



John Garcia

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This month we provide a different perspective for harmonica players. Ever wonder what other musicians think about harp players? Specifically, have you ever considered your harp playing from a singer or guitar player's point of view? We sat down and talked with John Garcia, veteran guitar player, singer and former lead guitarist and frontman for John Lee

Hooker and The Coast to Coast Blues Band. In addition to John Lee Hooker, John has worked and performed with a "Who's Who" of blues artists including Albert King, B.B King, Hubert Sumlin, Bo Diddley, Norton Buffalo, Walter Horton, Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, James Cotton, James Harman, Al Kooper, Elvin Bishop, Nick Gravenites, Charlie Musselwhite, and Muddy Waters and many more. John currently teaches guitar at the School of the Blues®, plays lead guitar in the John Lee Hooker Jr. band, plays and sings with the School of the Blues All-Star Band and leads his own band, The John Garcia Blues Band.

DC: John, you have been playing for many, many years. How long?

JG: About thirty-five years, at least.

DC: Started when you were a teenager?

JG: Yeah, I was about sixteen. I'm still a teenager (Laughs).

DC: Any one else in your family, mother or father plays an instrument?

JG: The only person was on my dad's side of the family, my grandmother. She was a boogie-woogie piano player.

DC: Did that open you up to jazz and blues?

JG: Not really, I didn't want to be a piano player. I wanted to play guitar (Laughing). I took a few lessons in the beginning. Later on, as I got older, I appreciated the piano a lot more. I obviously heard the boogie-woogie and stuff, but I hadn't got the bug yet. That didn't really happen till I was in my late teens.

DC: Was that when you were in your first band, in your teens?

JG: Yeah, I started about sixteen. I picked up the guitar and probably had my first band within the first year. I was really into wanting to make it happen.

DC: Was that a rock 'n roll band?

JG: No. Mostly it was instrumentals. Instrumental music of the time; stuff like Dick Dale and the Deltones. Surf music was kind of coming to the end of its era. I was listening to Freddie King and all his classic instrumentals like "The Stumble" and "Hideaway". Also The

Ventures were still pretty popular. But I was mostly coming from that instrumental music thing. I didn't even think about or wanted to be a singer.

DC: So when did the blues grab you?

JG: I would have to say probably Freddie King. I remember the album was "Freddie King Goes Surfing". That really wasn't the original title. It was "Freddie King Hideaway". But they changed the title to sell records at the time. I knew it was different than the other surf music that was happening. But even surf music had blues tinges in it. I was probably drawn to that because of that fact. And I was listening to people like the Stones. The Stones were doing blues. Their first couple of records were blues. John Mayall and The Bluesbreakers. It all came together and that made me want to listen to more of the American artists like Magic Sam or guys like T-Bone Walker. Once it was Freddie King, it led me into all those other players.

DC: When were you first exposed to a harmonica player in a blues band?

JG: Actually, it was pretty early on. I was listening to and dug groups like Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters. I heard the harp then. I was drawn to it also. Some of the artists that I did really like, some of them were harmonica players. They just weren't guitar players. Sonny Boy Williamson II. Little Walter. Big Walter Horton. I dug all those guys. I really liked their "vibe"; their singing and their harmonica playing. And usually they had cool guitar players. There were some cool guitar licks happening. It was a real good complement. I liked the whole package. So I never really thought too much, even though I was playing guitar, it was no big deal to want to learn "Spoonful". And maybe even try and sing and play it cause I just dug the tune. It was never an issue of whether it was a harmonica player or guitar player. The general music, in fact, I dug. Those were some of the first cats. Definitely, I was really moved by Walter Horton and Sonny Boy II. And of course Little Walter. Those three I would say were very strong. But then I was an avid fan of Paul Butterfield, too. During that period was when I was really getting into it. Mike Bloomfield, Paul Butterfield, Charlie Musselwhite, all those cats were a real inspiration. They weren't just guitar players. They were harmonica players.

DC: Can you think back to the first time when you played with a harmonica player?

JG: I pretty much jumped into it. I would have to say Gary Smith was the first. That was the first band I was with a really fine harmonica player, The Gary Smith Blues Band. That's back about '69, '70, '71. Right in there. I would say that was my christening of playing in a Chicago style blues band. It was great. I really dug it and had a lot of fun. I liked the idea of harp and guitar.

DC: When you started with a band, you had Gary who is an excellent harp player and who plays well and integrates well into a band. But you have had some experiences working with Dave Barrett in his Harmonica Masterclass workshops when you get a chance to see and play with varying levels of experience. So let's dig into the dark side. There are a lot of pluses to be said about the interaction between harmonica and guitar when they play together. But think of the other side, when it doesn't work. When the harmonica and guitar are not "working together", whether you are listening to a band or playing with a harp, what do you experience as not working?

JG: First of all I'll say this before I go into the dark side. I've been pretty lucky. Like I said I pretty much started in the late sixties and early seventies listening to a lot of great harp players. And I was really fortunate to get into a band that had a great harp player, Gary (Smith). So through most of my life, I haven't had a lot of bad experiences. Even in the

seventies we would do shows and I would play with Charlie Musselwhite. So I was getting to play with really good players. The problem came much later on in the later years when I took these guys who wanted to sit in. They were horrible. It's about experience. A lot of guys just lack experience. I guess the bottom line is if I play with someone who can't play, he's probably going to get some dirty looks (Laughs). Or I'm going to tell him (whispering), "Don't play". Sometimes you have to tell people cause they just don't know. Again a part of it is just the experience thing. I guess I'm pretty picky too. I usually try not to put myself into those kinds of situations. Every once and a while it does happen. Somebody will come up and want to play; you let them play and they are not very good or very experienced. So you have to deal with the situation at the time. You "grin and bear it". I usually try to be diplomatic and lean over and say, "Just play the spaces". Sometimes guys don't play the spaces. Your singing and they are playing all over your singing.

DC: Is that a common thing for many harp players?

JG: To me that is one of the common things. Other common things would be; playing where they are not supposed to be playing. Basically (a harp player) fill in the spaces. Another thing too is volume if you they are backing you up. You can play behind a singer also or add chords behind another lead instrument. Sometimes they have a tendency to have their volume level too high. Sometimes it's not enough. Again it depends on the experience of the player. I've always tried to work with people and tried to help them if they don't know. Some of these things sometimes people just don't know. And every once and awhile you get a guy where you can't tell them anything. You just have to "grin and bear it". If I know somebody is really not that good, then I rather they didn't come on stage (Laughs).

DC: Often times, the guitar and harmonica play a song in the same pitch range. What do you as a guitar player do to try and work away from that so you are spaced differently from the harp player?

JG: Sometimes you want to be kind of connected. There are a lot of cool lines where you do play unison lines. And again sometimes you play harmonies. My whole thing with that, whether you play harp, saxophone or piano or guitar, I think the idea is to complement. You want to listen to the other player and try to add to the music. If I hear a harp playing something, I might try to play something that counters what he's doing. Or something that will add to the music. Of course if he is soloing, then I want to be comping and putting stuff underneath it to really bring the harp to the occasion. The same thing for me. I hope if I am soloing or singing that the harp is going to complement me in ways that are going to bring the music to a higher level.

DC: Yes, and still keep your solo or your singing "up front".

JG: Yeah, because everybody has their place (in the music). You have a harmonica doing a solo, and when they aren't soloing then they are comping. Or they are playing fills. It is the same thing for me. I'm either comping, playing rhythm, or I am playing fills behind somebody. It's really fun when you have that interaction, when all the players are listening to each other. That's when you know it is really happening. And you get that with more seasoned players, guys who have been playing longer. Because they are listening to each other and trying to take the music to the highest possible level.

DC: Outside of Gary (Smith), Andy Just, Charlie Musselwhite and players like that, do you find that harmonica players, on average, know less about music and music theory than other members of the band?

JG: Yeah, I would say on the grand scale, yes. You find a lot more guys that are more intuitive. Which brings up a point, which is kind of funny. You know I play a little harp and even all my harp, pretty much all my harp stuff, I got from listening or playing with guys. I think I bought one book in my life on harmonica by Tony Glover. It wasn't that great. Sorry Tony (laughing). But for the time it was the only book, right. But what little (harp) I play, I pretty much play intuitively. I can figure out the notes, but always approach that instrument more intuitively. And I think a lot of players do. Now I look at it a little more from a technical point of view, but it's such a personal little instrument. You put your lips on it and nobody sees those holes.

DC: It's fair to say as players get more experience and play in more bands that it's important for them to understand more about the music theory so you can say "play a fifth there" or "add a seventh there".

JG: Oh, yeah, especially today if you really want to take the harp to a higher level. I urge that with even harp guys that I play with or people that I know that play. It probably was a little bit different when I was picking it up, the way I looked at it. Now that I'm older and have been playing a lot more years, I am a lot more into the theory and what makes things tick because I want to become even a better player than what I was. If you want to be all that you can be, then you want to delve as deep into the subject as you can get. And you're right, the harp can be taken to so many other levels. There are a lot of really great players out there who not only got the feeling, but they are very well schooled. Howard Levy comes to my mind. Of course that's not really blues harmonica. There are a lot of guys that bridge the gap between blues and jazz. A lot of great players. These are guys that have obviously studied to some degree. I think you have to study to some degree. I was all for the intuitive thing for a lot of years, but then I realized it only got me to a certain level. I would urge anybody, no matter what instrument they play, to dig deep into and know that stuff so that they can become a better player.

DC: And play with other people because that is the common language between the different players in a band to share information and suggestions. Without that basis, it's going to be a lot harder to develop that band repertoire.

JG: Yeah, if you can't communicate then it's not going to happen.

DC: Can you think of the worst kind of experience you have had with a harp player in a band?

JG: Yeah, the guy that comes up and he just plays nonstop through the whole tune. He just plays! And he's just blowing notes, randomly. He's just trying to fill in everywhere. That's a nightmare. He doesn't really have any licks. He's just blowing as many notes on the harp as he can and just feeling space. That would be anybody's worst nightmare, I would think. They are the kind of guys that give harmonica players a bad name.

DC: That's true.

JG: They don't listen. They do not listen. They're just playing, playing every second of the tune. They are probably still even playing when the song ends. They are still doodling (laughs). I have to be honest with you and I wouldn't mention any names, I have had a few experiences like that. Usually they are the guys you don't ask back to the bandstand.

DC: That's a good point. Because if you want to be asked back for another tune or another time... leave a good impression.

JG: I would think the opposite of that too, and a lot of this probably has to do with guys just being nervous or not experienced, it's really kind of annoying too when you get a guy up there that hardly plays. And when he plays he plays so soft that you never really hear it. It's obvious he's not ready. And I've seen quite a few guys like that too that are almost afraid to play. But again that's a confidence issue. But I would say, definitely, the guy who plays nonstop and tries to fill every space, doesn't really have any licks, just huffin' and puffin' are the kind of guys you want to take the hook out and pull them off. I've gotten to the point I think though when if it is like that, you just tell the guy, "It isn't happening".

DC: Yeah, because it's effecting not only him but the rest of the band.

JG: Yeah, unless it is a jam. If it's just a jam, you're trying to give everybody a chance. But when you come to perform and play, you want to give it your best.

DC: Thanks John. I appreciate your time and insight from all your years of playing experience. Best wishes for success in your future harp playing.