



The Chromatic Harmonica's Greatest Strength

By David Barrett, Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine

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Winslow Yerxa is very busy finishing up an important harmonica project this month and was unable to submit an article. To keep Winslow's blues chromatic harmonica fans happy I've decided to step in and write this month's article... I hope you enjoy.

The chromatic harmonica's greatest strength in blues is in its ability to present one note in many ways. This month we'll start with a lick played frequently on the chromatic harmonica, and I'll show you how it can be transformed with the great techniques the chromatic has to offer.

Example 1 demonstrates our basic lick. Add tremolo or vibrato on all held notes.

Ex. 1

Musical notation for Example 1: A 4/4 measure with notes 3, 4, 5, 6+, 5, 6, 5. A triplet of notes 4, 5, 6+ is marked with a '3' above it.

In Example 2 we'll add the dip (start the note with a slight bend and let it release to its natural pitch quickly) to the 6 draw.

Ex. 2

Musical notation for Example 2: A 4/4 measure with notes 3, 4, 5, 6+, 5, 6, 5. A triplet of notes 4, 5, 6+ is marked with a '3' above it. A dip is indicated by a downward arrow above the 6 draw note.

Another great technique for the harmonica is the head shake. Example 3 demonstrates this.

Ex. 3

Musical notation for Example 3: A 4/4 measure with notes 3, 4, 5, 6+, 5, 6, 6, 5. A triplet of notes 4, 5, 6+ is marked with a '3' above it. A head shake is indicated by a downward arrow above the 6 draw note and a double bar line above the final 6 draw note.

In Example 4 let's leak in a bit of the 7 draw (two-hole combination) with our 6 draw and a bit of the 6 draw with our 5 draw for a bluesier sound.

Ex. 4

Let's now tongue block the notes and use the slap to present this lick. Place your lips over five holes and slap your tongue on the left four holes. Using the word "Hall" can be helpful. "Ha" is the tongue off the harmonica—creating the chord, and "ll" is the tongue on the face of the harmonica—giving you the tongue block single note. Example 5 demonstrates this.

Ex. 5

Example 6 gives us the cool flutter-tongue technique for the last note. The flutter is the same as the slap, but many times over (tongue lifts on and off the face of the harmonica quickly).

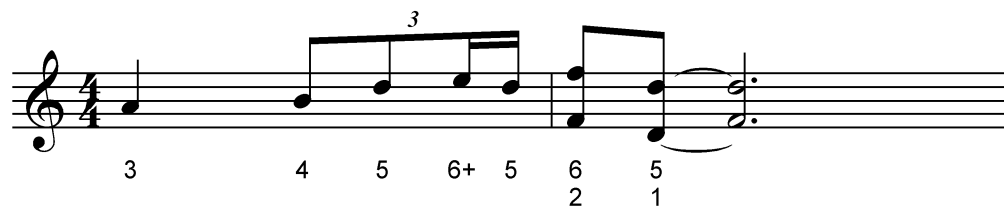
Ex. 6

Fake octaves (major 6ths) are great for making a lick bluesier. Fake octaves are achieved by placing your lips over four holes and blocking the middle two (using more of the tip of your tongue). Example 7 demonstrates this.

Ex. 7

Octaves are great for making a lick more powerful. Octaves are achieved by placing your lips over five holes and blocking the middle three. Example 8 demonstrates this.

Ex. 8



I hope these examples have helped you appreciate how cool the techniques you've been studying can sound when they are placed in context.

About the Author David Barrett

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