

Notation Key



David Barrett Lesson Material & Song Transcriptions 4th Edition

Notation of Technique

The harmonica is a very technique-rich instrument. In order to write music and transcribe solos accurately, I use special symbols along with standard music notation to designate which technique, or combinations of techniques are to be used.

Keys

All of my notation (excluding some chromatic harmonica notation) is written as if you are playing on a C Major Harmonica. This is beneficial to the studying harmonica player to think and become proficient in one key (when picking up any other key of harmonica, the blows, draws and general techniques are the same—the harmonica does the transposing for you). Understand, however, that you can perform ANY song in ANY key by simply using a different-keyed harmonica.

Reference Material

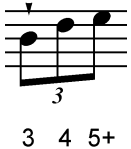
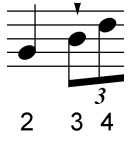
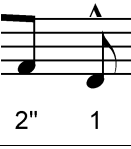
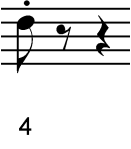
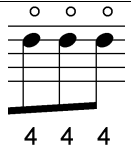
For the first time in blues harmonica history there is an abundance of lesson material available to study. At the end of this Notation Key I have provided a list of lesson material I have authored that I feel will help you to understand more about blues harmonica technique and its application. Next to each technique I will reference to which of my methods teaches it.

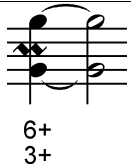
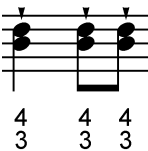
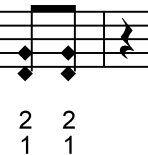
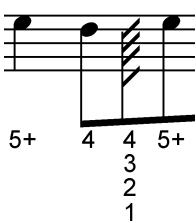
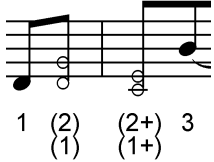
Some of you will be referencing this Notation Key along with your studies at www.bluesharmonica.com. For you next to each technique I will reference which study on the site you can learn more about it. Clicking on this link will take you directly to that lesson (you will need to be a subscribed member to have access to these lessons).

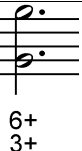
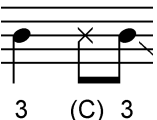
Study Recommendations

When studying a piece of music, start by slowing down the music to a speed where you can hear what is going on well. The Amazing Slow Downer is great for this, found at www.ronimusic.com (lessons on how to use this software is on www.bluesharmonica.com). Study each chorus at a very slow tempo until you can play the entire song accurately at the slow tempo. Once you have all of the notes, rhythms and techniques down for the song, focus on the fine details such as dynamics, note textures, tone changes, vibrato usage and anything else that will help to polish the song. Speed the song up little by little until you reach the original tempo of the song. Try to find a play-along track (available at www.harmonicamasterclass.com) with a similar tempo and feel to practice with. Finally, think about how you'll describe the song to a band if you wish to perform the song on stage.

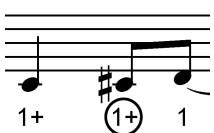
Basic Notation & Common Techniques

Technique	Example	Description	Reference
Blow & Draw		When a hole number stands by itself (3) the hole is to be inhaled (draw). When a hole number is followed by a plus (5+) the hole is to be exhaled (blow).	All Books
Bend Slash(es) next to hole number		For each degree of a bend on the harmonica a small slash will be used following the hole number. The 3 draw half step bend (B-flat) is notated with one slash (3'). The 3 draw whole step bend (A) is notated with two slashes (3"). The 3 draw minor third bend (A-flat) is notated with three slashes (3''').	C1 p60-68 BHTDVD12 S1 Bending Study 1
Slur Curved line above or below connecting two note heads of different pitch		The slur indicates to slide (or in our case bend) smoothly from the pitch of one note to the pitch of another note. This symbol is also used for the Tie . The tie connects to notes of the SAME PITCH and directs you to combine the duration of the two notes.	General Notation
Dip Small "V" shape above a note		Note starts bent (around a quartertone or half step) and releases quickly. Some players use the articulations: Ya, Gya, Dya, Dwa, Tya or Kya. A dip is a more concise way to notate this technique compared to writing out the bent note with a slur to the non-bent note. When a dip is present on a bent note (3' B-flat), you will start below the pitch of the bent note (slightly below B-flat)—ending at the notated pitch (B-flat).	C1 p69 BB p18 BHTDVD12 Bending Study 2
Cut Small upside-down "V" above a note		The opposite of a Dip—note starts at the natural (unbent) pitch and quickly bends downward (around a half step). The articulations Dow, Gow or Cow work well.	BH2 p11 William Clarke Study
Staccato Dot above note head		Note still receives its full note value, but is played short. (such as a "Ta," not holding the note after articulating).	General Notation Bending Study 3
Shake Three slashes above or below note head(s)		Shake between lower and upper notes. Rule of thumb is to start with the lower note and then start the shake to the upper note. Most draw shakes start with a dip. You can open your embouchure a bit to allow a little of the other note to bleed for a dirtier shake. You can also shake in an octave or fake-octave embouchure.	BB p17 C1 p42 BHTDVD12 Blues Harmonica Fundamentals
Slap Small open circle above note head		Same as standard tongue block (lips over four holes, tongue blocks three left holes), but the tongue starts off the harmonica, sounds the chord, and then slaps down to leave one note sounding (similar to saying "Hal"). This is considered a common tongue block technique and is not notated in my newer books and transcriptions.	BB p24 C2 p18 BHTDVD12 EX3, BBC Tongue Blocking Study 2
Flutter Tongue Same notation as shake, but notice there is no second note for a shake		Same embouchure as slap, but tongue travels on (single note) and off (chord) the harmonica to create a "flutter-like" effect.	C2 p26 BHTDVD12 EX3, BBC Tongue Blocking Study 3

Side-Flutter Tongue Small squiggly line between note heads		Same embouchure as flutter tongue, but tongue moves left to right. Typically the flutter is between octave notes; but you can use the tip of your tongue, covering fewer holes, for a larger chord sound.	Little Walter's "Off The Wall," 5th Chorus
Glissando Line ascending or descending to note head		Slide between the two notes that are connected by the glissando. When there is no starting note for the glissando, slide from two or more notes above or below the target note, depending on the direction of the line.	C1 p38 BHTDVD12
Note Combination		The addition of an upper note for a thicker texture (sometimes referred to as a double-stop). The volume of the upper note (how much air you allow to flow into the upper hole) depends on how strong a chord sound you want. If only a little bit of the upper note is added, I will use parentheses on the upper tablature hole number to show that only a little bit of air should leak into the upper hole.	General Music Notation Blues Harmonica Fundamentals
Quartertone Small plus (+) above a note head		Half of a half step bend. Basically, it is a very slight bend. The example at left shows a half step bend for the tablature on the 3 draw (3' B-flat). The music notation shows the half step bend B-flat. The plus (+) above the note head indicates that the note should be played a quartertone higher than notated. For this instance you would play a pitch between the 3 draw and 3 draw half step bend. Quartertones are used often in blues—especially on the 3 draw in second position. If you do not bend enough, your line will sound very major (non-bluesy). If you bend the 3 draw too much, your line will sound very dark (more towards sounding minor than bluesy). You will see in the notation (and hear on recordings) that players will use many variations of the bend on the 3 draw. Listen carefully and do your best to match the player's pitch.	C2 p14 BHTDVD34 Bending Study 4
Grace Note Small note with slash on stem		A grace note indicates to play a note quickly before the next note. A grace note is used in place of a faster notated rhythm in the cases where the note is played so quickly that it does not make sense to place it in the normal stream of a line.	General Music Notation
Chuk Diamond-shaped note heads		This is a special notation used where a player hits a set of notes with a strong, staccato attack. Articulations for this are commonly: chuk, tut or kuk. Listen to Junior Well's instrumental "Chitlin Con Carne" for a great example.	Junior Well's "Chitlin Con Carne"
Pull Slash-shaped note heads		Tongue covers all four holes (no notes sound), slight pressure is built and tongue releases to sound chord. Unlike the Lift, the Pull is an articulation (more common).	BB p30 BHTDVD12 EX3, BBC, BH1 Tongue Blocking Study 3
Rhythmic Breathing & Ghosted Notes Thin, hollow-shaped note heads		Rhythmic Breathing is used by players for rhythmic effect between main musical lines. These lines are not just breaths on the harmonica, but rhythmic elements that if not played present the song differently than the original. These should be played very softly. Ghosted Notes are basically the same, but are notes felt more than heard—note(s) may not sound, just the player's articulation is heard.	Little Walter's "Rocker"

Octave Embouchure		An embouchure where four to five holes are covered by the lips and the tongue blocks the middle holes to sound the notes on the left and right, producing an octave. All common tongue block techniques can be used on the octave (slaps, pulls, side-pulls, pull-slaps, flutters, side-flutters, etc.).	BB p31 C2 p21 BHHTDVD12 Tongue Blocking Study 4
Fake Octave		Same as octave embouchure, but notes are not octaves (in our example at left the interval of a flat-7th is played).	BB p31 C2 p21 BHHTDVD12 Tongue Blocking Study 4
Cough X-shaped note head with (C) in tablature		Similar to a Ghosted Note, but a strong cough is used to pronounce the note.	Magic Dick's "Whammer Jammer," 2nd Chorus
Wa	Wa	Note sounds with hands closed tightly, then hands open quickly creating a "Wa" sound.	BHTDVD12 Cupping & Hand Effects
Roll	Roll	Note presented with the Spanish "R," as in "Rosa" or the top-back of the tongue like the Hebrew "Ch" as in "Chaiim."	Big Walter Horton's "La Cucaracha"
Double Vibrato	Double Vibrato	Throat vibrato with slow hand tremolo.	William Clarke's "Lollipop Mama," 1st Chorus Tremolo & Vibrato
Straight Eighths	Straight Eighths	A passage where the rhythm moves from a swing (triplet-based) feel to a straight (eighth note-based) feel.	William Clarke's "Blowin' the Family Jewels," 6th Chorus

Chromatic Harmonica Specific Notation

Technique	Example	Description	Reference
Button In Circled hole numbers		Slide button in when this notation is present. In some older method books you will see the hole number in parenthesis.	BBC Blues Chromatic Study 2
Slide Jab Staple-like shape above a note head		Start with the slide button out and press the slide button in quickly to perform the notated note. In the example at left the 5 draw would be played first, with the slide coming in quickly after. The note produced when the slide is out is similar to a grace note.	Mitch Kashmar's "Crazy Mixed Up World"
Low Octave "L" next to hole number		On 16-hole chromatic harmonicas (such as the Hohner Super Chromonica model 280C) there is a range of four holes that is one octave lower than the lowest holes of the standard 12-hole chromatic. These holes are also labeled as 1 through 4, confusing them with the standard range 1 through 4. In notation, an "L" before the hole number designates that it is to be played in the low register. In some older methods hole numbers are shown in Bold instead of having the "L" indication.	Little Walter's "Blue Light"

Techniques Not Notated

Technique	Description	Reference
Pucker	An embouchure where you use your lips to obtain a single note and any other desired note combinations. When no obvious tongue block technique can be heard (such as slap, octave or flutter), it can be very difficult to hear whether the player is tongue blocking or puckering.	BB1 & CC1 Blues Harmonica Fundamentals
Tongue Block	An embouchure where you use your tongue to obtain a single note and any other desired note combinations. Mouth commonly placed over four holes with the tongue (top) blocking the three holes to the left, leaving the single note on the right side of your embouchure to sound.	BB p24 C2 p18 BHTDVD12 EX3, BBC Blues Harmonica Fundamentals
Pull-Slap	An articulate slap. Same as a slap, but tongue starts on the harmonica like the Pull before it pulls off to sound the slap. This can be used in a single-note or split embouchure. Though almost all great players use this technique, you can hear it used most clearly from Rice Miller.	BH2 p18
Side-Pull	Tongue covers all four holes (no notes sound), right side of tongue pulls back to sound single note on right. Similar to pucker “Ta.” This can be used in single-note or split embouchure.	BH2 p18
Lift	Similar to a Pull, with no articulation. Tongue releases after a tongue block to sound the chord in the embouchure. Can be used in place of any Pull if a softer sound is desired.	Same Idea as Pull
Throat Tremolo	Throat opens and closes (vocal chords). No change in pitch.	BB p24 C1 p42 BHTDVD12 Tremolo & Vibrato
Vibrato	Throat opens and closes with tongue relaxed, allowing it swing in and out of air stream to cause change in pitch.	C2 p15 BHTDVD12 Tremolo & Vibrato
Hand Tremolo	Hand (right hand for a right-handed person) opens and closes rhythmically.	BB p7 BHTDVD12 Tremolo & Vibrato

Special Note Regarding Transcriptions of Technique

In regards to transcriptions (where I write down what another artist has performed), It is not practical to notate every action taken in performing a note or sound on the harmonica. Over-notating can also make a transcription very difficult to read. In my lesson material I make it clear what I’m using and what I expect you to do. In regards to what another player is using, sometimes there is no way to determine the exact embouchure that was used. For these reasons, I do not specify embouchure (tongue blocking or pucker) for each note. In some passages it will be obvious to you. From techniques such as octaves, that you must tongue block; in others, such as with triple tonguing, you will know to use the pucker embouchure; and in still others you will have the choice of which embouchure you feel presents the passage best. Choose the embouchure YOU believe best reproduces a specific artist’s sound—or produces the sound YOU want.

Study the lesson material I have written (www.bluesharmonica.com, books, CDs, DVDs) so that you become familiar with the great wealth of technique and movement the blues harmonica has to offer. With time your ears will be able to tell you how much of one or another technique is used. Listen carefully to the use of tone variation, vibrato, dynamics and shading of notes—this cannot be notated effectively. Use notation and transcriptions as a guide and let YOUR EARS tell you what is going on in a song.

Method Book & Video Abbreviation Key

Clicking on the link next to a book or DVD will bring you to a page with detailed information about the method and an option to purchase at www.harmonicamasterclass.com.

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School of the Blues Lesson Series

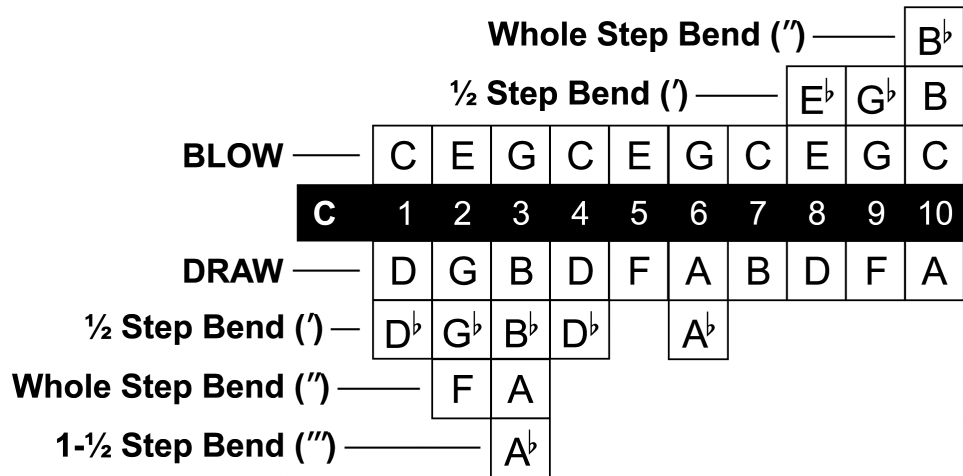
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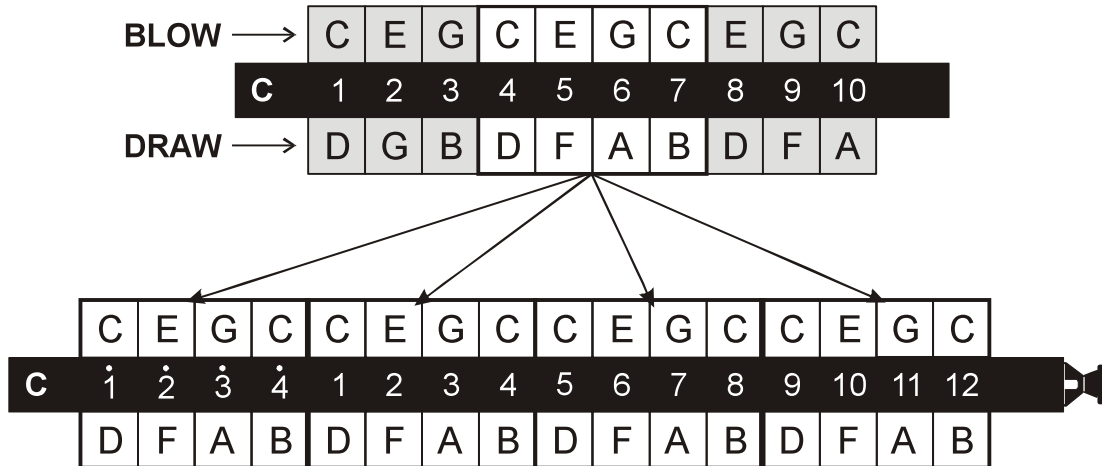
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Thanks to Diane Smith for proofreading and editing of this notation key

Standard Note Bending



Chromatic Note Layout (Referenced from Diatonic Harmonica)



12 Bar Blues Progression

I															
IV							I								
V				IV				I				V			