

LEARNING MADE EASY



Blues Harmonica

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

Breathe the blues
into your harmonica

Learn about bending, tongue
blocking, and chordal rhythm

Connect with blues history
and the major players

Winslow Yerxa

Harmonica player, teacher,
and author





Blues Harmonica

by Winslow Yerxa

for
dummies
A Wiley Brand

Blues Harmonica For Dummies®

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Introduction

The harmonica is a mysterious instrument — you can't tell much about how to play it from looking. It has no keys or strings so you won't see any hands or fingers moving around on them. All you see is someone's hands pressed to his face and maybe cheeks puffing in and out. Yet the harmonica exerts a fascination for everyone who hears it. It's tiny but can make a big sound, and it makes such a pretty yet plaintive, voice-like sound.

When you try to play the harmonica, though, you can get frustrated easily. Harmonicas come in a dizzying array of sizes and types, and if you get one and just try breathing through it, you'll get musical sounds but not like what you hear from the players whose expressive sounds you find so compelling.

Fortunately, you have *Blues Harmonica For Dummies* in your hands. Whether you're just beginning to act on your curiosity or you're a seasoned player looking for the next stage in your musical growth, this book offers solid information and advice.

About This Book

Blues Harmonica For Dummies gives you all the information you need to get started playing the blues on the harmonica. But you don't need to sneak down a dark alley and give a secret password to get at this stash of essential knowledge. All that treasure is in broad daylight, with plenty of easy ways to help yourself to whatever you need, including

- » **Step-by-step descriptions:** I break every action and task into a series of numbered steps that you can

master one at a time.

- » **Pictures and diagrams:** I illustrate the internal actions that you perform with your tongue and throat and the external actions of using your hands and lips on the harmonica.
- » **Tablature:** I include tab that shows the actions you use to play each note of a song or segment of music.
- » **A Companion Website:** You can visit the website at www.dummies.com/go/bluesharmonicaafd.

Conventions Used in This Book

Throughout the book, I use the following conventions consistently to make the text easy to understand:

- » *Italics* mark a new term, and I follow with a simple explanation and then use the term again in context.
- » I highlight in **bold** the keywords in bulleted lists and the action parts of numbered steps.
- » All web addresses appear in monofont.

I use the terms *harmonica* and *harp* interchangeably. These are only two of the many colorful monikers the harmonica enjoys, including *French harp*, *Mississippi saxophone*, *mouth organ*, and several others. I managed to limit myself to only the two most common names.

What You're Not to Read

Ultimately, you become a blues harmonica player by listening, imitating, and then letting your own imagination come up with ways to express yourself. This

book is here to help you through that process, and you can skip anything that doesn't seem to help you right now. Later on you may come back and look for something when you feel that it will help you.

You can ignore the written music, though you may find the arrow-and-number tablature helpful because it tells you what holes, breaths, and bends to play.

You can skip paragraphs that have a Technical Stuff icon attached to them, though I've tried to keep those to a minimum.

Harmonica lore is one of the great pleasures of knowing about the instrument and its traditions, but you don't need it to get down to the nuts and bolts of playing, so you can skip any sidebars, those gray boxes sprinkled throughout the book.

Foolish Assumptions

I assume that you've never played music before and don't know a beat from a Bf or an octave from an ocarina. That's okay. What's important is that you have the desire, the curiosity, and the motivation to express yourself by playing blues on the harmonica.

Still, I know that you may already play the harmonica and are looking to sharpen your skills. If so, I include enough information to take you to the next stage in your playing.

I also assume that you're interested in playing the most popular type of harmonica, the 10-hole diatonic harmonica (often called the *blues harp*) — the same type of harmonica that's used by every blues player, in addition to rock and country musicians. You can play almost everything in this book on a single diatonic

harmonica tuned to the key of C. As you develop your playing skills, you'll want to get harmonicas in other keys, but to get started, and for easy reference, a *C-harp* (harmonica in C) is all you need.

However, I also assume that you'll get curious about the chromatic harmonica, a larger type of harmonica that's designed to play in every key. The chromatic has a unique sound and is an important part of the modern blues harmonica player's *kit*, or set of harmonicas, so I cover the basics of blues chromatic as well.

How This Book Is Organized

Blues Harmonica For Dummies is organized to give you easy, direct access to the information you're looking for. You can read the book from beginning to end or you can browse and skip around to find the most interesting topics or helpful information. The chapters are clustered in six parts, each focusing on a different stage of your growth as a player, and I also include two appendixes with handy information you'll need.

Part 1: So You Wanna Play Blues Harmonica?

In this part, you find out what you need to prepare for your adventure. You get some background on the blues, not only as a musical style, but also as an attitude for communicating and sharing with others. Just as important, you discover how the harmonica contributes and fits into the music. Then you survey the types of harmonicas available — which ones to start with, which are the best values, where to shop, and how to add to your collection as you advance. You also get an orientation on some music fundamentals, including how to read the harmonica *tab* — the symbols that tell you what actions to perform to play melodies and rhythms on the harmonica.

Part 2: Doin' the Crawl: Your First Harmonica Moves

This is the part where you start to play the harmonica. You pick it up and hold it, breathe through it, and make rhythmic sounds. Then you start to move around and play melodies along with *licks* and *riffs*, those nuggets of

bluesy melody that make up the building blocks of blues harmonica playing. Finally, you start using those licks and riffs to fill up the container of the blues song — the 12-bar blues.

Part 3: Beyond the Basics: Getting Bluesy

Part 3 takes you into the territory where you find the real gold of harmonica expressiveness. You start ranging all over the harmonica and discovering how to get around its entire range. You start making the harmonica sound more like a human voice by using your hands, lips, tongue, throat, and lungs to shape your sound and create sonic texture. Finally — the pièce de résistance — you start bending notes to make that classic wailing, slithering sound of blues harmonica.

Part 4: Developing Your Style

Blues harmonica is surprisingly versatile, and in this part you start to explore how to play in different keys, play dark-sounding minor blues, use the chromatic harmonica, and play blues songs that have unusual formats.

Part 5: Taking It to the Streets: Sharing Your Music

When you express yourself, you probably want to start sharing your passion at some point. When you're ready (or just eager — sometimes doing it is more important than being ready), you can use this part of the book to help you put together a repertoire of tunes to play, to amplify your playing with electronic equipment to sound even cooler and to be heard in a noisy world, and to connect with the larger world in two important ways: by finding other musicians to collaborate with and by

playing for audiences other than your dog and the goldfish in your aquarium.

Part 6: The Part of Tens

Would you eat a hot dog without mustard? (Hey, even a tofu dog needs the proper presentation!) Would a *For Dummies* book be complete without its Part of Tens? I think you know the answer to both questions. In this part I share ten important points about blues harmonica history.

Part 7: Appendixes

At some point you may want to know what notes are in what holes in every key of harmonica. You may need this as much as you need the handshake protocols for communications satellites (apologies to any telecom geeks out there!), but this information may just come in handy, so I include it in [Appendix A](#). [Appendix B](#) gives you the complete list of tracks on the website including where you can find and hear the tabs, or musical examples, that are scattered throughout the book.

Icons Used in This Book

The icons in the margins of this book may look like whimsical decorations, but they're more than eye candy. Each icon is a signpost that tips you off to something that's either important enough to read carefully or dull enough to skip if you're not interested in too much detail.



REMEMBER This icon highlights information that you want to keep in mind to help you as you acquire a skill or understanding.



TIP

Every now and then, I can offer a little insight or useful bit of information that makes an idea easier to understand or a task easier to accomplish. This icon helps you spot those little nuggets.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Sometimes you want to skip the why and just get to the how. Technical talk can be helpful to your understanding, but if you just want to cut to the chase, you can safely skip the text near this icon without compromising your understanding of the subject at hand.



WARNING

The Warning icon alerts you to things that you shouldn't touch, swallow, or even think about trying if you value life, limb, and the continued ability to pursue happiness (or maybe if you just want to avoid bruising your ego).



PLAY THIS

When you see this icon, you know that you can go to a specific track on the website to hear and play along with the musical examples and songs in the book. If you are reading this text in an electronic format, The website where you will find the audio tracks is www.dummies.com/go/bluesharmonicafd.

Where to Go from Here

You can dive into this book at any point, but you may want to target a specific area to suit your interest and your level of experience. Here are a few possibilities:

- » If you're at the beginning of your journey and still don't have a harmonica or know much except that you like the blues, check out [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#). After you get a harmonica, [Chapters 2](#) through [7](#) get you up and running.
- » If you just want to learn how to bend notes, you can jump directly to [Chapter 11](#), though you may benefit from first spending some time with [Chapter 9](#).
- » If you can play already but want to get more expression into your playing, flip to [Chapters 9](#) and [10](#).
- » If you're finding that the covers of the harp are turning blue on the left side while the right side stays gleaming and pristine, turn to [Chapter 8](#) to get you playing through the entire range of the harmonica.
- » If you want to try new approaches to get more variety out of your playing, have a look at [Chapters 12](#), [13](#), and [14](#) to start playing in different keys, or *positions*, on the harmonica. You can also check out [Chapter 15](#) to get acquainted with adding chromatic harmonica to your bag of tricks for a whole new sound or [Chapter 16](#) to start playing in minor keys.
- » If you want to sound loud and proud and start getting that distorted, amplified blues sound, see [Chapter 19](#), which covers using microphones, amplifiers, and effects to beef up your sound and broadcast it to the world.
- » If you want to develop your blues repertoire, flip to [Chapter 18](#), which has lists of important harmonica recordings in a broad range of historical periods and blues styles.

If none of these suggestions are quite what you have in mind, take a look at the index or table of contents to find what you're looking for — or just open the book and see what you stumble across.

Part 1

So You Wanna Play Blues Harmonica?

IN THIS PART ...

You discover the strong bond between blues and the harmonica, find out which harmonicas to get and how to care for them, pick up on some essential musician's lingo, and then get started with the basics of playing blues on the harmonica.