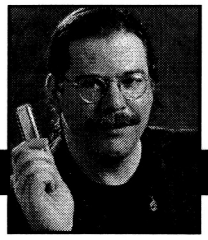


TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

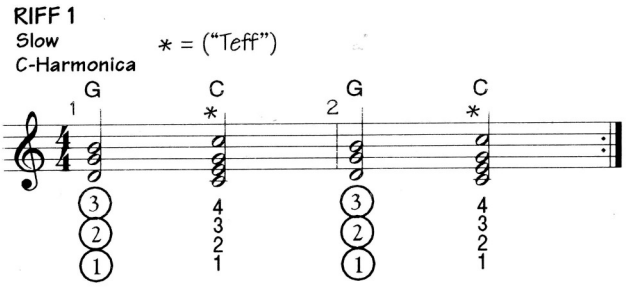
Train Sounds

Few things have gripped the American imagination like trains. In countless songs, the lonesome sound of a whistle or the temptation to hop a freight and leave one's troubles behind are themes often met with. In his book *Father of the Blues,* W.C. Handy tells us that he could recall hearing harmonica players imitating train sounds as far back as the 1870s. And if you're a harmonica player, being able to do a train piece is still virtually *de riguer*. In this issue we're going to look at how to make some train sounds, and because it's important to hear some of this stuff for yourself, I'll also tell you about some classic recordings in this genre.

The three main sounds that trains make are the clickety-clack of the wheels going down the tracks, the hissing of the brakes, and of course the whistle. Each of these can be mimicked on the harp. The sound of the wheels can be made by playing rapid chords in the lowest four holes. When you listen to enough railroad pieces, it's remarkable how many ways this has been done. The brakes can be imitated by loosening the lips on the harmonica and percussively hissing in such a way that the breath goes over the reed plate covers. And to make the sound of the whistle, two adjacent draw reeds are usually bent together and played as drawn out notes. Let's look at these moves separately and then combine them into a short solo.

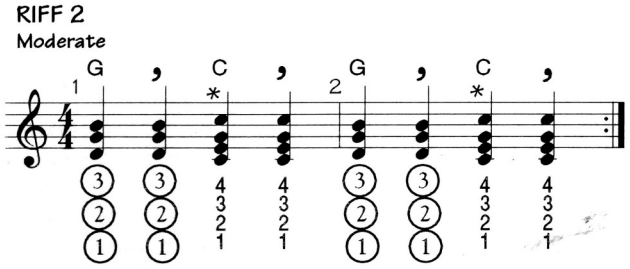
To get the train rolling, hold the harp up to your mouth in lip-blocking position.

Play the first three draw holes and hold the chord for two beats as shown in the first measure of Riff 1.

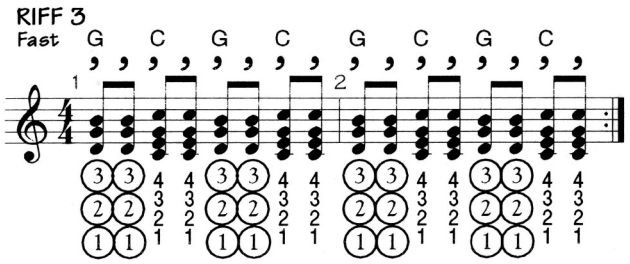


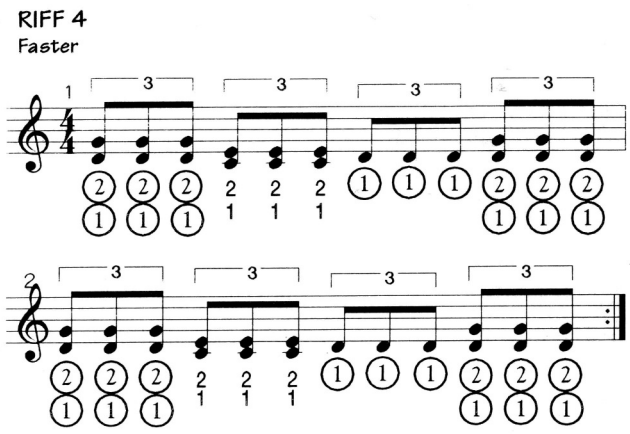
Then, play the first four blow holes and pull the right end of the harmonica forward in such a way as to create a gap between your lips and the harp on the right side of your mouth. As you do this, sharply hiss the syllable "teff" as if you were spitting. Done correctly, this will sound like the brakes releasing as the train begins to move. Hold the blow chord for two beats.

Then play two quarter note chords on 1-3 draw and tongue on the second chord by whispering "ta" as shown in Riff 2. Next, play two chords on 1-4 blow and "hiss" on the second chord.



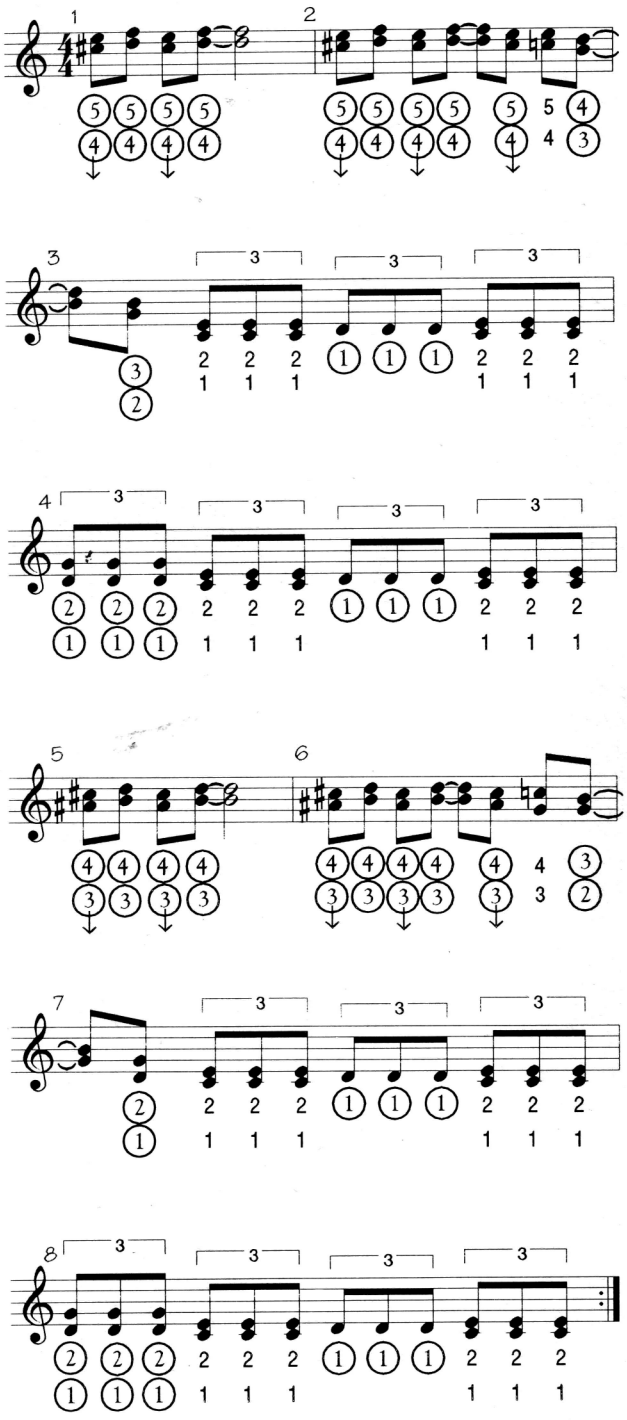
By now our train is picking up a little speed. Riff 3 is in eighth note rhythm and is played without the hisses. To bring her up to full throttle, switch to the triplet riff in Riff 4 let her fly down the tracks. As you do this riff, whisper "Oodally-hoodally-oodally-hoodally."



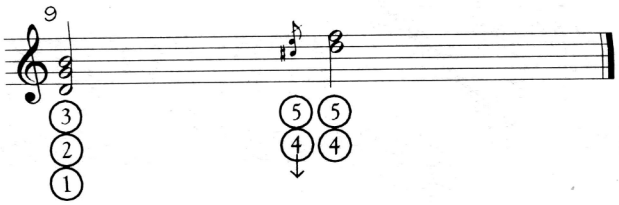


The whistle effects in Riff 5 are made by bending two draw notes together and then releasing them. Either 3-4 draw or 4-5 draw may be used. After tooting the whistle, go back to the triplets and then slow down the train by playing the first three riffs in reverse order. One last hiss of the brakes and you can stop – you've reached the next town.

RIFF 5



Ending



Suggested Listening

The following is a short discography of selected train "tracks" (pun intended) compiled with the help of my online harmonica buddies at the Internet newsgroup Harp-L-Digest. It lists classic recordings from the '20s and '30s as well as more recent recordings.

Devil in the Woodpile-Essential Recordings Of Blues Harmonica (Indigo #2032; Twyman House, 31-39 Camden Road, London NW19LF, UK)
"Pan American Blues" by DeFord Bailey
"Railroad Piece" by Palmer McAbee
"Chickasaw Special" by Noah Lewis

Medicine Show Man (Trix #3302; 160 W. 71st St., NY, NY 10023)
"Fast Freight Train" by Peg Leg Sam

Harmonica Blues (Yazoo #1053; 37 East Clinton St., Newton, NJ 07860; Ph: 201-579-7763; Internet: www.shanachie.com)
"Railroad Blues" by Freeman Stowers

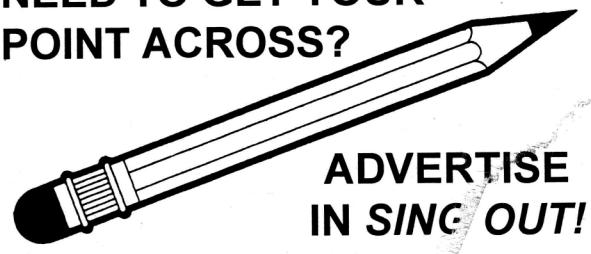
Harmonica & Vocal Solos (Folkways #2035; 995 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 7300, MRC 953, Smithsonian Instute, Washington, DC 20560; Ph: 800-410-9815; Internet: www.si.edu/folkways)
"Locomotive Blue" by Sonny Terry

Good Time Charlie (Monument #32215; dist. by Sony)
"Orange Blossom Special" by Charlie McCoy

Harmonicology (Beancake #008; PO Box 4211, Ann Arbor, MI 48106)
"Dakota 400" by Peter "Madcat" Ruth

***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 5460, Bethlehem, PA 18015-0460, or send e-mail to harmonicati@singout.org.*

NEED TO GET YOUR POINT ACROSS?



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