

Chapter 1

Connecting with the Blues

In This Chapter

- ▶ Expressing yourself through the blues
 - ▶ Understanding how the harmonica fits into the blues
 - ▶ Getting started playing blues harmonica
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The blues is a uniquely American art form that got its start from the collision of African and European cultures in the American South. First documented around the beginning of the 20th century, blues has continued to expand in popularity ever since. Blues began with its original base of African Americans in the rural South and then migrated — first to regional population centers, then to the industrial North, then to the West Coast, and finally to Great Britain and Europe during the 1960s.

At the same time, as African Americans moved on to newer musical styles, middle-class Caucasian Americans took up the blues, both as listeners and players, making the blues a truly integrated style. But even before this passing of the cultural torch, blues exerted a profound influence on other American music styles, including jazz, country, and rock. And blues isn't done extending its reach. I've heard musicians from Brazil creating new flavors of the blues by infusing it with their own traditions. I wouldn't be surprised if a fur-clad Inuit in an igloo somewhere in the Canadian Arctic is whiling away the long winter nights by singing the blues in the Inuktitut language by the light of a whale oil lantern.

The harmonica has been an integral part of the blues odyssey from the beginning. During the golden age of Chicago blues, pianist Otis Spann once remarked, "Harmonica is the mother of the band." (See Chapters 18 and 21 for more on the history and great players of blues harmonica.) Spann's piano playing was beautiful, but that statement has also been sweet music to the ears of harmonica players ever since.

What the Blues Is All About

Blues seems to defy the standards of how notes fit together — a legacy of that cultural collision of African and European musical ideas. Wherever a clear, straight path leads to certainty about how the elements of music combine in a systematic way, blues finds a way around it or simply veers off on a tangent. If you try to relate the blues to that straight path, you can do it, but you have to come up with some sophisticated theories to make it all fit together. Jazz musicians do that, and they do it in a convincing way.

When they feel the need to do so, blues musicians can also come up with sophisticated explanations of how the blues works. But they seldom focus on such explanations because, ultimately, blues is about expressing yourself in a direct (though often sly and humorous) way by using the expressive tools of the blues. Who cares how your cellphone works? You can use it to communicate, and the same goes for the blues.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the basics of how notes fit together, and in Chapter 7 I relate some of the classic methods that blues harmonica players use to adapt the harmonica's notes to the musical forms used in the blues.

Blues is about natural expression

Blues musicians often adapt their song lyrics to the immediate circumstance, commenting on current events or to people in the room by name. At the same time, blues is full of clichés. By having the clichés to fall back on, blues singers can feel free to add or change those clichés in a way that feels comfortable. They don't have to stick to the program, but at the same time, they don't have to come up with something totally original and new. They can change a few words or notes or phrase the rhythm differently and thereby express themselves more vitally in that moment than if they had to perform something locked down on a page. Audience members familiar with the clichés that blues singers draw on appreciate the singers' skills in using the materials.

Playing blues harmonica also uses many clichés that you can alter at will. Short sequences of notes called *licks* are like little sayings that you can drop into a conversation wherever they seem to fit. Blues harmonica players often string together clichés that they may have heard and played many times, but they string them together in a new sequence, maybe change some notes, or alter the rhythm to make it fresh, just as singers do.

Blues gives you a safe kind of musical freedom

Like any art form, blues requires you to hone your craft in order to perform it well. But blues also offers you a lot of flexibility to express yourself without worrying whether you'll fall off the tightrope or commit some terrible faux pas. If you're a beginner, you can get started without fearing that glowering critics will be staring down their noses at you for transgressing some esoteric rule known only to the high mavens of the art. Consider some of the no-fault aspects of the blues:

- ✓ Playing a wrong note in the blues actually takes a lot of effort and planning. Notes that shouldn't fit according to traditional rules of music theory and harmony somehow always seem to work in the blues. I cover a little bit of music theory in Chapter 3.
- ✓ The simplicity of the blues verse makes losing your way kind of hard because you can always tell where you are. Each blues verse is short, consisting of three segments that each begin with a different background chord. You'll learn to identify those chords as you listen and play. You can even repeat the same melody fragment over all three segments of the verse if you want to. I cover this topic in Chapter 7 and extend it in Chapter 17.
- ✓ Repetition is a big part of blues, and so is playing short sequences of as few as three notes — as long as you do so rhythmically. This book is full of these short segments, called *licks* and *riffs*. I go into detail on blues harmonica licks and riffs in Chapters 6, 13, 14, 15, and 18.

Why the Harmonica Is Cool All on Its Own

The harmonica has been a part of the blues pretty much since the beginning. One reason for this is that the harmonica has always been inexpensive; another is that, no matter where you lived, you could buy harmonicas by mail order. But price and availability aren't the only reasons the harmonica is attractive. The harmonica has a natural genius for the blues, which is remarkable when you consider that the people in Germany who designed the harmonica in the early 19th century were interested in playing cheerful, sprightly, German folk melodies. They never envisioned the moaning, wailing sounds that people now associate with the harmonica. (For more on blues harmonica history, have a look at Chapter 21.)

The sound of the blues, built right in

Two things about the blues immediately strike the ear of anyone whose main musical experience has been with the piano's precise sound and European music's do-re-mi scale:

- ✓ **Some of the notes sound flat compared to the do-re-mi scale.** If a blues singer sang a song like “Do-Re-Mi” from *The Sound of Music*, the first thing you'd notice is that some of the notes sound different because they're sung at a lower pitch. The lowered notes are called *blue notes*. Blue notes can sound dark, mean, and hard. They also conflict with the musical background, which breaks rules but is part of the characteristic sound of blues. To help create this effect, blues musicians often play the harmonica in the “wrong” key — a key different from the key that the harmonica is tuned to. Because the scale isn't right for the key, it includes some notes that don't belong, and they just happen to be some of the blue notes. (For more on how notes fit together, see Chapter 3.)
- ✓ **Notes often slide from one to the other.** This slurring sound is called *bending notes*. You start playing a note and then you bend, or slide, away from it, creating a wailing, slithering sound. The harmonica bends notes in a way that creates a strong impression on listeners. (I show you how to bend notes in Chapter 11.)

A third aspect of the harmonica is also very conducive to playing the blues. Playing *chords* (several notes at once) with catchy rhythms is a big part of the blues. The harmonica is built to play chords and works really well for playing chord rhythms, which is also a lot of fun.

The harmonica goes everywhere

The harmonica is one of the most portable instruments in existence. It was the first musical instrument played in outer space, during the early days of space travel, when even an extra ounce of weight was critically important. You can carry one or more harmonicas in your car, purse, backpack, or pocket and play during those odd moments when you have an opportunity. I first started playing by noodling on a harmonica as I walked from class to class during high school. If you play whenever you have an extra few moments, you'll start to get good at it really quickly.

What It Takes to Get Started

Anytime you take up something new, you develop a feel for the style and attitude of doing it. You pick up some of the special lingo, you get acquainted with some of the history and lore, and, most important, you master the specific skills that you use to participate. This is true for golf, quilting, rock climbing, and playing blues harmonica.

Getting the blues in your ears

No one can learn to play blues solely from reading a book (even a book as well written as this one). You get to know the blues only by hearing it. Chapter 18 lists blues harmonica recordings in several styles that will get the sound and the glory of blues harmonica in your ears. Of course, the blues isn't played exclusively on the harmonica. To really broaden the base of your understanding and appreciation, listen to great singers, guitarists, saxophonists, and piano players who may not have played with harmonica players. You might start by listening to classic blues on your favorite alternative radio station or online music channel and letting the sound seep into your ears and your consciousness.

Knowing the story of the blues

The history of the blues is fascinating all by itself, starting as it does in a place and time that is deeply American and yet is almost exotic to most Americans. When you're starting to play the blues, knowing its story enriches your appreciation of the art form. I sketch out this history from a harmonica perspective in Chapter 21, but you can deepen your understanding with some good blues history books written for the general public and also by reading biographies of such blues icons as Little Walter, Muddy Waters, B. B. King, and anyone else whose story has been told in print.

Digging in on Blues Harmonica: Getting Your Playing Going

Wouldn't it be great if you could just buy a harmonica, pick it up, and instantly express your feelings with astonishing fluency, wit, and beauty? I'd love to design the harmonica that would do that. But until I do (or someone beats me to it), I can offer a few recommendations to help you develop your harmonica-playing abilities.

Taking the time to make it happen

Rome wasn't built in a day or, as it turns out, even in a thousand years. Am I trying to tell you that you'll be in a nursing home before you develop any harmonica *chops* (ability)? No, of course not. But skills don't happen by magic. If you're determined, you can become good enough to play in public as a fully fluent musician within about two years. Chapters 18 and 20 can help you develop the skills you'll need as a performing musician.

Maybe you're not looking to become a professional musician. Maybe you just want to take the trip and enjoy the ride but also want to experience a noticeable development in your abilities. The key is to find the time and opportunity to play on a regular basis. A few minutes every day does more for your progress than a marathon three-hour session once every couple of months.



If you really look at your daily activities, you may find some opportunities to play regularly. A few examples:

- ✓ Can you play in your car for a few minutes, before you start for your destination, after you arrive, or in the evening, when you don't want to disturb anyone or be heard making awful noises?
- ✓ Can you find a quiet spot to be alone and practice during your lunch hour?
- ✓ Do you sometimes just kill time channel-surfing or doing something equally fascinating? Maybe you can use that time to play your harmonica instead.



Working with a teacher or coach, whether in person or online, can help you assess your progress, identify what you need to work on, and set goals. Having that person expecting work from you also motivates you to find time to practice. And if you work with a really good player, you'll also gain inspiration by hearing him or her play.

Becoming fluent in the language of blues harmonica

Ever notice how a 3-year-old boy walks almost exactly like his dad? He doesn't study this consciously; he just does it. If you listen to enough blues harmonica, you'll start to absorb and emulate the characteristic approaches to rhythm, phrasing, and many other details that you hear in the playing of others. Chapter 18 lists some great harmonica recordings that can give you a starting point for feeding your blues ear.

However, you won't pick up everything automatically. The only way to know what you're doing (as opposed to what you may think you're doing) is to record yourself and listen back. You'll experience some good surprises ("Wow, I had no idea that sounded so good!") and some not-so-good ones ("Yeesh, that sucks more than I realized!"). Armed with that feedback, you can then strengthen the good stuff, work on improving the bad stuff, and fill in the blanks — the parts of your playing that just sound sort of bland or flavorless.

After you become aware of your playing details, you'll start to develop a keener awareness of what the best players do. At first you'll just want to enjoy the greatness of these artists, but as you become aware of your own playing, you'll want to take out your pencil and clipboard, put on the white lab coat (at least virtually), knit your eyebrows together in a determined and focused way, and say, "Okay, just precisely what is he or she doing that makes that sound so good?" You'll begin to notice several of the nuances that I discuss in Part II, such as *articulation* (how you start and end notes and sequences of notes) and sound textures that you create with your tongue and hands.

As you start playing with the techniques I describe, you'll get to know what they sound like, and you'll start noticing and identifying those techniques in the players you listen to. Instead of going, "Wow, what is that he's doing?" you'll start saying, "Wow, that's a great use of tongue slaps!" Listening and doing will chase each other in a spiral, spurring your development as a player to improve faster and faster.

Getting in the blues harmonica groove

When you're *in the groove*, you're traveling in a way that feels natural and good. Everything seems to move at exactly the right pace and rhythm and falls into place at the right time without strain or effort.



To find your groove when you play the harmonica, first work on the absolute foundations, such as the ones in Part II of this book. No matter what your playing level is, you can always benefit by working the fundamentals, and many advanced players do this regularly. They know from experience that a tiny improvement in the basics magnifies your abilities at every level that's built on those foundations. The more mastery you have over the basics, the easier your groove is to find.

Another thing you can do to find your groove is to listen to as many players and styles as possible and find the ones that really inspire you. When you have something that moves you enough to want to do it, your motivation helps lock you into a groove.

Finally, having fun is a huge element in finding your groove. Some folks believe that the blues is all about heartbreak and misery. It's true that the blues, just like country music and the tabloids in the supermarket, tends to deal in stories of strong emotions and extreme actions and circumstances. But a central message of the blues is to rise above it all and have a good time. Listen for the relaxed humor and the catchy, bouncy grooves that inform a lot of blues tunes. When you feel that groove, hitch your wagon to a goal that inspires you, and focus on the fundamentals, you'll have a powerful combination that will pull everything you need into place as you move along.