



# TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

## IRISH POLKAS ON HARMONICA

I've devoted past columns to playing various kinds of fiddle tunes on harmonica, including the reel, jig, hornpipe and waltz, but never the Irish polka. If you play Celtic music, it's good to know at least a handful of them, as they are played at Irish sessions where they serve as a changeup from the usual jigs and reels. For this teach-in, then, let's take a pair of famous polkas and learn them on the mouth harp.

The polka originated in Bohemia and debuted in the ballrooms of England and France in 1843. According to a contemporary report in *The Times of London*, the dance offered

"the intimacy of the waltz combined with vivacity of the Irish jig." The name "polka" comes from the Bohemian "pulka," meaning half, and refers to the short steps that characterize the dance.

British military bands brought the dance and its accompanying music to Ireland, and many early Irish polkas were adaptations of tunes from other parts of Europe. For many years the polka was the black sheep of Irish tune types, being widely viewed as foreign and therefore tainted. Consequently it was ignored in the collections of Francis O'Neill and the first three books of Brendan Breathnach's five-volume work, *Ceol Rince na hÉireann* (19 and 24 polkas are included in Breathnach's last two

# Denis Murphy's Polka

SO!  
TRACK 20  
CD

Fast; ♩ = approx. 130

D - Harmonica

Traditional, arr. by Glenn Weiser

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The musical score is written for a D-harmonica in the key of D major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It consists of four staves of music, each with a corresponding guitar chord diagram and a sequence of fingerings in circles below the notes.

- Staff 1:** Measures 1-4. Chords: D (measure 1), Em (measure 3), A (measure 4). Fingerings: 8 (9) 8 (8) 7 (6) 6 4 5 6 (5) (4) (8) 7 (7) (6) (7) (6) 6.
- Staff 2:** Measures 5-9. Chords: D (measure 5), Em (measure 7), A (measure 8), D (measure 9). Fingerings: 8 (9) 8 (8) 7 (6) 6 4 5 6 (5) (4) (8) 8 (8) 7 7 (8) (8) 7 7 (6).
- Staff 3:** Measures 10-13. Chords: G (measure 11), D (measure 12). Fingerings: 6 8 8 (8) 8 (6) (9) (9) 8 (9) 6 8 8 (8) 8 (8) 8 (8) 7 (6) 6.
- Staff 4:** Measures 14-18. Chords: D (measure 14), G (measure 15), Em (measure 16), A7 (measure 17), D (measure 18). Fingerings: 6 8 8 (8) 8 (6) (9) (9) 9 (10) 9 (9) (7) (8) 7 7 (6) (8) 7 7.

First and second endings are indicated by bracketed measures at the end of the second and fourth staves.

volumes respectively, indicating the tunes' belated acceptance).

Over the years, the Irish polka developed into a dance and tune form bearing little resemblance to its ancestor on the Continent. Polkas are the fastest of all Celtic tunes, and can clock at up to 80 bars a minute. Today, the polka is most often heard in County Kerry in the southwest of Ireland, and in the Sliabh Luachra district where it is the preeminent dance tune. Unlike the jig and reel, which dominate the Irish musical landscape everywhere else, and also the original ballroom polka, the Kerry polka doesn't begin with a one-beat anacrusis, or a pickup measure.

On harmonica, I play polkas in pucker position, but they can also be done with tongue blocking. The biggest challenge with these tunes is working up to the prestissimo tempos they require. Here, as with all fast music, you're best off learning the pieces at a moderate pace, and increasing the speed gradually.

The two polkas here, "Denis Murphy's Polka" and "John Ryan's Polka," are both well-known tunes. Denis Murphy (1910-1974) was a fiddler from Sliabh Luachra who, along with his sister, Julia Clifford (1914-1997), was a student of Munster fiddle master Pdraig O'Keefe (1887-1963) and came to exemplify the Kerry fiddling style. A few traditional tunes, including the first polka, were renamed after Murphy because of the authoritative way in which he played them. Planxty recorded "John Ryan's Polka" along with "Denis Murphy's Polka" and a third tune, "The Forty-Two Pound Cheque," in a polka set on their 1974 album, *Cold Blow the Rainy Night*. "John Ryan's Polka" can also be heard in the 1997 movie *Titanic* during the scene showing the Irish party on the third-class deck.

Although they're not tabbed out for harmonica, I have the music notation and guitar chords to 10 other Irish polkas in my new online collection of about 500 Celtic and North American fiddle tunes at <[www.celticguitarmusic.com/tb\\_main.htm](http://www.celticguitarmusic.com/tb_main.htm)>. Enjoy!

## John Ryan's Polka



Fast; ♩ = approx. 130

D - Harmonica

Traditional, arr. by Glenn Weiser

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The musical score for "John Ryan's Polka" is presented in four staves. Each staff includes guitar chords (D, G, D, G, D, G, Bm, A, D, Bm, A, Em, A7, D) and harmonica fingering (circled numbers 1-9). The tempo is marked "Fast; ♩ = approx. 130". The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The score includes repeat signs and first/second endings.

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