



FILISKO'S HARMONICA BREATHING GUIDE - 1

VARIOUS NOTES TO PROMOTE RELAXED AND CONTROLLED HARMONICA BREATHING - 7/20/13

Even though the harmonica works both inhaling and exhaling, it is my opinion that the most powerful and expressive sounds that it can make in the lower half are obtained while inhaling. In cross harp, not only can ALL the blues notes (*b3 b5 b7*) and conventional bends be obtained while inhaling, but also all the chord tones (1 3 5). Therefore, my experience is that the longer that you can continuously inhale while playing, the more expressive, powerful and bluesy your playing will likely sound. Two techniques that will help you to accomplish this are the *Exhale Push* [EP] and the *Nose Push* [NP].

The *Exhale Push* [EP] is the act of squeezing the maximum air out of your lungs. You will want to work at being able to automatically use this before putting the harp to your lips. Seems simple but there are obstacles.

The *Nose Push* [NP] is the act of opening up the nose and releasing or dumping air OUT through the nostrils simultaneously to playing an exhaling note, split or chord without drawing unnecessary attention to that exhaling sound. Nice to have that root note exhaling on 3 & 6. Watch how diatonic accordion players use their air hole. Think of the [NP] as a [EP] with the same goals, but you get the benefit of hiding it underneath an exhale note so you must develop the ability to breathe out of your mouth and nose at the same time.

The problem is that it is not natural or intuitive to have a minimum of air in your lungs so, your body will sabotage your attempts to release it by engaging the *Asphyxiation Reflex*. Your body never has any trouble getting the air in if it really needs it. The problem is getting the air out and controlling the flow of it back in.

The *Asphyxiation Reflex* is your hidden enemy and reveals itself by allowing air to come in through the nose in the form of involuntary nose breathing, or in the form of a quick unconscious inhale gasp immediately before playing. It is a silent killer that keeps you from playing to the strengths of the instrument, minimizes your blues horsepower and encourages "in-out-in-out" pattern playing.

Your breathing range has 3 key places: **R** = Relaxed (*rest - 1/2 full*), **F** = Full, **E** = Empty. Your upper range is between **Relaxed & Full**. Your lower range is between **Relaxed & Empty**. Your total range is between **Empty & Full**. (*Please see page #2*) Your natural default is to only play in your upper range. The *Asphyxiation Reflex* will not allow you to easily access your lower range, but once you do become comfortable accessing it, you will have access to your entire range.

The closer you get to **Full** or **Empty**, the more you will experience distress. The amount you experience is at least equal to the amount of work your muscles, used for breathing, happen to be doing. Distress will more quickly engage the *asphyxiation reflex* that causes the involuntary nose breathing. This nose breathing happens when the body senses any potential for asphyxiation or interference with normal breathing. Some people have a greater problem with this than others. The invisible distress noted at the **Empty** range, **E**, is not consciously perceived due to the *asphyxiation reflex* engaging. These are some of the reasons why you will want to practice and play with the most relaxed possible posture and demeanor. The train imitation will always help too.

Below are some exercises for you to better familiarize yourself with your lower range of breathing and put you on a path on how to overcome your *Asphyxiation Reflex*.

#1 ~ Use the [EP], and VERY SLOWLY allow air back in until you are relaxed at the **R**, half full place. Repeat again & again. You should be breathing ONLY in your lower range. Think of this as backwards breathing.

#2 ~ Perform #1, but when you get to your half full place of rest **R**, continue to inhale until you are full, **F**. You want to be able to inhale smoothly and evenly through your entire breathing range.

#3 ~ Perform #1 and then eventually #2 with the harmonica just sustaining something. Next try it with a throat tremolo or sustaining a chordal effect. DO NOT inhale through your nose! If you suspect that you are, you will need to pinch off your nose with your free hand or a nose clip. You will want to be able to control your ability to open and close off your nose and generally only exhale through your nose and not inhale through it. Check out the song, "I.O.U. Blues".

#4 ~ Practice the [NP] by playing a slow two bar sustained chordal effect and using the [NP] on the last beat to release the necessary air to comfortably continue indefinitely. Check out the song, "N-P Blues".