

## IN TUNE BY CATHI NORTON

Probably no article I've written has been requested as often as one I did in 1996 on Joe Filisko, custom harmonica designer from Joliet, Illinois. That didn't really surprise me because not only does Filisko do amazing things for the sound and build of a harmonica, but he's elusive about self-definition. He squirms when you call him a custom harp designer, a musician, a writer, a recording artist, a communicator, a teacher, or any one of the things he does so well, because he's nervous about being "pigeonholed." He's having too much fun exploring. After repeated questions about what Joe was "up to" these days, I sat down to nail him on the subject without really "nailing" him. Quite a trick.

I'll start out with the squirmy part. Joe Filisko is a large figure in the world of harmonica for a variety of reasons, but the one that first called him to my attention was his abilities as a machinist and custom harmonica maker. Custom made Filisko harps are ensconced in the gig bags of serious players all over the world. Kim Wilson, Neil Young, Howard Levy, Peter "Madcat" Ruth, Phil Wiggins, and endless others can testify to his innovative craftsmanship in tuning, building, and repairing harmonicas, but his skills extend far beyond that. As a musician, he is a fluent guitarist and harmonica player, presently working in the Carl Davis blues band and in a folk duo with long-time partner, Anita Miller. As a teacher at numerous conventions, workshops, and festivals, as well as at the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, Filisko has the rare ability to communicate the techniques and joy of playing, whether his listeners be of beginning or advanced abilities. His zeal for teaching is matched by his determination to learn. He is a relentless researcher, which has recently led to the recent completion of his "Complete Discography of Walter Horton" and a compelling article on the history of harmonica/train sounds. As a person I admire his determination to learn, his generosity, loyalty, and the sense he gives everyone that they are the most important subject at hand. Now if that hasn't made him squirm, I'll let his own words do the rest!

CATHI: How do you approach playing the harp in your blues band or duo?

JOE: There are certain songs on which I like to just completely "wing" it and do whatever the moment calls for, but I guess I frown on players that don't think of themselves as ensemble players. They feel they need to improvise everything. The great thing about improvising is that you can be in the moment and do what's appropriate, that's where the real magic happens. The down side is when you fall on your face you blast the teeth out of your mouth (laughs)! What I hear is that most

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players think the harmonica is to be played like Little Walter, Big Walter, Sonnyboy, or George Smith and if the song doesn't call for that type of sound, they don't play at all. When I play, I'm thinking of the harmonica as an instrument that's capable of doing certain things and I'm trying to get that sound out. I try to do justice to the song and make sure what I'm doing is drawing attention to the song and not me. If I can make the song better and show off, then great! (Laughter.)

CATHI: Do you worry about audience reaction?

JOE: I have learned to protect what's sacred to me by not having expectations. I am, in a sense, a very selfish performer because I really just try to entertain myself. I have a short attention span. That's why I do a broad variety of stuff. I always wonder how I can become more bizarre with what I'm doing with this instrument. I need to keep it interesting for myself and I think that's what an audience can appreciate too. It's not about being perfect, because I have fully accepted that it's not going to be even remotely perfect, but it has to have a sense of magic; it has to fit; and have a sense of unity.

CATHI: Tell me how you got started on music Joe.

JOE: When I was going to Junior College I found out I could actually study guitar as part of the program. I was already enrolled in the machine tool program, studying metalworking. Nothing stirred me more than the guitar in music, and the actual part of playing the guitar-putting my hands on it; strumming and moving my fingers-was addicting! When I found out I could study it, I was blown away. So I got involved in lessons. The guitar instructors, Jeff Jaskowiak (who is now one of my closest friends), got me doing cool stuff, eventually jazz. Then I literally got to the point where I said, "If this is what it takes for me to improvise, I can't do it; I quit." I realized I just wasn't fit to climb that mountain then. It was too big for me, but I think Jeff had me pegged right away as a working fool (laughs), and so he put together a guitar ensemble.

CATHI: An ensemble?

JOE: Yes, at one point there were at least a dozen guitarists. It was the "Joliet Junior College Wolf Pack Guitar Ensemble" (laughs). The important thing here is he said, "What songs do you want to do?" and we did them--songs he wrote, some by Bach, Mozart, and even a Satriani tune...a big variety. Jeff and I transcribed a bunch of things and I wrote out all the guitar parts by hand. I would have been excited to do one show, but Jeff is a big dreamer. I appreciate guys that dream big and yet go about trying to do something for you. He arranged a full week of shows playing to

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screaming (with pleasure!-laughs) high school students. I was so blown away because I never imagined I could have a big dream and exceed beyond that! We played for about three years and had a full-page write up in my Bible- *Guitar Player Magazine*. I can't begin to tell you how that changed my whole attitude about EVERYTHING, because it made me realize you can do anything you want if you just DO it! It blew my mind and contributed to my being fearless and probably aggressive in terms of my harmonica playing. I really learned to say, "What's the worst that can happen?" Well, the worst is that I fall on my face and make an idiot out of myself, and I already know I'm an idiot anyway, so what's the big deal? It's incredibly freeing. I learned not to take myself seriously, yet be so serious that I scare myself! (Laughs.)

CATHI: Wow...how'd you get to be a harp-building wizard?

JOE: (Laughs). Well, the story is that I'd been making these very interesting, beautiful-looking harmonicas and a buddy took pictures of them. He had connections at the local newspaper and soon they called me for a story.

CATHI: And then every harmonica player read that and called you?

JOE: No (laughter), it gets way worse. Within a couple of days the AP sent down a photographer and interviewed me. They ran a nationwide story and I got letters from as far away as Guam!

CATHI: What did they want to know – how to build harps?

JOE: Well, inquiring...you know. You've got to remember I was well warned: if you want to make a living, don't try it doing harmonica work, and I believed it. So I thought, "Well, I'm not trying to make a living; I'm just trying to work and figure out what's up." I thought I could supplement with other work. But soon Channel 7 News did a story and then the *Chicago Sun Times* and I got BOMBED with all this attention.

CATHI: Did it go to your head?

JOE: Well, I've always been who I am. I wasn't going to let anybody tell me what I was doing was great because to me it always had faults. A good example is that definitely for years players fantasized about having older pre-War harmonicas because they played better than new harps at that period in time. So naturally it seemed smart, if I was going to make or modify anything, to have my harps be at least as good as the ones those people coveted. I feel confident that I've surpassed that point long ago.

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CATHI: No doubt (laughs).

JOE: But all that attention meant I needed to get it together and really start understanding the way this thing worked. So that's what happened. And at the same time I started teaching at the Old Town School of Folk Music. I always wanted to teach, so I went up and played for them and they could see that I was not lacking in sincerity or enthusiasm. It's been a big blessing for me. Pretty soon I was working at conventions and festivals, and I really work hard at preparing for them.

CATHI: I know you're about to go to Germany to the "World Harmonica Festival" this fall too huh? Are you excited?

JOE: Yes. I'm not going to hold back or deny a musical opportunity. I've been fearless, but simultaneously I do major maintenance on my ego and try to raise the musical bar on myself. I don't know if excited is the right word. You know what it is? I look around and see things that need to be done, or that they can be done in a better way. Nobody seems to be volunteering, so I just do it and hope and pray that someone better comes around and does it so I don't have to do it, but just hang around and soak it in (laughs).

CATHI: So you feel a responsibility to do such things - like your *Discography*?

JOE: I don't know if it's a responsibility. It's just that I have a hard time respecting people that sit back and criticize when they don't do anything. I like to be able to walk the walk and get something done rather than just talk about it. So going to Germany is going to be a great experience and a good time, but a lot of work! I'll be DESTROYED when I get back, but I like being in the midst of things and counted as a "doer," so I'm there!

CATHI: How do you prepare for festival workshops or seminars? Tab things?

JOE: No. I might have some tab, but I've learned how to conduct something more interesting without tabs. I try to be extremely open-minded, so I can turn on a dime and say, "Oh, this ain't workin'-we'll go to plan B," and not let it rattle me. It's important for me to just be in tune and be flexible. The easy way to do it is to have questions, but to questions alone is sort of representative of not preparing something. Mostly why they want me there I think (laughs) is to teach the world how to replicate the harmonicas I do, and that can be frustrating.

CATHI: You said before it's hard because they need to do three things to prepare?

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JOE: The three most important things are learn how to replace reeds, adjust the reed, and tune the instrument. That's 90% of the ordeal right there.

CATHI: So they have to feel accomplished at that before you can teach anything?

JOE: Well, it's just the unspoken, but instantly known, thing about their dedication. Are you going to take the time to teach somebody how to play some of your more fancy guitar stuff if they never bothered to learn how to tune? This is work I do seven days a week, and I have invested an insane amount of time and money in my experience and education, so if somebody's not going to take those first steps it's sort of obvious that it's a pointless waste of time to get into it.

CATHI: Well, you're very good at teaching. Is that what you're "into" these days?

JOE: What I'm into is learning. I want to be in a situation where I'm learning and having fun. Such a huge, huge part of where I am today is a result of me taking the time to study, break down, and learn the nuances of different playing styles. That's been the biggest part of where I'm at. I took the time to really learn those styles-the Chicago Blues style and its many facets, the Nashville country thing, the more jazz-world music thing, where you're playing harmonica and treating it more as a chromatic instrument, and so on-and was able to communicate with the players that think this is what they are looking for.

CATHI: How do you LEARN a piece of music and then communicate it?

JOE: A lot of work and patience...total listening. There are very few visual cues available. It's a lot like magic. One of my regrets is I didn't put any energy into studying magic-it's beautiful. It's a lot like harp.

CATHI: Because?

JOE: I'm thinking of it in terms of the time that goes into preparing for a little trick. The ability of a magician to take a coin, make it appear, throw it out there, and disappear. Tremendous preparation goes into that. It's a visual thing, but probably more impressive if you could watch from behind and see what's going on. The harmonica is like that. There's so much going on internally in the mouth and throat, with breathing, that it can be very complex, and that really fascinates me-probably because I'm such a visual, hand-eye coordination junkie (laughter). But it's a matter of listening and figuring out what the possible ways are that it can be done. The second part is learning how to play it. Then, when you have it down, you give it one of these brutally honest sessions. "How does mine compare?" If it's not

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happening, something isn't right yet. That's not for the sense of duplication, but just learning a different way of doing it. There's a huge school of thought that you should do your own thing and not copy anybody else. That's fine, and I'm not going to make any stand on that, but the thing I find extremely interesting and satisfying is thinking of it as history-trying to break down and understand what's been done before. Again, it comes down to really appreciating people who take the time to study and research. I feel that's extremely important. What impresses me 99.99% of the time is musicians that learned to play by the rules before they decided to break them.

CATHI: Lots of people say that the most valuable learning tool is to really hear someone-be right in their face when they play.

JOE: ABSOLUTELY! I took advantage of that because I had a business that allowed me to get to know people, sit down, and analyze their playing so I could make better harmonicas.

CATHI: So when someone comes to get their harp fixed, you talk to them, observe their style, and try to suss out what ways the harp can be improved according to what styles they want to try? Or is this a student-teacher thing?

JOE: Hmm, well, you could use the word "student," and certainly for people paying me for instruction it is. But a lot of times I just have such a collection of various techniques and styles, tremolos and vibratos, hand things and different ways to explain tone and note bending, that I'm able to make suggestions. I am immensely into teaching; I think education is the answer. That's where it's at for me. Many times I figure things out in a backwards way; it's me figuring it out and then backtracking, dissecting it backwards very slowly. Then it comes down to coming up with a language that we both understand that gives a direction.

CATHI: Could you do it verbally, or do you have to show it on the harp?

JOE: It would be a combination (laughs). The best-case scenario is you play, me comment, me play, me comment and point out, and then you play again. Then it's a matter of saying, "a little more of this, a little more of that"-that sort of thing. That's the best way to communicate because we're dealing with the problem. If we were just going to communicate through words, it's difficult because I don't totally know what you mean when you use a word in a certain way. This is a great problem with the instrument in general. Players say: "This note is sticky," and I'll say, "What's 'sticky' mean? Too quick, too slow; it feels unresponsive?" I'm always trying to

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define. I have to be able to understand and break it down into something everybody can understand.

CATHI: A communication freak huh? (Laughs.)

JOE: Yeah...mostly because I don't like to be misunderstood and I want so BAD to know what you think! (Laughter)

CATHI: Well, I know you're teaching, you still build great harps, you're playing with the Carl Davis blues band and continuing your folk duo with Anita Miller-even doing some recording, but what are your goals, Joe?

JOE: (Laughter) You're making me squirm...you little brat! Being involved in music to the greatest extent I can is definitely one of them. I'm trying, in terms of employment and finances, to have the maximum amount of jobs secured so that as long as my hands and eyes are functional, you know, and I can sit down and come up with a product and make it work. I want to learn and I don't want to be made to feel like I HAVE to do something. I appreciate the freedom of doing different things. I have invested an insane amount of time into doing this. I'm just trying to keep life interesting, be happy (which I am), and try to create win-win situations between myself and whoever I run into. It's humbling and scary sometimes that people get so excited about the custom harps I do. I mean I can tell you some scary stories...

CATHI: (Laughs.) Well, they're holy relics to some.

JOE: Yeah, and I can't believe...I'm just trying to make some money!

CATHI: Well, it's like a doctor or a specialist: if you don't know how he does the cure, you're in awe.

JOE: (Laughs.) And then he kills ya!