



TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

PLAYING BACKUP

When you're playing in a group situation, it's important to know how to drop into the musical background when it's not your turn to solo. While switching from melody to accompaniment is easy for instruments like the guitar, banjo or mandolin, it's a challenge for the harmonica because of the instrument's design. For this issue, we'll take the old chestnut "The Water Is Wide" and show you how to accompany this beautiful melody with two-note chords.

In a sense, the harmonica is deceptively named. You might think it is easy to *harmonize* a tune with it until you learn that it was originally made for playing German folk songs and seems to have only two chords. When you blow into it, you get the notes do, mi and sol, which make up the tonic chord. When you play the draw notes, you get sol, re, fa, la and ti, which give you a dominant ninth chord. Obviously, most music has more than two chords, so as soon as you try to get beyond the pair supplied by the harmonica, difficulties can arise. But a better knowledge of the layout of the instrument, as well as a dose of music theory, will help you learn backup on the harp. Table 1 shows the location of the scale steps on the harmonica. These will be indicated with numbers instead of syllables, like this: do-1, re-2, me-3, fa-4, sol-5, la-6, ti-7.

TABLE #1										
Hole No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Out	1	3	5	1	3	5	1	3	5	1
In	2	5	7	2	4	6	7	2	4	6

The next table shows which degrees, or notes of the scale, are in each of the seven chords of the major key. The Roman numerals I through VII in the first column represent triads, or three-note chords – one for each note in the scale. A triad is built by starting on a note in the scale, going up three steps, and then three steps more. The C chord, for example, has the notes C-E-G – the first, third and fifth steps of the C scale. Therefore, the for-

mula for any triad is 1-3-5. In a major key, the I, IV and V chords are major, the II, III and VI are minor, and the VII is diminished. Often, the V chord has the "la" scale tone added to it, creating the V₇ chord. This is why there is a 7 next to the V and a 4 added to the other degrees of the scale making up the chord.

TABLE #2	
Chord	Scale Degrees
I	1,3,5
II	2,4,6
III	3,5,7
IV	4,6,1
V	5,7,2
V ₇	5,7,2,4
VI	6,1,3
VII	7,2,4

TABLE #3						
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	B°
D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#°
E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m	D#°
F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm	E°
G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#°
A	Bm	C#m	D	E	F#m	G#°
Bb	Cm	Dm	Eb	F	Gm	A°

Table 3 lists triads I through VII in the seven keys used most often by folkies. Memorize this information – you can use it to transpose songs from one key to another. Because the position of the scale degrees is the same on any key harmonica, holes 1-, 2- and 3-out played together will always be a I chord.

It is not always possible to play all three notes of a triad at the same time on the harmonica. Complete chords are available for the I, II, V, V₇ and VII chords. For the III, IV and VI, however, you'll have to use just two of the three notes.

As a rule, when playing backup use chords in the lower six reeds. Try to change chords in such a way that each chord moves to another that is nearby, making for a smooth transition.

Table 4 lists two-note chords you can use on the harmonica.

I've added a new chord at the bottom of Table 4: the V_7 of the V. This is a dominant seventh chord built on the second note of the scale. In the key of C, for example, the V_7 of V would be D_7 ; in D it would be E_7 ; in E, $F\#_7$; in F, G_7 ; in G, A_7 ; and in A, B_7 . The V_7 of the V contains a raised fourth and is therefore termed an *out of key chord*. It is usually followed by a V or V_7 chord. I generally play 1-draw for the V_7 of V.

To put all of this theory into use, let's assume we want to work out an accompaniment to a song in the key of C with the following chord pattern:

TABLE #4	
Chord	Hole No.
I	5 6 4, 5
II	(5) (6) (4) (5)
III	6 5
IV	(6) (5)
V_7	(4) (3) (5) (3) (2) (4)
VI	5 4
VII	(4) (3)
V_7 of V	(1)

/C/Am/F/C/C/Am/Dm/G $_7$ /C/Am/F/Em/F/C/G $_7$ /C//

Using the key of C column in Table 3, we can analyze the chord progression by finding the Roman numeral that corresponds to each chord.

/I/VI/IV/I/I/VI/II/ V_7 /I/VI/IV/III/IV/I/ V_7 /I//

Now refer to Table 4 for the suggested harmonica chords. Alternative ways of playing these chords can be worked out by using Tables 1 and 2.

"The Water Is Wide" seems to be an American blend of older folk songs from the British Isles. In addition to an English version, the Irish "Carrickfergus" and the Scottish "Waly, Waly" bear resemblances. The setting here is based on the way I heard it played by master flatpicker David Grier. Pete Seeger's rendition was printed way back in V.9#1 and included in *The Collected Reprints From Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine Volumes 1-6, 1959-1964* (ISBN 0-9626704-0-5).

If you have any questions or comments, drop me a line in care of *Sing Out!* at P.O. Box 5253, Bethlehem, PA 18015-0253, or via the internet at singout@libertynet.org with Harmonica in the subject line.

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