

# Filisko's 3 Foundations *(the physical body)*

2/19/26

## 1 - HARP HOLDING and BODY POSITIONING *(Good Posture)*

Practice with just left hand - Look relaxed, use mirror - Bad posture affects breathing

## 2 - EMBOUCHURE DEVELOPMENT - Blocking allows fastest access to all sounds

Chords - Clean Single Notes - Splits - Dirt - Vamping/Slapping

Learn to bend while Blocking. It is worth it!

## 3 - BI-DIRECTIONAL BREATHING AWARENESS

2 RANGES of Breathing - Upper/*Inflated* - Lower/*Deflated (Asphyxiation Reflex)*

3 AREAS (PLACES) of Breathing - Relaxed/Middle - Empty - Full

# Filisko's 6 Fundamentals *(sounds of the harp)*

## 1 - CHORDS RHYTHMIC - easiest to play - default to holes 1-3 *(wide puckering)*

Breath Pulse *(throat / glottis / cough)* Tone Pulse *(vowels)*

Tongue *(lips)* Articulations *(consonants)* Diaphragm - *(upper range breathing only)*

TRAIN IMITATION *(throat)*

HAM-BONE

FOX CHASE *(simple)*

HARD SHUFFLE

I'M A MAN

SONNY TERRY

TRAIN IMITATION *(tongue)*

WALTZ

PEG'S RHYTHM

CHORD BOMBS

RUMBA

MISSISSIPPI

## 2 - CHORDS and Chordal Effects SUSTAINING - Extend your full range of breathing

Tame the asphyxiation reflex and develop the four essential breathing skills

Exhale Push (EP) - Nose Push (NP) - Inhale Pull (IP) - Nose Pull (Pull)

## 3 - CHORDS & TONGUE BLOCKING - The Tongue and Chords

SOFT SHUFFLE *(ghost chording)* - full tongue block rhythmic chording

CHORDAL EFFECTS - tongue shakes - rapid vamping - Train Whistle Sustaining

## 4 - NOTES & TONGUE BLOCKING - The Tongue, Chords, Notes, Splits & Dirt

CLEAN SINGLE NOTES - Ornamental Bending - Full Bends - Middle Bends

SPLITS / OCTAVES - Split 4, Split 5, Split 3 and others

DIRTY NOTES & SPLITS - 1% - 99% is a wide range of possible degrees of dirt

VAMPING / SLAPPING - regular or SBW2 (pull-slaps) - accompaniment / folk

## 5 - APPROPRIATE REPERTOIRE - Have active repertoire within your skill set

Think K-16 - Have your goal be to play plenty of simple stuff very well - Own it!

## 6 - RIFFS - LICKS - HOOKS - SONGS - MELODIES Essential Repertoire

BOOGIE +

TRAIN

TAPS and LULLABY'S

RUMBA +

FOX CHASE

AMAZING GRACE and SPIRITUALS

BOX SHUFFLE

I'M A MAN

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

HAM-BONE

MANNISH BOY

HOLIDAY and CHILDREN'S SONGS

**1 - HARP HOLDING and BODY POSITIONING** - Being relaxed is important. If you don't look relaxed, you aren't relaxed. Good posture is not intuitive. Bad posture is easy to slip into. Harp players often display very poor posture which negatively effects breath control.

- Mimic the posture of a great vocalist who stands upright and tall, or Kim Wilson, who displays perfect posture with no slouching. Practicing in front of a mirror will help you avoid bad habits.
- Hold the harp in your left hand only and drop your right arm if you aren't using your right hand skillfully. Holding the harp with both hands almost always causes raised shoulders and a dropped head. **THE HARP IS NOT HEAVY!** Holding the harp with only your left hand, in practice and performance, is strongly encouraged.
- You can create "two handed" resonance by holding a cup or can in your left hand; a small tomato paste can works nicely.
- Check your left-hand position. Note the image with bent right index finger and the gap between your thumb and the bottom of the harp. Also note how fingers are close together and fanning outwards.

**2 - EMBOUCHURE DEVELOPMENT** - (How you place your mouth on the instrument.) Tongue Blocking allows the quickest access to all the five types of sound that the harmonica makes: Chords, Clean Single Notes, Splits, Dirt (notes *and* splits,) Vamping/Slapping. Puckering puts the focus on one note while Tongue Blocking (TB) allows the best access to the **BIGGEST** sounds. If you compare these two embouchure techniques to playing the piano, puckering on the harmonica is like using only one finger, having access to one piano note at a time. TB is like using all five fingers opened on your hand, giving access to all five types of sound. There is a common assumption that bending notes is not possible when blocking. I can confirm 100% that this is not true. Learning to bend skillfully with blocking just takes time. Initially learning TB may feel clumsy, as having your tongue stuck out much of the time is not natural. You have to do the work. Having access to the many layers of additional sound is worth it.

**3 - BI-DIRECTIONAL BREATHING AWARENESS** (*Asphyxiation Reflex*) When singing or playing another wind or brass instrument, breathing is one directional. Taking a deep inhale breath and letting it out while making music is **VERY** natural and intuitive. The harmonica is often the exact opposite of this, with much need to have very long and controlled **INHALE** phrases. This moves you into unnatural breathing. Being able to inhale **AND** exhale when playing (bi-directional breathing) often results in the body being confused because the natural breathing is disrupted and that triggers the asphyxiation reflex. The asphyxiation reflex is part of your bodies natural fight or flight mechanism that retains air in your lungs in response to suffocation triggers. Having lungs full and trying to breath in more air will set off the asphyxiation reflex which traps you in your upper range (lungs full) and chokes off exhaling. Being able to overcome this reflex and access the lower (deflated) range of playing, is a players greatest challenge. Of course nobody has ever suffocated trying to play the harmonica. *See the Filisko Breathing Guide*

**1 - CHORDS PLAYED RHYTHMICALLY** - Chords (holes 1, 2, (3) *only*) are the best sounding and easiest to play. Create a rhythmic groove and you will be making music. Rhythm comes mainly from the diaphragm, throat, tongue, in various combinations. Every harp player should have a train imitation in their active repertoire. It is easy to play and can be upgraded and expanded to strengthen your fundamentals along your journey of playing. Practice all chordal rhythms with a metronome. Learning how to satisfy your breathing needs will be one of the challenges you will face here. Most chord rhythms can be used to self-accompany your singing on simple one-chord songs. Think of the call and response of a military troop marching and singing. Inserting a chord rhythm between the vocals is instant music. Many lyrics and poems can be used.

**2 - CHORDS and Chordal Effects SUSTAINING** - Work to make your inhaling range of breathing equal to your much more intuitive exhaling range. Being able to sustain longer, with control, will benefit ALL of your harp playing. Learn to manage the asphyxiation reflex and develop the four essential breathing skills: Exhale Push (EP) - Nose Push (NP) - Inhale Pull (IP) - Nose Pull (Pull). The Nose Dump [ND] will help learning the Nose Push. *See Breathing Guide*

**3 - CHORDS and TONGUE BLOCKING** - Playing chords generally means NOT tongue blocking. The Soft Shuffle (*ghost chording*) is an important blues technique using a full tongue block between quick, spitty chords. This was a favored technique of Sonny Boy 2 (aka Rice Miller) and likely also Little Walter. Rapid Vamping and the Tongue Shake may also fit into this category.

**4 - NOTES and TONGUE BLOCKING** - Using the tongue to touch and block holes on the harmonica can be likened to a piano player keeping the fingers extended and hovering just above the piano keys. A player can instantly access chords, splits, notes and the percussive vamping/slapping sound by the shape and placement of the tongue, often being coordinated with breathing. Unlike a finger which can be visualized pushing down one piano key, the tongue is shape shifting and can be trained to block out 1, 2, 3 or more holes at a time. Many countless players in the wake of Paul Butterfield will claim to not be a tongue blocker, but will use the split-4 block, falling short of slightly changing the tongue shape and allowing for a clean note out of one corner of the mouth or the other. Tongue blocking is too often misunderstood and very underestimated.

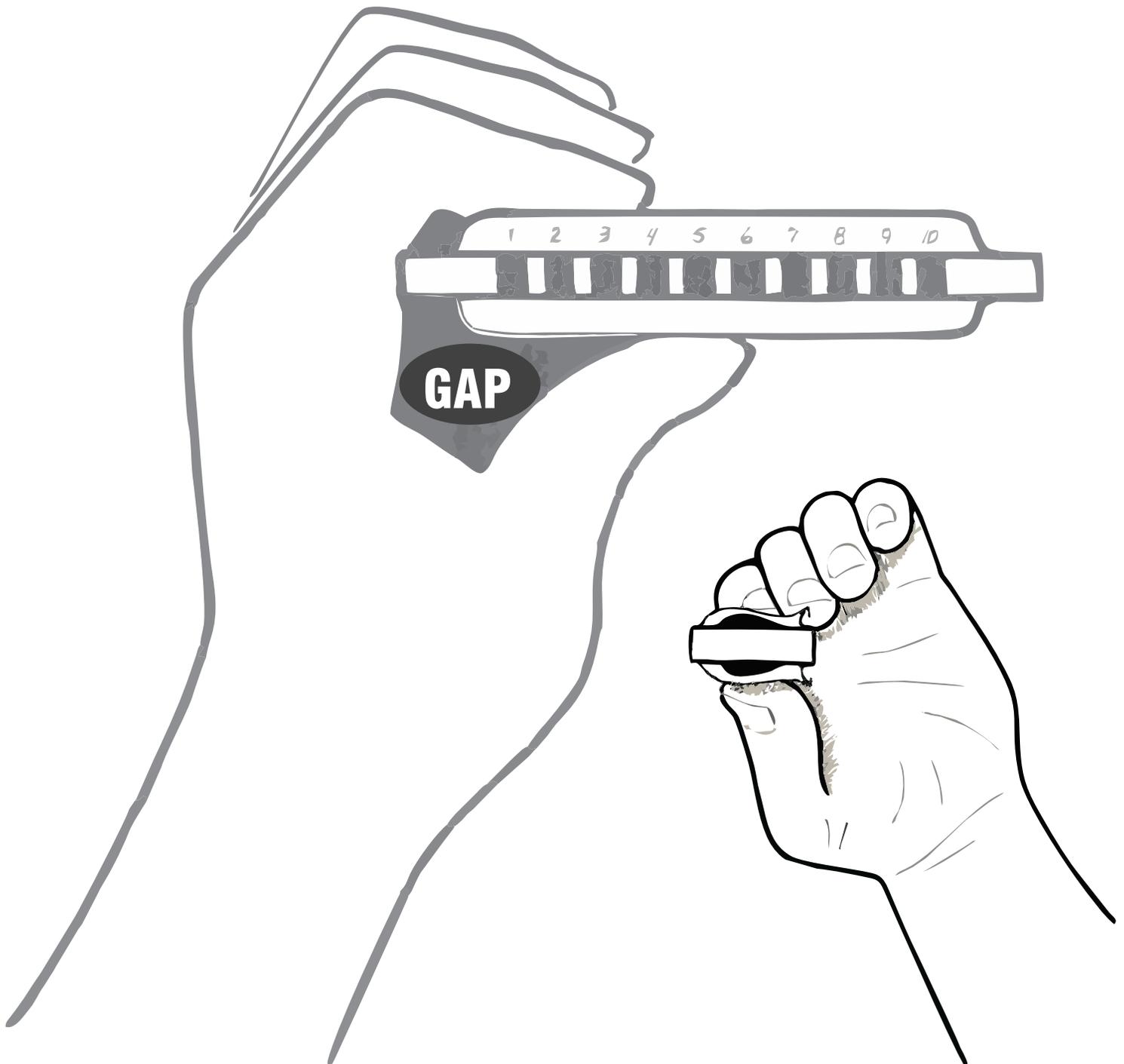
**5 - APPROPRIATE REPERTOIRE** - Have active repertoire within your skill set. I have observed many players work on songs that are way beyond their skills and musical maturity. It is much better to play something simple quite well as opposed to something advanced played in a sloppy manner. Think grades K-16. You wouldn't tell a five-year old to study college level books. A one-year player shouldn't attempt to play a Little Walter instrumental, but listen to them all frequently! Play plenty of simple tunes and songs well - Own them! My harmonica mission has been to create exciting material for beginning and intermediate players.

**6 - RIFFS - LICKS - HOOKS - SONGS - MELODIES** There are things that everyone who claims to play harmonica should know how to play. The list may be a little different for those who are only interested in playing blues. Learning how to play "Happy Birthday," "Amazing Grace," "Jingle Bells," or a lullaby may save the situation. Playing a simple train may very well dazzle your friends and family.

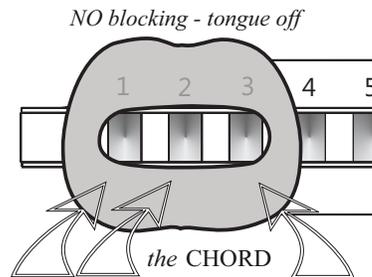
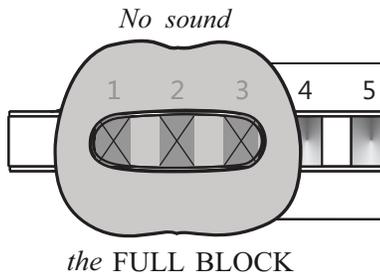
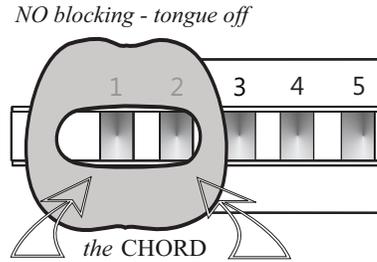
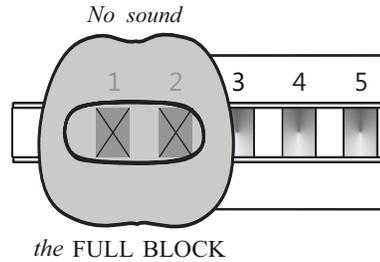
# Filisko's 3 Foundations & 6 Fundamentals

2/19/26

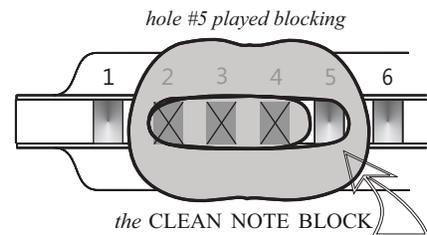
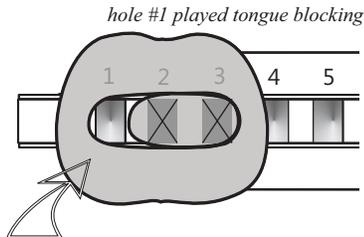
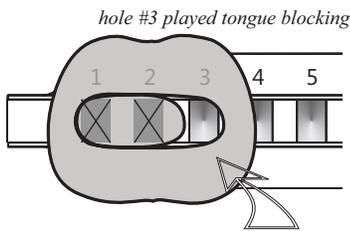
Hold the harmonica with the numbers facing up in your left hand, keeping your fingers tight together, fanning them slightly outwards like the bell of a horn. Note the angle of the index finger and the large gap under the harp. This gap allows the left wrist to be held in a more natural position, keeping the harmonica level, and will minimize the tendency for you to tilt your head and harp to your left. Your playing posture will look and feel more natural and relaxed. Check it in a mirror. Keep your right arm down and relaxed. You can use your right hand skillfully only after building some skills with your left.



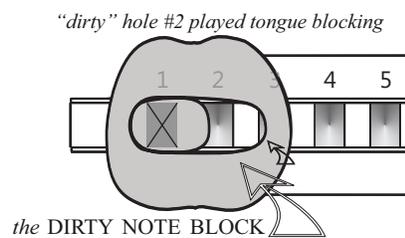
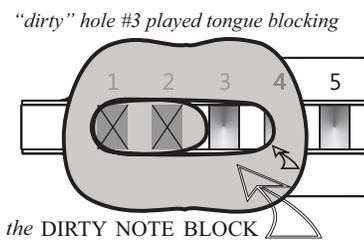
## VISUAL DEPICTIONS of some of the SOFT SHUFFLE FULL TONGUE BLOCK CHORDING



## VISUAL DEPICTIONS of some of the CLEAN SINGLE NOTE TONGUE BLOCKS



## VISUAL DEPICTIONS of some of the DIRTY NOTE TONGUE BLOCKS



## VISUAL DEPICTIONS of some of the SPLIT-4, 5 and 3 TONGUE BLOCKS

