

## HARPIN' THE BLUES

In the Blues world the Harmonica is affectionately known as the “Harp”. In the mid 1800’s, cowboys played their harmonicas to calm restless herds, soothe their horses and keep themselves company around the camp fire and on the long trails west. In the United States, the harmonica became very popular as a blues instrument. The Harp was never really featured as a leading instrument in early blues bands, being more about background color to a band’s sound, much as backup singers enhance the lead vocals, but there were some exceptional harp players on the scene. In the 1930’s and early 1940’s a man named John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson became well known. After the Second World War, Chicago became a major centre for the blues, with great players such as Rice Miller “Sonny Boy Williamson II” and Walter Marion Jacobs “Little Walter”. Many consider Little Walter to be the greatest blues Harp player. When Little Walter joined Muddy Water’s band in Chicago and blew his harp into a microphone, he established the harp as an essential element in the urban blues sound. He died in 1968. African American traditions use a different scale than European traditions, so they could not play some of their notes on the harmonica. That is, until someone figured out that you could “bend” a harmonica’s notes. If you play a Harmonica “backwards” – that is, suck air in (draw), in what is called “cross harp” or “second position” – you can take notes and force them down a pitch or two. It is really a completely different technique. It “bends” the draw reed on that hole creating a lower tone. It coincides with the love for this instrument to sound like the voice, to make the instrument say what you say, and to make it warmer, more expressive of the voice’s emotional timbres. In the Blues, a harmonica can cry and wail, express pain and sorrow, and bring an emotional feeling to the listener. Most Blues players prefer a ten hole harmonica (Diatonic) using the “cross harp” technique, taking the key note from the second “draw” hole rather than the fourth “blow” hole, thus one-fourth above the given key. The emphasis on the “draw” allows the notes to be bent more easily, giving the freedom to incorporate the slurs and slides of the human voice. “Bending notes is a tough technique for beginner harmonica players but it is where the secret to getting a “bluesy sound” lies, because it’s the way to get the flat third, fifth and seventh; the blue notes”

**Larry Watt**