

Here are some things I learned in the last 35+ years that I wish I knew when I was first starting out. I believe that these insights can direct your playing efforts in a positive direction while minimizing the possibilities of picking up bad habits. One of my main goals has always been to enlighten people on what made the masters great, and how to play and sound like them. This is the result of studying and transcribing hundreds of the greatest recordings of those great players and learning from the living ones. Thank you! JF

1. **HOLDING HARP (left hand)** - Hold the low end of the harp (*hole #1*) against the middle joint of your left hand index finger causing that finger to bend as much as 90 degrees as opposed to laying it flat and straight across the top of the harp. A space (*hole/gap*) should be between your left thumb and bottom of harp. This will allow your left wrist to be in a more natural position and minimize the tendency to tilt your harp and head to your left. You will look more relaxed and natural, as though you were singing. Keep your left hand fingers close together. Holding a small tomato paste can with your ring and pinky fingers while practicing will make it easier, allowing your right arm to relax and improving your sound. My advice is to practice the bulk of the Fundamentals holding the harp with one hand. (*See 3 Foundations*)

2. **BOTH HANDS TOGETHER** - Most teachers promote two handed playing. I have pointed out a number of reasons why this can be problematic and can lead to bad habits. You will eventually need to incorporate both hands in some of your playing. Here's my thoughts. Hands contribute to the traditional sound and become a part of the instrument as soon as they touch it. Use them as skillfully as possible to enhance the sound, as opposed to just holding the harp. Always keep the fingers of each hand held close together to keep sound from escaping between them. The real secret to the hands is the tightness of the "cup," not the size of the "cup." When you cup your hands together around the harmonica, don't completely cover over the entire back of the harmonica. Let the high end be open and exposed to let some sound out. You do not need to cover the entire back of the harmonica to get a great sound. This is a more common and acceptable practice when cupping a mic and playing amplified. Your long term goal as a player will be to keep the index finger and thumb of the left hand in contact with the skin on the left side of your face and the thumb of the right hand in contact with the right side of your mouth. Drag your left hand with the harp along the left side of your face as you slide to the higher notes. If you are not using your right hand skillfully, keep it down and relaxed at your side. Are your shoulders raised up??? Practice with your right arm down!

3. **POSTURE** - If your hands are together and you bend your arms at the elbows, you will find that the harmonica falls quite a bit short of reaching your mouth. Raise your arms and NOT your shoulders! Don't drop your head and slouch! Your profile when playing should appear to aim the sound straight out or upwards, not downwards. Place your music very high on your stand or attach it above your eyes on a wall. Don't place it flat on a table in front of you! Have a mirror in your practice room to check yourself. When you have your piece memorized, learn to fix your eyes on a point on the wall that is above your head. Correct yourself so you don't learn to feel comfortable and relaxed, even though your posture is bad. Keep your head and arms up and your shoulders down. (*See The 3 Foundations*)

4. **RELAX & BREATHE** - Make it a goal to stay relaxed and breathe through the harmonica. Think "inhale & exhale" as opposed to "suck & blow." Constant forceful playing is a bad habit. If you look tense, you are tense. Often, the tension comes from the asphyxiation reflex prohibiting you from releasing air, and keeping you inflated. Relaxed playing habits are best developed by practicing backwards breathing and the Train with perpetual breathing. (*See The Breathing Guide*)

5. **BLOCKING** - Use tongue blocking as your default for clean single notes. It is, in my opinion, essential for getting the most sound and biggest sounds and tone out of the harmonica, and gives you the easiest access to all the "5 Types" of the harmonica's sound. (*see "Blocking Insights" and "5 Types of Sound and 5 Types of Tone"*)

6. **BENDING** is one of the most expressive sounds that the harp makes, but it does not necessarily equal blues. Most bending is advanced. I have observed numerous ambitious beginners develop VERY bad playing habits from trying to force bends. If you are not yet making music on the unbent notes, you may not be ready to incorporate bending. Bending skillfully when blocking can take years of practice and it is also a skill that can atrophy. (*see Bending Insights*)

7. **RHYTHM, GROOVE and the SWAY** - In blues, the rhythm and groove of the song RULES. ***Keeping the groove is more important than playing the right notes!*** Train your body to twist or "sway" from side to side like you are walking along with the rhythm of the music. If you can walk with rhythm, you can learn to play with rhythm. If someone were to plug their ears and watch you, they should be able to feel the tempo of the song. If this is too difficult for you to do, then that is even greater evidence that you should be working on it or playing simpler songs. Watch yourself playing in front of a mirror. Don't tap your feet unless you can do it in the groove, otherwise it could be a distraction to other musicians. Video your feet to see if you are a skillful foot tapper, and make the metronome your friend. (*See The 6 Fundamentals*)

8. DYNAMICS - Imagine a volume control on your playing from 0 - 10. 1, 2, and 3 is your "soft" range. 4, 5, and 6 = "Moderate" range, 7, 8, and 9 = "**LOUD**" range. Don't concentrate too much in one range, especially 7, 8 and 9. Having a wide variety of dynamics in your music ("push" and "pull") helps to keep the attention of most audiences. Be aware of internal dynamics, or dynamics required within the same phrase.
9. EXHALE PUSH and NOSE PUSH - Develop the habit of always using the **Exhale Push** [EP] before you play an inhale phrase and the **Nose Push** [NP] while you are playing a sustained exhale note or split. The *asphyxiation reflex* makes getting air into your lungs very easy and natural, but getting the air out and controlling its flow back in is very challenging. Overcoming this is a huge secret to getting a big powerful blues sound. (Watch how accordion players use their air valve.) Skilled breathing when playing blues is often the exact opposite of breathing when singing. The *asphyxiation reflex* is a huge obstacle when playing. Practicing backwards breathing daily will help controlling it. (*see Breathing Guide*)
10. PLAYING, PRACTICING & PERFORMING - Remember those 3 P's and be sure to not confuse them. There is a big difference between "playing" and "practicing." "Practicing" is giving focused attention to what you can't play correctly and implies work. "Playing" is reviewing what you can play, whether done correctly or incorrectly, and implies self amusement. "Performing" is having fun playing with the intent to entertain. If you are not progressing to performing, you are not likely practicing correctly or not actually practicing at all.
11. LISTENING ACCOUNTABILITY - Practice and play as often as possible with background tracks, a metronome, or a band. It is EXTREMELY important to continually develop your listening skills. Many challenges you may have experienced with your playing can likely be attributed to NOT listening closely enough. Fixating on the harmonica and what you are playing can be compared to taking your eyes off the road while driving and only looking at the speedometer and tachometer. Music is the art of sound and requires maximum listening efforts. It's also possible that you are not able to hear the metronome well enough as your harp is closer to your ear than your metronome. You may need to practice with it closer to your ear. Walk around with your eyes open and play music with your ears open.
12. RECORDING YOURSELF - Get in the habit of recording yourself and listening to the recordings. This will help determine how good your listening skills are. It is VERY important to identify and fix the bad habits and errors in your playing as early as possible, whether pointed out by a teacher or identified by yourself. If you don't listen to recordings of yourself you won't know what you actually sound like, and you could possibly spend your practice time learning and permanently memorizing mistakes and bad habits. OUCH!!
13. MEMORIZATION - Memorize your songs correctly as soon as you can and get away from looking at the written music. If you are struggling with memorizing correctly, you may be trying to play something beyond your skill-set. Please remember to record yourself.
14. FAILING - Practice failing gracefully. Don't try to play perfectly; expect to make some mistakes and be prepared to navigate through them and finish the song you started. Stopping and starting over can lead to bad performance results. Keeping the rhythm and playing through a mistake often gives the opportunity to practice improvisation. Finishing the piece with a good attitude and a smile on your face is what is important to the audience. Do not put too much value on playing perfectly. Most people really don't care. Learn to laugh at your mistakes. This is the best emotional response, especially in public! It gets the audience on your side. NEVER display anger or use profanity.
15. REPERTOIRE - This is the songs that you know. Your *active* repertoire is songs you can play currently and your *inactive* repertoire is songs that require some review to play. You can divide your *active* repertoire into two categories, *playing* and *performing*. If you look like you are preoccupied with thinking, eyes are closed, ignoring the audience, unable to communicate with the band and call out solos, the song is still a part of your *playing* repertoire. When given the opportunity to call out a song and lead them, always be prepared to play a song from your *performing* repertoire. Appoint a "spotter" in the audience to help guide you with your volume levels, etc. Don't turn down an offer to sit in with a band.
16. GREAT PLAYERS - Listen to the classic recordings of the "GREATS" often, and attend live performances as often as you can. Feed your ears and mind a diet of the best examples of playing. Listening to great stuff increases your chances of sounding great. Study and analyze great playing, eventually transcribing it.
17. HARP CARE - Always tap out any loose moisture and wipe your harp down when are finished playing. Moisture is an enemy to the harmonica, and saliva, a digestive juice, is even worse.
18. TEACHING - If you have the temperament and time, find some beginning harp students. This will keep the fundamentals of playing in the forefront of your mind. You don't have to be accomplished to teach.