



## Blessings and Curses

Perspective for the New Harmonica Player

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Our harmonica carries with it a number of blessings and curses. Let's focus on the **Blessings** first.

**There are no wrong notes on your harmonica.** Your C Major Diatonic Harmonica only contains the seven notes relative to the key of C. So, if you were to play with someone also in the key of C, you won't hit any wrong notes! You might play some inappropriate notes at certain times, but technically no "wrong notes." Relative to most other instruments, a saxophone for example, there's plenty of wrong notes all over the instrument. The new player has no idea which notes are the correct notes to play when they're first handed their instrument.

**To play in a different key all you need to do is grab a different key of harmonica.** When our saxophonist learns how to play in the key of C, they learn the fingering on their instrument for the notes in the key of C (C, D, E, F, G, A, B and C). When a new song comes up in a different key, say the key of D, they'll need to use different fingering and find the notes relative to the D scale (D, E, F#, G, A, B, C# and D). Changing the key of a given song is also very common. It's not uncommon to practice a song in one key and arrive to rehearsal and the bandleader changes the key to better suite their voice. For that reason, most instrumentalists are aware that they should be able to play a song in any key (commonly twelve keys). That's a lot of work! Most players will spend their first years learning scales and arpeggios, enabling them to move from key to key without too much trouble (this takes a lot of years by the way). All harmonica players have to do is grab a different key of harmonica! For the most part, nothing changes... just grab the correct key of harmonica to match a song and away you go! This allows the harmonica player to not have to focus their first years of study on scales and theory—we're able to dig into the music and play on stage much quicker than most other instruments.

If you choose Blues as your style of music, **the 12 Bar Blues Progression stays constant from song to song.** If we were to listen to all of the blues music performed and recorded to this point in time, we would probably find that the majority of the songs (I would venture to guess around 98%) use the standard 12 Bar Blues Progression. What this means is that what you learn from "this song" is transferable to "that" song. Other styles of music use different chord changes and forms for each song, making improvising a much longer, more laborious process (yup, back to those scale and arpeggios).

**The harmonica is technique-rich.** I've played most of the classical and popular musical instruments and my assessment is that out of all of those instruments the harmonica gives you the most options on how to present a note. Below I have listed for you a sampling of how many different ways you can present one note on the harmonica.

**Techniques that can be performed in a Pucker embouchure (as well as tongue block embouchure—except for double, triple and toddle tonguing).**

- 1) Pucker – Pucker up and play that note!
- 2) Wa – Note sounds with hands closed tight, then hands open quickly.
- 3) Hand Tremolo – Hand (right hand for a right-handed person) opens and closes rhythmically.
- 4) Exaggerated Hand Tremolo – Hand (right) opens and closes rhythmically with a very large movement (James Cotton is known for using this to great effect).
- 5) Throat Tremolo – Throat opens and closes. No change in pitch.
- 6) Vibrato – Throat opens and closes with tongue relaxed, allowing it swing in and out of air passage to cause change in pitch.
- 7) Double Vibrato – Throat vibrato with hand tremolo.
- 8) Ta/Da/Ka/Ga/Cough/Double, Triple and Toddle Tonguing – Articulations
- 9) Dip – Note starts bent and releases quickly (Ya, Gya, Tya or Kya).
- 10) Cut – Note starts natural and quickly bends (Dow or Gow).
- 11) Two Note Combo (Slight & Strong) – Play a single note with bleed of upper note.
- 12) Shake – Shake (clean and bleed) between lower and upper note. Upper note is decoration (4/5).
- 13) Glissando – Slide up to a note, or slide between two notes.
- 14) Kiss-Pop – Note is sounded by kissing.
- 15) Growl – Note is presented with a fluctuation between tongue and roof of mouth.
- 16) Roll – Tongue flutters like the Spanish “R,” as in “Rosa” or the top-back of the tongue like the Hebrew “Ch” as in “Chaiim.”

**Techniques that can only be performed in a Tongue Block embouchure.**

- 17) Tongue Block – Mouth is over four holes—tongue blocks three holes to the left.
- 18) Side-Pull – Tongue covers all four holes (no notes sound), right side of tongue pulls back to sound single note on right. Similar to pucker “Ta.”
- 19) Lift – Tongue releases to sound chord (four holes).
- 20) Pull – Tongue covers all four holes (no notes sound), slight pressure is built and tongue releases to sound chord. Unlike the Lift, the Pull is an articulation (more common)
- 21) Slap – Same as standard tongue block, but tongue starts off the harmonica, sounds chord, and tongue slaps down to leave one note sounding (Hal).
- 22) Flutter Tongue – Same embouchure as slap, but tongue travels on and off the harmonica.
- 23) Pull-Slap – An articulate slap. Same as slap, but tongue starts on the harmonica like the pull before it pulls off to sound the slap.
- 24) Octave – Lips are over four holes, tongue blocks two middle holes to sound note on left and right (1+/4+). Also, cover five-hole octaves.
  - a) Slaps, Pulls, Side-Pulls, Pull-Slaps all used.
- 25) Fake Octave – Same as above, but notes are not octaves.
- 26) Side-Flutter Tongue – Same embouchure, but tongue moves left to right.

Wow, now those are blessings! To be able to pick up a harmonica and have the knowledge that you can't hit a wrong note due to the way the harmonica is constructed. To have the ability to just grab a different harmonica when the band changes keys is also a huge time-saving design, allowing you to focus from the get-go on making music. The idea of the 12 Bar Blues being constant allows you to develop a vocabulary of licks, ideas and movements that can be applied to most other songs also cuts the time down from picking up your instrument for the first time and being able to improvise. Our availability of technique on the harmonica really gives us many ways in which to present what we're saying to the listener.

Now for the **Curses**... believe me, these blessings easily outweigh the curses, though we do have our demons to deal with on this instrument.

**The harmonica is like playing a guitar with some broken strings and frets missing.** Those “wrong notes” that I spoke of earlier can be the “really great sounding notes” when placed in the right context. Though you have all of the notes within the major scale, it’s the lowered notes (commonly the lowered 3rd, 5th and 7th) that sound bluesy. Bending, different ways to present a note (our list of techniques) and phrasing are very important to our instrument that doesn’t have as many notes available to it as most other instruments.

**The majority of technique on the harmonica happens in the mouth where you can’t see it.** When playing the piano you see the note... touch the note... get the note. Since most of our techniques will be invisible to you, you’ll spend a lot of time getting to know the inside of your mouth. **The tongue is responsible for all good and evil on the harmonica.** If a note sounds good, your tongue is in the right place. If a note sounds bad—flat, airy or muted in tone, your tongue is in the wrong place. We’ll use different types of speech (certain syllables for example that will locate your tongue in the general area of a technique) to learn much of this, but these will only get your tongue into the general area for performing a technique. Studying the harmonica requires lots of time exploring and refining movement to achieve the desired results and best tone.

**Harmonica players are the redheaded stepchildren of the music world.** Harmonica players are notorious for getting on stage and stepping on the toes (playing when they shouldn’t play) of the other musicians. Because we don’t have to learn the theory that all of the other musicians have to, harmonica players can’t converse with other musicians. When chords are used that are outside of the standard 12 Bar Blues we’re lost, even if we’re told what chord, or what notes of the chord are played. On top of this, most harmonica players study the harmonica to learn how to solo. Most harmonica players just don’t know what to do while someone else is singing or soloing.

The answer to this is to learn some basic music theory as it pertains to the harmonica. Learning how to play the guitar or bass at a basic level you’ll find to be very helpful in the understanding of Blues music theory. There really isn’t much music theory that you need to study on the harmonica, but what there is to memorize... you really need to memorize!

### **What Next?**

You’ll first focus your study of the harmonica on playing single notes with good tone and timing within the 12 Bar Blues Progression (I recommend *First Lessons Blues Harmonica MB20180SET* for this). As you get close to finishing this period in your studies you’ll start to work on your bending and tongue blocking skills. You’ll use a combination of books and songs from various great artists that use these techniques. Once your bending and tongue blocking skills are strong, you can pretty much conquer any song. As time goes on (when you’re ready for it) you’ll also dig into studying position playing (1st and 3rd position), improvising and accompaniment playing.

As you travel down the road to mastery of the harmonica I recommend you always are work on three areas. Work on a **new technique** to keep your technique skills growing. Work on a challenging song to give your technique context and help you to learn more licks and movements (not to mention a full song that you can perform). Lastly, give yourself some time at

the end of your practice session to apply what you're learning. Put on your favorite jam track and try to use some of your new licks or techniques.

As a side note, the most common harmonicas used by blues players are the keys of (from lowest in pitch to highest): G, A, Bb, C and D.

Best wishes on your journey!

Best Regards,

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