



# Armed and Not Dangerous

This little instrument can stop bullets and stampedes. But will it work here?

by MARGIE GOLDSMITH

→ TRUE, I SHOULD NOT STARE.

But the man in front of me makes it impossible not to. Should I *not* be looking at his chiseled torso and pecs the size of tractor tires? What about the pig tusk dangling from his neck? It's all so ... interesting. The man's barefoot friends are here too, dressed in grass skirts and with faces streaked in yellow ochre. These men know nothing about me. Worse, I know nothing about them.

I've just arrived by expedition vessel at Garove Island in Papua New Guinea, one of the last true wildernesses. The people here still cook over hot rocks. They fetch their water from wells and carry it in jugs on their heads. They have no TV or Internet or Facebook. What these islands do have are 800 cultures and languages. I speak none of them.

When the men come down to the shore, they're as interested in my white skin and blond hair as I am in their headdresses. One of them steps forward.

"We used to eat you, now we greet you," he says. I start staring again, this time at his gums stained red from betel nut. There's no telling what someone might do under the influence of the narcotic. I slowly reach into my pocket and pull out a strange little object.

"Harmonica," I say, bringing it to my lips. "Pretty music."

When I play in front of people, they usually tap their feet. But no one's doing that here. I strike out with "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Let It Be."



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"How about American blues?" And I launch into a montage of music straight out of Memphis. The men, oozing menace moments ago, become boyishly curious. They subconsciously sway to the rhythm. Behind the face paints I can see a few smiles.

I'm not the only one who's been rescued by a mouth organ. Cowboys knew the effects of a harmonica's sound and

played to soothe their horses. When shots were fired at Jesse James' brother, Frank, a harmonica in his pocket deflected the bullet and saved his life. Astronaut Wally Schirra smuggled a harmonica aboard *Gemini 6* and played "Jingle Bells" for the world, the first time an instrument was played in outer space.

Just as those historical figures did, I take my harmonica everywhere because, well, you never know.

Once, while I was taking photos at sunrise in Tibet, a group of young boys threw stones at me, so I whipped out my 10-hole and played a tune. Soon they were trying to bring me to their homes for breakfast. In South Korea I played for schoolchildren who then followed me around as though I were the Pied Piper. My harmonica also broke the ice with men on horseback in Mongolia, who in return treated me to a private throat-singing performance.

It's working on these islands too. A day later, on Madang Island, I join a few other ship passengers for a hike. Along the trail a barefoot boy of about 12 comes out of nowhere and scrambles up a papaw tree. He clings to a branch

and looks down at me, so I reach for my harmonica and play some music. He shinnies down and moves closer. I'm not sure what he says next, but it must be either "Can I have that?" or "Give that to me" because he's reaching for the harp.

I'd brought plenty of toy harmonicas for the children, but I've given them all to a village chief to distribute, as is the custom here. I only have this one left. Again, the boy reaches for it. I run the instrument back and forth in my mouth.

"See? Like a toothbrush," I say, holding it out so he can see how wet I've gotten it. "You don't want my toothbrush. Gross." I'd like to leave the harmonica with the boy, but its germs would do him more harm than good. He seems to understand this, and I continue up the trail.

When the ship moves on to Kitava in the Trobriand Islands, I go browsing

through shops where a boy, about 4, peeks from behind a woman selling jewelry. I pull out my harmonica and play "Down by the Riverside." The boy moves out from his mother's skirt and stares. When I play a boogie-woogie, he looks as though he's about to cry.

I pocket my harmonica and start to walk away, but just then the boy's mother runs up, unclasps her shell necklace and fastens it around my neck.

"Tenkyu that," she says, pointing to her son, who is now smiling ear to ear. And for a second, I have a mental image of this kid growing up with muscular thighs and a headdress. He has a pig-tusk necklace hanging around his neck. And he's greeting travelers by playing a boogie-woogie with one of the little harmonicas I left with the chief.

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## Double-Duty Sounds



### VALIHA IN MADAGASCAR

Take a hollow bamboo stalk, brake cables from a bike, a little water-buffalo hide, and you too can make a valiha (left) to strum. If the audience starts to drift, a musician can bring the entire contraption to the mouth and use it as a megaphone.

### BANGIBANG IN PHILIPPINES

At a glance these look like seven solid-wood clothes hangers. In the Philippines they work together (tap-i-tap them) as a percussion instrument for the Ifugao people. But really, they could work as hangers for wetsuits.

### BOLA IN NEW ZEALAND

Maori dancers in New Zealand swing this rather small ball on a string as they dance around, occasionally thumping it against their chests. So the bola, and the sternum, become a drum. When not being used as a musical instrument, it could be a nice tetherball for cats.



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