with him for seven months. I should have stayed a lot longer, but I was young and thought I learned from him what I could.

I still play on occasion with him. I'll be playing the San Francisco Blues Festival with him in a couple weeks. It feels good to be playing the shows I saw when I was a kid. I never dreamed I'd be playing the same stages. He is one of the reasons why I teach. If I didn't

have his guidance, I wouldn't be where I am today. I like to think I'm that way for my students.

DC: Do you play/perform with other instruments besides the harmonica?

DAVE: In college I studied and learned how to play pretty much every instrument. I use bass and piano on a regular basis with my students, occasionally guitar or drums. I don't play any of them well enough to gig.

DC: Any other musicians in your family?

DAVE: My mother sang, played guitar and piano. My brother played trumpet in school. My father played the record player. My wife is a wonderful singer from Japan. We met while she was in the US studying Jazz voice. She left a career in Japan to live in the US when we got married. When my son is old enough and she has more free time, maybe she will sing again.

DC: Who are the artists that had the largest influence on you as a player? Historical? Contemporary?

DAVE: Everybody! I studied anyone who blew harp. I still do.

DC: When did you start teaching?

DAVE: I was going to college as a music major and thought doing private teaching would be a great way to earn money for school. I was eighteen then. I wish I could have all my first year students back. That was such a learning curve. There really were no serious method books on the market, so I spent more time at home writing material for students than in the teaching seat. That's what started a life-long pleasure of writing instruction books for blues harmonica. I taught at three music stores at that time. One of them was Showcase Music Institute. That was a cool place. We were required to teach two workshops each month. One I did a jam session with a fellow instructor and the other I did a technique series. Each month I worked hard on presenting a specific technique to the students. After a year, that gave me the basis for my first book with Mel Bay Publications, Building Harmonica Technique. I finished that book and published it at age twenty.

DC: When did you take the "bold" step and decide to become a full-time blues musician?

DAVE: I've been a full-time harmonica teacher since I was eighteen. There were periods of heavy study in college and the six years of running a music store (The Music Tree) that took a lot of time, but being a great blues harmonica educator has always been my goal. I perform fairly regularly, but my focus is clearly on instruction. That's what I do best and have a thirst to do better every day.

In January of 2000 I left the Music Tree to run the Harmonica Masterclass Company, private teaching and writing full time. That was also the month my son was born. It was the beginning of two great things, not to exclude my beautiful and supportive wife, Nozomi. I opened School of the Blues in San Jose in 2002.

DC: What brand of harps do you usually use?

DAVE: I use Joe Filisko customized Hohner Marine Bands. I also use HarpSmith customized Hohner Special 20's. Lee Oskar model harps are also fine harmonicas; I use them when I need a special tuned harp.

DC: What microphones do you usually use?

DAVE: I usually use a smaller Shure bullet mic (from the 40's) with a black-label Controlled Reluctant Shure element.

DC: And the amp?

DAVE: The new Sonny Jr. 4x10. It's a 1959 Fender Bassman style amp with all the goodies to make it sound killer for harp.

DC: What amps did you use in your first studio recording?

DAVE: A Fender Princeton Reverb (1967-1972 model) and a reissue 1959 Fender Bassman, modded by Sonny Jr.

DC: What amp and mic do you recommend for a beginning player?

DAVE: The Fender Blues Jr. is a nice inexpensive amp with a Shure green bullet mic (520DX). Vintage gear is great, but you kind of have to know about them before you buy. Pre 1982 Fender Princeton amps I feel are great amps for most small-room situations. The Fender Bassman is a great gigging amp. The older Shure Controlled Magnetic or Controlled Reluctant elements are real nice with these amps, with any body that's comfortable. If someone is interested in vintage mics, I send them to Fritz Hasenpusch, Tom's Mics or Sonny Jr.

DC: You play a lot with John Garcia, how and when did you first meet up with him?

DAVE: I first met John when I was eighteen years old. I did a demo with a guitar player I went to school with by the name of Shane Dwight. He still plays blues. Shane was taking lessons from John at the time and recommended that we have John listen to it and tell us what he thought. I knew he taught a guitar class at the local high school. I waited for him one night and approached him about listening to the tape.

Many years later when I started to manage the Music Tree in Morgan Hill I was doing a lot of booking for various Bay Area events. I started booking John, and on occasion sitting in with him. He was, and is, always good about having people sit in with him. I would sit in when he did a solo act and sometimes when he played with his band.

The first time we formally worked together was a local event called the Friday Night Music Series in Morgan Hill. I booked it under my name with John's band, even though we had never played a show together. I went to one of his shows and recorded the evening, with his permission of course. I later went through the tunes and chose the ones I liked and made a set list. It was a great idea and worked out well. It was like we rehearsed together many times before the show, but it was really me just practicing to their songs I recorded and giving them a set list of their tunes! The gig went smooth and we did more gigs after. We have since worked together often, especially after I opened the School of the Blues. We formed the School of the Blues All Stars with Kevin Coggins on drums, Frank De Rose on bass, Steve Czarnecki on keyboards. All these players have been long-time blues musicians in my area. John and I also recorded an album together in 2003, my first.

DC: As a harmonica player, what strikes you about playing with John?

DAVE: He has studied all the guitar players through time and really knows how to back a harp player. He plays harp himself, so he knows what it's capable of. He's a real student of accompaniment playing, not just soloing. John also doesn't stop at blues from the 50's, he covers any era of blues that grabs him. Though I feel more at home with the earlier

stuff, playing other types of blues has helped to stretch my knowledge and become a more well rounded player. My ability to play like a horn or organ player is a good example that developed by playing with John. I'm very lucky to play with him. He's been a sort of a mentor as well as a musical partner.

DC: You have had an opportunity to play with a lot of great musicians as you part on your annual workshops. What harmonica players do you strongly remember? What other musicians?

DAVE: I enjoyed working with them all so much, I would need a couple hours to speak all the good things about each artists. Overall, it's just great to be around other players that are so passionate about blues and the harmonica. Lee Oskar has been very helpful through the years. I got to work with the very players I was studying so hard years before. A dream-come-true to a certain degree.

DC: Is there a particular event that you would single out as being most memorable?

DAVE: The Legends of the Blues Harmonica concerts we used to do stick out as being very memorable to me. Participating in Mark Hummel's blow out shows are also very memorable.

DC: How much preparation/arranging did you do for your recording?

DAVE: We did one rehearsal with the guys I hired. We then recorded in the studio for about four hours. John and I tracked our solos later. All of my tunes were originals, so they were worked out pretty well ahead of time.

DC: How much "room" do you leave yourself and the other musicians for inspired moments in the studio?

DAVE: I give the musicians a general direction and form. What they do is up to them to make it sound good. In rehearsal each player added to the song if they had a good idea.

DC: For your instrumental tunes, how much of the playing is pre-written?

DAVE: Being my first album, I pretty much worked out everything ahead of time. I wanted to play it safe. My next album I'll work out the heads and improvise everything else, like I do when I play live.

DC: Can you share any "secrets" that you use for your recording sessions' setup?

DAVE: Before I went into the studio a spoke to Mark Hummel and Gary Smith. They both recommended using two amps at the same time and different mics to capture different tone. One mic right in front of the amp, one about two to three feet away and one behind the amp. We spent a lot of time on dialing in the harp tone.

DC: What helpful words of advice would you give a beginning player?

DAVE: Follow my books carefully and try to hook up with a local harp teacher. If there aren't any in your area, fly in and work with me at a workshop or at the school in San Jose.

DC: An intermediate player?

DAVE: Same answer as the question before with the addition of how important it is to memorize great harmonica songs and to play licks with jam tracks to make sure they can place into context what they learn. Technique is of course an important area of study.

DC: An advanced player?

DAVE: Same answers as the questions before with the addition of how important it is to play often with other players. I work hard to hook up my better players with other students at the school. For many strong players, playing in a band or a duo is the only way they'll get the motivation to move to the next step in their musicianship.

DC: How about someone who wants to teach harmonica to others?

DAVE: Study all the material available out there. I have teacher accreditation programs, so that's, of course, an option.

DC: Thanks Dave. I appreciate your setting aside some time to talk today and share a little more about your playing history and experience.

DAVE: Your welcome.