

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

Harmonica

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Play right out of the box,
with little or no experience

Get to know scales and
chords on a harmonica

Bend notes like a pro
and play multiple styles

Winslow Yerxa

Renowned harmonica player
and instructor

Harmonica

**for
dummies[®]**
A Wiley Brand



Harmonica

2nd Edition

by Winslow Yerxa

**for
dummies®**
A Wiley Brand

Harmonica For Dummies®, 2nd Edition

Published by: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774, www.wiley.com

Copyright © 2020 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey

Published simultaneously in Canada

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise, except as permitted under Sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the Publisher. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

Trademarks: Wiley, For Dummies, the Dummies Man logo, Dummies.com, Making Everything Easier, and related trade dress are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc., and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

LIMIT OF LIABILITY/DISCLAIMER OF WARRANTY: THE PUBLISHER AND THE AUTHOR MAKE NO REPRESENTATIONS OR WARRANTIES WITH RESPECT TO THE ACCURACY OR COMPLETENESS OF THE CONTENTS OF THIS WORK AND SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIM ALL WARRANTIES, INCLUDING WITHOUT LIMITATION WARRANTIES OF FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. NO WARRANTY MAY BE CREATED OR EXTENDED BY SALES OR PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS. THE ADVICE AND STRATEGIES CONTAINED HEREIN MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR EVERY SITUATION. THIS WORK IS SOLD WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT THE PUBLISHER IS NOT ENGAGED IN RENDERING LEGAL, ACCOUNTING, OR OTHER PROFESSIONAL SERVICES. IF PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE IS REQUIRED, THE SERVICES OF A COMPETENT PROFESSIONAL PERSON SHOULD BE SOUGHT. NEITHER THE PUBLISHER NOR THE AUTHOR SHALL BE LIABLE FOR DAMAGES ARISING HEREFROM. THE FACT THAT AN ORGANIZATION OR WEBSITE IS REFERRED TO IN THIS WORK AS A CITATION AND/OR A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF FURTHER INFORMATION DOES NOT MEAN THAT THE AUTHOR OR THE PUBLISHER ENDORSES THE INFORMATION THE ORGANIZATION OR WEBSITE MAY PROVIDE OR RECOMMENDATIONS IT MAY MAKE. FURTHER, READERS SHOULD BE AWARE THAT INTERNET WEBSITES LISTED IN THIS WORK MAY HAVE CHANGED OR DISAPPEARED BETWEEN WHEN THIS WORK WAS WRITTEN AND WHEN IT IS READ.

For general information on our other products and services, please contact our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 877-762-2974, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3993, or fax 317-572-4002. For technical support, please visit www.wiley.com/techsupport.

Wiley publishes in a variety of print and electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some material included with standard print versions of this book may not be included in e-books or in print-on-demand. If this book refers to media such as a CD or DVD that is not included in the version you purchased, you may download this material at <http://booksupport.wiley.com>. For more information about Wiley products, visit www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020938974

ISBN 978-1-119-70012-8 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-119-70078-4 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-119-70077-7 (ebk)

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents at a Glance

Introduction	1
Part 1: Getting Started with Harmonica	7
CHAPTER 1: What Is This Thing Called Harp?	9
CHAPTER 2: Becoming a Harmonica Owner	17
CHAPTER 3: Making Your First Harmonica Sounds	33
CHAPTER 4: Relating to Notes, Scales, and Chords	55
Part 2: Starting to Make Some Music	75
CHAPTER 5: I Hear a Melody: Playing Single Notes	77
CHAPTER 6: Shaping Your Sound	103
CHAPTER 7: Enhancing Your Sound with Your Tongue on the Harp	127
CHAPTER 8: Bending Notes	149
CHAPTER 9: Positions: Playing One Harp in Many Keys	177
Part 3: Growing Beyond the Basics	199
CHAPTER 10: Fancy Playing: Developing Flair and Speed	201
CHAPTER 11: Mastering New Songs	219
CHAPTER 12: Behind the Hidden Treasure: Bending Notes Up	229
Part 4: Developing Your Style	245
CHAPTER 13: Rockin' and Bluesin'	247
CHAPTER 14: Expressing Yourself with Some Folk and Gospel Melodies	267
CHAPTER 15: Fiddlin' the Night Away with Traditional Dance Tunes	283
Part 5: Taking It to the World	299
CHAPTER 16: Putting It All Together — Your Tunes, Your Band, Your Listeners . . .	301
CHAPTER 17: Amplifying Your Sound	313
CHAPTER 18: Improving Your Harmonica with Repairs and Upgrades	327
Part 6: The Part of Tens	347
CHAPTER 19: Ten (Or More) Ways to Connect in the Harmonica World	349
CHAPTER 20: Way More Than Ten Harmonica Albums You Should Hear	357
Part 7: Appendixes	365
APPENDIX A: Tuning Layouts for All Keys	367
APPENDIX B: Audio Tracks and Video Clips	373
Index	383

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
About This Book	1
Foolish Assumptions	3
Icons Used in This Book	3
Beyond the Book	4
Where to Go from Here	4
 PART 1: GETTING STARTED WITH HARMONICA	 7
CHAPTER 1: What Is This Thing Called Harp?	9
Considering the Harmonica's Coolness	9
Becoming the Next Harmonica Idol: What It Takes to Play	11
A harmonica	11
A little music know-how	11
Your body	12
Regular practice — and unstructured fun!	12
Taking Your Talent to the Next Level	13
Hanging Out in the Harmonica Village	14
Sharing your music with others locally	14
Visiting the repair shop and the accessory store	14
 CHAPTER 2: Becoming a Harmonica Owner	 17
Shopping for Your First Harmonica	18
Understanding the construction of the ten-hole diatonic	18
Tuning in to the key of the harp	19
Starting out with a harp in the key of C	19
Pricing a harmonica	20
Determining where to buy a harp	20
Safe and Sound: Caring for Your Harp	21
Collecting Additional Diatonic Harps	23
Purchasing popular keys	24
Expanding your range with harps in high and low keys	24
Adding Variety to Your Harmonica Kit	25
Chromatic harps	25
Tremolo and octave harmonicas	27
Making Your Harps Portable with Carrying Cases	28
Getting to Know You: Discovering How a Harmonica Works	29
Making a five-layer tin sandwich	29
Taking a closer look at the reeds that make the sound	30
Locating different notes	31

CHAPTER 3:	Making Your First Harmonica Sounds	33
	Preparing to Play the Harmonica	33
	Picking up the harp	34
	Putting the harp in your mouth	34
	Breathing through the harp	35
	Moving through the holes	35
	Getting Acquainted with Some Musical Concepts	36
	Zeroing in on harmonica tab	36
	Counting with musical time	36
	Locking in with the beat	37
	Using beats as building blocks	39
	Developing Your Sound	44
	Expanding and sustaining your breathing	44
	Cupping the harp in your hands	47
	Nestling the harmonica in your mouth	50
	Playing some cool rhythms	50
CHAPTER 4:	Relating to Notes, Scales, and Chords	55
	Getting in Tune with the Singable Notes	56
	Understanding the curious phenomenon of octaves	56
	Naming the notes and creating a scale	57
	Using octaves to name all the notes	57
	Altering pitches with sharps and flats	58
	Measuring small distances with semitones and whole tones	59
	Sizing Up Intervals	60
	Counting out the size of an interval	60
	Determining the quality of an interval	61
	Finding the Key of a Song	62
	Stepping Through Scales	63
	Diatonic and chromatic scales	63
	Major and minor scales	64
	Modal scales	66
	Altering a scale with sharps and flats	66
	The Building Blocks of Chords	67
	Four basic types of chords	68
	Adding notes to basic triads	68
	Chord progressions	69
	Writing Notes Down	70
	Placing notes on a staff	70
	Writing sharps and flats on the staff	72
	Unlocking key signatures	72
	Finding harmonica notes on the staff	73

PART 2: STARTING TO MAKE SOME MUSIC	75
CHAPTER 5: I Hear a Melody: Playing Single Notes	77
Shaping Your Mouth to Single Out a Note.	78
Forming the pucker embouchure.	78
Producing a tongue-block embouchure.	80
The Elements of Motion: Moving from One Note to the Next	81
Exploring breath changes.	82
Finding your way with hole changes.	83
Alternating breath changes and hole changes	85
Coordinating simultaneous hole changes and breath changes ..	86
Exploring the Three Registers of the Harmonica	87
Playing Familiar Tunes in the Middle Register	88
“Good Night, Ladies”	89
“Michael, Row the Boat Ashore”	89
“Mary Had a Little Lamb”	90
“Amazing Grace”	91
Making Your First Multi-Hole Leaps	92
“Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”	92
“Frère Jacques”	92
“On Top of Old Smokey”	94
Shifting up from the Middle.	95
“Bunessan” (“Morning Has Broken”)	95
“Joy to the World”.	96
Floating in the High Register	97
“Aura Lea” (“Love Me Tender”)	98
“She’ll Be Comin’ ‘Round the Mountain”	99
“Silent Night”	100
CHAPTER 6: Shaping Your Sound	103
Enlarging Your Sound with Projection	104
Using your air column.	104
Enriching your sound with the smooth swimming exercise	104
Increasing airflow through the reeds	106
Varying your volume with dynamics.	109
Projecting with your hands	110
Starting and Ending Notes with Articulation	112
Starting notes with your tongue	113
Using your throat to articulate notes	115
Initiating a note with your diaphragm	116
Shaping the Tone Color of Your Notes.	118
Changing vowel sounds with your tongue.	118
Brightening and darkening your sound using your hands	119
Slowly changing the sound	119
Combining hand and tongue vowels	120

Pulsating Your Notes with Vibrato	120
Diaphragm vibrato	121
Throat vibrato	122
Tongue vibrato.....	123
Hand vibrato.....	123
Synchronizing and layering pulsation.....	124
 CHAPTER 7: Enhancing Your Sound with Your	
Tongue on the Harp	127
Using Your Tongue to Combine Chords and Melodies	128
Knowing the chords on your harp	128
Accompanying melodies with chords.....	129
Chasing the beat with a chord.....	131
Reinforcing Melody Notes with Your Tongue	132
Applying the tongue slap	133
Popping chords with pull-offs	133
Creating Chord Textures with Your Tongue	135
Alternating tongue placements to produce the chord rake	136
Lifting and replacing your tongue to play a chord hammer	137
Rapidly alternating widely spaced notes with the shimmer	138
Combining Widely Spaced Notes with Splits.....	139
Sticking with a locked split	139
Inching along with variable splits	140
Playing Quick and Wide Leaps with Corner Switching.....	145
 CHAPTER 8: Bending Notes.....	149
Knowing the What and the Why of Bending	150
What is bending?.....	150
Why bend notes?.....	151
Getting Started with Bending Notes Down	151
Exploring the roof of your mouth.....	152
Making some helpful noises	153
Creating your bend activator with the K-spot.....	154
Playing your first bend	156
If at first you don't succeed: Practicing persistence	158
Deepening Your Skills at Bending Notes Down	159
Surveying the bendable notes.....	159
Working through the four stages of bending control	162
Bending draw notes down in the middle register	163
Bending draw notes down in the heart of the harp —	
the low register	165
Bending blow notes down in the high register.....	170
Bending on Different Types of Harmonicas	174
Chromatic harps	174
Double reed harps.....	175

CHAPTER 9: Positions: Playing One Harp in Many Keys	177
Understanding How Positions Help Your Playing	177
Figuring Out a Position	179
Relating Positions, Modes, and Avoid Notes	181
Rocking with Six Popular Positions	182
First position (C on a C-harp)	183
Second position (G on a C-harp)	185
Third position (D on a C-harp)	188
Fourth position (A on a C-harp)	190
Fifth position (E on a C-harp)	193
Twelfth position (F on a C-harp)	195
 PART 3: GROWING BEYOND THE BASICS	199
 CHAPTER 10: Fancy Playing: Developing Flair and Speed	201
Mastering Melody from the Ground Up	202
Seeing the scale	203
Recognizing scale patterns	204
Anchoring melodies on chord notes	209
Simplifying the scale to five notes	211
Adding Ornaments to the Melody	214
Shakes	214
Rips, boings, and fall-offs	215
Grace notes	215
Developing Your Speed	216
Start slow and know each individual move	216
Learn in small chunks	217
Speed it up — slowly	217
Think and play in larger units	217
 CHAPTER 11: Mastering New Songs	219
Understanding How Songs Work	219
The container: Structuring time	219
The shifting backdrop: Chord changes	221
The foreground: Melody	221
Choosing the Right Harp	222
What are the notes in the scale?	222
What are the notes in the chords?	223
Making It Up versus Playing It Straight	225
Learning melodies	225
Jamming on a tune	226
Trial and Error: Playing Along with Random Music	227

CHAPTER 12: Behind the Hidden Treasure:	
Bending Notes Up	229
Considering the Coolness of Overbends	230
Playing more licks, riffs, and scales	230
Playing in more keys	231
Exploring the Things to Know Before You Start	232
How to choose a suitable harmonica	232
Determining which notes overblow and overdraw	232
Preparing your mind, body, and ears	235
Getting Your First Overblows	236
The push-through approach	236
The springboard approach	238
Achieving More Overblows	239
Getting Your First Overdraws	239
Raising the Pitch of an Overbend	241
Playing overbends in tune	241
Bending overbends up	241
Blending Overbends into Your Playing	242
Strengthening your overbend approaches	242
Smoothing your follow-ons	244

PART 4: DEVELOPING YOUR STYLE 245

CHAPTER 13: Rockin' and Bluesin'	247
Getting Hip to the Blues/Rock Approach	248
The Three Basic Chords of Rock-and-Roll, Blues, and Nearly Everything	249
The Three Popular Harmonica Positions	249
Relating positions to chords and scales	250
Second position and the three basic chords	250
First position	251
Third position	251
Playing Sweet Melodies in First Position	252
"Kickin' Along"	252
"Youngish Minor"	253
"Morning Boots"	254
The 12 Bars of Blues	255
Making a statement: Tell it, brother!	255
Fitting the notes to the chords	256
Exploring 12-Bar Blues with Second Position	257
"Ridin' the Changes"	257
Driving the rhythm with "Lucky Chuck"	258
"Buster's Boogie"	259
Adding Minor Chords to a Progression: "Smoldering Embers"	261
Adding the Flat III and Flat VII Chords: "John and John"	263
Burning in Third Position: "Tom Tom"	264

CHAPTER 14:	Expressing Yourself with Some Folk and Gospel Melodies	267
	Sampling Some First-Position Songs	268
	“Buffalo Gals”	268
	“Wildwood Flower”	269
	“La Cucaracha”	270
	Getting Acquainted with a Few Second-Position Songs	271
	“Since I Laid My Burden Down”	272
	“Cluck Old Hen”	273
	“Aura Lea” in second position	273
	“This Train (Is Bound for Glory)”	274
	Inhaling Some Third-Position Melodies	276
	“Little Brown Island in the Sea”	277
	“She’s Like the Swallow”	278
	Exploring Folk Songs in Twelfth, Fourth, and Fifth Positions	279
	“À la claire fontaine” in twelfth position	279
	“The Huron Carol” in fourth position	280
	“Poor Wayfaring Stranger” in fifth position	281
CHAPTER 15:	Fiddlin’ the Night Away with Traditional Dance Tunes	283
	Choosing Harps for Playing Folk and Celtic Music	284
	The tremolo harmonica	284
	The chromatic harmonica	285
	Playing Fast Fiddle Tunes	285
	Trying Out Some First-Position Tunes	286
	“Jerry the Rigger”	286
	“Soldier’s Joy”	287
	“The Stool of Repentance”	289
	Energizing Some Tunes in Second Position	290
	“Over the Waterfall”	290
	“Angeline the Baker”	292
	“Bat Wing Leather”	294
	Feeling the Excitement of Third-Position Tunes	295
	“Dorian Jig”	295
	“The Dire Clog”	295
	PART 5: TAKING IT TO THE WORLD	299
CHAPTER 16:	Putting It All Together — Your Tunes, Your Band, Your Listeners	301
	Putting Your Tunes Together	302
	Selecting tunes for the harmonica	302
	Making it your own: Arranging a tune	304
	Adding vocals to your tunes	306

Making Music with Others	306
Setting some ground rules when you play with others	306
Knowing when to lay out	308
Playing in a duo	308
Jamming with a band	309
Strutting Your Stuff Onstage	310
Looking good, feeling good	310
Preparing for an onstage performance	310
Overcoming stage fright	311
Recovering from mistakes	312
Taking center stage: Soloing	312
CHAPTER 17: Amplifying Your Sound	313
Getting Acquainted with Amplification Basics.	314
Playing through a Microphone for the First Time.	314
Playing into a microphone on a stand	315
Playing with a microphone cupped in your hands.	316
Hearing yourself through the chaos.	317
Avoiding the dreaded howl of feedback	318
Taking Amplification to the Next Level: Clean and	
Distorted Amplified Sound.	319
Getting better acquainted with microphones.	319
Altering a harp's sound with effects	321
Cranking it up with amplifiers, preamps, and speakers	322
Connecting Mics, Amplifiers, and Effects Units.	324
CHAPTER 18: Improving Your Harmonica with	
 Repairs and Upgrades	327
Gathering the Tools You Need	328
Following Good Repair Practices.	329
Making Three Simple Improvements	330
Disassembling and reassembling a harp.	330
Flexing the reeds	331
Smoothing sharp edges and corners	332
Diagnosing and Fixing Problems.	332
Taking a harp apart and putting it back together.	334
Clearing obstructions from your harp	336
Fixing reeds that are misaligned	337
Narrowing reed slots.	337
Setting reed action	338
Tuning your harmonica	342

PART 6: THE PART OF TENS	347
CHAPTER 19: Ten (Or More) Ways to Connect in the Harmonica World	349
Take Lessons from a Pro	349
Enjoy Harmonica Performances	350
Seek Out Musical Events That Don't Focus on Harmonica	350
Let Loose at Jam Sessions and Open Mic Nights	350
Contribute to Harmonica Discussion Groups Online	351
Surf Informational Websites	352
Use Paid Content Learning Sites	353
Join a Harmonica Club	354
Share Your Enthusiasm at Harmonica Festivals	354
Sign Up for a Harmonica Seminar	355
Advertise	356
CHAPTER 20: Way More Than Ten Harmonica Albums You Should Hear	357
Blues	358
Rock	359
Bluegrass/Old-Timey	360
Celtic	360
Country	361
Gospel	362
Jazz	362
PART 7: APPENDICES	365
APPENDIX A: Tuning Layouts for All Keys	367
APPENDIX B: Audio Tracks and Video Clips	373
The Audio Tracks	373
The Video Clips	380
Customer Care	381
INDEX	383

Introduction

Are you hankering to play the harmonica? Are you intrigued by that tiny, expressive instrument that you can take everywhere? Or are you maybe fascinated by that cool character in shades who gets up in front of a band and rips through an incandescent harmonica solo or by the lass in blue jeans who plays a sweet, plaintive melody by the campfire? Have you finally decided that it's time to just go for it and become the person making that music?

If so, *Harmonica For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, is the place to start. If you're a novice who doesn't own a harmonica yet, this book opens the door with solid advice and gives you a guiding hand into this fascinating new world. Even if you're already an accomplished player, this book shows you all sorts of techniques and approaches that can take your playing to the next level of excellence.

You can have a lot of fun making music with the harmonica, and it can enrich your social life. Over the last 40 years, playing the harmonica has introduced me to new friends worldwide. I've become friends with some of the world's greatest harmonica players, and I've noticed something remarkable about them: Even though they can comfortably rest on their laurels and bask in being called "world's greatest," they rarely do. They remain curious and open to new experiences. I imagine that you do, too. If so, I invite you to join me on the journey of discovery called playing the harmonica.

About This Book

Harmonica For Dummies, 2nd Edition, gives you everything you need to get going with the harmonica. One great thing about this book is that it's a reference you can jump into and out of at will. Just head to the table of contents or the index to find the information you want. Here are a few more great things about this book:

» **Music tab and notation and for all the music in the book.** *Tab* (short for *tablature*) tells you the physical actions you take to play the harmonica. It tells you what hole number to go to and whether you need to exhale (an arrow pointing up) or inhale (an arrow pointing down). Simple, eh? Everything you can play on the harmonica in this book is tabbed.

In the second edition, you also get to see animated video of lips and tongue on the holes of the harmonica moving and breathing as a song is played (Chapter 5) or a technique is employed (Chapter 7). I include music notation for every piece as well. Being able to read notes on a staff isn't required to play harmonica, but it isn't difficult to learn, either.

- » **Audio tracks that you can play along with for every example, song, and exercise in this book.** Tab, tongue illustrations, and descriptions can carry you only so far. By listening, however, you can quickly comprehend what you're going for. In fact, by hearing the sound you're striving for, you'll achieve it more quickly.
- » **Videos of important actions and techniques.** In addition to the 17 animated videos of lips, tongue, and breath actions to play songs and techniques, you can view 15 videos of me demonstrating essential techniques of breathing, holding the harmonica, getting a single note, shaping the sound with hand action, using vowel sounds to bend notes, using microphones, and even repairing a harmonica.

The audio and video files are available at www.dummies.com/go/harmonica.

It's also important to note that this book focuses on the ten-hole diatonic harmonica, which has — you guessed it — ten holes. Each hole on the harmonica should be numbered. When I refer to a note on the harmonica, I often state the hole number and the breath direction. For instance, “Hole 4 Blow” refers to the note you get when you go to Hole 4 and exhale into it. “Blow 4” means the same thing.

To use this book, you only need one harmonica: a ten-hole diatonic harmonica in the key of C. Harmonicas come in all 12 keys, in addition to being available in high and low versions of several of those keys. All the skills you learn on the universally available C-harmonica will transfer to the other keys of harmonica.

You'll notice that I use the terms “harmonica” and “harp” interchangeably throughout the book. The harmonica has many colorful names, and these two are the most popular (and the most likely to be accepted in polite company).

When I talk about high and low notes, I mean exactly those — the notes that people think of as high (a mouse squeaking, for instance) or low (a foghorn or maybe Barry White). On a harmonica, the low notes are on the left and the high notes are on the right.

This book contains both figures and tabs, which are numbered sequentially within each chapter. Figures illustrate important points in the text. Tab, which is short for *tablature*, shows you the actions required to play each note (which hole to play,

whether to blow or draw, and any other actions required). Each tab in the book shows you a tune, scale, chord, or sequence of notes that you can play on a harmonica. And if you're not sure what the tab is supposed to sound like or whether you're getting it right, don't worry — each tab has a reference to the corresponding audio track so you can listen to the tab being played.

Foolish Assumptions

I'm going to stick my neck out and assume that you like the harmonica and that you wouldn't mind being able to rip out some cool licks. But I won't assume that you know anything at all about where to start or what sort of a harp to get (oops, I mean what sort of *harmonica* to get — maybe you don't know any of the inside lingo yet, either). Maybe you don't know anything about music except that you like it. Don't worry — that's not a problem.

At the same time, I won't assume that only a greenhorn will ever read this book. You may be an intermediate player who has the basics down but who is looking for a few tips to feed your ever-growing harmonica fascination. I also won't assume that you're interested in blues, campfire tunes, or any other style of music. The core techniques you need for every kind of music are covered, though I do include chapters specifically on blues and rock, folk and gospel, and fiddle tune styles.

I do assume that you're interested in the most widely played type of harmonica: the ten-hole diatonic harmonica (which includes such popular brands as Hohner, Lee Oskar, Suzuki, and Seydel). While I do touch briefly on other types, such as chromatic and tremolo harmonicas, this book focuses on the ten-hole diatonic.

Icons Used in This Book

In the margins of this book, you find icons to help you spot important information — or even information that you may want to skip. Like those neon signs that depict a shoe or a martini glass in a shopping district, these icons point out things you may want to get into or skim over as you read. Here are the icons I use and what they mean.



REMEMBER

This icon highlights important points that are key to the understanding and skills you want to acquire.



TIP

Every now and then I offer a tip that can get you where you're going more quickly or can put things in the right perspective. This icon helps you spot these golden tidbits.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

This icon highlights long-winded technical explanations. If you want to skip the tech talk and just try out a new technique, that's perfectly fine. Later you may get curious about how things work. When that happens, you know where to look.



WARNING

When you see this icon, exercise caution to avoid damaging your harmonica or, more important, your eyes, ears, or other sensitive body parts (including your ego).



PLAY THIS

This icon helps you relate what you hear on the audio tracks and see in the videos to the examples and techniques in the book. The book describes and the audio and video tracks demonstrate — what a combination!

Beyond the Book

This book provides great information to help you learn the harmonica, but you can find many more resources on Dummies.com:

- » There are over 100 audio tracks that accompany the chapters of this book. I also give several video and animated demonstrations. Check out these essential resources at www.dummies.com/go/harmonica.
- » You can download the book's Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/harmonica. It's a handy resource to keep on your computer, tablet, or smartphone.
- » You can read interesting companion articles that supplement the book's content at www.dummies.com/extras/harmonica. I even included an extra top-ten list.

Where to Go from Here

If you're a beginner and don't know much about harmonica, start your journey with Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 5. They provide you with the basics to get you up and running.

If you already play but can't quite figure out how to play what you're hearing on CDs or at live shows, check out Part 3, where you discover how players use positions to play in many keys.

If you're fascinated by the secrets of bending notes, check out Chapter 8. (*Tip:* Working first with Chapter 6 will give you a big advantage.) And if you want to learn some tasty tongue textures, flip to Chapter 7.

If you already play fairly well but haven't yet developed a repertoire of tunes, hooked up with a band, or played in a jam or onstage, check out Part 5. And last but not least, if you're an experienced player who wants to pick up on more advanced techniques, head to Parts 3 and 4.

1

Getting Started with Harmonica

IN THIS PART . . .

Learn about the origins of the harmonica.

Find out how harmonicas are constructed.

Figure out what kind of harmonica to buy.

Get an intro to harmonica tablature.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Discovering what makes the harmonica such a cool little instrument
- » Considering what it takes to play the harmonica
- » Understanding how to take your playing beyond the basics
- » Sharing your music with others and visiting the virtual harmonica village

Chapter 1

What Is This Thing Called Harp?

Maybe you're attracted to the sweet yet wailing sound of a harmonica. Or maybe you dig the image of a harmonica player onstage who somehow manages to strike a hip-looking pose while apparently eating a sandwich that's hidden in his or her hands. Either way, you know you love harmonica, and you're dying to find out more. For a little background on the harmonica (or, as players call it, the *harp*) and why it's such a great instrument to play, read on.

Considering the Harmonica's Coolness

What makes the harmonica one of the world's best-selling musical instruments? Let me count the ways! Here are just a few reasons that the harp is so cool:

- » **Its sound has immediate appeal.** Its haunting, plaintive wail, which alternates with sweet, soothing tones, makes the harmonica attractive and easy to identify. Even a beginner on harmonica can rock a roomful of listeners for a few minutes. Expert musicians can play on the immediate emotional

connection of the harmonica to create extended intimacy and depth of expression. That emotional appeal is one reason the harmonica is so often featured in film scores and on popular records.

- » **It automatically sounds good.** The harmonica was designed to be, well, harmonious. It can sound several notes at once in pleasing combinations that make intuitive sense because they automatically support the melody notes. Playing a harmonica is like riding a bicycle that you can't fall off.
- » **You can take it anywhere — even outer space.** The harmonica is one of the most portable instruments around. In fact, here's a tidbit most folks don't know: The harmonica was the first musical instrument in outer space. On a December 1965 space flight, astronaut Wally Schirra reported an unidentified flying object in a polar orbit (Santa's sleigh, perhaps?) and then played "Jingle Bells" on a harmonica that he had smuggled aboard.
- » **It's cheaper than dinner out.** Seriously! You can buy a decent harmonica for less than the cost of a restaurant meal. You can't say that about a guitar or synthesizer.

HARMONICA ANCESTORS IN THE STONE AGE

Possibly as early as the Stone Age, and probably in Southeast Asia, someone cut a narrow flap (or reed) into a thin piece of bamboo, held it up to his mouth, and plucked it. The resulting vibration of the free-swinging reed was amplified by the player's mouth. Jaw harps, the oldest and simplest instruments to use *free reeds*, are still made this way in many parts of the world.

Later, people tried simply blowing on the reeds instead of plucking. However, to sound properly, each reed had to be installed in a bamboo tube whose length was tuned to the note sounded by the reed. Eventually, people made these free reeds out of metal and bundled several tubes together to create mouth-blown instruments, such as the *khaen* (several tubes bound together in rows like a pan pipe) and the *sheng* (a cluster of tubes inserted into a gourd, which looks like a forest of bamboo growing out of a teapot).

To this day, the *khaen* is used in Thai and Laotian social music and courtship rituals, while the *sheng* remains an esteemed instrument in Chinese opera. The metal free reeds used in *khaens* and *shengs* are thought to be the oldest living relatives of the reeds used in harmonicas today.

- » **It's close and intimate with the player.** You can enclose a harmonica completely within your hands, and its sound comes out closer to your ears than that of any other musical instrument. Playing the harmonica can be an intimate act, almost like writing in a secret diary.
- » **It has the allure of the outsider.** The harmonica seems to bring out the rebel and the lone wolf in some players. In fact, harmonica technique is built on doing things the designers never imagined and may not even approve of! The harmonica embodies the triumph of creativity over orderly procedures.
- » **It has the appeal of tradition.** Despite the lone wolf aspect, the harmonica expresses musical traditions beautifully, and it's also well accepted within the comfortable confines of community values.

Becoming the Next Harmonica Idol: What It Takes to Play

Playing a musical instrument doesn't take supernatural abilities. It simply takes desire and application (and, okay, maybe a little talent). So, if you want to play the harmonica, trust your desire — you can totally do this. If you're willing to try, you just need a few things, which I explain in the following sections.

A harmonica

If you go shopping for harmonicas, you may encounter a bewildering array of types and models at prices that range from the equivalent of a hamburger to a small car! So when you're ready to buy your first harp, check out Chapter 2 for a buying guide to help you select a decent-quality harmonica of the right type at a sensible price.

A little music know-how

Chapter 3 shows you how to read basic harp tab, which is the main thing you need to understand in order to read the examples and tunes in this book. If you read through all of Chapter 3, you also can pick up some basic music theory (which never hurt anyone). And if you want to puzzle out reading musical notation in addition to tab, check out Chapter 4.

HARMONICA IN THE WESTERN WORLD

No one really knows when the free reed made it from Asia to Europe (see the sidebar “Harmonica ancestors in the Stone Age” for more on the free reed’s start in Asia). However, it had certainly arrived by 1636, when a khaen-like instrument was clearly described by French philosopher Marin Mersenne.

Then, in the late 1700s, German professor Christian Gottlieb Kratzenstein fashioned a new kind of free reed. Instead of being cut from the surface that surrounded it, the reed was made separately and attached above the surface. This new type of reed could respond to airflow without being mounted in a tube whose length was tuned to the reed’s pitch. Freeing the reed from the tube created all sorts of new possibilities. This new type of reed was incorporated into organs, pitch pipes, and even the handles of walking sticks — you could stop to admire the view and play a little tune on your cane. Then, starting in the 1820s came an explosion of free reed inventions — harmonicas, concertinas, accordions, and bandoneons began to appear all over German-speaking Europe.

The invention of the harmonica itself is hard to pin down. Credit often goes to a German teenager named Friedrich Buschmann, who in 1828 wrote a letter describing a square configuration of pitch pipes strung together to play combinations of musical notes. Meanwhile, others were already building harmonicas as early as 1824. In any case, by the 1870s, when mass production began, the harmonica had taken on today’s familiar form. By the 1920s, Hohner was making 20 million harmonicas a year, and people worldwide were using them to play folk, popular, and even classical music. Since then, the harmonica has been a fixture on the world music scene.

Your body

It may surprise you to know that most of the sound you hear when you play a harmonica comes from your lungs, throat, mouth, and hands — not the harmonica. After you get the hang of breathing through the instrument, you can start developing a little rhythm (Chapter 3 again), and then you can zero in on single notes to play melody (Chapter 5). From there you can start using your body to shape and amplify your sound (Chapter 6 goes into greater depth on this). At that point, you’re ready to tackle just about anything on the harmonica.

Regular practice — and unstructured fun!

The most important thing you can do to become better at playing the harmonica is to play regularly. Keep one in your pocket, car, purse, briefcase, carry-on bag,