



Playing the Diatonic Harmonica

Playing the
by Mike Moxcey



Diatonic Harmonica

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(Actually, it would be blank except I had to tell you it was blank so now it isn't).

Many people play the harmonica. Some just use it around the campfire; others such as Paul Butterfield, Neil Young, and Bob Dylan have made a good living playing the harmonica. This brief introduction will get you started playing the harmonica which is also called the "mouth harp" or just plain "harp."

Caring for Your Harmonica

First off, don't treat the harmonica like a toy. It is a musical instrument and will give you many hours of pleasure if you take care of it.

1. **DON'T BLOW TOO HARD.** The reeds inside will get bent out of shape and not sound good anymore. There is no way to fix most harmonicas so you'll have to buy another one.
2. **Keep it clean.** Keep it in its case when you carry it in your pocket so the reeds don't fill up with lint.
3. **Keep it clean.** When playing the harmonica, try not to salivate into it. After playing a song, gently tap the side of the harmonica with the holes against the palm of your hand.

Understanding the Diatonic (regular) Harmonica

A Diatonic harmonica is one that just plays the regular notes of the key it is. That's like playing the white keys of the piano and without playing any black keys. Chromatic harmonicas have all the notes of the scale on them but they are harder to play.

The key of the harmonica is usually stamped on the metal or painted on the wood someplace.

A C harmonica can be played in the key of C (in what is called first position) and in the key of G (in what is called 2d position). If you blow out (exhale) on any three holes of the harmonica, you will make a C chord.

Try it. Slide up and down, always blowing out. You might need to moisten your lips slightly. All those sounds are C chords.

Finding Notes

The holes on the harmonica are numbered from one to ten. At first, trying to blow just a single hole may seem impossible. But just a little bit of practice pursing your lips lets you realize that those holes are quite far apart.

The ten hole harmonica has 20 different notes because blowing out (exhaling) makes a different note from drawing in (inhaling). Actually there are only 19 different notes because two are the same: the 2 hole blowing out and the 3 hole drawing in.

The Major Scale

The only full C scale on the harmonica goes from the 4th hole to the 7th hole.

Blow out on the 4 (C).

Draw in on the 4 (D).

Blow out on the 5 (E).

Draw in on the 5 (F).

Blow out on the 6 (G).

Draw in on the 6 (A).

Now switch the sequence.

Draw in on the 7 (B).

Blow out on the 7 (C).

Reading Tablature

Tablature is just another way of explaining how to play an instrument. Most music is written in the standard musical notation of staves and notes. Those music writings apply to any instrument. Tablature only applies to the instrument it's written for. In harmonica tablature, the hole to use is shown by a number. The way to blow or draw is shown by an arrow below the number.

Blowing Out is an Up Arrow "↑" and Drawing In is a Down Arrow "↓".

In this brief intro, extra long notes are shown by a thicker arrow "↓" but in most harmonica tablature, the length of time to hold a note is shown by the length of the arrow.

Here is the C scale we just played written in tablature form:

④ ④ ⑤ ⑤ ⑥ ⑥ ⑦ ⑦
↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

Let's try some familiar songs. If the songs don't sound quite right, then add or subtract notes and beats to make it sound the way you think it should.

Mary Had a Little Lamb

⑤ ④ ④ ④ ⑤ ⑤ ⑤ ⊕
 ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑

④ ④ ④ ⊕ ⑤ ⑥ ⑥ ⊕
 ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑

⑤ ④ ④ ④ ⑤ ⑤ ⑤ ⑤
 ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑

④ ④ ⑤ ④ ④ ⊕ ⊕ ⊕
 ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

④ is the 4th hole ⑤ is the 5th hole ⑥ is the 6th hole ⊕ means to wait a beat
 ↑ means blow out (exhale) ↓ means draw in (inhale)

Clean Your Harmonica after Playing!!!

Rhythm

Each of the round indicators (a hole or the clock) stands for one beat. See if you can clap your hands (not while trying to play the harmonica!!!) so you can get a feel for how some of the notes need to be held longer than others.

Here are the chords a guitar or piano could use to play along. The slashes are the beats and should go along with the words or syllables below each one. Play each chord the required number of beats until a new chord shows up.

C / / / / / / /
 Mary had a little lamb,
 G / / / C / / /
 little lamb, little lamb.
 C / / / / / / / /
 Mary had a little lamb, its
 / / G / C / / /
 fleece was white as snow.

Skip to My Lou

This song has a neat little riff at the end that takes as much practice as all the rest of the notes put together.

verse:

⑤⑤	④④	⑤⑤	⑥	④④	③③	④④	⑤
↑↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↓↓	↓↓	↓↓	↓
⑤⑤	④④	⑤⑤	⑥	④⑤⑤⑤④	④	④	
↑↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↓↑↓↑↓	↑	↑	

chorus:

⑤	④	⑤⑤	⑥	④	③	④④	⑤
↑	↑	↑↑	↑	↓	↓	↓↓	↓
⑤	④	⑤⑤	⑥	④⑤⑤⑤④	④	④	
↑	↑	↑↑	↑	↓↑↓↑↓	↑	↑	

[C]Lost my partner what'll I do?

[G]Lost my partner what'll I do?

[C]Lost my partner what'll I do?

[G]Skip to my Lou my [C]darling.

Flies in the sugar bowl, shoo fly shoo ...

Going to Texas, two by two ...

Chorus:

Skip, skip, skip to my Lou, (3x)

Skip to my Lou my darling.

Cat's in the cream jar, what'll I do? ...

Cow's in the cornfield, looking at you ...

alternate chorus:

Lou, lou skip to my lou, (3x)

Skip to my Lou my darling.

Down in the swimming hole, lost my shoe ...

Choose your partners, skip to my lou...

I'll get another one prettier than you ...

Can't get a red bird, a blue bird will do ...

Little red wagon painted blue ...

I got a red bird, a pretty one too...

Flies in the buttermilk, two by two ...

④ is the 4th hole

↑ means blow out (exhale)

⑤ is the 5th hole

⑥ is the 6th hole

↓ means draw in (inhale)

Polly Wolly Doodle

verse:

④④ ⑤ ⑤ ④ ④④ ⑤ ⑤ ④
 ↑↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑↓ ↑ ↑ ↑

④④ ⑤⑤ ⑤⑤ ⑤⑤ ⑤⑤ ④ ⊕ ⊕
 ↑↓ ↑↑ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓ ⊕ ⊕

④⑤ ⑤ ⑤ ④ ④⑤ ⑤ ⑤ ④
 ↓↑ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓↑ ↓ ↓ ↓

④⑤ ⑤⑤ ⑤⑤ ⑤⑤ ④④ ④ ⊕ ⊕
 ↓↑ ↓↓ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑ ⊕ ⊕

chorus:

④④ ⑤ ⊕ ⊕ ④④ ⑤ ⊕ ⊕
 ↑↓ ↑ ↑↓ ↑

④④ ⑤ ⑤ ⑤ ⑤ ④ ⊕ ⊕
 ↑↓ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ⊕ ⊕

④⑤ ⑤⑤ ⑤⑤ ④④ ④⑤ ⑤⑤ ⑤⑤ ④④
 ↓↑ ↓↓ ↓↓ ↓↓ ↓↑ ↓↓ ↓↓ ↓↓

④⑤ ⑤⑤ ⑤⑤ ⑤⑤ ④④ ④ ⊕ ⊕
 ↓↑ ↓↓ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑ ⊕ ⊕

verse:

1. Oh I [C]went down south for to see my Sal,
sing polly wolly doodle all the [G]day.
 My Sal she am a spunky gal
sing polly wolly doodle all the [C]day.

chorus:

Fare thee well, fare thee well,
 fare thee well, my fairy fay,
 for I'm going to Louisiana
 for to see my Susianna
 singing polly wolly doodle all the day.

2. Oh my Sal she is a maiden fair
 sing polly wolly doodle all the day.

with curly eyes and laughing hair

sing polly wolly doodle all the day.

3. Oh a grasshopper sitting on a railroad track...
 a-picking his teeth with a carpet tack ...

4. Oh I went to bed and it weren't no use ...
 my feet stuck out like a chicken roost ...

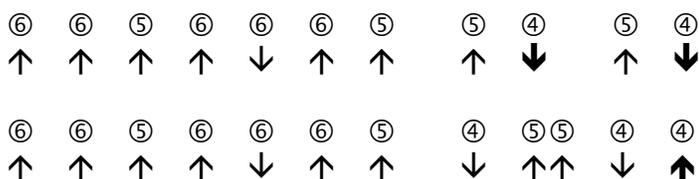
5. Down in the henhouse on my knees ...
 I thought I heard a chicken sneeze ...

6. He sneezed so hard with the whooping
 cough ...
 he sneezed his head and feathers right off ...

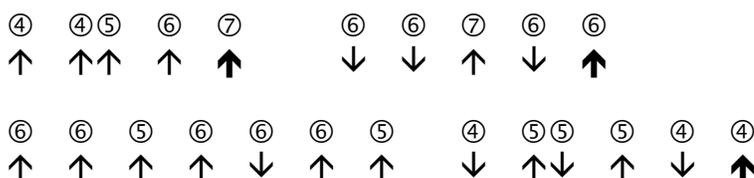
Camptown Races

by Stephen Foster

verse



chorus



Oh the [C]camptown ladies sing this song,

[G]doo dah, doo dah.

[C]Camptown racetrack's five miles long,

[G]all the doo dah [C]day.

ch: [C]Going to run all night,

[F]going to run all [C]day.

Bet my money on the bobtail nag,

[G]somebody bet on the [C]bay.

Oh the long-tailed filly and the big black hoss
doo dah, doo dah.

came to the mudhole and they both cut across
all the doo dah day.

Went down south with my hat caved in,...

I came back north with a pocket full of tin

The blind hoss stuck in a big mudhole ...
Can't touch bottom with a ten-foot pole ...

Old muley cow came on the track ...
The bobtail fling her over her back ...

They fly along like a railroad car ...
Running a race with a shooting star ...

See them flying on a ten-mile heat ...
Round the racetrack then repeat ...

I win my money on the bobtail nag ...
I keep my money in an old totebag ...

Special Effects

Now that you can play one hole at a time accurately, you can spice up your playing by doing two holes at once. When you get to the "dah" of "doo dah," try drawing in on both the 4 and the 3 holes at the same time. And when you get to the final note of each verse or chorus, play a full C chord by blowing out on the 3,4 and 5 holes simultaneously.

Playing Higher Melodies

There is another almost complete C scale farther up the harmonica. It is missing only the 7th note, the B note, of the scale. Try this scale:

⑦	⑧	⑧	⑨	⑨	⑩	⑩
↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑
C	D	E	F	G	A	C

Here are some higher versions of the previous songs. The breathing pattern is pretty much the same; you just switch holes at different times.

Mary Had a Little Lamb

⑧	⑧	⑦	⑧	⑧	⑧	⑧	⊕		⑧	⑧	⑧	⊕	⑧	⑨	⑨	⊕
↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑			↓	↓	↓		↑	↑	↑	
⑧	⑧	⑦	⑧	⑧	⑧	⑧	⑧	⑧	⑧	⑧	⑧	⑧	⑧	⑦		
↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑			

Skip to My Lou (chorus)

⑧	⑦	⑧⑧	⑨		⑧	⑦	⑧⑧	⑨
↑	↑	↑↑	↑		↓	↓	↓↓	↓
⑧	⑦	⑧⑧	⑨		⑧⑧⑨⑧⑧	⑦	⑦	
↑	↑	↑↑	↑		↓↑↓↑↓	↑	↑	

Polly Wolly Doodle (verse)

⑦⑧	⑧	⑧	⑦	⑦⑧	⑧	⑧	⑦
↑↓	↑	↑	↑	↑↓	↑	↑	↑
⑦⑧	⑧⑧	⑧⑧	⑨⑨	⑧⑧	⑧	⊕	⊕
↑↓	↑↑	↑↑	↓↓	↑↑	↓		
⑧⑧	⑨	⑨	⑧	⑧⑧	⑨	⑨	⑧
↓↑	↓	↓	↓	↓↑	↓	↓	↓
⑧⑧	⑨⑨	⑨⑨	⑧⑧	⑧⑧	⑦	⊕	⊕
↓↑	↓↓	↓↓	↑↑	↓↓	↑		

Oh Susannah

by Stephen Foster

verse (play twice)

④④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑤ ④ ④ ⑤⑤ ④④ ④
↑↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓↑ ↓

④④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑤ ④ ④ ⑤⑤ ④④ ④
↑↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑

chorus

⑤ ⑤ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑤ ④ ④
↓ ↓ ↓↓ ↓ ↑↑ ↑ ↑ ↓

④④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑤ ④ ④ ⑤⑤ ④④ ④
↑↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑

The song is played as two verses and a chorus when singing.

1. Well I [C] come from Alabama with
my banjo on my [G] knee
and I'm [C] going to Louisiana, my own
true love [G] for to [C] see.
It rained all night the day I left, the
weather was bone [G] dry,
the [C] sun so hot I froze myself, Susanna
[G] don't you [C] cry.

chorus:

[F]Oh Susanna, now
[C] don't you cry for [G] me
cause I'm [C] bound for Louisiana with
my banjo [G] on my [C] knee.

2. I had a dream the other night when
everything was still.
I dreamed I saw my gal Susanne,
she was coming around the hill.
A buckwheat cake was in her mouth
a tear was in her eye.
I said, "I'm bound for Dixieland,
Susanna don't you cry."

3. I soon will be in New Orleans
and I'll look all around,
and when I find Susanna
I'll fall upon the ground.
But if I do not find her then I will surely die,
and when I'm dead and buried,
Susanna don't you cry.

Clean Your Harmonica after Playing!!!

Extras to Add:

Try to figure out the high version to this song.

Add some double and triple hole blows and draws wherever you think they sound good.

Buffalo Gals

verse: ④④ ④⑤ ⑥⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ⑤ ⑥⑤ ⑤ ④ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ⑤
 ↑↑ ↓↑ ↑↑ ↓↑ ↑ ↑ ↑↓ ↓ ↓ ↓↑ ↑ ↑

④④ ④⑤ ⑥⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ⑤ ⑤ ⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑤ ⑤ ④ ④
 ↑↑ ↓↑ ↑↑ ↓↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

chorus: ⑦⑦ ⑦ ⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ⑤ ⑥⑤ ⑤ ④ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ⑤
 ↑↑ ↓ ↓ ↑↑ ↓↑ ↑ ↑ ↑↓ ↓ ↓ ↓↑ ↑ ↑

⑦⑦ ⑦ ⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ⑤ ⑤ ⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑤ ⑤ ④ ④
 ↑↑ ↓ ↓ ↑↑ ↓↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

As [C] I was walking on down the street,
 [G] down the street, [C] down the street,
 a pretty little girl I chanced to meet
 and we [G]danced by the light of the [C]moon.

I asked her if she'd be my wife,
 be my wife, be my wife.
 Then I'd be happy all my life
 if she'd marry me.

[C] Buffalo gals won't you come out tonight,
 [G] come out tonight, [C] come out tonight?
 Buffalo gals won't you come out tonight,
 and [G] dance by the light of the [G] moon?

I got a gal at the top of the hill,
 the top of the hill, the top of the hill.
 She's a moonshiner's daughter but
 I love her still
 won't you tell me that she's comin' out tonight?

I danced with a gal with a
 hole in her stocking,
 her knees kept a-knocking and her
 hips kept a-rocking.
 I danced with a gal with a
 hole in her stocking,
 and we danced by the light of the moon.

Give you five dollars if you come out tonight,
 come out tonight, come out tonight.
 Give you five dollars if you come out tonight,
 and dance by the light of the moon.

I asked her if she'd stop and talk,
 stop and talk, stop and talk.
 Her feet covered up the whole sidewalk
 but she was fair to view.

My and my gal we sat on the stoop,
 sat on the stoop, sat on the stoop.
 Her pa came out and made me loop de loop
 won't you tell me that she's comin' out tonight?

I asked her if she'd stop and dance,
 have a dance, care to dance
 I thought that I might get a chance
 to shake a foot with her

I got a gal with a wart on her chin,
 with her toes turned out ,
 with her eyes turned in.
 She's a pretty good gal for the shape she's in
 won't you tell me that she's comin' out tonight?

Skipping Holes

So far, all the songs have been played on adjacent holes. This next song jumps a hole on the chorus, going from the 4th to the 6th hole. It skips two holes on the high version of the chorus.

Shortnin' Bread

verse (repeat for one full verse)

⑦ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ⑥ ⑦⑦ ⑥ ⑥ ⑦⑦ ⑥ ⑥ ⑥ ⑤⑤ ④ ④
 ↑ ↓↓ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑

chorus

④④ ⑥⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ④ ⑥ ⑥ ⑥ ④④ ⑥⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ⑤ ④ ④
 ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

④④ ⑥⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ④ ⑥ ⑥ ⑥ ⑦⑦ ⑥⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑥ ⑤ ④ ④
 ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

High version

verse (repeat for one full verse)

⑩ ⑩⑩ ⑨ ⑩ ⑩⑩ ⑩ ⑨ ⑩⑩ ⑩ ⑨ ⑩ ⑧⑧ ⑧ ⑦
 ↑ ↓↓ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑

chorus

⑦⑦ ⑩⑩ ⑨⑨ ⑩ ⑦ ⑩ ⑨ ⑩ ⑦⑦ ⑩⑩ ⑨⑨ ⑩ ⑧ ⑧ ⑦
 ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

⑦⑦ ⑩⑩ ⑨⑨ ⑩ ⑦ ⑩ ⑨ ⑩ ⑩⑩ ⑩⑩ ⑨⑨ ⑩ ⑧ ⑧ ⑦
 ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

Three little babies laying in bed
two was sick and the other most dead.
Went to the doctor, doctor said,
"You got to feed those children some shortnin bread."

chorus:
Mama's little baby loves shortnin', shortnin',
mama's little baby loves shortnin' bread.
Mama's little baby loves shortnin', shortnin',
mama's little baby loves shortnin' bread.

When those children sick in bed
heard that talk about shortnin' bread
they got up well and dance and sing
skipping round they cut the Pigeon Wing.

So put on the skillet, put on the lead.
Mama's gonna make some shortnin' bread.
That ain't all she's gonna do,
mama's gonna make some coffee, too.

I slipped in the kitchen, raised up the lid,
and stole me a mess of that shortnin' bread.
Winked at the pretty gal and I said,
"Baby how'd you like some shortnin' bread?"

Well they caught me with the skillet
and they caught me with the lid
and they caught me with the gal
making shortnin' bread.
Six months for the skillet, six for the lid,
now I'm doing time for eating shortnin' bread.

Cupping Your Hand

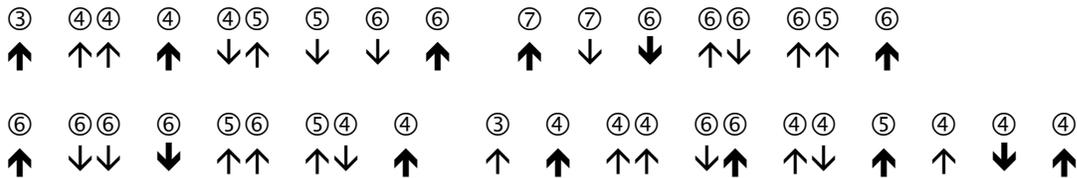
One of the common ways to hold your instrument is with your left hand gripping the harmonica between the Index finger and Thumb as if they were an alligator's mouth chomping down on the harmonica. Then place the heel of your right hand under your left Thumb, and cup the rest of the right hand up to your left Little finger to form a sounding hole.

Now blow a single note and open and close the sound hole by spreading the two hands apart. You can make different sounds.

For slow, mournful tunes, fluttering the sound hole can make the harmonica warble. The next two songs are good for practicing that technique.

The flutter often sounds best on the last note of a line. Open and close the sounding hole to accent the other notes.

Shenandoah



Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you,
Away, you rolling river.
 Shenandoah, I long to hear you
Away, we're bound away
'cross the wide Missouri.

Oh, Shenandoah, I love your daughter
Away, you rolling river.
 Oh Shenandoah, I love your daughter
Away, we're bound away
'cross the wide Missouri

Missouri she's a mighty river...
 When she rolls down, her topsails shiver...

Seven years, I courted Sally...
 Seven more, I longed to have her...

Farewell, my dear, I'm bound to leave you...
 Oh, Shenandoah, I'll not deceive you...

Swanee River (Old Folks at Home)

by Stephen Foster

⑤ ④④ ⑤④ ④ ⑦ ⑥ ⑦ ⑥ ⑤ ④ ④
↑ ↓↑ ↑↓ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓

⑤ ④④ ⑤④ ④ ⑦ ⑥ ⑦ ⑥ ⑤ ④④ ④ ④
↑ ↓↑ ↑↓ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑↓ ↓ ↑

⑦ ⑦⑧ ⑥ ⑥ ⑥⑥ ⑦ ⑦ ⑥ ⑤ ⑥ ⑥
↓ ↑↓ ↑ ↑ ↓↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑

⑤ ④④ ⑤④ ④ ⑦ ⑥ ⑦ ⑥ ⑤ ④④ ④ ④
↑ ↓↑ ↑↓ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑↓ ↓ ↑

Way down upon the Swanee River, far, far away
That's where my heart is turning ever
That's where the old folks stay.
All up and down the whole creation, sadly I roam
Still longing for the old plantation
and for the old folks at home

All the world is sad and dreary everywhere I roam .
Oh mamma, how my heart grows weary,
far from the old folks at home

All 'round the little farm I wandered, when I was young.
Then many happy days I squandered,
many the songs I sung.
When I was playing with my brother, happy was I.
Oh, take me to my kind old mother,
there let me live and die.

One little hut among the bushes, one that I love.
Still sadly to my mem'ry rushes, no matter where I rove.
When shall I see the bees a humming,
all 'round the comb?
When shall I hear the banjo strumming,
down by my good old home

Breathing Techniques

Once you begin to get familiar with the harmonica, it gets fairly easy to pick out songs. The trick to playing a song over and over is to control your breathing.

That requires planning ahead a little and practicing exhaling or inhaling through your nose at the same time you're playing a note. Then you can get rid of excess air or get some more oxygen before you pass out.

There are two things to practice:

1. Getting a note while breathing both through your mouth and your nose.
2. Maintaining the correct loudness of the note while you deal with the needs of your lungs.

Learning these techniques, like everything else, just takes practice.

Tongue-Blocking

Tongue-Blocking is another special effect that works very well with the songs you've already learned. What you do is cover some of the holes of the harmonica with your tongue, then as you're blowing, you lift the tongue off then put it back to add a chord sound to the single note, almost as if a guitarist picked one note and then strummed a chord.

1. First, you must open up your mouth to cover the first four holes (1-4) of the harmonica.
2. Next, stick your tongue out and place it over the first three holes (1-3). It helps to hold the harmonica at an angle. When you blow out, you should only hear the one C note:

④
↑

It takes a little practice to get the placement of everything exactly right.

3. Now as you're blowing out, lift the tongue off the bottom 3 holes. Do not change your breathing. The lifting of the tongue is done during a blow out. You do not make two different blows. You lift the tongue independently so that the 4 hole is blown continuously.

④ ①②③④
↑ continue with same breath

In the following tablature, lifting the tongue will be shown as a ○ (for the open mouth). You can use the tongue-block method to spice up almost any song. Polkas and waltzes that are in 3/4 time will lift the tongue twice for each note (which means you must put it back then lift it again while maintaining a smooth breath). Try it on Swanee River.

④ ①②③④ ①②③④
↑ ○ ○

This next song just shows how the tongue-block can spice up a simple song. It doesn't add any beats; it merely substitutes the unblocked blow or draw for one of the main notes. It doesn't use any blocking on the quick parts.

Skip to My Lou

⑤ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ④ ③ ④ ⑤
↑ ○ ↑ ○ ↑ ○ ↑ ○ ↓ ○ ↓ ○ ↓ ○ ↓ ○

⑤ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ④ ⑤⑤⑤ ④ ④ ④
↑ ○ ↑ ○ ↑ ○ ↑ ○ ↓ ↑↓↑ ↓ ↑ ○ ↑ ○

Train Rhythm Blues

To do the basic train rhythm, you move down to the lower notes of the harmonica (holes 1-6) and draw in instead of blow out. This means you are playing in the key of G (if playing a C harmonica). This is also called playing in "second position" or playing "cross-harp."

First, draw in on the 2 and 3 holes together.

As you're drawing, drop your chin to get a little extra incoming puff of air. If your lips are loose, this should also mean you get a little bit of extra sound from the 1 hole.

Try that. In the tab, a single "chug" (draw and drop) is shown as:

23 123
 ↓ ↓

After doing the "chug," then blow out on the 2 and 3 holes but try to blow out with a short, explosive breath so it isn't too loud and the sound is cut off at the end.

23
 ↑

You need to put three of these together and then end with a long draw note. I do a quick drop and blow before starting the next line. You may find some other patterns that suit your taste.

23 123 23 23 123 23 23 123 23 3 ⊕ 3 3
 ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

That's a basic line. I usually put 4 of these together to make a "verse." *The important thing is the rhythm of the breathing, not the notes.* To make the verses sound interesting, you can move up and down to different holes and just draw one hole occasionally.

Here is one sample verse to get you started.

23 123 23 23 123 23 23 123 23 34 ⊕ 34 34
 ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

23 123 23 23 123 23 34 234 34 23 ⊕ 23 23
 ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

23 123 23 23 123 23 23 123 23 34 ⊕ 34 34
 ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

34 234 34 23 123 23 1 1 12 23 ⊕
 ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓

Bending a Note

Bending a note means to change the sound of the note. Topnotch harmonica players can actually play chromatics simply by bending any note they want to make it flatter.

To bend a note, you actually suck the air in, not just draw it in. To practice, *put down the harmonica*. Now breathe in while pinching your lips almost closed. You ought to get to where you really have to exert some effort almost like sucking through a straw that's plugged up.

BE CAREFUL. You can easily blow out a reed and destroy your harmonica if you suck too hard.

Now draw in on the 4 hole normally, then pinch your lips until you hear the sound change. Practice that without making it change too much.

Try it on the 5 hole, then the 3.

The Train Whistle Sound

To make the train whistle sound, you must bend the note first, then ease off. So you start with a sucking breath then unpucker your lips to turn it into a regular draw. Here is how I show it in this tablature on three different holes.

4 5 3
 ↘ ↘ ↘

My favorite sound is uses the 3 and 4 holes with a hand flutter. Here is another train rhythm that starts with two train whistles then throws them in various places.

34 ↘		34 ↘			
23 123 23 ↓ ↓ ↑	23 123 23 ↓ ↓ ↑	23 123 23 ↓ ↓ ↑	34 ⊕ 34 34 ↘ ↓ ↑		
34 234 34 ↓ ↓ ↑	23 123 23 ↓ ↓ ↑	34 34 34 ↓ ↓ ↑	23 ⊕ 34 34 ↓ ↓ ↑		
23 123 23 ↓ ↓ ↑	23 123 23 ↓ ↓ ↑	23 123 23 ↓ ↓ ↑	34 ⊕ 23 23 ↓ ↓ ↑		
34 ↘		23 123 23 ↓ ↓ ↑	23 123 23 ↓ ↓ ↑	23 ↘	

Playing in Second Position

The train rhythm blues was played in second position. This means that on a C harmonica, you were actually playing a song in the key of G. A guitar or banjo playing along would strum mostly G chords (with an occasional C or D thrown in). The full G scale is:

G major scale: G A B C D E F# G

There is no F# on the C harmonica so you have to avoid songs with it. One of the reasons blues sounds so good playing cross-harp is that the blues scale uses an F instead of an F#. Of course, it also uses a Bb instead of a B, but that is easy (and fun) to get by bending the B note.

G blues scale: G A Bb C D E F G

Besides playing cross-harp down on the low notes, you can go all the way up. You just have to learn where the main notes are.

The notes in a G chord are G, B and D. Here are those notes on the harp:

①	②	③	③	④	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨
↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑
D	G	G	B	D	G	B	D	G

Drawing in on the 5 or the 9 gives you the F which is part of the G7 blues chord. Bending the Bs will give you the Bb notes and you can use any of the other holes to find the melody.

Here are some songs you've already learned in 1st position or C. Now they've been transposed (changed) into 2d position or G.

Mary Had a Little Lamb (cross-harp)

⑦	⑥	⑥	⑥	⑦	⑦	⑦	⊕	⑥	⑥	⑥	⊕	⑦	⑧	⑧	⊕
↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓		↓	↓	↓		↓	↓	↓	
⑦	⑥	⑥	⑥	⑦	⑦	⑦	⑦	⑥	⑥	⑦	⑥	⑥	⊕	⊕	⊕
↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑			

Polly Wolly Doodle (cross-harp)

chorus

⑥⑥	⑦	⊕	⊕	⑥⑥	⑦	⊕	⊕	⑥⑥	⑦	⑦	⑦	⑦	⑥	⊕	⊕
↑↓	↓			↑↓	↓			↑↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓		
⑥⑦	⑦⑦	⑦⑦	⑥⑥	⑥⑦	⑦⑦	⑦⑦	⑥⑥	⑥⑦	⑦⑦	⑦⑦	⑦⑦	⑦⑦	⑥⑥	⑥	
↓↓	↑↑	↑↑	↓↓	↓↓	↑↑	↑↑	↓↓	↓↓	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑	↓↓	↓↓	↑	

Camptown Races (cross-harp)

verse:

⑧ ⑧ ⑦ ⑧ ⑧ ⑧ ⑦ ⑦ ⑥ ⑦ ⑥
 ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓

⑧ ⑧ ⑦ ⑧ ⑧ ⑧ ⑦ ⑥ ⑦⑦ ⑥ ⑥
 ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑

chorus:

⑥ ⑥⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑧ ⑧ ⑨ ⑧ ⑧
 ↑ ↑↓ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓

⑧ ⑧ ⑦ ⑧ ⑧ ⑧ ⑦ ⑥ ⑦⑦ ⑦ ⑥ ⑥
 ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑

Shortnin' Bread (cross-harp)

verse (repeat for one full verse)

⑨ ⑧⑧ ⑧ ⑧ ⑨⑨ ⑧ ⑧ ⑨⑨ ⑧ ⑧ ⑧ ⑦⑦ ⑥ ⑥
 ↑ ↑↑ ↓ ↑ ↑↑ ↑ ↓ ↑↑ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓↓ ↓ ↑

chorus

⑥⑥ ⑧⑧ ⑧⑧ ⑧ ⑥ ⑧ ⑧ ⑧ ⑥⑥ ⑧⑧ ⑧⑧ ⑧ ⑦ ⑥ ⑥
 ↑↑ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↑↑ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

⑥⑥ ⑧⑧ ⑧⑧ ⑧ ⑥ ⑧ ⑧ ⑧ ⑨⑨ ⑧⑧ ⑧⑧ ⑧ ⑦ ⑥ ⑥
 ↑↑ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↑↑ ↑↑ ↓↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

Amazing Grace (cross-harp)

④⑤ ⑥ ⑦⑥ ⑦ ⑦⑥ ⑥ ⑤ ④ ④⑤ ⑥ ⑦⑥ ⑦ ⑥⑦ ⑧ ⌚
 ↓↑ ↑ ↓↑ ↓ ↓↓ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↓↑ ↑ ↓↑ ↓ ↓↓ ↓

⑧⑧ ⑧⑧ ⑧⑦ ⑧ ⑦⑥ ⑥ ⑤ ④ ④⑤ ⑥ ⑦⑥ ⑦ ⑥ ⑥ ⑤⑥⑦ ⑥
 ↓↓ ↑↓ ↓↓ ↓ ↓↓ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↓↑ ↑ ↓↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑

Try lots of hand flutters with this song. You can play a C chord for the turnaround at the end by blowing out on the 5-8 holes or doing a regular tongue-block blow. However, tongue-blocking is not useful when playing in cross-harp position.

Carrying On

The harmonica is a musical instrument.

People who treat it like a toy never discover just how good the instrument can be.

It isn't a toy. It can be the first real musical instrument you learn to play. If you go on to other instruments, then you'll already have a background in figuring out melodies. If you begin to play one of the standard band wind instruments such as flute, trumpet, or saxophone, then you'll have already learned the basics of managing your breath.

Treat your harmonica with respect and you will get many hours of enjoyment out of it.

Carry it around and try to figure out songs you've heard or figure out your own tunes.

If you find someone who plays another musical instrument, find out what key they generally like to play or sing in and then buy a harmonica in that key. All the techniques are identical, it's just the sound that changes which makes it easier to change keys on the harp than it is on most other instruments. (But it's also more expensive.)

There are also double reed harmonicas which have a very full sound. They have two reeds for each hole, much like a 12-string guitar has 2 strings for each string on a regular guitar. Double reed harmonicas also take a lot more breath to play. They aren't usually used in blues, but when playing in 1st position using tongue-blocking and hand flutters, they rival the sound of an organ.

Enjoy your instrument.

Take care of it. Keep it in its case.

Play it a lot.

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