



FILISKO'S 5 TYPES OF SOUND & 5 TYPES OF TONE - 9/20/17

I have always found the subject of "tone" fascinating and VERY hard to define. I believe that everyone could agree that having no tone is a bad thing and having big tone is a good thing. In order to get into the details of this, I have found it necessary to address the subject as "tone" AND "sound." Here's my take on it.

The harmonica is a very tiny instrument and it is very good at sounding tiny. Making it sound BIG is a sign of mastery, usually taking many years, and an essential ingredient in the "traditional" and Chicago Blues sound. I believe this is different from many of the modern playing styles. Having a detailed understanding of what tone exactly is, and what the various sound types are, will be very helpful to you in not only understanding the complexities of the early players and styles, but also in obtaining that sound for yourself if you desire.

TYPES OF SOUND - There are five types of sound the harmonica is capable of mechanically producing before any tonal variations are added. These are the sounds that come out of the harmonica. The last four are also the core of "Technique Tone." Some can be played simultaneously.

1. **Clean Notes** - One individual hole played unbent, bent, or overbent. Think of this as the smallest type of sound that the harmonica can make. No difference tones will be present.
2. **Splits / Octaves** - Two clean holes played simultaneously out of each side of the mouth with at least one hole blocked in between them. The most common is the Split-4 (*tongue blocks out two*), followed by the Split-5 (*tongue blocks out three*), and Split-3 (*tongue blocks out one*).
3. **Dirty Notes & Dirty Splits** - One clean hole played simultaneously with a little part of an adjacent hole, usually the higher hole. The dirty note of the split is usually the highest note. This can indeed be the result of playing sloppy, but is used by the masters with great precision. They may use a little dirt, a moderate amount of dirt, a lot of dirt or any degree in between. The magical result is the newly created third note called the "difference tone." Many of the masters can end up blurring the line between dirty notes and chords.
4. **Percussive** - The explosive attack resulting from using the various types of vamping / slapping on clean notes, dirty notes or splits, but not chords. This adds another layer to the resulting sound.
5. **Chords & Chordal Effects** - Two or more adjacent holes played simultaneously. Think of chords as having the biggest sound that the harmonica can make, especially on holes 1, 2 & 3. Chordal effects include shakes, tongue shakes and rapid vamping. I personally have found that thinking of all the chordal effects as part of the same group has many benefits even though some, such as the shakes, can be executed to sound more like clean single notes. Chords are generally NOT played tongue blocking but result after lifting the tongue away from the harmonica.

TYPES OF TONE - Tone is thought of as a warm, pleasing or BIG sound or, the amount of bass/treble in ones sound. Tone can be broken down into five different categories or types. Without incorporating the first three of these, the harp will sound like its size, . . . tiny. The best players generally use the full range of tonal variations. "Technique" tone is included here because in my experience, a player using all the "Types of Sound" will generally end up automatically with a bassier tone and a bigger sound.

1. **Technique Tone** - The powerful result of skillfully using all the 5 TYPES OF SOUND.
2. **Head Tone** - The resonance created in your head and neck (*mouth cavity and vocal tract*)
3. **Hand Tone** - The resonance created by your hands and the tightness of their formed "cup"
 4. **Harp Tone** - The sound fingerprint of the actual harmonica
 5. **Equipment Tone** - The sound fingerprint of the equipment and gear