

The Quest for Tone

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The quest for good tone is always on the mind of the conscientious harmonica player. Achieving a good acoustic (non amplified) tone is difficult enough, but to add into the mix how a mic and amplifier work with it adds to the complexity. Most players understand that good tone comes with time, but there are specific areas of focus that we'll study right now that will take years of this process.

Embouchure

The first place to start is with your embouchure. Embouchure for the harmonica player encompasses the throat, jaw, tongue and lips; all of which affect tone. The easiest way to explain what is considered a good embouchure is to yawn. The throat opens, the jaw drops and the tongue lowers to the floor of the mouth. The result is a large airway for warm air to travel in and out of the harmonica.

Pictured below are some side shots of well-know players performing at a Harmonica Masterclass Workshop® (photos by Mark Fenichel). Notice how low each player's jaw is dropped to achieve good tone.



Mark Hummel



Rod Piazza

The Tongue

Placement of the tongue is a very important factor. Most people, even when they think the tongue is down, unknowingly hump the middle to back of their tongue up. If the tongue impedes the airway, it will cause your tone to be weak, flat and/or airy. Start by looking in the mirror and yawning. Notice the placement of your tongue. Is it humped up in the back? If it is in the correct location, it should be sitting on the floor of the mouth, with the top of the tongue pretty much level with the top of your lower teeth. As time goes on you can have your tongue rest higher in the mouth, but until you are able to control the placement of your tongue (this will happen naturally over time) it's best to just leave it out of the way.



Bad



Good

The Lips

Many blues players (including myself) use what's called the tilted embouchure. By tilting the face of the harmonica downward (up to forty-five degrees) the single hole is created from the curvature of the lower lip. This frees the upper lip to ride up on the top cover plate as high as the player wants. When tongue blocking, this embouchure is also desirable because the tilt of the harmonica allows you to use the broad top of the tongue instead of the tip. This makes general tongue blocking techniques like pulls and five-hole octaves much easier to achieve and in general sound better due to achieving more even coverage over the holes.



All of this is what I call natural tone. Your goal is to create a warm, round sound from every note that you play. If you hear that a note sounds flat in pitch, your tongue is in the way. Experiment with tongue placement to raise the pitch of the note. If you hear that a note sounds airy, your tongue is in the way. Experiment with tongue placement to get rid of as much airiness as possible. If you hear that your tone is thin and lacks fullness, follow all of the directions above to open your embouchure to achieve good tone.

Technique Tone

We just spoke of how to create what we call a good natural tone for any note that you may play. When someone is listening to a player and says "that guy's got killer tone", what they're hearing is a combination of the player's good natural tone and the technique he uses to thicken the presentation of the lines he's playing.

The use of two note textures (like a 4 draw with a little bit of 5 draw) helps to thicken the presentation of notes. Tongue blocking is of huge importance to sounding fuller. Techniques such as slaps, pulls and octaves are found in almost every line a blues player plays. If you don't tongue block, and you're looking for that big sound, then start studying

tongue blocking NOW! Material to help get you started is *Basic Blues Harmonica Method (MB99103BCD)* and *Building Harmonica Technique Video #1 (MB99107VX)*.

Amplified Tone

Many students have on their agenda to work on their amplified playing. Before we even plug in, we cover everything I've spoken of so far. To achieve good amplified tone, start with the techniques that you need to feed the amp to sound good. If you haven't developed good technique yet, the best mic and amp will fail you miserably.

With that said, the two areas of focus are your use of technique and an airtight cup. Technique is simple; use anything that makes you sound thick, rich and full. In general, anything that uses more than one note is good. Again... two note combinations, octaves, slaps and pulls are all great amplified techniques. Demonstrated below is a lick played with just single notes. It will sound thin. The second example takes the same line and shows how it can sound thickened up with technique.

The image shows two musical staves in 4/4 time. The first staff shows a lick with single notes and fingerings: 4, 4, 4', 3', 4+, 3', 2, 2, 2. The second staff shows the same lick with techniques like slaps and pulls, indicated by 'o' and 'v' marks above notes, and more complex fingerings: 5/4, 4, 4', 3', 4+, 3/2/1, 2, 2, 2.

Holding the Mic

When holding the mic, the main focus is to smother the harmonica so that no air escapes from your cup. The tighter you make your cup, the more bass response, volume, and distortion you get—plus being less prone to feedback. Most players forget to cover the upper holes with their thumb. The upper holes (including the small leak from where the cover plate crimps together) need to be blocked to achieve a sealed cup. Demonstrated below is what I call the end-cap. The right hand completely covers the right side of the harmonica and touches the face.



The next picture shows how the thumb is used to seal the holes, but the end of the harmonica is left open. Many players play this way and is OK, but you will not get as good of a seal as with the previous cup.



Our last picture shows the two-thumbs-up approach and creates the best seal of all the cups due to the hands touching both sides of the face. Though this a great cup, not everyone likes this due to the face being really buried into the hands, making moving around the harmonica difficult.



Final Thoughts

All of the ideas we spoke of are part of the big picture of tone. Through diligent practice learning good technique and the study of great players, you will achieve what you're looking for. Don't be in a hurry. Learning the harmonica is a life-long pleasure.

About the Author David Barrett

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