

LEARNING MADE EASY



Blues Harmonica

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Breathe the blues
into your harmonica

Learn about bending, tongue
blocking, and chordal rhythm

Connect with blues history
and the major players

Winslow Yerxa

Harmonica player, teacher,
and author



Blues Harmonica

by Winslow Yerxa

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

Blues Harmonica For Dummies®

Published by **John Wiley & Sons, Inc.** 111 River St. Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774 www.wiley.com

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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey

Published simultaneously in Canada

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2020931540

ISBN 978-1-119-69451-9 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-119-74888-5 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-119-74892-2 (ebk)

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

The harmonica is a mysterious instrument — you can't tell much about how to play it from looking. It has no keys or strings so you won't see any hands or fingers moving around on them. All you see is someone's hands pressed to his face and maybe cheeks puffing in and out. Yet the harmonica exerts a fascination for everyone who hears it. It's tiny but can make a big sound, and it makes such a pretty yet plaintive, voice-like sound.

When you try to play the harmonica, though, you can get frustrated easily. Harmonicas come in a dizzying array of sizes and types, and if you get one and just try breathing through it, you'll get musical sounds but not like what you hear from the players whose expressive sounds you find so compelling.

Fortunately, you have *Blues Harmonica For Dummies* in your hands. Whether you're just beginning to act on your curiosity or you're a seasoned player looking for the next stage in your musical growth, this book offers solid information and advice.

About This Book

Blues Harmonica For Dummies gives you all the information you need to get started playing the blues on the harmonica. But you don't need to sneak down a dark alley and give a secret password to get at this stash of essential knowledge. All that treasure is in broad daylight, with plenty of easy ways to help yourself to whatever you need, including

- » **Step-by-step descriptions:** I break every action and task into a series of numbered steps that you can master one at a time.
- » **Pictures and diagrams:** I illustrate the internal actions that you perform with your tongue and throat and the external actions of using your hands and lips on the harmonica.
- » **Tablature:** I include tab that shows the actions you use to play each note of a song or segment of music.
- » **A Companion Website:** You can visit the website at www.dummies.com/go/bluesharmonicafd.

Conventions Used in This Book

Throughout the book, I use the following conventions consistently to make the text easy to understand:

- » *Italics* mark a new term, and I follow with a simple explanation and then use the term again in context.
- » I highlight in **bold** the keywords in bulleted lists and the action parts of numbered steps.
- » All web addresses appear in `mono font`.

I use the terms *harmonica* and *harp* interchangeably. These are only two of the many colorful monikers the harmonica enjoys, including *French harp*, *Mississippi saxophone*, *mouth organ*, and several others. I managed to limit myself to only the two most common names.

What You're Not to Read

Ultimately, you become a blues harmonica player by listening, imitating, and then letting your own imagination come up with ways to express yourself. This book is here to help you through that process, and you can skip anything that doesn't seem to help you right now. Later on you may come back and look for something when you feel that it will help you.

You can ignore the written music, though you may find the arrow-and-number tablature helpful because it tells you what holes, breaths, and bends to play.

You can skip paragraphs that have a Technical Stuff icon attached to them, though I've tried to keep those to a minimum.

Harmonica lore is one of the great pleasures of knowing about the instrument and its traditions, but you don't need it to get down to the nuts and bolts of playing, so you can skip any sidebars, those gray boxes sprinkled throughout the book.

Foolish Assumptions

I assume that you've never played music before and don't know a beat from a B♭ or an octave from an ocarina. That's okay. What's important is that you have the desire, the curiosity, and the motivation to express yourself by playing blues on the harmonica.

Still, I know that you may already play the harmonica and are looking to sharpen your skills. If so, I include enough information to take you to the next stage in your playing.

I also assume that you're interested in playing the most popular type of harmonica, the 10-hole diatonic harmonica (often called the *blues harp*) — the same type of harmonica that's used by every blues player, in addition to rock and country musicians. You can play almost everything in this book on a single diatonic harmonica tuned to the key of C. As you develop your playing skills, you'll want to get harmonicas in other keys, but to get started, and for easy reference, a *C-harp* (harmonica in C) is all you need.

However, I also assume that you'll get curious about the chromatic harmonica, a larger type of harmonica that's designed to play in every key. The chromatic has a unique sound and is an important part of the modern blues harmonica player's *kit*, or set of harmonicas, so I cover the basics of blues chromatic as well.

How This Book Is Organized

Blues Harmonica For Dummies is organized to give you easy, direct access to the information you're looking for. You can read the book from beginning to end or you can browse and skip around to find the most interesting topics or helpful information. The chapters are clustered in six parts, each focusing on a different stage of your growth as a player, and I also include two appendixes with handy information you'll need.

Part 1: So You Wanna Play Blues Harmonica?

In this part, you find out what you need to prepare for your adventure. You get some background on the blues, not only as a musical style, but also as an attitude for communicating and sharing with others. Just as important, you discover how the harmonica contributes and fits into the music. Then you survey the types of

harmonicas available — which ones to start with, which are the best values, where to shop, and how to add to your collection as you advance. You also get an orientation on some music fundamentals, including how to read the harmonica *tab* — the symbols that tell you what actions to perform to play melodies and rhythms on the harmonica.

Part 2: Doin’ the Crawl: Your First Harmonica Moves

This is the part where you start to play the harmonica. You pick it up and hold it, breathe through it, and make rhythmic sounds. Then you start to move around and play melodies along with *licks* and *riffs*, those nuggets of bluesy melody that make up the building blocks of blues harmonica playing. Finally, you start using those licks and riffs to fill up the container of the blues song — the 12-bar blues.

Part 3: Beyond the Basics: Getting Bluesy

Part 3 takes you into the territory where you find the real gold of harmonica expressiveness. You start ranging all over the harmonica and discovering how to get around its entire range. You start making the harmonica sound more like a human voice by using your hands, lips, tongue, throat, and lungs to shape your sound and create sonic texture. Finally — the *pièce de résistance* — you start bending notes to make that classic wailing, slithering sound of blues harmonica.

Part 4: Developing Your Style

Blues harmonica is surprisingly versatile, and in this part you start to explore how to play in different keys, play dark-sounding minor blues, use the chromatic harmonica, and play blues songs that have unusual formats.

Part 5: Taking It to the Streets: Sharing Your Music

When you express yourself, you probably want to start sharing your passion at some point. When you’re ready (or just eager — sometimes doing it is more important than being ready), you can use this part of the book to help you put together a repertoire of tunes to play, to amplify your playing with electronic equipment to sound even cooler and to be heard in a noisy world, and to connect with the larger world in two important ways: by finding other musicians to collaborate with and by playing for audiences other than your dog and the goldfish in your aquarium.

Part 6: The Part of Tens

Would you eat a hot dog without mustard? (Hey, even a tofu dog needs the proper presentation!) Would a *For Dummies* book be complete without its Part of Tens? I think you know the answer to both questions. In this part I share ten important points about blues harmonica history.

Part 7: Appendixes

At some point you may want to know what notes are in what holes in every key of harmonica. You may need this as much as you need the handshake protocols for communications satellites (apologies to any telecom geeks out there!), but this information may just come in handy, so I include it in Appendix A. Appendix B gives you the complete list of tracks on the website including where you can find and hear the tabs, or musical examples, that are scattered throughout the book.

Icons Used in This Book

The icons in the margins of this book may look like whimsical decorations, but they're more than eye candy. Each icon is a signpost that tips you off to something that's either important enough to read carefully or dull enough to skip if you're not interested in too much detail.



REMEMBER

This icon highlights information that you want to keep in mind to help you as you acquire a skill or understanding.



TIP

Every now and then, I can offer a little insight or useful bit of information that makes an idea easier to understand or a task easier to accomplish. This icon helps you spot those little nuggets.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Sometimes you want to skip the why and just get to the how. Technical talk can be helpful to your understanding, but if you just want to cut to the chase, you can safely skip the text near this icon without compromising your understanding of the subject at hand.



WARNING

The Warning icon alerts you to things that you shouldn't touch, swallow, or even think about trying if you value life, limb, and the continued ability to pursue happiness (or maybe if you just want to avoid bruising your ego).



PLAY THIS

When you see this icon, you know that you can go to a specific track on the website to hear and play along with the musical examples and songs in the book. If you are reading this text in an electronic format, The website where you will find the audio tracks is www.dummies.com/go/bluesharmonicafd.

Where to Go from Here

You can dive into this book at any point, but you may want to target a specific area to suit your interest and your level of experience. Here are a few possibilities:

- » If you're at the beginning of your journey and still don't have a harmonica or know much except that you like the blues, check out Chapters 1 and 2. After you get a harmonica, Chapters 2 through 7 get you up and running.
- » If you just want to learn how to bend notes, you can jump directly to Chapter 11, though you may benefit from first spending some time with Chapter 9.
- » If you can play already but want to get more expression into your playing, flip to Chapters 9 and 10.
- » If you're finding that the covers of the harp are turning blue on the left side while the right side stays gleaming and pristine, turn to Chapter 8 to get you playing through the entire range of the harmonica.
- » If you want to try new approaches to get more variety out of your playing, have a look at Chapters 12, 13, and 14 to start playing in different keys, or *positions*, on the harmonica. You can also check out Chapter 15 to get acquainted with adding chromatic harmonica to your bag of tricks for a whole new sound or Chapter 16 to start playing in minor keys.
- » If you want to sound loud and proud and start getting that distorted, amplified blues sound, see Chapter 19, which covers using microphones, amplifiers, and effects to beef up your sound and broadcast it to the world.
- » If you want to develop your blues repertoire, flip to Chapter 18, which has lists of important harmonica recordings in a broad range of historical periods and blues styles.

If none of these suggestions are quite what you have in mind, take a look at the index or table of contents to find what you're looking for — or just open the book and see what you stumble across.

1

So You Wanna Play Blues Harmonica?

IN THIS PART . . .

You discover the strong bond between blues and the harmonica, find out which harmonicas to get and how to care for them, pick up on some essential musician's lingo, and then get started with the basics of playing blues on the harmonica.

- » Expressing yourself through the blues
- » Understanding how the harmonica fits into the blues
- » Getting started playing blues harmonica

Chapter 1

Connecting with the Blues

The blues is a uniquely American art form that got its start from the collision of African and European cultures in the American South. First documented around the beginning of the 20th century, blues has continued to expand in popularity ever since. Blues began with its original base of African Americans in the rural South and then migrated — first to regional population centers, then to the industrial North, then to the West Coast, and finally to Great Britain and Europe during the 1960s.

At the same time, as African Americans moved on to newer musical styles, middle-class Caucasian Americans took up the blues, both as listeners and players, making the blues a truly integrated style. But even before this passing of the cultural torch, blues exerted a profound influence on other American music styles, including jazz, country, and rock. And blues isn't done extending its reach. I've heard musicians from Brazil creating new flavors of the blues by infusing it with their own traditions. I wouldn't be surprised if a fur-clad Inuit in an igloo somewhere in the Canadian Arctic is whiling away the long winter nights by singing the blues in the Inuktitut language by the light of a whale oil lantern.

The harmonica has been an integral part of the blues odyssey from the beginning. During the golden age of Chicago blues, pianist Otis Spann once remarked, "Harmonica is the mother of the band." (See Chapters 18 and 21 for more on the history

and great players of blues harmonica.) Spann's piano playing was beautiful, but that statement has also been sweet music to the ears of harmonica players ever since.

What the Blues Is All About

Blues seems to defy the standards of how notes fit together — a legacy of that cultural collision of African and European musical ideas. Wherever a clear, straight path leads to certainty about how the elements of music combine in a systematic way, blues finds a way around it or simply veers off on a tangent. If you try to relate the blues to that straight path, you can do it, but you have to come up with some sophisticated theories to make it all fit together. Jazz musicians do that, and they do it in a convincing way.

When they feel the need to do so, blues musicians can also come up with sophisticated explanations of how the blues works. But they seldom focus on such explanations because, ultimately, blues is about expressing yourself in a direct (though often sly and humorous) way by using the expressive tools of the blues. Who cares how your cellphone works? You can use it to communicate, and the same goes for the blues.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the basics of how notes fit together, and in Chapter 7 I relate some of the classic methods that blues harmonica players use to adapt the harmonica's notes to the musical forms used in the blues.

Blues is about natural expression

Blues musicians often adapt their song lyrics to the immediate circumstance, commenting on current events or to people in the room by name. At the same time, blues is full of clichés. By having the clichés to fall back on, blues singers can feel free to add or change those clichés in a way that feels comfortable. They don't have to stick to the program, but at the same time, they don't have to come up with something totally original and new. They can change a few words or notes or phrase the rhythm differently and thereby express themselves more vitally in that moment than if they had to perform something locked down on a page. Audience members familiar with the clichés that blues singers draw on appreciate the singers' skills in using the materials.

Playing blues harmonica also uses many clichés that you can alter at will. Short sequences of notes called *licks* are like little sayings that you can drop into a conversation wherever they seem to fit. Blues harmonica players often string together

clichés that they may have heard and played many times, but they string them together in a new sequence, maybe change some notes, or alter the rhythm to make it fresh, just as singers do.

Blues gives you a safe kind of musical freedom

Like any art form, blues requires you to hone your craft in order to perform it well. But blues also offers you a lot of flexibility to express yourself without worrying whether you'll fall off the tightrope or commit some terrible faux pas. If you're a beginner, you can get started without fearing that glowering critics will be staring down their noses at you for transgressing some esoteric rule known only to the high mavens of the art. Consider some of the no-fault aspects of the blues:

- » Playing a wrong note in the blues actually takes a lot of effort and planning. Notes that shouldn't fit according to traditional rules of music theory and harmony somehow always seem to work in the blues. I cover a little bit of music theory in Chapter 3.
- » The simplicity of the blues verse makes losing your way kind of hard because you can always tell where you are. Each blues verse is short, consisting of three segments that each begin with a different background chord. You'll learn to identify those chords as you listen and play. You can even repeat the same melody fragment over all three segments of the verse if you want to. I cover this topic in Chapter 7 and extend it in Chapter 17.
- » Repetition is a big part of blues, and so is playing short sequences of as few as three notes — as long as you do so rhythmically. This book is full of these short segments, called *licks* and *riffs*. I go into detail on blues harmonica licks and riffs in Chapters 6, 13, 14, 15, and 18.

Why the Harmonica Is Cool All on Its Own

The harmonica has been a part of the blues pretty much since the beginning. One reason for this is that the harmonica has always been inexpensive; another is that, no matter where you lived, you could buy harmonicas by mail order. But price and availability aren't the only reasons the harmonica is attractive. The harmonica has a natural genius for the blues, which is remarkable when you consider that the people in Germany who designed the harmonica in the early 19th century were interested in playing cheerful, sprightly, German folk melodies. They never envisioned the moaning, wailing sounds that people now associate with the harmonica. (For more on blues harmonica history, have a look at Chapter 21.)

The sound of the blues, built right in

Two things about the blues immediately strike the ear of anyone whose main musical experience has been with the piano's precise sound and European music's do-re-mi scale:

- » **Some of the notes sound flat compared to the do-re-mi scale.** If a blues singer sang a song like "Do-Re-Mi" from *The Sound of Music*, the first thing you'd notice is that some of the notes sound different because they're sung at a lower pitch. The lowered notes are called *blue notes*. Blue notes can sound dark, mean, and hard. They also conflict with the musical background, which breaks rules but is part of the characteristic sound of blues. To help create this effect, blues musicians often play the harmonica in the "wrong" key — a key different from the key that the harmonica is tuned to. Because the scale isn't right for the key, it includes some notes that don't belong, and they just happen to be some of the blue notes. (For more on how notes fit together, see Chapter 3.)
- » **Notes often slide from one to the other.** This slurring sound is called *bending notes*. You start playing a note and then you bend, or slide, away from it, creating a wailing, slithering sound. The harmonica bends notes in a way that creates a strong impression on listeners. (I show you how to bend notes in Chapter 11.)

A third aspect of the harmonica is also very conducive to playing the blues. Playing *chords* (several notes at once) with catchy rhythms is a big part of the blues. The harmonica is built to play chords and works really well for playing chord rhythms, which is also a lot of fun.

The harmonica goes everywhere

The harmonica is one of the most portable instruments in existence. It was the first musical instrument played in outer space, during the early days of space travel, when even an extra ounce of weight was critically important. You can carry one or more harmonicas in your car, purse, backpack, or pocket and play during those odd moments when you have an opportunity. I first started playing by noodling on a harmonica as I walked from class to class during high school. If you play whenever you have an extra few moments, you'll start to get good at it really quickly.

What It Takes to Get Started

Anytime you take up something new, you develop a feel for the style and attitude of doing it. You pick up some of the special lingo, you get acquainted with some of the history and lore, and, most important, you master the specific skills that you use to participate. This is true for golf, quilting, rock climbing, and playing blues harmonica.

Getting the blues in your ears

No one can learn to play blues solely from reading a book (even a book as well written as this one). You get to know the blues only by hearing it. Chapter 18 lists blues harmonica recordings in several styles that will get the sound and the glory of blues harmonica in your ears. Of course, the blues isn't played exclusively on the harmonica. To really broaden the base of your understanding and appreciation, listen to great singers, guitarists, saxophonists, and piano players who may not have played with harmonica players. You might start by listening to classic blues on your favorite alternative radio station or online music channel and letting the sound seep into your ears and your consciousness.

Knowing the story of the blues

The history of the blues is fascinating all by itself, starting as it does in a place and time that is deeply American and yet is almost exotic to most Americans. When you're starting to play the blues, knowing its story enriches your appreciation of the art form. I sketch out this history from a harmonica perspective in Chapter 21, but you can deepen your understanding with some good blues history books written for the general public and also by reading biographies of such blues icons as Little Walter, Muddy Waters, B. B. King, and anyone else whose story has been told in print.

Digging in on Blues Harmonica: Getting Your Playing Going

Wouldn't it be great if you could just buy a harmonica, pick it up, and instantly express your feelings with astonishing fluency, wit, and beauty? I'd love to design the harmonica that would do that. But until I do (or someone beats me to it), I can offer a few recommendations to help you develop your harmonica-playing abilities.

Taking the time to make it happen

Rome wasn't built in a day or, as it turns out, even in a thousand years. Am I trying to tell you that you'll be in a nursing home before you develop any harmonica *chops* (ability)? No, of course not. But skills don't happen by magic. If you're determined, you can become good enough to play in public as a fully fluent musician within about two years. Chapters 18 and 20 can help you develop the skills you'll need as a performing musician.

Maybe you're not looking to become a professional musician. Maybe you just want to take the trip and enjoy the ride but also want to experience a noticeable development in your abilities. The key is to find the time and opportunity to play on a regular basis. A few minutes every day does more for your progress than a marathon three-hour session once every couple of months.



TIP

If you really look at your daily activities, you may find some opportunities to play regularly. A few examples:

- » Can you play in your car for a few minutes, before you start for your destination, after you arrive, or in the evening, when you don't want to disturb anyone or be heard making awful noises?
- » Can you find a quiet spot to be alone and practice during your lunch hour?
- » Do you sometimes just kill time channel-surfing or doing something equally fascinating? Maybe you can use that time to play your harmonica instead.



REMEMBER

Working with a teacher or coach, whether in person or online, can help you assess your progress, identify what you need to work on, and set goals. Having that person expecting work from you also motivates you to find time to practice. And if you work with a really good player, you'll also gain inspiration by hearing him or her play.

Becoming fluent in the language of blues harmonica

Ever notice how a 3-year-old boy walks almost exactly like his dad? He doesn't study this consciously; he just does it. If you listen to enough blues harmonica, you'll start to absorb and emulate the characteristic approaches to rhythm, phrasing, and many other details that you hear in the playing of others. Chapter 18 lists some great harmonica recordings that can give you a starting point for feeding your blues ear.