

TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

THE 12-HOLE MARINE BAND

Many Celtic tunes can be played on the 10-hole diatonic harmonica, but owing to this instrument's limitations, there are many others that cannot. This obviously creates a dilemma for any would-be Celtic harmonicist. Because the first octave of the harmonica was designed for tongue-blocking accompaniment, the fourth and sixth steps of the scale are lacking. However, certain tunes, especially those in the key of one sharp (G major, D Mixolydian, A Dorian or E natural minor), require the low sixth. And while playing this note is possible by bending the 3-draw reed down a whole step, it is hard to hit accurately and cleanly, particularly when playing a fast dance tune.

One approach to this problem is the extended-range Marine Band. These are available in the keys of G or C, and come in two models: the No. 365 or 14-hole, and the shorter No. 364 or 12-hole, which is the one we'll discuss here. Although the 12-hole C is an octave lower than the 10-hole C, the first 10 holes of the 12-hole G are the same as those of the 10-hole G. The 364 extends the range of the harmonica up to the high fifth step (sol) of the fourth octave. Here's a diagram for the 12-hole in the key of G:

KEY OF G												
Hole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Out	G	B	D	G	B	D	G	B	D	G	B	D
In	A	D	F [#]	A	C	E	F [#]	A	C	E	F [#]	A

The 10-hole harmonica is designed so that in the first six holes, the blow reed of each hole is lower than the draw reed; for the upper four holes, the reverse is the case. In the high part of the 12-hole, however, the reeds start to crisscross. G is on 10-blow, but F[#] is on 11-draw, and A is on 12-draw. B, usually the highest note found in traditional tunes, is on 11-blow. This leaves the highest note, D, on 12-blow, only rarely used. The layout of the high reeds can be very confusing at first, so I've written out a scale and some exercises to help you get used to it. Use lip-blocking position for these.

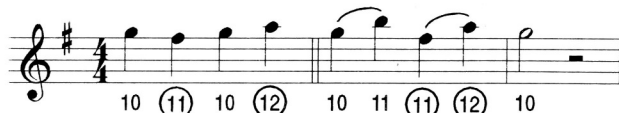
Exercise 1 - G Scale, Reeds 4 through 12



After you've worked on the scale, try the next half-dozen exercises. These are melodic patterns commonly found in traditional tunes. Remember that you have to skip over a reed to get from G (10-blow) to A (12-draw). When you make this jump, you should tongue (this is done by touching the tongue to the roof of the mouth just above the front teeth as if whispering the syllable "ta") in order to prevent the 11th hole from sounding.

Exercise 2

Exercise 3



Exercise 4

Exercise 5



Exercise 6

Exercise 7



"Danny Boy," which comes from County Derry, is the most highly esteemed, yet most abused song in all Irish music. Musicologists have long considered it the best specimen of a folk tune in existence (they cite its rising, wave-like motion culminating in the high B in the second part as the reason), and violin virtuoso Fritz Kreisler even called it "the most beautiful melody I have ever heard." But the poor song has also been the victim of countless maudlin renditions by Irish tenors. In fact, because of this association, many traditional Celtic musicians tend to avoid "Danny Boy," but when performed in a straightforward manner, the song shines in its original loveliness.

Before closing, I should also mention that blues-harp master Rice Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson II) recorded some great sides with the low C 12-hole. In a future teach-in, we'll take a look at the 364 as a blues ax.

DANNY BOY

12-Hole

1 G

2 C

3 G

Em

4 D

D7

5 G

6 C

Am

7 G

D

8 G

9 D

7 9 10 11 10 11 11 10 9 10

10 G

11 Em

D7

G

12 D

A7

D7

13 G

C

14 G

Em

15 G

C

D

16 G

7

Glenn Weiser, author of several books on harmonica and Celtic guitar playing, performs solo acoustic blues, Celtic and old-time stringband music. You can write to him in care of Sing Out!, P.O. Box 5253, Bethlehem, PA 18015-0253, or send e-mail to harmonicati@singout.org.