

***A SHORT GUIDE***  
***TO***  
***THE HARMONICA***

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# The History of the Harmonica

Richard Pochrich has been credited as the first to play a glass armonica (harmonica) which comprises a series of glass vessels. The Irish musician first performed in London in the mid-18th century on a set of upright glasses filled with varying amounts of water.

The instrument is played by rubbing fingers around the edge or rim of one or more of the glass vessels. Liquid, usually water, is placed within each vessel in differing amounts.

The correct quantity of water will produce a musical scale which can be altered by adding or subtracting the water within each glass or by using different sized glasses.

Sounds are produced by vibrations emanating from each of the instruments glasses. These sounds resonate at different frequencies to create different musical tones. By moistening and placing a finger on the rim of each glass and moving the finger in a circular motion a musical note is produced.

By keeping a constant finger movement with a steady degree of touch a note is produced by each glass which varies in pitch. Skilled performers use both hands and several fingers in unison to produce soloing melodies and chordal sounding music in harmony.

Benjamin Franklin took the process a step further by attaching the glass sections to a peddle operated treadmill and enclosing them into a timber casing (similar to a piano) so that the instrument could be played whilst seated.

Lead glass was predominantly used initially but later it was found that crystal quartz produced a superior quality of sound and tone.

A German musical instrument maker, Christian Ludwig Buschmann is believed to have invented the 'Harmonica' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Joseph Richter, a Bohemian instrument maker created a variation that was to become the standard for the models which have since been developed.

Richter's version featured 10 holes with 20 reeds on two separate plates that notes to be both blown and drawn. With the plates mounted on either side of a cedar comb and tuned to the diatonic seven note scale this model soon became the most popular harmonica of its day.

Probably the most famous manufacturer of harmonicas was another German. Mattais Hohner formed the Hohner Musikinstrumente RmbH & Co. in 1857.

The harmonica grew in popularity and with the introduction of mass production the harmonica was able to maintain the much increased demand. Hohner has been responsible for manufacturing many different types and styles of harmonica and has manufactured many millions of Hohner product over the years.

The Hohner harmonicas are well respected instruments which are manufactured using precision engineering resulting in the production of excellent sound quality.

As a result Hohner harmonicas have been used by many famous musical artists and professionals in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Hohner have also developed new designs which include, but are not limited to, the chromatic harmonica, the bass harmonica and even an electric version which will allow sound amplification.

Today there are now a great number of harmonica manufacturers across the globe. Many are famous such as Lee Oskar, Suzuki, Tombo and Harley Benton.

All types and styles are being produced by mass manufacture, of this still very popular musical instrument due to its range of musical timbre and its obvious portability.

These products cover are vast in range of quality and price but because of this the harmonica remains readily affordable to all who wish to play it.

Although the harmonica has been around for many years its recognition has never achieved the level which is afforded to more serious musical instruments. This is probably due to a perceived low cost and a multitude of lesser quality models.

Even though producing notes by both blowing and drawing air makes the instrument is fairly unique and the use of the lips. Mouth, tongue and throat for tone and pitch control combine to provide a large range of musicality for the solo artist or in a band.

The original harmonicas had a reed layout which allowed melodies to be played as a diatonic instrument with basic chord accompaniment played.

Later a tuning higher than the diatonic evolved which resulted in the Tremelo harmonica. The addition of a slide operated by a button at the end of the instrument which raised the notes produced the Chromatic harmonica allowing even more notes to be played. The harmonica has evolved even further with additional holes which allow the instrument to cover several octaves.

# Types of Harmonica

## **Diatonic:**

This is the harmonica for the novice or beginner. This type of harmonica generally has 10 holes and is available in 12 different keys. It provides the ability to play a complete major scale of the chosen key comprising seven notes. Up to 20 notes can be reached by blowing drawing and bending such as in blues playing.

## **Diatonic Tremolo Tuned:**

This type of harmonica has two reeds per note. When the harmonica is played both reeds sound together as one is tuned slightly higher than the other. This difference in their tuning produces the effect of a vibrating tremolo.

## **Diatonic Octave Tuned:**

This type of Harmonica is tuned one octave higher than the diatonic tuned model.

## **Chromatic:**

Chromatic Harmonicas a major scale of the chosen key much like a Diatonic Harmonica. This instrument has a button which controls a slide. The slide allows the harmonica to play the half step notes, in-between the major scale notes, when the button is pressed. Any key and any type of scale can therefore be played.

# Buying a Harmonica

Buying a harmonica is a very personal decision.

Playing a harmonica properly takes a little more time and effort than you may think.

The first mistake you might make would be to think you can just pick it up and play it without any tuition whatsoever.

Initial tuition is a must for any budding musician and playing the harmonica is no different.

Once you have made the decision to purchase a harmonica you need to use some knowledge about your future instrument. Here are the tips you will need to help you through the exercise:

- Think about the cost. As a novice you only need to buy a model that is functional and hold its tune. So a relatively low financial outlay maybe all that is necessary.
- It must fit in your mouth with comfort.
- There must be no sharp edges either around the reed comb or holes which might cut your lips.
- There must be no sharp edges around the body of the instrument which might injure your hands or fingers.
- It is preferable that your first harmonica is a diatonic model.
- Diatonic models comprise 10 holes with 20 notes made by blow and draw.
- The outer casing can be made of plastic or metal as long as the notes are true in pitch..
- The key of C is the best key to start with as it is mid range and there are millions of songs and instrumentals for you to play along with. This key also seems to be the preferred key for most harmonica tutorials and lessons.
- Check that the screws which hold the reed plate within the casing do not protrude and cause abrasion.
- It is always worth considering the purchase of some lip balm with your harmonica as you may suffer from chapped lips if you over practice.
- You will need somewhere to keep your harmonica safe from damage and although the case which should be provided with its purchase should be sufficient it will only suffice for one key. You will need to purchase harmonicas in other keys eventually so consider the procurement of a multiple harmonica storage case for future use.
- There are 12 keys for the harmonica which are:  
A, A#./Bb, B, C, C#/Db, D, D#/Eb, E, F, F#/Gb, G, G#/Ab  
and each diatonic harmonica will only play in one key, So to collect all 12 keys could prove expensive. Chromatic harmonicas will play in any key but are higher priced because of their complex composition and their versatility.

## VARIOUS HARMONICA MODELS



"Echobell" harmonica

Available from <http://harmonicaland.com>

Picture from <http://harmonicaland.com>



TREMELO 24 by Tombo

with 48 reeds, 24 tones and plastic comb

Available from <http://harmonicaland.com>

Picture from <http://harmonicaland.com>



SUPER 64 GOLD by Hohner

with 64 reeds, brass reedplates and plastic comb

Available from <http://harmonicaland.com>

Picture from <http://harmonicaland.com>



M20 MANJI by Suzuki

highly crafted and engineered instrument

Available from <http://harmonicaland.com>

Picture from <http://harmonicaland.com>



TRUMPET CALL by Hohner

Handmade harmonica that made history

This model is an octave tremolo

Available from <http://harmonicaland.com>

[Picture from http://harmonicaland.com](http://harmonicaland.com)



Silver Boomerang Harmonica by Seydel

Available from <http://harmonicaland.com>

[Picture from http://harmonicaland.com](http://harmonicaland.com)



Harponette by Hohner

Available from <http://harmonicaland.com>

[Picture from http://harmonicaland.com](http://harmonicaland.com)





Blues Harmonica Set by Harley Benton  
comprising 12 blues harmonicas in all keys (10 holes/20 notes)

available from <http://www.thomann.de/gb/>

picture from <http://www.thomann.de/gb/>



Two octave, chromatic bass harmonica by Swan  
comprising 29 holes

since the notes are so low, all of the tones are  
achieved by blowing rather than drawing air from

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/>

picture from <http://www.amazon.co.uk/>

## Beginning and Progressing with the Harmonica

You might think, probably because the harmonica is a rather small unimposing instrument, that you can learn to play it without having some professional guidance and lessons. This would be entirely the wrong thought, because like learning to play any musical instrument the building blocks of becoming a notably proficient performer are created by the skills taught at the onset of the learning process.

There are many courses available to start you off on the road to playing and none other than JP Allen's harmonica teaching course which can be reviewed and accessed through the following website:- <http://harmonicateasyway.weebly.com>

This course contains all the necessary instructions, tips and techniques to become a truly excellent harmonica player which I believe it to be the most comprehensive course available.

Assuming you have purchased a harmonica which suits you by using the advice given in the previous chapter 'Buying a Harmonica' you are now ready to learn to play.

When you have been taught the initial concepts you can then try some experimentation on your own. In this way you can try to create your own style of playing and play the type of music you prefer.

You should also try to listen to as many harmonica players as you can, so that you can appreciate how many different musical genres there are, all of which can be played on the harmonica.

Reference can be made to the list of 'Harmonica Players Across the World' in the next chapter. Once the playing skills have been learnt the player can introduce musical creativity by producing their own musical pieces.

A free music recording program is available online called 'Audacity' which will allow you to record your music making onto your computer from where it can be published for posterity. You could even upload your music onto you tube if you record it on video.

Once you have reached a good level of ability you should start to play with other musicians. You should try to join in with others wherever possible by joining online forums, joining music clubs or going to local open mic nights and getting involved. Try and go to as many harmonica festivals as you can particularly the annual festival in Bristol UK which is renowned for its participants.

Your next goal should be to join a band as this is where your musical ability will probably be expressed most. By playing with other like-minded musicians your musical creativity and ability will improve immensely. It is also recommended joining an organisation in the United Kingdom called The National Harmonica League which has been formed for harmonica players of all levels and musical abilities.

# HARMONICA PLAYERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

This is a limited list of some of the Harmonica players from around the world. The Author recognises that there are many more harmonica players not included here. The reader should improve their harmonica knowledge further by continuing to research other players and their styles on a effort to improve their own harmonic playing capabilities.

## **England:**

Terry Carter, Tim Corbett, Cyril Davies, Ernie Gordon, Gikes Hedley, Roy Hugman, Mick Jagger, John Lennon, Eddie Martin, John Mayall, John O'Leary, Lee Sankey, Will Tang.

## **Ireland:**

Don Baker, Murphy Brothers, Eddie Clarke, James Conway, Rick Epping, Larry Fitzpatrick, Mark Graham, Andy Irvine, Cathal Johnson, Donal Kavanah, Larry Kinsella, Mick Kinsella, Graham Macartney, Don Meade, Kieran McHugh, Brendan Power (born in New Zealand)

## **Scotland:**

Tommy Basker, Donald Black

## **Wales:**

Myfanwy Derek

## **France:**

Cadio, Pierre Dacquin, Alexis Korner, Bruni Kowalczyk

## **Italy:**

Willi Burger, Fabrizio Poggi

## **Germany:**

Igor Flach, Joe Filisko

## **Holland:**

Hermine Deurloo

## **Norway:**

Sigmund Groven

## **Slovenia:**

Robert Ivacic

**United States of America:**

Larry Adler, JP Allen, De Ford Bailey, Carey Bell, Sugar Blue, Robert Bonfiglio, Billy Branch, Paul Butterfield, James Cotton, Magic Dick, Bob Dylan, Tony 'Little Sun' Glover, Slim Harpo, Big Walter Horton, Little Walter Jacobs, Lazy Lester, Huey Lewis, Paul deLay, Taj Mahal, Charlie Musselwhite, Gary Primich, Jerry Portnov, Jimmy Reed, Jason Ricci, Michael Rubin, George 'Harmonica' Smith, Bruce Springstein, Little Sonny, Sonny Terry, Junior Wells, Sonny Boy Williamson I , Sonny Boy Williamson II, Al Wilson, Kim Wilson, Howlin Wolf, Steve Wonder, Neil Young

**Canada:**

Bernie Bray, Tommy Reilly

**Argentina:**

Anibal Repetto, Sandra Vazquez

**Brazil:**

Jefferson Goncalves, Val Tomato

**Australia:**

James Conway, Norman Gunson, Paul Kelly, Jim Keays, Brad Shepherd, Vikki Thorn, Chris Wilson

**Japan:**

Akemi Iwama

**Taiwan:**

Nidalap Lee

## Major Harmonica Manufacturers

Bends - Brazil

Hardwood Harmonica Company (wooden coverplates) - USA

Hering – Brazil

Hohner – Germany

Hohner - USA

Huang Harmonicas – China

LaVoie – USA

Lee Oskar – USA

Seydel – Germany

Swan - France

Suzuki – Japan

Tombo - Japan

Weltmeister - Germany

**For the most comprehensive Harmonica teaching course**

**go to**

**<http://harmonicatheeasyway.weebly.com/>**