

Tales from a Train Hoppin' Accordion Player - Part III

“Monster Harmonica Workbench” with Kinya Pollard
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I first met this world traveler in 1999 at David Barrett's Harmonica Masterclass® Legends of the Blues Harmonica event. While a couple hundred attendees rushed from the “booth area” into the Ballroom to see the likes of Jerry Portnoy and Magic Dick, I took full advantage of this break, and spent *mono y mono* time with internationally renowned harmonica (and accordion) craft-sman, Rick Epping.

For many professional harmonica players who play HOHNER Harmonicas, Rick was considered the progenitor of the quality improvement movement implemented at HOHNER.

On April 15, 2005, after 18 years with HOHNER USA, Rick Epping retired. I was fortunate enough to be able to hook up briefly with one of my “mentors” before his departure back to Ireland.

For our final installment, we will conclude our conversation with Rick Epping, the Train Hoppin' accordion player.

HarpSmith: Before we continue with our “tech” talk, could you recall some of the memorable live acts you caught while you were in Los Angeles?

Rick: I remember seeing George Smith first time at the Ash Grove. I used to go there as a teenager, and was totally blown away by his performance. In fact the first song George was doing when I walked in had him singing in falsetto—imitating the female part. And anybody who has ever had the pleasure of catching one of George's gigs knows first hand that he was a tall, big man, and to see him singing in falsetto made for a double take. It was pretty amazing; it was great to see him.

The Ash Grove was like musical college for me because I saw so many great performers. Blues, old time country music, Blue Grass and Brownie McGee and Sonny Terry. I'd see everyone from Big Walter to J.B. Hutto, T-Bone Walker, Big Mama Thornton, and Lightnin' Hopkins. It was something else. The Chambers Brothers were another regular group, and the guy that used to open for all these great blues acts was Taj Mahal. He must've had

some type of education, I'll tell you, opening for all these guys, and playing with a lot of them. I remember once when Lightnin' Hopkins was playing and Taj was up playing with Lightnin', and Lightnin' was just leading him through a merry chase. Every refrain would be different—it would be eleven bars, thirteen bars—and Taj was doing his best, doing a good job, of keeping up with where Lightnin' was taking him.

Harpsmith: Have you seen Paul Butterfield?

Rick: Yes. I saw him at the Troubadour.

Harpsmith: Yeah, that's where they recorded the live album. Were you there?

Rick: I don't know if they were recording that night, but it was great. Elvin Bishop and Bloomfield were both playing with him, and full band, and it was a great show.

Harpsmith: Thank you for sharing your memories with our readers. Okay, back to work. I used to say that reeds were basically spring metal. Was that an accurate description?

Rick: Yes, harmonica reeds are spring tempered metal.

Harpsmith: Regarding the new reed profiles, how did you determine which reeds to phase into the product line first, and what has the response from players been?

Rick: We haven't had anyone comment at all about any changes in it. The way we have actually done it is I have compiled a list of the most critical reeds information gotten from our Service Department of which reeds blow out the most, and the most keys—you know, the 4 and 5 draw, 7 blow, 4 blow—and in which keys that the problems were greatest. And that was the list of the priority reeds we needed to change first. And that went into production, oh, well over a year ago, year-and-a-half ago.

By now a lot of the harps that are out there are starting to cycle through the various inventories—Germany's, ours, and various distributors and dealers. Many contain the new reed profiles. In fact, one of our local Marine Band players here in Richmond, reported that he has noticed that his reeds are holding up better; however, did not comment on any changes to the Marine Band's playability.

Harpsmith: Are we going to see that across the entire product line?

Rick: Yes, that's the plan.

Harpsmith: Last January at the NAMM tradeshow, you gave me a sneak preview of the new Marine Band Deluxe 2005. The most obvious improvement was to the comb. This did not surprise me, as treated wooden combs are trademarks of a fine customized harmonica. Are they using pear wood for the MB2005 comb?

Rick: Yes, it is pear wood. Just the outside corners and the corners on the cell dividers have been rounded off to make for a more comfortable harmonica. The comb is sealed on the inside of the cells as well as the front (mouthpiece).

And I should say as well that this project, the Marine Band Deluxe 2005, was spear headed by Steve Baker. He was the main force that pushed it through.

HarpSmith: I recalled disassembling some of my old Marine Bands that I had purchased in 1973, and was surprised to see significant striations on the comb caused by the teeth of the saw blade. What changes to the production processes did Hohner make to ensure smoother surfaces on the combs, are they sanding them now?

Rick: No, they're certainly not sanding them. The manufacturing technique has not changed much over the years. A long board, 4-1/2 inches, or whatever the length of the harmonica comb, by 1 inch, which is the depth of comb, by about 18 inches--solid block, is painted black on three sides and yellow on one side. Next, they cut it into individual comb lengths. Then they stack them all up together, and with a multiple data saw blade, cut the ten channels. It is a combination of the blade sharpness and how fast they run the block of pear wood through it.

HarpSmith: Peering into the back of the MB2005, I see the nails have been replaced with screws. This will make my job easier!

Rick: That's correct, three reed plate screws and four cover plate screws (two on each side).

HarpSmith: Are there any enhancements to the reed plates, or is it stock MB?

Rick: There were no enhancements to the reed plates, they are stock MB.

HarpSmith: Which keys will be available for the MB2005?

Rick: Thirteen keys: Low F through regular F. No low keys other than Low F and Low F-sharp (no high F-Sharp).

HarpSmith: The rear folds (break) of the MB2005 cover plates are bent inward and the flair in the back is opened higher (for greater sound projection). Besides that, the classic MB shape of the "vented" cover plate remains unchanged.

From the first time I discovered my '73 Blues Harp was a Marine Band harmonica dressed up with "un-vented" cover plates, I became fascinated with cover plate designs and the impact they have on shaping the sound of a harmonica.

What is the historical significance to the original MB cover plate design?

Rick: The original 1896 Marine Band cover was patented by Jacob Hohner, one of the sons of the Founder. Examining the shape of the profile of the covers—arching up in the front to create a resonate chamber, then flowing out the back with no folds supports my theory that Jacob's first cover plates were actually designed with acoustical principles in mind, not just as something to protect the reeds or for ornamental factors.

Jacob's "open air" concept was that the cover be flexible. The original design had four separate little tab feet that held the covers on. And his idea was that the cover should have

as minimum a connection to the reed plate as possible in order that it was free to resonate itself. So, in other words, if it were fixed along too much of its surface or edges, that would inhibit the covers from actually vibrating.

The downside of Jacob's original cover plates were that they were fragile and could easily be crushed. Eventually, folds were incorporated to strengthen the back of the cover plates; however, sacrificing some of the resonate qualities. When playing these old harmonicas, you could actually feel the vibration when you lightly touched the cover plates.

Harpsmith: I remember you saying at one point Hohner changed the thickness on the production harmonicas only to go back to the original thinner ones.

Rick: That's correct. There was some kind of a regulation in Europe that children's toys, etc. could not have its metal parts be less than ½ mm (millimeter). Hohner produced harmonicas with ½ mm thickness covers which did cut down on the resonance of the instrument. Eventually it was determined that those regulations did not apply to harmonicas and; therefore, Hohner returned to the .3 thickness.

Harpsmith: I was so pleased that Hohner changed the finish of the cover plates. It appears to be more of a chrome process that doesn't tarnish nearly like the other ones.

Rick: Yeah, well that is still an ongoing project to work on that, and I know that some of the last samples of Marine Band Deluxe were actually stainless covers. Whether that has survived into production I honestly don't know at this point, because there are a lot of problems working with stainless, with tools that were designed for plated mild steel.

Sorting out the elements of what functions well, looks terrific, and doesn't rust, is an on going effort for Hohner.

Harpsmith: Let's discuss your XB40 harmonica. What possessed you to come up with such an innovative design?

Rick: Well back in the early 1980s, Will Scarlet had a single cell prototype with three reeds in it that he showed me that I thought was a really cool idea. And ten years later when I had heard nothing more, and I was working at HOHNER, I thought it might be interesting to see if it actually worked.

So I cobbled together something based on that, and found that in doing so these reeds started in a way to self-activate sympathetically with the other reeds. When I started to bend notes; however, I was also creating unwanted dissonance. But that was what set me to thinking, "what can be done." I came up with a system of valves and chambers that overcame this problem. At that point I realized I had something unique. It took twelve years of working on it, three patents, and countless hours before it came about.

Harpsmith: So at a performance, do you find yourself pulling out the XB more and more?

Rick: Yeah, yeah. I don't only use it because all the harmonicas have—I mean, I use regular Richters, I use octave models. And each model has something about it that is desirable and unique. So, you know, it will never totally replace the Richter for me, but for

some songs I think it is great. In fact, I was just playing it last night at House of Richmond, and it was probably pretty much 1/3 XB-40s, 1/3 octave models, and 1/3 regular Richter models that I played.

Harpsmith: You think the harmonica is stronger now? I mean, you've been in it for so many years, you've seen it go through many changes. So what are your thoughts that way, as far as an industry or a musical instrument.

Rick: I think, I think it is strong. I mean, it has had phases and fads for many times over the years. But I think this is a really good time for harmonicas, um, you know, a lot of...I think a lot of players are really getting serious about the instrument. It has always been taken serious by harmonica players, but it is, you know, more integrated as a serious instrument in various kinds of popular music. Not just big band music or Blues.

Ah, I think a lot of people of my generation, who kind of started off in Blues, play just Blues. Although I've started Country music and old time music even before Blues, I was playing fiddle tunes. You know, when I was twelve, thirteen, and didn't start playing Blues until I was fifteen, when I went to see Sonny and Brownie.

But, ah, guys that made me play Blues on a Richter model for 20 years, 25 years, are at the point, you know, in life where they are looking for a little more. I see, you know, I'm sure you've seen it as well, guys are more interested in different models. You know, diatonic players taking up the chromatic, and octave models and tremolo models, and altered tunings. You know, looking for ways of expanding the instrument. And I think that's a really good sign.

Harpsmith: Yeah. Yeah, we're going to really need another, well, another Jimmy Hendrix of the harmonica. John Popper did that for a bit, where even though his style of playing didn't agree with a lot of the hardcore players, still exposed a lot of people to the instrument that didn't know what it was.

Jason Ricci, I'm sure you've heard of Jason, he's just amazing. And if he can, not calling himself a Blues Band, and somehow get immersed in mainstream, you know, something might happen there. You know, these preconceived notions when you say Blues Band.

Rick: Right, right. Well, it's going to happen. It always does, someone will come along.

Harpsmith: Thank you for taking the time.

Rick: All right, take care.

Rick Epping assured me that after he and his family settle into their new home in Ireland he would continue to be active in the harmonica community. Thank goodness for that!

Be certain to catch our next issue where I will report to you the results of the face off between the new Hohner Marine Band Deluxe 2005 and the vintage Hohner Marine Band 1896 harmonicas.

“Hit it and Quit it”!

Kinya Pollard
The Harpsmith

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