

# GETTING STARTED HARMONICAS



Engaging & Inspiring Musicians

Excerpted from  
MakingMusicMag.com

■ Harmonicas have been played in one form or another since their invention in the Far East around 1000 BC. Early harmonicas used reeds and bamboo resonating pipes. The modern kinds played by blues and jazz musicians usually have a metal cover, a wooden or plastic “comb,” and brass reed plates.

Harmonicas are wind instruments that belong to the reed family (along with clarinets and bassoons). Thanks in part to their ruggedness, the harmonica’s metal reeds literally can be blown this way and that to increase the instrument’s tonal range. A typical, inexpensive “blues harp” has 10 holes, each of which can be blown (breath out) or drawn (breath in) to produce 20 different notes.

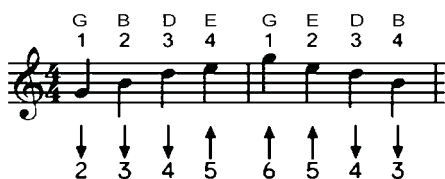
Some notes on a blues harmonica also can be “bent” by changing the shape of the mouth to produce sharps and flats. Add to that advanced techniques such as cross harp, overblows, wah-wah, tongue slaps, throat vibrato, and miking and you have an instrument that is more than the sum of its parts.

There are many harmonica styles and brands on the market, but to get started, look for a harmonica that suits the style of music you wish to play. Fans of bluesman James Cotton or jazzman Howard Levy will want a 10-hole diatonic harmonica. Larry Adler enthusiasts should choose a chromatic harp (they have a button the side to change tones). Traditional folk music often employs the tremolo harmonica.

You may have seen some players using so many harmonicas, they carry them in a “gun belt” across their chests or even in a tackle box. That’s because 10-hole diatonic blues harmonicas come many keys. To get started, you don’t need to buy a full complement. For playing blues, it’s recommended you first buy a diatonic harp in the key of C, D, or G, common keys for blues songs.

## TRY THIS: SIMPLE BLUES RIFF

This notation shows one a basic blues “riff,” heard in countless songs and often used as a bass line. Written harmonica music sometimes adds an extra set of notations (tab). For



the first note (G), the accompanying down arrow means “draw” (breathe in) and the “2” refers to hole 2 on a harmonica in the key of C. The up arrow refers to “blow” (breathe out) notes. Thus you play an E by blowing hole 5.

If you’ve already tried to play some harmonica tab, it may have occurred to you that you can’t play and read the numbers on the harp at the same time. Getting a feel for what hole you’re on takes practice. You can try putting your finger on the hole you’re blowing, then pull the harmonica away from your lips to check. Some suggest covering the notes to the left and right with your fingers to help learn what each note should sound like. Or skip the guesswork and give the Bendometer ([www.harmonicagame.com](http://www.harmonicagame.com)) playing system a try.

## BLUES

A “blues harmonica” is more often than not a 10-hole diatonic harmonica (although blues music can be played on other types). A diatonic harmonica produces notes and chords in a single key. Manufacturers offer diatonic harmonicas in several keys. You should start out with a D or G model.



## OCTAVE

Each row of holes on an octave harmonica is tuned exactly one octave apart. When the two rows are played together it sounds as though two harmonicas are playing the same melody. This enables a single player to achieve a stronger, full-bodied sound not possible while playing a standard diatonic harp.



## CHROMATIC

The chromatic harmonica has a button-operated slide that allows the player to change the pitch of any given note upward by a half step. This means that each hole has four pitches rather than two.



## TREMOLO

Tremolo harmonicas are somewhat misnamed. “Tremolo” usually refers to a wavering of pitch or volume, but the unique sound of tremolo harmonicas actually comes from an effect called “frequency interference”—the two reeds in each hole are tuned differently, one slightly sharp and the other slightly flat.

