

TEACH-IN: HARMONICA

by Glenn Weiser

Helpful hints & suggestions from instrumental masters

NOTE-BENDING IN FIDDLE TUNES

One of the major differences between playing blues and fiddle tunes on the harmonica is how often notes are “bent,” or lowered in pitch by compressing the air stream within the mouth. In blues, note bends are used frequently for playing the “blue” notes of the African vocal scale, but in fiddle tunes, they are used rarely. Nonetheless, this technique is still useful for getting certain notes in the scale otherwise unobtainable on the harmonica or in mimicking the way a fiddler can slide up to a note. For this issue, then, we’ll review note-bending techniques and then try a couple of old-time fiddle chestnuts that require this essential skill.

On the harmonica, holes 1-6 can be bent on the draw, or in-notes, and holes 7 through 10 can be bent on the blow, or out-notes. On 1, 4, 5 and 6-draw, the note can be lowered by a half-step. On 2-draw, and on 3-draw, the note can be lowered by a half-step, a whole step, or a minor third (a step and a half). 7-9-blow can be bent by a half-step, and 10-blow can be bent by a half-step or a whole step.

To bend a draw note in pucker position, lower the part of the tongue behind the tip as you raise the middle part up towards the roof of your mouth as you sound a reed. Pull the tongue back as you do this. The note should then lower in pitch. To bend a blow note, raise the tip of your tongue towards the roof of your mouth above your front teeth. Also, to bend notes, the flow of air through the nasal passages must be temporarily stopped.

Note-bending is also possible in tongue-blocking position, even though many people find puckered bends easier because of the tongue’s greater freedom of movement in this position. I bend notes either way depending on the situation, finding puckering easier for bends requiring speed.

To bend a tongue-blocked note, keep the tongue flat and raise it towards the roof of the mouth as you narrow your throat. Male players should feel their Adam’s apple moving downwards. Even if you can already bend with lip blocking, you should try learning to bend in tongue blocking position anyway – I find some riffs feel more natural this way.

Note-bends are indicated in the tablature by an arrow below a hole number for a half-step bend, an arrow with a crossbar for a whole step bend, and an arrow with a double crossbar a minor third bend.

The two tunes featured here were first recorded during the fledgling years of the country music record business when string bands dominated the market. The first, “Mississippi Sawyer,” was recorded by the Hill Billies during the period 1925-6. Try using pucker technique for this one. The note-bend occurs in the fourth measure of the B part, where you have to hit the 3-draw (B) as a whole step bend and allow it to rise to its normal pitch (C#). Using the note-bend allows you to play the tune an octave lower than usual. For comparison, the tab to the upper-octave version has been included below the low-octave tab.

The second tune, “Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss,” was waxed by Samantha Bumgarner in 1924. I’ve arranged it for tongue-blocking. The tongue slaps are indicated by the percussion line that appears below the melody and tab. The note-bends occur on the 8-blow in the pickup measures. For the note-bends, switch to pucker position, and then switch back to tongue blocking position the rest of the time.

A common note-bending technique is the grace note bend. This occurs two ways: first, a bent note may be allowed to rise up to the unbent pitch of the reed as fast as possible, and second, an unbent note may be bent as fast as possible. These are termed “releasing” and “applying bends” respectively, and in both situations, a grace note indicates these bends. In the third and fifth measures of the B part of “Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss,” the grace notes are used as releasing bends.






Mississippi Sawyer


SO!
21 & 22
CD

Fast; ♩ = approx. 112

D - Harmonica




Traditional


D  Em  Em7/D 



Low: 5 (5) 6 6 5 6 6 5 6 6 5 6 (6) 6 5 (5) (5) (4) (5) (5) (4)





High: 8 (9) 9 9 8 9 9 8 9 9 8 9 (10) 9 8 (9) (9) (8) (9) (9) (8)


A7/C#  A7  D 



(5) (5) (4) (5) 6 (5) (4) 5 5 (5) 5 (4) 4 (3) 4 (4) 5 (5) 6 6 (5)



(9) (9) (8) (9) 9 (9) (8) 8 8 (9) 8 (8) 7 (7) 7 (8) 8 (9) 9 9 (9)


E9  A7  D  D 



5 (4) 4 5 (4) 4 (3) (4) 4 5 4 3 4 5 (4) 4 5 (4) 4 (4) 5 (5) 6 6 5





8 (8) 7 8 (8) 7 (7) (8) 7 8 7 6 7 8 (8) 7 8 (8) 7 (8) 8 (9) 9 9 8


A7  D 



(4) (3) 3 (3) 3 (3) (3) 4 (4) 5 (5) (4) 4 5 (4) 4 5 (4)

(8) (7) 6 (7) 6 (6) (7) 7 (8) 8 (9) (8) 7 8 (8) 7 8 (8)

F#m  Bm  A7  D 



4 (4) 5 (5) 6 6 (5) 5 (4) 4 5 (4) 4 (3) (4) 4 5 4

7 (8) 8 (9) 9 9 (9) 8 (8) 7 8 (8) 7 (7) (8) 7 8 7


(TURN THE PAGE FOR "FLY AROUND MY PRETTY LITTLE MISS" )





Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss




SO!
TRACK 23
CD




Fast; ♩ = approx. 120
D - Harmonica

Traditional

D 

A7  D  D  G 

D  A  D 

G  D  A  D 