Glossary Of Diatonic Harmonica Techniques
Preparation by JP Allen & Evan Curtain - Presented by Harmonica.com

Below you will find a list of the most common diatonic harmonica techniques. I have organized them from easiest to most complex so that you can get an idea of which technique you will need to learn next in order to continue progressing as a harmonica player.

Though many people consider harmonica the “easiest instrument” to learn, mastering the instrument is a whole different story (as you may have already found out). One of the challenging aspects of harmonica is the fact that the large majority of the techniques are invisible to the eye. This document will take the mystery out of harmonica techniques and lay down the nuts and bolts of what it takes to master the instrument.

When I was a beginning harmonica player I sometimes found myself confused and “in the dark” of how to get “those cool harmonica sounds”. One of the things that helped me the most was to learn a new harmonica technique. Once I knew a technique existed, and the essence of how it’s done, I could start focusing on it and mastering it little by little.

Some of the techniques you’ll find in this document are fairly easy and some will take some time to master. If you need help you will find most of these techniques in my incredible bundle of video lessons called, “Blues From the Vault”.

http://www.harmonica.com/lessons/blues/offer.html

If you are reading this document I know that you’re serious about harmonica. I commend you… and I encourage you to stay with it and enjoy the ride.

Your Harmonica Buddy,
JP Allen
Level 1 Techniques

Diaphragmatic Breathing:

This is probably the most fundamental part of playing the harmonica; learning to breathe properly with the diaphragm. It is most often associated with yoga and meditation and must be used in order to effectively get nice full notes as well as in rhythmic playing. Diaphragmatic (belly) breathing is a great way to relax and, as mentioned, gets a deeper and clear breath. Many beginning students may find that they are breathing from the chest, which is more shallow and often done when under stress. An easy way to see if you are breathing from either your chest or diaphragm is to place one hand on the chest and one on the belly and while breathing see which hand rises and falls. If you are breathing from your chest you may find you are tense and your shoulders may rise toward your ears. If you are breathing from your diaphragm you will find that you are more relaxed and most of your body remains still while you can focus more on the rise and fall of your belly. You may often find JP talking about the harmonica player’s drumsticks, which can only be effectively used with diaphragmatic breathing and is explained in his lessons found on harmonica.com.

Straight Harp (1st position play):

We traditionally think of campfire songs as the easiest to play with 1st position play. These songs such as “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”, “Mary Had a Little Lamb”, “Red River Valley”, “Home on the Range”, “Clementine” etc. are most often played in straight harp (1st position). They are normally played by ear in the same key as the harp and often stick to holes 4-7 where it is easiest to play the notes found in the scale of that key harmonica. Holes 4-7 are considered the middle octave and, as mentioned, contain the full diatonic scale of the key of the harmonica used without the need to use bends, which are commonly used in holes 1-3 in cross harp (2nd position).

Chords and Train Chugging Rhythms:

You can play chords (more than 1 note played at the same time) on the harmonica, which are easier to get than single notes. The chords are often used as backing rhythms to a song in which there might be melodic play. The embouchure often used is the tongue block embouchure, which allows for blocking notes to produce single notes when chords aren’t preferred. However, what you may find us talk about is the deep relaxed embouchure, which is the preferred in our technique because of its practicality and ability to make bending play easier. Chord chugging, often related to train sounds, is mostly applied with rhythmic breathing patterns, which is found emphasized in Blues From The Vault found on harmonica.com. You may hear players play a rhythm then a train whistle sound. Many of the Chord chugs you hear are most often done on the first 3
holes of the harmonica. As you will see, if you check out JP’s videos, his use of nonsense words like “Tooka Diddly”. The reason for this is to break up the rhythm with “T” sounds and “K” sounds. The tongue is used to create the rhythms and certain words work well to emphasize the rhythms themselves. You can also find a more detailed explanation and instruction on the **deep relaxed embouchure** on Blues From The Vault.

**Single notes:**

It can be challenging to get good clean single notes on the harmonica but can fairly easily be done with practice using the **deep relaxed embouchure**. This is accomplished by relaxing your jaw and placing the top lip deeper over the top of the harp and the bottom lip more shallow and has a way of naturally allowing you to more easily blow or draw a single note with enough airflow to get a nice full sound. Again refer to harmonica.com video on the subject. The *Embouchure* is the way in which the mouth is put on the harmonica and you may find that we use this term often. You might find other teachers talk about different embouchures which use the tongue. They are all very effective in their own way and you, personally, may find that they work for you. It just takes some experimentation on your part. We found that the deep relaxed embouchure is effective in that it allows for use of the tongue and is used fundamentally in harmonica.com lessons.

**The 2nd hole draw:**

A nice clean 2nd hole draw, and sometimes 1st and 3rd hole draws, is often a problem for beginners and they may find themselves in the pre-bend tongue position, which doesn’t allow for a cleanly played note. They may find it sounds flat or won’t play at all and mistakenly think there is a problem with the harmonica. In order to remedy the situation you should relax the tongue and concentrate on positioning the mouth for making an “eeee” sound. You may find that an “aaaaah” sound works better because the “eeee” may lead to raising the back of the tongue. The most important thing to remember is to flatten your tongue and make sure the back of your tongue is not raised at all and is relaxed. Experiment with it and find what works best for you.

You may want to let a little air in through the nose at first to help in playing the note. If you draw a chord using the 1, 2 and 3 holes and you can hear the 2 draw then you know the harp is working properly. If not you may find that by opening up your harmonica to expose the reeds there may be something such as a hair or a piece of food stuck in the reed. These conditions sometimes happen but can be reduced by washing your mouth out with water before you play and properly storing your harmonica in a case. If all else fails and you can’t seem to remedy the problem you may need work on the reed or get a new harmonica. For me it’s usually the 4th draw reed that goes out and depending on the cost of the harmonica I will either work on it myself, have someone else work on it, or just get a new harmonica. Before you replace your harmonica 1st check to make sure that it is either a clean reed or your technique just may need some work.
**Hand Techniques:**

The most common hand technique often used is the *cupped hand technique*, in which the right or left hand, depending on your dominant hand is placed over the harmonica to form an airtight cup. While one hand is holding the harmonica with index finger on top and thumb on the bottom in a slotted position with the other fingers protruding out and down while together, the other hand is positioned in a way in which it can open and close over the harmonica holding hand to form traditional “wah wah” sounds. It is similar to vibrato but uses the hands to form differing volumes by alternating between muted and open playing of the harmonica.

**Multiple key harmonicas:**

Diatonic harmonicas come in all kinds of different keys: All 12 keys of the *major scale* as well as minor keys and special tunings, such as melodic minor and country tuned. They usually range from the low end at G to the higher pitched F#, but can be tuned on such harps as High G or low D, or even low C. A normally tuned C harp is often used in beginner harmonica teachings, and is often used when playing straight harp, such as in the song *Piano Man* by Billy Joel. The most common keys played, especially in blues, are A, C, and D harps. It is a good idea to have at least those 3 harmonicas when getting started as a beginner.

**Note Articulations:**

The tongue is often used in order to make notes more abrupt or concise. Articulations are often done with syllables that use a consonant followed by a vowel (i.e. ka, da, ta, ha, or ga, which are the most common ways to break up notes). Articulations can also be done using *tongue blocking*, which cuts off the air abruptly. Tongue blocking is also often used for octave playing and *split intervals*, which we will mention in later levels.

**Shakes and Warbles:**

You will see an introduction to this in level 1 and will be more emphasized in level 2. A *shake* is a quick back and forth movement between two adjacent notes, but can be also done with and octave shake in which octaves are played by separating two notes with the tongue and shaking back and forth. *Octave shakes* are not often done on the diatonic but are more often used in blues with a chromatic harmonica such as in songs like “Blues with a Feeling” by Little Walter. Shakes are often called warbles and are commonly done by shaking either the head or the harp rapidly from side to side. More advanced shakes can often use note bending.
**Level 2 Techniques**

**Cross Harp (2\textsuperscript{nd} position)**

2nd position is most often used to play blues as well as rock and country music. To play cross harp, or 2\textsuperscript{nd} position, you play in a key that is a 5\textsuperscript{th} higher than the harmonica you are playing. For example if you want to play in 2\textsuperscript{nd} position using a C harp you would be playing a song in the key of G. A good way to understand it is that the 5\textsuperscript{th} note of the C scale is G so you would play in the key of G for the C harmonica.

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 \\
C & D & E & F & G & A & B \\
\end{array}
\]

One key that always seems to confuse beginners is F. You would use the Bb harmonica in 2\textsuperscript{nd} position. The reason for that is that each key has its own scale and a Bb scale has a F for the fifth note of the scale

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 \\
Bb & C & D & Eb & F & G & A \\
\end{array}
\]

Another way to remember which key harmonica to use for 2\textsuperscript{nd} position is that the key of the harmonica will be a 4\textsuperscript{th} of the key of the song (meaning the 4\textsuperscript{th} note of the scale of the song will be the correct key harmonica to use)

Ex. Key of G song=C harmonica

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 \\
G & A & B & C & D & E & F# \\
\end{array}
\]

Ex. Key of F song=Bb harmonica

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 \\
F & G & A & Bb & C & D & E \\
\end{array}
\]

Below is a quick reference chart for all 12 keys and the harmonicas for 2\textsuperscript{nd} position play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key of song</th>
<th>Key of harmonica</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ab</td>
<td>Db</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2nd position uses mostly draw notes and starts on the 2 draw hole. Much of the playing is done on the lower end of the harp (holes 1-6) and draw bends are usually used to play in a more expressive and “bluesy” style, which is what cross harp is well known for. A good way to remember which note 2nd position usually starts on is as in the chart is that the key of the song is the same as the the 2 hole draw. For example on a C harp the 2nd hole draw is a G note. The same thing goes for all the other harps (Bb harp 2nd draw=F, A harp 2nd draw=E, etc.)

Available notes of the Diatonic harmonica and Scales

Below are diagrams of all 12 keys of the diatonic harmonica so you can see the similarities of the setup as well as the difference in scales. As you will see the major scale is seen and played more easily in holes 4-7. The blues scale, which is often used in cross harp(2nd position), is found in holes 2-6 with 2 draw bends on holes 3 and 4.

d=draw, b=blow, ^=semitone bend, ^^=whole step bend (a semitone is a half step between notes i.e. difference between A and Bb or B and C. Here is the chromatic scale to better explain: C Db D Eb E F F# G Ab A Bb B C (there is a semitone/half step between each note). You may notice that we use C# and Db interchangeably. They are the same note just shown differently in certain scales.

The G blues scale found on the C harp is:

G Bb C C# D F G
2d 3d^ 4b 4d^ 4d 5d 6b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bb</td>
<td>Eb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Db</td>
<td>F#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eb</td>
<td>Ab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F#</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As you will soon see all of the harmonicas are set up in the same way for their relative scales. If you want to find out what the blues scale for each harmonica is then look at the harmonica layout diagrams that follow for each harmonica and see what the 2nd position is in the previous chart to see which hole aligns with which note. (ie.-if you can play the G blues scale on the C harp then you can play the E blues scale on an A harp)

The following will show you the major scale for the C harp but as mentioned the harmonicas are set up in the same way just different scales.

**Major scale on C harp:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1b</td>
<td>1d</td>
<td>2b</td>
<td>2d^^</td>
<td>2d/3b</td>
<td>3d^^</td>
<td>3d</td>
<td>4b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b</td>
<td>4d</td>
<td>5b</td>
<td>5d</td>
<td>6b</td>
<td>6d</td>
<td>7d</td>
<td>7b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b</td>
<td>8d</td>
<td>8b</td>
<td>9d</td>
<td>9b</td>
<td>10d</td>
<td>10b^</td>
<td>10b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Layout of all 12 keys of the diatonic harmonicas**

- **C harp**
  - Draw Bends and Blow Bends
  - Overblows and Overdraws

- **Db harp**
- **D harp**

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Draw Bends

Draw bends can be a monster that many people find are difficult to deal with, however you may find you are closer to draw bending than you realize. As I tell my students if you are having a hard time getting a good clean 1, 2, or 3 draw note then you are on the cusp of getting a draw bend. Your tongue needs to be in the correct position to get a good bend. That position involves raising the back of your tongue to the top of the back of
your mouth and creating a jet stream. You will be creating a tunnel of pressure that will actually change the pitch of the note, lowering it in pitch. What some people find helpful when first learning to bend is to actually turn the harmonica up slightly and visualize the note changing. Another approach is to take a coffee stirrer or a small straw and try to suck in with more pressure. If you bend the end of the straw with your fingers you will find that your tongue will make its way into the correct position to bend a note on the harmonica. Another approach is to go out and get a thick milkshake and try to suck it through the straw. If your tongue is in the correct position you should be able to make a “koh” sound. When you are saying “koh” your tongue is up in the back and down in the front which will allow you to create that pressure that you need. As you have seen you can change pitches 3 half steps/semitones on the 3rd hole but you may find it easier to learn to bend on the 1st or 4th hole draws. **Draw bends are available on holes 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6.** There is a small bend available on the 5th hole draw but it is not a true half step. Another good thing to remember is that a bend does not require more air. The air is just accelerated. You are actually almost conserving air when bending: you are using a little less of it because of the pressure you are creating from your tongue. For more info on learning to bend see JP’s *Blues From The Vault.*

### Mechanics of harmonica during a bend

Many people don’t realize what is actually going on with the reeds when they are bending. As JP mentions in his *Blues From The Vault* videos the blow reed is also vibrating along with the draw reed during a draw bend. The reason that the 5th hole draw bend does not bend a full half step is because there is only one half step or semitone difference between the 5th hole blow and draw played without a bend (refer to the harmonica layout.)

![Harmonica Layout](https://www.harmonica.com)

You can see in the C harmonica there is an E on the blow and an F on the draw. These are only a half step apart (there is no E# or Fb. If you know about music theory they sometimes do use those notes but an E#=F and an Fb=E, for those of you who may have seen those notes used.). If you notice on the C harp the difference between the 1st hole blow and draw is 2 half steps (1 whole tone) which leaves room for the blow reed to bend
a full semitone/half step (difference between C and C#). The 2nd hole difference between E and G is 1 ½ steps and leaves room to bend 2 half steps (or a whole tone/step.)

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
G & F# & F \\
½ & ½ & \\
\end{array}
\]

As you can see the 3rd hole has a difference of 2 whole steps or 4 half steps G to B. I show the following from B to G the draw bends descend that way from B to Ab and the G is the 3rd hole blow:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
B & Bb & A & Ab & G \\
½ & ½ & ½ & ½ \\
\end{array}
\]

As you can see from the diagram the 4th hole is set up just like the 1st hole (C =1 blow, D=1 draw and 1 draw bent a half step is C# or Db). The Eb (above hole 4 blow) is actually an overblow, and is a more advanced technique, that will be mentioned in level 3. In the blow bends (mentioned in the following section) there is the same thing going on with both blow and draw reeds vibrating at the same time.

**Blow bends**

Blow bends are done with the same basic tongue position of the draw bends. You may find that a blow bend is more easily done by pushing your tongue slightly forward (the back of your tongue is still raised but moves a little forward in your mouth). You are saying “koo” but you are blowing instead of drawing. Blow bends are available in holes 8-10 and you will, like the draw bends, notice a lowering of pitch. Hole 7 has somewhat of a blow bend but, like hole 5 on the draw bend, hole 7 is not a true half step bend because like hole five the difference between the blow and the draw is a half step. The Eb (hole 8 blow bend), F# (hole 9 blow bend), B and Bb (hole 10 blow bends) are working in much the same way as the draw bends only you are blowing instead of drawing and you will notice the difference between the notes still holds true (ie. The 8 hole blow is an E and the blow bend is Eb lowering the pitch, which is found between D (8 draw) and E in the chromatic scale. There are some players who only use a C harmonica to play in all 12 keys, like Otavio Castro, which is true chromatic playing and is truly a great feet on the diatonic harmonica, considering that a diatonic scale, what the harmonica was named for, is a 7 tone scale (ie. C D E F G A B). As you can see by the layout of the harmonica the diatonic scale is found using only the notes on the harmonica with no bending or overblowing. The exceptions to that are of course found in holes 2 and 3 draw bends (F and A on the C harp) and 10 blow bend (B on the C harp). The diatonic scale is also known as a major scale as we mentioned before. The C# on hole 7 is an overdraw and like the overblows will be mentioned in level 3, for it is a more advanced technique.

**Intermediate Bends**
An intermediate bend is a bend found between the full range of the bend like on holes 2 and 3 draw. The 3rd hole draw intermediate bends are Bb and A where the full bend is Ab. Intermediate bends are useful because of their use in the blues scale, like the G blues scale which uses a Bb (3rd hole intermediate bend on a C harp). Intermediate bends are often hard to maintain pitch. You can use a tuner or a piano to check to make sure you are playing an intermediate bend in pitch. If you want to hear someone who uses intermediate bends in pitch, listen to some of Howard Levy’s recordings. Even Howard often only uses them as passing notes instead of resolving notes (notes you end on).

**Dip Bends**

The dip bend is done by approaching the note either bent at first, releasing into another unbent note in a quick but smooth manner or playing the unbent note and gradually sliding into a bent note. It is frequently used to add a little flavor to a note.

**Glissando**

A glissando is a group of notes played in rapid succession that ends on the main note to be played. If you play a single note and slide the harmonica across your mouth then you are playing what is known as a glissando. You are not spending time articulating each note you are just passing through the notes in a rapid manner and sometime end up on back the starting note. If you finish on any final note, articulating it, it is sometimes referred to as a ripped glissando.

**Throat vibrato**

Throat vibrato on a harmonica is done in much the same way as a singer uses it. It is a slight wavering of the pitch of a note and is done by sort of pinching of the air stream. It is similar to the bend yet not to the extreme that a bend is played. If you can picture a wavering of a frequency on an old cb radio, that is the effect of the throat vibrato. The diaphragm is also used but most of the work is done by the throat.

**Diaphragm Tremolo**

The Diaphragm tremolo is much like the throat vibrato in sound but there is a slight difference. The difference is, *instead of a pitch oscillation, like on the throat vibrato, there is a volume oscillation*. The diaphragm is used primarily with the tremolo and is done by making a sort of laughing sound, like “ha ha ha”. Tremolo is sometimes referred to as a vibrato but they are different in their natures.

**Growl**
A growl is used often with a deep draw bend. It is an effect made by allowing the soft palette in the back of mouth to relax and vibrating it with a snoring effect. The vibration along with the bent notes allows for the growling sound.

**3rd position (AKA. “slant harp” or “double cross harp”)**

A Good way to remember 3rd position is that it is 1 whole step (2 half steps) above the key of the harp to be played. For example if you wanted to play a C harp in 3rd position, you would be playing in the key of D. The mode of 3rd position is a minor key, in Dorian mode so you would actually be playing in D minor. A Dm scale is the same as an F scale because Dm is the relative natural minor to the Key of F but instead of starting on the 6th note of the F scale, as in Aeolian mode (natural minor) it starts on the 2nd note (D) of the C scale and works its way back around the scale. This is what is known as the Dorian mode and is most often played in 3rd position harmonica.

```
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1
Ex.  F scale=  F G A Bb C D E F
```
```
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1
Aeolian Dm scale =  D E F G A Bb C D
```
```
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1
Ex.  C scale=  C D E F G A B C
```
```
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1
Dorian Dm Scale = D E F G A B C D
```

This is how the Dorian mode scale is set up and each note is separated. Whole Step - Half Step - Whole Step - Whole Step - Whole Step - Half Step - Whole Step -
```
   w h w w w h w
Ex. D E F G A B C D
```

Below is a chart which shows all 12 positions for all 12 keys Many of them require overblows and will be mentioned again in level 3 terms because of their advanced nature.
Knowing where you are on the harmonica

It is a good idea to learn the layout of the harmonica (refer to layouts section) because it is important to know that some notes play differently from a technique perspective. As you become better able to reach bends and overbends you will want to know where you are. Knowing how the notes play on each harmonica will allow you to pick certain harmonicas, and use them in different positions. For example, you may be playing a song which on one harp requires a bend or an overbend and you may want to hit that note cleanly. If you know the layouts of each harmonica and learn the notes of the song you may find that one harp may allow you to play all the notes you need without needing to bend too much. As you will come to realize some notes play more easily than others and learning your harmonicas can turn you into a more well rounded player.

Playing all over the harmonica

You can usually play most songs in 2 different octaves on the harmonica. The 2nd octave (holes 4-7) is generally easier to play in because usually all of the notes are available without bends. Sometimes you may find that a song requires overbends(overblows and overdraws) and unless you are accomplished at getting those then you may want to either play in the first octave and use bends or choose a harmonica that allows you to play all the notes you need without needing to use bends or overbends. You may find that the 3rd octave allows you to play certain songs, as long as the notes are there, but you may start to run out of notes. Again it helps to know the layout of all your harmonicas.

Equipment

Rack
A rack is a device that allows you to play without using your hands. Usually the rack goes around your neck and it pivots to, and away from, your mouth. There is often a wing nut that tightens and loosens to allow you to move closer or farther away from the harmonica, which is placed on the rack. You may have seen players like Bob Dylan or Crystal Bowersox (from American Idol) use a rack so they could play guitar and harmonica at the same time.

**Amplifiers**

Blues players often use a tube amp to get that distorted grungy sound that is so often sought after. Many players love to use old guitar amps like the Fender Bassman, Bassman Relissue (RI), Fender Champ, or the Fender Princeton. Some players like modeling amps like the Line 6 because it allows for effects without an effects pedal, which is often used in amplified play. To hear someone who is a connoisseur of effects then listen to Jason Ricci, who also uses overbends in a lot of his playing.

**Effects pedals**

Many players prefer reverb and other effects like digital or analog delay. These can sometime be done without pedals but having a pedal allows for ease of changing between sounds without having to bend over and adjust your amp’s knobs. Most guitar effects pedals work well with harp playing but some are very sensitive to feeding back like a wah pedal, because of the changing in volume and the use of a microphone.

**Mics**

A good mic (microphone) can make all the difference in the world to your sound, whether you are singing or playing the harmonica through it. Some good harp mics are the Shure Green Bullet, Astatic JT30, Hohner Blues Blaster, which are all bullet shaped and made to fit in a cupped hand. Another interesting mic is the Hohner HooDoo handheld wireless mic. It fits on your finger and is very small which is great for allowing for hand effects like “wahs”. Some people prefer to use vocal mics like the Shure SM-57 or SM-58 which they hook up to their amp, or, directly through the mixing board and use as both a harp mic and a vocal mic. Some players even have a pedal that allows them to switch between the two (effects and no effects).

**Level 3 Techniques**

*(Advanced and Beyond)*

**4th-12th Positions**
These positions require a familiarity with the note layout of the harmonica and many of them require the ability to play not only draw bends and blow bends but overbends (overblows and overdraws). It is good to know the various modes to play in these positions. Below is the chart for all 12 positions in all 12 keys and the proper names for positions and slang names for the harps.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key of Harp</th>
<th>1st “Ionian” Major</th>
<th>2nd “Dorian”</th>
<th>3rd “Phrygian”</th>
<th>4th “Aeolian”</th>
<th>5th “Lydian”</th>
<th>6th “Neutral Major”</th>
<th>7th “Major”</th>
<th>8th “Minor”</th>
<th>9th “Minor”</th>
<th>10th “Major”</th>
<th>11th “Major”</th>
<th>12th “1st Flat” Lydian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F#/G#</td>
<td>C#/Db</td>
<td>A♭</td>
<td>E♭</td>
<td>B♭</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>C</td>
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12th Position is sometimes called “1st flat”. It is the Key with one more flat than the key of the harp. It is a 4th above the key of the harp. For example, the C harp 12th position is the key of F (C scale has no flats and F scale has a Bb). 12th position is excellent for playing melodies in a major key. To play in 12th position on the bottom of the harmonica you need to be good at playing 2nd hole draw whole step bend (2nd bend available) and 3rd hole draw whole step bend (also 2nd bend available in that hole. Remember there are 2 bends available in 2nd hole draw and 3 bends available in 3rd hole draw).

**Split Intervals**

Split intervals are notes that are split usually by the tongue. They are usually split into octaves. An example of an octave split interval is 1 and 4 blow or draw played at the same time with the 2nd and 3rd holes blocked out by the tongue. You can also get an octave by playing holes 4 and 8 draw and blocking out 5, 6 and 7 draws.

**Split Interval Bends**
You can bend 2 notes of a split interval, such as in an octave, at the same time. It is also possible to bend one note of an interval to create an octave. An example would be if you bent the 2 draw a whole step and played the 5 draw without a bend you could form an octave. On the C harp that would be an F octave interval.

**Tongue Switch Shimmer**

The tongue switch shimmer is an interesting effect where the tongue moves rapidly from side to side allowing corner holes to play individually. It is much like the split interval but instead of 2 holes being played at the same time, only one hole is being played at a time.

**Draw Bend Vibrato**

When trying to get a good smooth vibrato on draw bends you must use a lot of control with use of both the throat and the diaphragm. It requires a delicate breath and can sound very “unsMOOTH” if you don’t use a delicate touch. Throat vibrato is mainly a volume oscillation but can also be done using a slight pitch oscillation between bends. Remember that pitch oscillation is a slight wavering from note to note, as volume oscillation wavers between louder and softer.

**Blow Bend Vibrato**

Blow bend vibrato requires a little more control than draw bend vibrato because of the length of the reeds where blow bends are possible (holes 8-10). Some players find that the blow bend vibrato is easier because there is less play in the reed. Not as many bends as in the 2nd and 3rd hole draws.

**Speed**

Speed is one of those things that can be abused. Although it requires extreme note and rhythm accuracy many players play fast just to play fast and it becomes a little sloppy and they lose the beat. A couple of examples of players who use speed wisely and with much accuracy are Howard Levy and Jason Ricci. They are both overblow players. One player who used speed very well in a rhythmic way was the late Norton Buffalo. JP Allen of harmonica.com is also an excellent speed player with a great sense of rhythm. All four are good examples of how to play fast while not losing the song with overuse of speed.

**Slurs and Double Stops**

A slur is a technique that uses a primary note along with just a bit of another note. A double stop plays two notes at the same time with equal strength. With double stops bent
notes can be played along with unbent notes. This is especially possible on hole 1-4. Overblows can even be played where both draw and blow reeds sound and two notes come out. A slur differs from a double stop in that the volumes of the two notes used are at different levels. The slur has a louder primary note and a softer secondary note.

**Octave Shakes**

Octave shakes use split intervals but are rarely used on the diatonic harmonica due to its setup. Chromatic harmonicas lend well to octave shakes and there are even recordings of them used quite frequently using a chromatic harmonica. An octave shake is done much like a head shake but the tongue is used to block out the middle notes so an octave can be formed and 2 notes are played at the same time and rapidly switch back and forth between two more octave notes. For those who don’t know what an octave is, it is the same note just played at two different pitches (ie. 1st hole blow and 4th hole blow).

**Rhythm and melody together**

This technique is also known as “vamping”. You can do this with either a tongue block or by using a lip block by opening and closing the embouchure. It can also be done by rolling the harp up at the back to go from chord to single note. Usually a chord that contains the melody note is played and the tongue blocks the notes of the chord being played. This technique is often used in the first 3 holes (1, 2, and 3).

**Tongue Rolls**

A tongue roll is a vibration of the tongue much like pronouncing a Spanish style rolled “R”. Rolling the tongue and the back of the throat, especially while blowing, can create a machine gun effect which is an interesting effect for Sonny Terry-like rhythmic soloing.

**Whoops**

A whoop is done by using your voice to whoop or holler while playing the harp. A few players like Sonny Terry and Peter “Madcat” Ruth used this technique often while playing. They also used other sounds like barks and clicks to add flavor to the songs. It is best done if you continue playing on the blow while you holler or “whoop”.

**Back Pressure Chords**

These require a very air tight cupping of the hands and can allow for playing the harmonica backwards. You aren’t actually playing with your mouth through the back of the harp but are creating an air pressure that allows you to move air through both the front and the back of the harmonica. The air pressure actually builds up in your tightly
cupped hand and flows back into the harp causing other non played reeds to vibrate. You can block holes that you don’t want played with your thumb or finger and use the back pressure notes along with the played notes to create new chords.

**Tongue Slap**

The tongue slap is a technique where first the chord is played briefly and then all but one or two notes are rapidly blocked with the tongue. The reason that it has a sort of “slap” sound is that the amount of air that was being sent through 3 or 4 holes is suddenly focused into 1 or 2 holes. The tongue slap is often used to punctuate notes.

**Flutter tongue**

This is also known as *rapid vamping*. Normally when doing this technique a split interval is played and the tongue is lifted and placed back onto the previously blocked notes repeatedly. There is a rapid switching back and forth between a chord and a split interval like an octave.

**Valved Bends**

Valved bends use only one reed to bend rather than both reeds as in a normal bend. Valved bends have a great potential in their range but take a different attack and bending approach.

**Overbends (Overblows and Overdraws)**

Overblows and overdraws require more narrow or tighter reed gaps and involve a lot more finesse than regular bends. Overblows and overdraws cause the opposite than normal reed to open rather than close, as happens in normal bending. In overblows there is an activation of the draw reeds and raise the note to ½ step above the normal draw note (unbent). Overdraws cause the blow reed to raise ½ step above the natural unbent blow note. As mentioned before a couple of overbend players are Howard Levy, Jason Ricci. Otavio Castro and Tinus Koorn(Overblow.com) both use only a C diatonic to play in all 12 keys, which requires a massive amount of overbends.

**Bending Overbends and overbend vibrato**

It is possible to bend the pitch of an overbend and even use vibrato but it requires tremendous focus and finesse.

**Chromatic Play**
The diatonic harmonica has great potential as a fully chromatic instrument but it require
great technique and a bit of expertise because of the difficulty of playing bends in perfect
pitch, not to mention playing of overdraws and overblows. Below is a note layout of a C
diatonic Harmonica along with all of the available notes. You will see that they are all
there, for 3 octaves, if you practice and setup your reeds properly.

**Draw Bends and Blow Bends**

**Overblows and Overdraws**

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</table>

**The chromatic scale**

C  C#  D  Eb  E  F  F#  G  Ab  A  Bb  B  C

As you can see when analyzing the harmonica layout there are 3 octaves of chromatic
scales available on the diatonic harmonica (Holes 1-4, 4-7, and 7-10) but as you can also
see unlike the chromatic harmonica there is no common set pattern of notes. They are
kind of all over the place (meaning each octave has a different way of playing available
notes.

**Counterpoint**

Counterpoint is where more than one melody is played at one time. This is done by using
a variety of techniques all at the same time, such as single notes, double stops, playing
out of both sides of the mouth, and split intervals. This is more possibly done on diatonic
harmonicas, as opposed to chromatics, due to the relative closeness of the holes to one
another. Specially tuned harmonicas are usually used for counterpoint play. For examples of Counterpoint playing listen to Richard Hunter.