

## Chapter 1

# What Is This Thing Called Harp?

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Discovering what makes the harmonica such a cool little instrument
- ▶ Considering what it takes to play
- ▶ Understanding how to take your playing beyond the basics
- ▶ Sharing your music with others and visiting the virtual harmonica village

**M**aybe you're attracted to the sweet yet wailing sound of a harmonica. Or maybe you dig the image of a harmonica player onstage who somehow manages to strike a hip-looking pose while apparently eating a sandwich that's hidden in his or her hands. Either way, you know you love harmonica, and you're dying to find out more. For a little background on the harmonica (or as players call it, the harp) and why it's such a great instrument to play, read on.

## *Considering the Harmonica's Coolness*

What makes the harmonica one of the world's best-selling musical instruments? Let me count the ways! Here are just a few reasons that the harp is so cool:

- ✓ **Its sound has immediate appeal.** Its haunting, plaintive wail, which alternates with sweet, soothing tones, makes the harmonica attractive and easy to identify. Even a beginner on harmonica can rock a roomful of listeners for a few minutes. Expert musicians can play on the immediate emotional connection of the harmonica to create extended intimacy and depth of expression. That emotional appeal is one reason the harmonica is so often featured in film scores and on popular records.
- ✓ **It automatically sounds good.** The harmonica was designed to sound, well, harmonious. It's designed to play several notes at once in combinations that are pleasing and make intuitive sense because they automatically support the melody notes. Playing a harmonica is like riding a bicycle that you can't fall off of.

- ✔ **You can take it anywhere — even outer space.** The harmonica is one of the most portable instruments around. In fact, here's a tidbit most folks won't know: The harmonica was the first musical instrument in outer space. On a Gemini space flight in December 1965, astronaut Wally Schirra reported an unidentified flying object in a polar orbit (Santa's sleigh, perhaps?) and then played "Jingle Bells" on a harmonica that he had smuggled aboard.
- ✔ **It's cheaper than dinner out.** Seriously! You can buy a decent harmonica for less than the cost of a restaurant meal. You can't say that about a guitar or synthesizer.
- ✔ **It's close and intimate with the player.** You can enclose a harmonica completely within your hands, and its sound comes out closer to your ears than that of any other musical instrument. Playing the harmonica can be an intimate act, almost like writing in a secret diary.
- ✔ **It has the allure of the outsider.** The harmonica seems to bring out the rebel and the lone wolf in some players. In fact, harmonica technique is built on doing things the designers never imagined and may not even approve of! The harmonica embodies the triumph of creativity over orderly procedures.
- ✔ **It has the appeal of tradition.** Despite the lone wolf aspect, the harmonica expresses musical traditions beautifully, and it's also well accepted within the comfortable confines of community values.

## Harmonica ancestors in the Stone Age

Possibly as early as the Stone Age (and probably in Southeast Asia), someone discovered that if you plucked a bow string and held it up to your open lips, your mouth would amplify the vibrations. Eventually, a clever musician developed a more compact sound source. This person made a simple jaw harp by taking a flat piece of bamboo and cutting a narrow flap (or reed) into its surface. When plucked or blown, the reed would swing freely and its vibration would sound a note. Eventually, people made these *free reeds* out of metal and installed them

in bamboo tubes to create mouth-blown instruments, such as the *khaen* (several tubes bound together in rows like a pan pipe) and the *sheng* (a cluster of tubes inserted into a gourd, which looks like a forest of bamboo growing out of a teapot). To this day, the *khaen* is used in Thai and Laotian social music and courtship rituals, while the *sheng* remains an esteemed instrument in Chinese opera. The metal free reeds used in *khaens* and *shengs* are thought to be the ancestors of the reeds used in harmonicas today.

## *Becoming the Next Harmonica Idol: What It Takes to Play*

Playing a musical instrument doesn't take supernatural abilities. It simply takes desire and application (and, okay, maybe a little talent). So, if you want to play the harmonica, trust your desire — you can totally do this. Once you're willing to try, you just need a few things:

- ✓ **A harmonica.** If you go shopping for a harmonica, you may encounter a bewildering array of types and models at prices that range from the equivalent of a hamburger to a small car! So when you're ready to buy your own harp, check out Chapter 2 for a buying guide to help you select a decent-quality harmonica of the right type at a sensible price.
- ✓ **A little music know-how.** Chapter 3 shows you how to read basic harp tab, which is the main thing you need to understand in order to read the examples and tunes in this book. If you read through all of Chapter 3, you also can pick up some basic music theory (which never hurt anyone).
- ✓ **Your body.** It may surprise you to know that most of the sound you hear when you play a harmonica comes from your lungs, throat, mouth, and hands — not the harmonica. After you get the hang of breathing through the instrument, you can start developing a little rhythm (Chapter 4), and then you can zero in on single notes to play melody (Chapter 5). From there you can start using your body to shape and amplify your sound. At that point, you're ready to tackle just about anything on the harmonica.
- ✓ **Regular practice — and unstructured fun!** The most important thing you can do to become better at playing the harmonica is to play regularly. Keep a harmonica in your pocket, car, purse, briefcase, carry-on bag, or fanny pack — it can pretty much go wherever you do. Find spare moments to play a little. Instead of watching reruns on TV or drumming your fingers on the dashboard at red lights, play your harp. Then, when you have time, try to spend half an hour just playing. As long as you do it frequently and regularly, you'll start to develop some playing ability.



Make sure to have fun and experiment. A regular practice session with goals is great, and I encourage it. But set some time aside for unstructured play. When you explore the instrument, you can have fun discovering new sounds, and you'll learn things about the harmonica that you won't get by sticking to the guided tour.

## Harmonica in the Western World

No one really knows when the free reed made it from Asia to Europe (see the sidebar “Harmonica ancestors in the Stone Age” for more on the free reed’s start in Asia). However, it had certainly arrived by 1636, when a khaen-like instrument was clearly described by French philosopher Marin Mersenne.

Then, in the mid-1700s, a Russian organ builder named Franz Kirschnik fashioned a new kind of free reed. Instead of being cut from the surface that surrounded it, the reed was made separately and attached above the surface. This new type of reed could respond to air flow without being mounted in a tube, which created all sorts of new possibilities. Kirschnik’s reed was incorporated

into organs, pitch pipes, and (starting in the 1820s) harmonicas and accordions.

Credit for inventing the harmonica usually goes to a German teenager named Friedrich Buschmann, who in 1821 strung together a series of pitch pipes to play a scale. By the 1870s, when mass production began and the Hohner company started aggressive overseas marketing, the harmonica had taken on today’s familiar form. By the 1920s, Hohner was making 20 million harmonicas a year, and people worldwide were using them to play folk, popular, and even classical music. Since then, the harmonica has been a fixture on the world music scene.

## Taking Your Talent to the Next Level

After you can play some chords and melody, you’re ready to take your harmonica skills on the road. You may not be ready for the 30-cities-in-15-days kind of road, but you’re definitely prepared to travel the road to greater mastery and satisfaction.

When you’re ready to take your talent to the next level, consider mastering tonguing techniques, which allow you to take full advantage of rhythmic chord-ing to accompany, vary, and accentuate melodies. (Check out Chapters 4 and 7 for more information on these techniques.) Your lungs, throat, tongue, and hands all play a part in making the harmonica one of the most expressive, voice-like musical instruments you can play. So be sure to explore ways to use your body to shape your sound as you advance. (Chapter 6 can help.)

Other important techniques include bending notes up and down in pitch, both to make an expressive wailing sound and to create notes that weren’t designed into the harmonica. Experienced players also regularly play the harmonica in keys that it was never designed for, which works surprisingly well. (Chapter 9 has more information on the art of playing in *positions*, or multiple keys.)



As you master harmonica techniques, you’ll likely want to start using them to play tunes. To work up your melody chops (your playing ability) in the high, low, and middle registers of the harmonica, spend some time with Chapter 10.

To see how song structures work, go to Chapter 11. Then you're all set for choosing songs and tunes to include in your repertoire (Chapter 16).

## *Hanging Out in the Harmonica Village*

Wouldn't it be nice to step out of your practice room and amble down to the main street of the nearest harmonica village? There, you could chill at a harmonica coffeehouse where you make music with your friends, visit a harmonica accessories boutique with all the latest harmonica belts and cases, hit the music store to find great harmonica CDs or get new harps, and maybe hang out at the local harmonica garage to check out the vintage models that have come in for a wash and wax or the hot rods that are being souped up for horsepower and speed. Some parts of this ideal village probably exist in your town, while some parts may require a trip to far-off cities. Still others exist only online. So the village is a virtual place, and one you have to assemble for yourself. The following list sheds light on some tips for finding (or creating) parts of the village, and it shows you how to deal with what you find when you get there.



- ✓ **Sharing your music with others locally:** Getting together with other folks to play music can be enormously satisfying. When you're ready to take the plunge, you need to assemble a repertoire of tunes and understand the musical etiquette of playing with your friends. Also, when you get up in front of an audience, you need to be prepared, read the mood of the crowd, make a good impression, and know how to keep your cool when you make mistakes. If you suffer from stage fright, you need to overcome it as well. Chapter 16 explains all this and more.

An important part of playing for audiences is using sound systems and amplifiers (although playing amplified is also just plain fun). Chapter 17 guides you through the workings of microphones, speakers, amplifiers, and sound systems so you can deal with sound technicians, hear and be heard, and sound great while you strut your stuff.

- ✓ **Making the worldwide connection:** Harmonica players are like other groups of folks who share a common interest — they simply want to connect with others to talk shop, share tall tales, jam, teach and learn from one another, and just hang out. The Internet isn't the only way to do this. In fact, face-to-face encounters can be much more rewarding than cyberspace encounters. How do you connect with other harmonica players locally and nationally? Find out in Chapter 20.
- ✓ **Visiting the repair shop and the accessory store:** Harmonicas can be leaky, and they occasionally go out of tune or even break a reed. However, even if your harps are working okay, you can still spruce them up for better performance, including faster response, brighter and louder tone, easier note-bending, and sweeter sounding chords.



Harp techs usually live in out-of-the-way places where they can concentrate on their work. Instead of shipping your harps away and waiting for several weeks, why not fix them yourself? You can save time and money (and feel empowered by your self-reliance). Check out Chapter 18 for some hints on fixing and upgrading your harmonicas. When you're ready to purchase some accessories to make playing even more fun, check out your local music store. However, you may find a greater selection from online specialty retailers and manufacturers. (Check out Chapter 19 for some information on available harmonica gear.)

- ✓ **Feeding your head (and ears) at the music store:** Over the years, harmonica players have recorded some really great music in an amazing array of styles, from classical harmonica quintets to heavy metal and jug bands. To discover some of harmonica's greatest players and how to hear the inspiring music they've made, check out the recommended listening in Chapter 21.

## Why is it called a harp when it doesn't have strings?

Both "harmonica" and "harp" are borrowed names, and neither one is the only correct name. The harmonica was invented during the Romantic era of Beethoven and Schubert. This was an era when home and garden décor included the *Aeolian harp*, which is a stringed harp that you set outdoors where the wind makes the strings vibrate. Even though the harmonica has reeds sounded by a player's breath instead of strings sounded by the wind, some early harmonica makers referred to their instruments as Aeolian harps by way of poetic association. Other early makers used the term

"mouth harp." Still others borrowed the name of the *glass harmonica*, which is played with a moistened fingertip rubbed on the rim of a glass. Since those early days, Germans have referred to the harmonica both as a *mundharmonika* (mouth harmonica) and as a *mundharfe* (mouth harp). Meanwhile, American books were comparing the harmonica to a harp as early as 1830, and the introduction of a model called the "French Harp" in the 1880s may have helped to popularize calling it a "harp" in the American South.