

MUSIC



In Search of Southern Sounds

Learning to play the blues harp (aka the **HARMONICA**) as though I was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi

MUSIC TO OUR EARS: The writer/brand-new harmonica player (illustrated above) showing off her skills at the two-draw, a harmonica staple

FORTY MILLION AMERICANS PLAY THE HARMONICA, so I figured it couldn't be that difficult to master. Abraham Lincoln played it. So did Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp. Jesse James' brother, Frank, had a harmonica in his pocket that deflected a bullet and saved Frank's life. An explorer in the Amazon, surrounded by angry Indians, pulled out his "mouth organ" and began playing a tune. The music apparently had a soothing effect because instead of slaying him, the Indians asked him to continue playing. "Odd," he said later, "they prefer Mozart."

In the mid-1920s, the harmonica was added to jazz and traditional music recordings. In the '50s, African-American migrants brought the harmonica to Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis and New York. In Chicago, musician Little Walter grabbed a microphone and played with his hand cupped over both his harmonica and the mic,

creating a resonant, distorted sound that most players since have imitated.

I wanted to learn it because I love the blues, especially the sound of the blues harmonica, called the "blues harp." I don't know why they call it a harp, because the harp I know is a triangular stringed instrument played by angels. Maybe only angels could have invented this instrument, only slightly bigger than a pack of gum but one that produces such a raw, gritty sound that you want to stamp your feet, snap your fingers and scream out "Yeaahh!"

A Shaky Start

On a lark, I begin my blues career by signing up for Jon Gindick's five-day Mississippi Delta Blues Harmonica Jam Camp at the Shack Up Inn in Clarksdale, Miss., a city where Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Ike Turner and Sonny Boy Williamson II played.

The first day in class, I am with two other beginners, being taught by Jon Gindick himself. He tells us to try and play the two-draw (the second hole on the harmonica). I suck in as much air as possible, my mouth wrapped around the instrument, but I sound like a bleating sheep. "Just relax," Gindick says. "You have to learn this note because it's home base to the blues. Drop your jaw, get your tongue flat on the bottom and use the K consonant to shape your inhaled airstream." Easy for him to say.

Still, I am not going to give up. Besides wanting to make that harmonica wail the blues, there is another reason I

want to learn to play. I travel the world for my job, and no matter which country I'm visiting, children run up to me and call out "hello," the one English word they know. I can say it back in Bhutanese (*kuzuzangpo-la*), Korean (*an-nyeong-ha-se-yo*), Japanese (*konnichiwa*) and about 10 other languages, but that's the only word I know, so I can't

have a conversation. But there is a universal language that requires no words, and it is music. If I can learn to play an instrument small enough for my pocket, I'll be able to interact with the locals in any language.

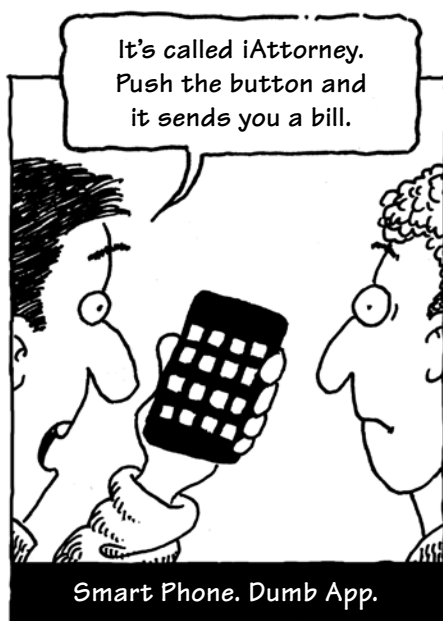
Not Yet a Maestro

By the end of the second day of jam camp,

there is hope. I can almost play the two-draw. I don't sound like Paul Butterfield or Junior Wells, but I can play a simple four-note blues riff.

By Day 3, I know what a 12-bar shuffle is. Each morning, I get up to run the cotton fields, return to my funky former sharecropper's shack at the Shack Up Inn, sit on my rickety porch and practice until breakfast. Morning and afternoon harmonica sessions are followed by dinner and more jamming and teaching until 10 p.m. On the third evening, we are to play in front of a live audience at Ground Zero Blues Club, which is partially owned by actor Morgan Freeman.

I cannot think of anything more frightening than playing music in a club, except maybe a tax audit because of a business deduction for blues camp. When I tell Gindick how terrified I am, he says that fear is



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natural, I just need courage, and I should let the music come from inside my body. I have no idea if the sound will come from inside me or from some divine intervention, but when I get up onstage and see the band members smiling and encouraging me, I am no longer afraid. I bring my harp to the mic, inhale, and suddenly I am in another world.

The Welsh Influence

Looking back, I don't know what I played because it wasn't a song; it was a jam. But when I finished my little solo, the audience burst into applause. After, people came up to tell me how great I sounded for a raw beginner.

That made it all worth it, but then I had a problem. Camp was over, and I knew I'd never keep it up on my own. How would I find a great teacher in New York City when Manhattan blues clubs play mainly jazz and rock? Then I remembered two good friends I'd made at camp: Kris from Detroit and Kate from Australia. Kate was taking Skype lessons from Lee Edwards, a great blues harp teacher who lived in Wales.

Skype? Wales? What would a Cardiff local know about the blues?

A whole lot, it turns out. And while I could see only his head and part of his torso on my screen, I needed only to observe how he held his harmonica and to watch and listen to how he played. He'd have me turn sideways so he could work on my embouchure (the

way I shaped my mouth to the harmonica), and when he saw that my shoulders were somewhere around my ears, he'd tell me to relax.

If he wanted me to work on a particular song, he'd email me a jam track. Every Monday at 9 a.m. (unless I was out of the country in a different time zone), his face would pop


up on my computer screen. And for the next hour, I'd learn about the blues, of which he has encyclopedic knowledge. He might point out a note I was playing incorrectly or teach me a new riff or part of a new song, and I'd forget that we were thousands of miles apart.

The Universal Language

On my next trip, an assignment to write about Turkey, I went from Istanbul to Ayvalik, a two-block-long village in Cappadocia. I sat in a small park opposite a café where elderly men smoked and chatted. In the park, small children stared at me curiously but kept their distance. "Merhaba," I said — hello, my one Turkish word. They didn't budge. I pulled out my harmonica and played "Amazing Grace," one of the first songs I'd learned. The children inched closer. By the time I'd finished, they had crowded around me, pulling on my arms and begging for another song. I played "Boogie Woogie." The elderly men in the nearby café stopped talking, and when I finished, they applauded.

I have since blown the blues in Namibia, where I played for a Himba tribe in the middle of the desert; in Banff, Canada, as I rode up the ski lift; on a bike while cycling Nova Scotia's Cabot Trail; and at the base of a bronze bull in Durham, N.C.

In August 2012, I went to Caraquet, New Brunswick, for the yearly Acadian "Tintamarre," a celebration and parade where everyone wears costumes and makes a huge racket with improvised and real instruments ("Tintamarre" means "make noise"). I was watching the parade when a group of about 10 female drummers marched by. The pounding rhythm was so infectious and joyful that I whipped out my harmonica and joined them. At first, I stayed in the middle of the group and played in the background, riffing off the beat. But as we moved down the street, I began to tap my feet, and my body started to sway, and suddenly I was playing a solo, leading the group like the Pied Piper.

If my notes sounded like a bleating sheep, who cared? I'm just one in a long line of Americans blowing out my heart with a harmonica — a "mouth organ," a "pocket piano," a "tin sandwich" — perhaps the most portable and entertaining instrument on Earth. 

MARGIE GOLDSMITH, a New York City-based writer, has traveled to 122 countries and written about them all. Her award-winning stories appear in *Robb Report*, *Elite Traveler*, *Black Card Mag*, *Islands* and many other publications.

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