



FILISKO'S 18 HARMONICA INSIGHTS - 1/5/20

Here's what I have learned over the last 30+ years that I wish I knew when I was first starting out. I believe that these insights will direct your playing efforts in the most positive direction possible while minimizing the possibilities of picking up bad habits. One of my main goals has always been to enlighten people on what made the masters great, and how to play and sound like them. This is the result of studying and transcribing hundreds of the greatest recordings of those great players and learning from the living ones. Thank you! JF

1. **LEFT HAND (*holding harp*)** - Hold the low end of the harp (*hole #1*) against the middle joint of your left hand index finger causing that finger to bend as much as 90 degrees as opposed to laying it flat and straight across the top of the harp. A larger space (*hole*) should appear between your left thumb and bottom of harp. This will allow your left wrist to be in a more natural position and minimize the tendency to tilt your harp and head to your left. You will look more relaxed and natural as though you were singing. Always keep your left hand fingers as close together as possible and in order to promote better relaxation. Holding a small tomato paste can with your ring and pinky finger while practicing will make it easier, allowing your right arm to relax and improving your sound.
2. **BOTH HANDS TOGETHER** - Your hands are an extremely important part of the traditional sound and become an actual part of the instrument as soon as they touch it. You want to use them as skillfully as possible to enhance the sound as opposed to just holding the harp. Always keep the fingers of each hand held close together to keep sound from escaping between them. The real secret to the hands is the tightness of the "cup," not the size of the "cup." When you cup your hands together around the harmonica, don't completely cover over the entire back of the harmonica. Let the high end be exposed to let some sound out. You do not need to cover the entire back of the harmonica to get a great sound. This is a much more common and acceptable practice when cupping a mic and playing amplified. Your long term goal as a player will be to keep the index finger and thumb of the left hand in contact with the skin on the left side of your face and the thumb of the right hand in contact with the right side of your mouth. Drag your left hand with the harp along the left side of your face as you slide to the higher notes. Don't be afraid to play with only one hand. If you are not using your right hand skillfully, you may be better off keeping it down & relaxed at your side. Are your shoulders raised up??? Practice with your right arm down!
3. **POSTURE** - If your hands are together and you bend your arms at the elbows, you will find that the harmonica falls quite a bit short of reaching your mouth. Raise your arms to bring it to your mouth. Don't raise your shoulders! Don't drop your head and slouch! Your profile when playing should appear to shoot the sound straight out or upwards, not downwards. Place your music very high on your stand or attach it above your eyes on a wall. Don't place it flat on a table down in front of you! Have a mirror in your practice room to check yourself. When you have your piece memorized, learn to fix your eyes on a point on the wall that is above your head. Check on yourself as you can learn to "feel" comfortable and relaxed even though your posture is bad. Keep your head and arms up and keep your shoulders down.
4. **RELAX & BREATHE** - Stay relaxed and breathe through your harmonica. Think inhale & exhale as opposed to suck & blow. Playing forcefully is the cancer of playing. If you look tense, you are tense. Often, the tension comes from the asphyxiation reflex prohibiting you from releasing your air, and keeping you constantly full up. Nothing is better at developing relaxed playing habits and good breathing techniques as practicing the Train Imitation.
5. **BLOCKING** - Use the tongue blocking embouchure as your default for clean single notes. It is in my opinion, essential for getting the most sound and biggest possible sounds and tone out of the harmonica, and gives you the easiest access to using all the "5 Types" of the harmonica's sound. (*see blocking insights*)
6. **BENDING** - Bending is one of the most expressive sounds that the harp makes, but, it does not necessarily equal blues. It can be quite advanced. I have observed numerous ambitious beginners develop VERY bad playing habits from trying to force bends. If you are not making music on the unbent notes, you may not be ready to incorporate bending. Bending skillfully can take years of practice and it is also a perishable skill. (*see bending insights*)
7. **RHYTHM, GROOVE and the SWAY** - The rhythm & groove of the song rules in blues. ***Keeping the groove is more important than trying to play the right notes!*** Train your body to "sway" from side to side like you are walking along with the rhythm of the music. If you can walk with rhythm, you can learn to play with rhythm. If someone were to plug their ears and watch you, they should be able to feel the tempo of the song. If this is too difficult for you to do, then that is even greater evidence that you NEED to be working on it. Watch yourself playing in front of a mirror. Only tap your feet if you can do it in the groove, otherwise it could be a distraction to other musicians. Video your feet to see if you are a skillful foot tapper and make the metronome your friend.



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8. DYNAMICS - Imagine a volume control on your playing from 0 - 10. 1, 2, & 3 is your "soft" range. 4, 5, & 6 = "Moderate" range, 7, 8, & 9 = "LOUD" range. Don't concentrate too much in one range, especially 7, 8 & 9. Having a wide variety of dynamics in your music ("push" & "pull") helps to keep the attention of most audiences. Be aware of internal dynamics, or dynamics required within the same phrase.

9. EXHALE PUSH & NOSE PUSH - Develop the habit of always using the **Exhale Push [EP]** every time you are about to play an inhale phrase and the **Nose Push [NP]** while you are playing a sustained exhale note or split. Because of the *asphyxiation reflex*, getting air into your lungs is natural while getting the air out and controlling its flow back in is where the challenge lies. Overcoming this is the best secret to getting a big powerful blues sound. Watch how accordion players use their air valve. Playing blues on the harp is often the exact opposite of singing. For many folks the *asphyxiation reflex* may be their single biggest playing challenge. (*see breathing guide*)

10. PLAYING, PRACTICING & PERFORMING - Remember the 3 P's and be sure to not confuse them. There is a big difference between "playing" and "practicing." "Practicing" is giving focused attention to what you can't play correctly and implies work. "Playing" is reviewing the stuff that you can play, whether done correctly or incorrectly, and implies self amusement. "Performing" is having fun playing with the intent to entertain. If you are not progressing, you are not likely practicing correctly or not actually practicing at all.

11. LISTENING ACCOUNTABILITY - Try to practice and play as often as possible with background tracks, a metronome, or a band. It is EXTREMELY important to continually develop your listening skills. If you have experienced difficulties playing with them, you are NOT listening close enough and probably fixating on the harmonica and thinking about what you playing. Music is the art of sound and requires maximum listening efforts. Don't walk around with your eyes closed and don't play music with your ears closed.

12. RECORDING YOURSELF - Get in the habit of recording yourself and listening to the recordings. This will help you to determine how good your listening skills are. It is VERY important to identify and fix the bad habits and errors in your playing as early as possible, whether pointed out by an expert or identified by yourself. If you don't listen to recordings of yourself, you won't know what you actually sound like and you could possibly spend your practice time repeatedly going over and permanently memorizing mistakes and bad habits. OUCH! ! !

13. MEMORIZATION - You should memorize your songs correctly as soon as you can and try to get away from using your eyes to see the written music. You need to turn your eyes off and have your ears be wide open to facilitate the best possible listening. Please remember to record yourself.

14. FAILING - You need to practice failing with grace. Making mistakes will always be a part of making music and you need to always work towards finishing playing through the song that you started. Making yourself keep the rhythm and playing through a mistake is often the beginning of improvisation. Stopping and starting over can easily lead to VERY bad performance results. Finishing the piece with a good attitude and a smile on your face is what is important to the audience. Do not put too much value on playing perfectly. Most people really don't care. Learn to always laugh at your mistakes. This is the best emotional response, especially in public! This will get the audience on your side. NEVER show signs of anger or use profanity!

15. REPERTOIRE - Your repertoire is the songs that you know. You can think of it as your *active* repertoire, songs you can play now or *inactive* repertoire, songs that would require some review to play. You can also divide your *active* repertoire in two categories of *playing* and *performing*. If you look like you are preoccupied with thinking, eyes are closed, ignoring the audience, unable to communicate with the band and call out solos, the song is still a part of your *playing* repertoire. Never turn down an offer to sit in with a band. When given the opportunity to call out a song and lead them, always be prepared to play a song from your *performing* repertoire. If performing, try to have a "spotter" in the audience to help guide you with your volume levels, etc.

16. GREAT PLAYERS - Listen to the classic recordings of the "GREATS" often, and see the living ones perform live as often as you can. You should feed your ears and mind a diet of the best examples of playing that you can. You have better chances of sounding great if you listen to great stuff. The next level is to study and analyze their music. The next level above that is to transcribe their music.

17. HARP CARE - When you are finished playing, always tap out any loose moisture and wipe your harp down. Moisture is an enemy to the harmonica and your saliva is a digestive juice, one of the worst.

18. TEACHING - If you have the temperament and time, get yourself some beginning harp students. This will keep the rudiments of playing in the forefront of your mind. You don't have to be accomplished to teach.