

# HARMONICA

## *happenings*

A quarterly publication of the Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica



*Harmonetta 101*  
*The Sgro Brothers*  
*& a New Rascals Movie*



Winter, 2011 Vol. 45 No. 1





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# In this issue:

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## Contents:

- 6 THE DON HENRY TRIO —**  
The tale of the legendary harmonica trio continues.  
Part 2 of 3.
- 12 HARMONETTA 101—**  
Phil Lloyd gets the inside scoop on this little known instrument  
from one of the masters, Bob Herndon.
- 17 RASCALS AT THE 'ROUGE—**  
A Harmonica Rascals movie 50 years in the making.
- 21 SPAH 2011 Factsheet—**  
The early word on the next convention!
- 22 Harmonicas & Health—**  
Two reports from the SPAH 2010 convention.
- 26 BEHIND THE BASH—**  
What it's like to be the host club at a SPAH convention.
- 28 Spotlight—**  
The one and only Sgro Brothers.

## Harmonica Events

For the latest information on these events, see the  
Events page on the SPAH website: [www.spah.org](http://www.spah.org)

**Jon Gindicks' Blues Harmonica Jam Camp**  
Clarksdale, MI May 24-28 and Sept 27-Oct 1  
[www.bluesharmonicajamcamp.com](http://www.bluesharmonicajamcamp.com)  
or call Jon at 310-457-8278

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[www.hillcountryharmonica.com](http://www.hillcountryharmonica.com)  
or contact Adam Gussow at [asgussow@aol.com](mailto:asgussow@aol.com)

**SPAH 2011**  
Virginia Beach, VA Aug 9-13  
[www.spah.org](http://www.spah.org)  
or contact Elizabeth Atkison at [ema3395z@hotmail.com](mailto:ema3395z@hotmail.com)

## Harmonica happenings

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SPAH, Inc.  
P.O. Box 865  
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EDITOR & PUBLISHER	JP Pagán
ASSOC. EDITOR	Jaine Rodack
COPY EDITOR	Danny Wilson

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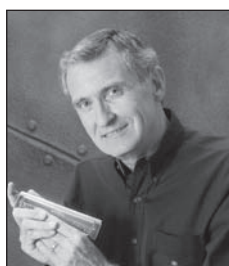
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# STEP RIGHT UP



half with great expertise and dedication. Without this, SPAH would not survive and we all know that we want it to live on.

With this in mind, I have appointed Winslow Yerxa with one person from our membership, yet to be announced, to head an election committee to seek candidates to run for the office of president and vice president. A little early you might ask? Not so when you consider that the only opportunity to chat openly with the candidates will be this year at the SPAH convention because the election occurs in April of 2012. This year we will have a "Meet the Candidates" forum at SPAH where the candidates can introduce themselves, share their vision for the future, tell you why you should vote for them and answer your questions. This is a first for SPAH, but the changes and growth demand it. Further, candidates must become fully informed of SPAH's internal activities prior to taking office so he/she can hit the ground running.

I feel it is an honor to be an administrator for SPAH. Hard work yes, but great satisfaction in knowing that I am giving back to an organization that has given so much to me and everyone else. The positions of president and vice president will require many business skills to which Winslow will speak, but most of all dedication and hard work. These are not "sit back and let others do the work" positions.

I ask that all of you that have the skills and experience consider running for office. Let Winslow know you are interested — or let him know of others that might qualify— at Winslowyerxa@yahoo.com. This is your SPAH and your opportunity to give back.

Soon, we will be converting our membership program to an on-line system with a company called MemberClicks. We will begin this year and complete it by 2012. With the new system, we will further our goal of complete integration of SPAH's business in one location which provides access from any part of the nation. This will be a huge step forward and members will also benefit. Roger Bale will be on board with us through 2012 but we will need another membership director to start training. This is very important and I ask those of you who may be interested to contact me for further discussion.

I also need a financial person to begin learning the duties of SPAH treasurer. If you have this experience, please contact me.

By the way, we have experienced some difficulties with distribution of *Harmonica Happenings*. Please let us know if you are not receiving your copy.

Thanks and keep warm,

Tom  
(775) 853-5118  
Tstryker1@gmail.com

Hopefully, the winter is starting to subside. We have all experienced major climate changes that were not expected while our economy, national and world affairs continue to be in turmoil. The best part is we are overcoming all of this and making progress.

Looking forward and rearward, it is now time to start planning for the administration change that will occur in August of 2012. That is when SPAH will have a new president, vice president, cabinet and directors. This is important stuff and not to be taken lightly. SPAH has been moving in a very positive direction and it must continue. Easy to say, but not easy to accomplish without leadership.

Leadership comes at a price for individuals. There is no compensation for the administrators except their paid trip to the conventions. Throughout the year, the administration works diligently on your be-

# WHAT IS SPAH?

SPAH is an organization whose objective is to preserve and respect the colorful past of the harmonica, while advancing its acceptance, in all its many forms, as a bona fide musical instrument. Among the membership are individuals and entire families, accomplished musicians as well as beginners, and people of all ages. Many members have played or do play the harmonica professionally. Their music styles, ranging through Country, Blues, Popular, and Classical, can be enjoyed via recordings or live performances.

The many benefits of SPAH will be available to you as a member. You are welcome to join SPAH regardless of playing ability or style. SPAH also welcomes members who just like to listen to harmonica music. You will be joining people from around the world to preserve and advance the harmonica. For more information on SPAH visit our website at [www.spah.org](http://www.spah.org).

## JOIN SPAH - *The Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica*

### WHAT SPAH DOES:

- \* Sponsors an annual International Harmonica Convention featuring classes, entertainment by professional harmonica players, and camaraderie.
- \* Distributes information on harmonicas and harmonica playing
- \* Recognizes and honors those who preserve and advance the harmonica
- \* Encourages the formation of local harmonica clubs
- \* Supports groups organizing harmonica conventions
- \* Maintains a website at [www.spah.org](http://www.spah.org)
- \* Sponsors an online harmonica discussion group and an online harmonica club news service

### MEMBER BENEFITS:

- \* Subscription to **Harmonica Happenings**, our quarterly magazine with harmonica news from around the world including seminar and convention listings, articles on playing techniques, repairs, harmonica clubs and famous harmonica players and groups, and information on recently released recordings and harmonica products.
- \* Discounts on SPAH's annual International Harmonica Convention

### NEW MEMBER SPAH APPLICATION

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COUNTRY (if other than USA) \_\_\_\_\_

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#### I Play These Harmonicas:

☐ Diatonic   ☐ Chromatic   ☐ Chord  
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#### Other Harmonica-Related Activities:

☐ Compose   ☐ Arrange  
☐ Teach   ☐ Collect Harmonicas

Enclose \$45 for individual membership or \$60 for Family. U.S. funds only, made payable to SPAH, Inc. Mail to: Membership Director, SPAH, Inc., P.O. Box 865, Troy, MI 48099-0865

If you prefer, you can fill out the membership form and pay your membership fee using a credit card by logging onto the SPAH website: [www.spah.org](http://www.spah.org).

## WINTRY MIX



I love winter. Maybe that's why we at *HH* seem to hang on to the Winter issue a little longer than we probably should. While a mention of winter may hit many of you like an unexpected blast of cool, Arctic air on an otherwise fine spring morning, I hope you notice a hint of bloom and color in this issue, a bright start to the new year.

Speaking of the new year, we actually had so many stories from last year's SPAH convention that not all of them fit into our post-convention issue. So two of this issue's features will be from the convention: our Harmonicas & Health report and a look at the convention from the host club's perspective.

Perhaps coincidentally, you may notice a lot of the rest of the issue is a bit of a look back, too. Charles Spranklin's odyssey as part of the Don Henry trio is now in its second installment (and it's a hot one!) and Al Smith finally finishes a movie he started over 50 years ago, bringing never-before-seen footage of the Harmonica Rascals to a new generation of harmonica players.

And since we like to educate as well as entertain, Phil Lloyd presents us with an introductory tour of the Harmonetta, a little known cousin of the harmonica which seemed to be in popular demand at last year's convention and will likely be much more visible at this year's SPAH.

Rounding out the issue are a spotlight on the Sgro Brothers and

a peek at what's in store for SPAH 2011, including some of our performers and seminars and information on special room rates (if you can't wait, just head on over to page 21 right now!).

Remember, online registration for the convention opens up soon ([www.spah.org](http://www.spah.org)), and registration packets will be going out with the next issue of *HH*, which you should have around May 1st.

I'd like to thank Eero Grundström and Paul Charette for the photos they contributed to this issue, and I'd like to remind the rest of you that if you have harmonica-related photos, please send them to me or, better yet, post them to our Flickr group, Harmonica World.

Thanks as always for dropping by, and please drop me a line and let me know how we're doing: what you like, what you don't and what you want more of.

### Submit your own content to *Harmonica Happenings*!

Articles, photos, ads, etc. must be submitted to *Harmonica Happenings* by the dates listed below for inclusion in the specified issue

Spring issue - March 15  
Summer issue - June 15  
Fall issue - September 15  
Winter issue - December 15

Submit items to:

JP Pagán  
Phone: 347-564-3073 Email: [HHeditor@mac.com](mailto:HHeditor@mac.com)

# THE DON HENRY TRIO?

## Part II

By Charles Spranklin

*NOTE: The last chapter ended with the three of us having the weirdest New Year's Eve of our lives. Now for a closer look at our show business existence, day by day.*

Our lack of experience in show business gave us the impression that we would ordinarily work five days a week performing and sometimes have our weekends off. It didn't take long for reality to leak into our fantasies of show business. The reality was, there were a couple of months of seven day work weeks with 4 or 5 shows a day, and there were four days a week with only 3 shows a day, and several Borscht Circuit weekends with double and triple gigs a night at different hotels, and there were two days a week with 1 show a day. There was one gig a week or every other week, and then just weeks of nothing at all. If we were away from home, that was when we had to find somewhere to layover that we could afford—in other words, to mooch on someone. For those of you who don't know the word “moocher” or to “mooch” it means someone that imposes themselves on an acquaintance or relative to take care of them physically or monetarily and are expecting the living status to which they are accustomed. Don soon made it clear to us that there was no shame in mooching for show folk.

We had just closed a date in Washington, DC, so who was the closest “mooch-ee” we could find? My father, who lived an hour away in Elkridge, Maryland welcomed us with our promise that we'd only be there a day or two. We were treated well for the first week, after that the next two weeks became a bit abusive on my father's pockets. We didn't have anything to offer him for his total hospitality. Finally a booking came up. We offered “thank yous” to Pop, that's all, and off we went. Another layoff occurred in Boston. Again, who was close enough to mooch on? Don's mother lived in Lynn, Mass. Mama Quagenti was delighted to put us

up for a day or two, or many more. We even picked up a local one nighter but remained under the wings of Mama Q. After that date I came home exhausted. I decided to bunk out early. I undressed and was about to climb into bed. The room was dark as I drew down the covers, but still I saw something odd between the sheets. I turned on the end table light and saw the entire bed was covered with ravioli. I called Don in. He looked a bit bewildered at the sight. Momma frequently did massive ravioli preparation days. To dry out the pastas, it was customary to spread them on a bed sheet and put them under the covers. He called her in. She was embarrassed but spent the next hour removing and assorting them on another bed. I fell asleep in the living room watching TV.

When no mooch-ees were available for our multiple day or weekly bookings, we had to find pay lodgings. The saving grace for Kim and I was that local hotels gave substantial discounts for the entertainers working at nearby entertainment establishments. Show folk were still considered the needy of the world. In our case, we fit the mold completely. Among those charitable facilities, the Milner Hotels were our favorite. Nightly sleepovers for us would range from 2 to 5 dollars or 8 to 10 a week, all negotiable, depending on how pathetic we were. We could almost afford that, but we did have to cut out a meal or two a day. Actually, the accommodations were quite respectable and roomy. It never occurred to us to double bunk. No, we had to have our own rooms, you know, for possible visitors.

Over long period layoffs, I stayed in Elkridge with my father. He had patience with me alone. In Baltimore I hooked up with a number of harmonica players our age that were local pros. One especially good group was the Al-Fred-Al Trio fronted by the great Al Logan. Al's playing was the closest thing to Jerry Murad, ever. The trio did Harmonicats numbers as did most trios of that era. I never went to Maryland without connecting with Al. That made the layoffs more palatable. Al and



I became lifelong friends. I will speak about him again later. (See chapter 3)

Bobby and Clair worked on several bookings with us and finally gave Don a green light for us to reach for the good ole big time. All of our current dates were from small-time agents. What we were not privy to was that Don was pitching to sign up with the William Morris Agency. The Don Henry Trio still had a salable name. The agency signed us on.

Out of the blue our new agent booked us into the famous Casino Theatre in Toronto Canada; our first shot at a week in a foreign country was very exciting for Kim and me. We were on the bill with Kay Starr. "Who's Kay Starr?" "She's the singer who has the hit record of 'Wheel Of Fortune'," Don answered. For me, it went in one ear and out the other. I never heard of her and had only a vague recollection of the record but was never impressed with it. Enough said, let's get going. "Are we going to see Niagara Falls," Kim asked? "You bet we are. We leave tomorrow." Yippee!

When we arrived at the Theatre, there were literally hundreds of people lined up for tickets. It looked like Sinatra at the Paramount on Broadway. "What are these people doing here?" "They came to see Kay Starr, nutcase," Don shot back! I still couldn't comprehend what this bedlam or Kay Starr was all about. Who cares, the first show is at noon and we're on second. That was enough to concentrate on. We unloaded the props and assembled them, put our makeup on and got into our suits. I snuck upstairs to see what was happening in the theater. I peeked out of the stage curtains and almost panicked. It looked like ten thousand people were stuffed into the theater. This was way out of my league. A really pretty woman approached me and asked if she could take a look. She let out a joyful giggle at the sight. She turned to me and said "Thanks" and walked away. "Gee, she's cute," I thought. I ran downstairs to our dressing room; oh yes, they gave us our own large dressing room, another new experience. My panic was obvious to Don. He was concerned. His reaction, "If you blow this, I'll beat your brains out!" The first act finished their turn to thunderous applause. The PA voice announced us; our music started. We grabbed the barrel and out we went. It's hard to explain but it took about three steps on stage to make me realize that I was where I was meant to be. I went into

auto mode. We did a fine job and got bigger applause than the first act and a call for an encore. I don't think I was ever again afraid on stage.

Coming off stage, we were soaked with sweat. We doffed our cloths and hung them up to dry. In my

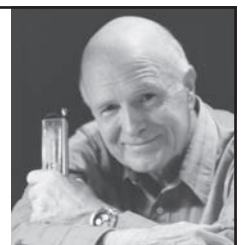
“FROM THAT MOMENT ON,  
DAY AFTER DAY, I NEVER  
MISSED A MOMENT THAT  
SHE WAS ON STAGE.”

soaked underwear, I pulled up a chair and threw my feet up on a table. I didn't realize it but our dressing room was right under the stage mike. I could hear the rest of the show. Then it happened; the PA voice announced Kay Starr. The audience went berserk at the sight of her. The band had to keep repeating the introduction to her song. Wow, this is wild. Finally she sang. It was a rousing upbeat number to open with. "Hey, she's good." Again she calmed the audience. She spoke a few words to them of thanks for the reception. The music for the next number started. It was a slow ballad, "I Want To Be Loved." About 8 bars in, I realized that something was happening to me. By the end of the first chorus, I was mesmerized. By the end of the song, I was emotionally hooked. I grabbed any clothes that I could put on my back to get upstairs and see this miracle. Oh no, it's the woman that asked to look through the curtain! That was it for me. A few moments ago I had no idea or a care about who Kay Starr was. Now I couldn't think of anything else. From that moment on, day after day, I never missed a moment that she was on stage.

She was a wonderful person to be around. I spent as much time in her presence as I could. Of course, I never got beyond the adoring fan stage but she knew what I was about and she treated me like a fellow performer. She

CHARLES SPRANKLIN  
IS A LONG-TIME  
CONTRIBUTOR TO  
HARMONICA  
HAPPENINGS.

YOU CAN  
CONTACT HIM AT:  
CSPRANK@AOL.COM



would compliment me on my playing and the particulars of my part in the act. At least I knew she was watching me. I took whatever kindness I could get from her. Several months later, we were booked with her into the Capital Theater in Washington, DC. I was ecstatic about being with her again. By this time we became more family. I could be in her presence without obviously mooning. I was passing her dressing room one day and she called for me to come in. She said she wanted to take a picture of us together. She grabbed a stagehand and gave him her camera. She knew how I felt about her and wanted to do this for me. She cuddled in close to me and the picture was taken. About a month later, she sent me the picture. I'm looking at it on my wall right now. It's 59 years old. There is something very peculiar about it. As we cuddled together, she placed two fingers of her right hand onto my jacket lapel. Either it was a thoughtful gesture or she was picking my pocket. I'll live with whatever her thoughtful gesture was. After the DC date, I never saw her again. Several years ago I met the great singer Margaret Whiting at a party. At that time she was doing a diva act with Rosemary Clooney and Kay. I asked her about Kay. She said, "I just got off the phone with her a minute ago." "Wow," I said, "could we call her back, I'd love to talk to her." She said, "She called me; I don't know where she is." Damn! Sadly for me, that was that.

In spite of Kay's record-breaking box-office show in Montreal, we still did the usual club dates and Borscht Circuit weekend runs. Only now we were booked into the cream gigs of the mountain resorts of New York. Resorts like Grosingers, The Concord, The Neville, Kutcher's, Browns, plus an endless list of other resorts offering 48 hours of top entertainment. The Don Henry Trio still had clout.

Most of the star acts from all areas of entertainment—top recording artists, vaudeville acts and especially the, "bluer the better" comedians—enthusiasti-



*Kay Starr and Charles Spranklin*

cally sought the weekend bookings on the Borsht Circuit. The pay was usually good, the food was non-stop and free, the sporting facilities were the best, especially at the pools where the hunt for game was obvious and plentiful. There were all levels of communal interaction, romance, gluttony and instant fulfillment, in short, the "anything-goes" wild life.

Our routine was to travel in the Black from Manhattan, and back for each day's dates even if we were booked for two or three days. Don insisted on it. The trip to the dates was usually quite tedious considering the hot summer days and no air-conditioning in the Black, but there was a bonus for the after midnight trip home. There was always a party. A party? Oh yeah, at the Red Apple Diner, the halfway mark to back to Manhattan, open 24 hours a day.

It was almost mandatory public relations for most of the performers to stop for a midnight snack and some fun mixing at the Red Apple. The place was aglow with Max Factor faces and shirt-neck tissues, ours included. To say the least, we rubbed elbows with and made a lot of celebrity level friends. Spontaneous performances would break out at the drop of an Eb note to be seen by any of the agents that were there, especially among the comics and singers. We could easily spend a couple of hours in the middle of the night being entertained by some brilliant talents and a share of moderate talents. We even took our turn at flashing our harmonicas with a ditty or two. We actually got calls from the other performers to play. We made a good impression on them and the agents.

The wildest of the entertainment was the clash of the impersonators. Three or four of the top mimics in the business would start a challenge from all sides of the diner just to outdo each other for their vocal and physical impressions of any personality the audience would call out. The crowd would be the judges of the winner. Each week the challenges got more and more entertain-

ing. I often thought that these sessions would make a great Broadway show.

The hot dates for us were still coming in. It required putting a lot of miles on the Black but that was show business. We were getting one or two week bookings in some very ritzy nightclubs, on the bill with stars like Nat Cole, Mel Torme, Dinah Washington, Marion Morgan, Tony Bennett, Lambert, Hendricks and Ross and a bunch more giant talents that at this moment I can't even remember. It kills me to say that. It all meant so much to me being with these great stars. Indecently, I realize that many of you younger folks reading this will have no idea of who these names that I am brazenly dropping are or were. If you're a computer person, take a few minutes and google them. You'll be glad you did.

Nightclub club gigs were always, to say the least, interesting, if not very dangerous. Remember, Kim and I were just 19 year olds and were far from hardened pros in the nightclub world. Nightclubbing for us was like the college education that neither of us ever got. Considering that this kind of education lasted only two years, I would say that both of us probably got a C+. The positive side was in honing our talent, becoming professionals. The negatives were mainly being unprepared in the area of social graces that were essential for survival in showbiz, and the really tough one, hit and run and romances. Tread as we may, only our noses were above water. Fortunately, we survived.

The nightclub world in those days was dazzling, to say the least. Many of the clubs went all out with elaborate productions around top stars of the time and hot backup acts, full orchestras, set design, lighting and, of course, showgirls. Oh yes... SHOWGIRLS. All they had to do was strut seductively across the stage, 90% naked, and framed in exotic plumage casting glorious dancing highlights over their... things. They were the showgirls. The dancing girls were called ponies. More later.

The stars on stage gave their all, the tabled audiences drinking constantly, in some cases to the state of belligerence among themselves and eventually toward the stage. Frankly, it scared Kim and me. None of it fazed Don. He was a hardened trouper.

Frequently, as expected, local mobsters would arrive with their entourages and muscle a few tables for themselves. Of course, they were immediately catered to royally. Later, the pony girls would be required to decorate their tables. This bothered me a lot. To me, the girls looked scared. Usually some of the acts were expected to join the party. Don and Kim would take the hint. I didn't. Was I brave or just stupid? Stupid yes, but being from the Bronx and being associated with them for part of my life, I had my fill of that ilk.

The final insult came after a late night show in a Rhode Island nightclub. We were pooped out. I was just climbing into bed when I got a frantic call from Don to get dressed and get back to the club. I started to demure but he yelled at me to "Get here right now." I got there to find out we had to give a performance. What?? Don blurted out that the local mob boss was at the bar demanding that we give him a personal show. I turned to leave and ran into the club manager who was very nervous. The star of the show just finished her turn. She was a wreck. He made it very clear to me that I would pay dearly if I bugged out. I knew what he meant. We walked into the dimly lit bar at about 1:30am to see our audience sitting by himself on a stool at the bar. Not far from him were two figures standing in the dark. He just indicated with his hand that we start playing. The manager urgently whispered out "Play, play!" We went through the act. Our audience never once applauded. Later, the manager reported to Don that the "audience" didn't like the kid in the middle.

Most of the clubs always had something unusual to offer, either in rules or setup. The king of those clubs was the Bellevue Casino in Montreal, a top rated gig. The place was fabulous but really peculiar. When we ar-

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rived there was no apparent entrance to back stage. We were directed to go through the stage curtains to get to our dressing room. Aside from one or two closed-door rooms obviously for the stars, the rest of the cast was distributed into a maze of connecting tents that served as sort-of dressing rooms. The specialty acts with props got the slightly larger tents while all of the others got seven by sevens with a mirror, a dressing table and a small sink with running water. The showgirls and the ponies got two immense tents with ample room size, costume racks and long, multi-stationed dressing tables on both sides for 10 or so of them at a time to dress and make up. The only privacy flaps were on the girls' tents and rarely were they ever closed. The mass of people in this area soon learned that there was no such thing as privacy. Between shows, practically no one was ever seen in much else than their sweaty underwear. Normal cover for the girls was panties and a skimpy bra. Of course that was very difficult to endure for us, but we soon adjusted to it. Oh yeah: not one of them was anything but gorgeous and very congenial. Our normal garb was jockey shorts while our stage clothes dried.

The real surprise of this strange setup was that the only entrance to back stage was a small door that was in the middle of the main customers ladies room. All of us guys had to, without knocking, actually just burst into the ladies room and climb through the small door. Of course, it created bedlam with the occupants, in whatever state of physical necessities they were in. Despite our apologies, rarely any complaints were made to the management. After a few days of it, nobody seemed to care. It all became delightfully normal behavior.

The shenanigans and the practical jokes between showgirls and us never stopped. Kim was a great looking kid so he got a lot of attention from them. Me, not so much! I was usually more the brunt of their practical jokes.

One time in a club in Canada, our act was being announced when about three of the showgirls grabbed me and planted a dozen or so kisses all over my mouth and face. I finally managed to push them off of me because our entrance music started. They were hysterical. I grabbed the pot and sailed onto stage. The instant I turned to the audience a roar of laughter burst from them. My face was a montage of big red kiss lipstick marks. Don and Kim couldn't control themselves from laughing with the audience. I was so flustered by the attack that I didn't realize what happened. I had to do the entire show that way. They made me take a special bow to the audience's laughter and applause. When we finished, they were waiting for me with more hugs and kisses, all saying what a good sport I was. I forgave them as long as they kept it up.

The doozy was at the Bellevue Casino. I was sitting in my dressing room relaxing for the next show when screams of panic broke out from next door. One of the girls came to my tent yelling that there was a mouse in their dressing room. "Help us!" Wearing only jockey shorts, I leaped to my feet and ran to save the day. I burst into their tent, head bowed, scanning the floor, looking for the mini monster. No mouse in sight. Suddenly, a wide circle of bare female feet crept into my frame of view. I lifted my head to see a dozen or more of the showgirls and ponies circling me, all stark naked. From somewhere in my deep-seated morality base, my eyes slammed shut and my head bowed chin to chest; I turned and tried to race out of the tent. "Not so fast fella!" In a din of laughter, I had to feel my way through these incredible bodies that closed in on me giving me hugs and kisses, again telling me what a great sport I was. My eyes never opened. As I exited the tent more boisterous laughter greeted me. The entire cast of the show was there, in on the joke.

I ran into my tent yanking the flap closed to shelter me from revealing my embarrassment. I sat solemnly trying to reconstruct the incident. For me, the whole thing was nothing more than flash frames that I could barely get into focus. It took several minutes for it to occur to me what my reaction to it was about. I was totally unprepared for it. The truth was, "I'm just a kid!" It was all beyond my experience. Any seasoned showbiz stud with half a brain would have milked those moments, in every possible way, eyes wide open, wise cracks, hands flailing, to register every second of it and catalogue those unforgettable images for their cerebral scrapbook. They would have made it the time of their lives. For me, it was an inconceivable incident of beautiful skin that was no more than a disorientated blur. What a waste of experience! As I think about it today, I should have sued for mental and visual cruelty.

To this day, 59 years later, I cannot mourn my reaction to that fantastic scene, and even the hugs and kisses those beautiful creatures awarded me for being such a good sport. By now, they are all old ladies. Still, I would love to have them all in a room, fully dressed of course, to thank them for that split second of a once-in-a-lifetime memory. Bless you all ladies, I imagine that you are now, at our age, still absolutely beautiful. ♪

*NOTE: Look for the next issue folks and keep reading, it gets even more interesting and wilder.*

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# HARMONETTA 101

## A lesson and interview with Bob Herndon

By Phil Lloyd

The Harmonetta is one of those strange instruments that is so obscure even most harmonica fans have never heard of it or even seen it. But many people who have followed some of the harmonica trios over the years—bass harmonica, chord harmonica and chromatic harmonica—have a passing acquaintance with the instrument.

I've been intrigued by the instrument over the years and but never felt I had the time or money to invest in the instrument. Then along came SPAH 2010 and I saw one for sale. After a brief hallway consultation with Bob Herndon, resident Harmonetta expert, I acquired it and proceeded to sort out the mysteries. It came in the original wood box but I wanted a leather carrying case and found one at the Mall of America, a brief shuttle ride away.

Hohner's Sissi Jones was available in the vendors' room and I asked her what she knew about the Harmonetta, since Hohner had produced the instrument. She took my name and address and said she would check through the archives back at the office for anything on the Harmonetta. A few weeks later, I received a copy of the 16-page *The Hohner Harmonetta Tutor* by Helmuth Herold and Armin Fett.

*The Tutor* has some helpful directions for fingering chords and individual notes but I was interested in more details. My search of the Internet turned up a reference to the Doug Tate articles in the Buckeye Harmonica Club's newsletter of a few years back. The article contained a diagram of the keyboard, which was also available in *The Harmonetta Tutor*, along with some



chord shapes on the keyboard.

But I wanted more. So I called up Bob Herndon and chatted with him to get the playing tips and instruction. Afterwards I got out my camera and shot a few photos of my Harmonetta and me holding it.

Now the reader may not be able to play great Harmonetta after reading this article, but it may offer a few useful tips. For those on the brink of deciding whether to buy one or not: watch out, it might be the final push.

Some have described the Harmonetta as a cross between a concertina and harmonica. Buttons determine which notes sound over its nearly three octave range—C to B. Which octave sounds depends on where the mouth is positioned on the mouthpiece.

Playing a three-note chord is easy. To play a four-note chord, just widen the mouth slightly. Playing an extended chord solo is easy because blow and draw produces the same note or chord.

It was not used by the Harmonicats in the original hit, but so many people worked their way through the ranks of Harmonicats over the years that someone in that group of Cats alumni had to be a Harmonetta player.

The instrument was apparently designed to supplement, if not replace, the two-foot long chord harmonica. It first appeared in the U.S. around 1956, which is less than a decade after the Cats put their version of “Peg O’ My Heart” on the map. Hohner produced it for about fifteen years, and serviced it for some years after that.

Checking on the Internet shows that many people offering them for sale today are under the mistaken impression that the Harmonetta is an antique dating from the 1930s. And they are totally confused by the layout of the keyboard which has five rows of keys. The first, third

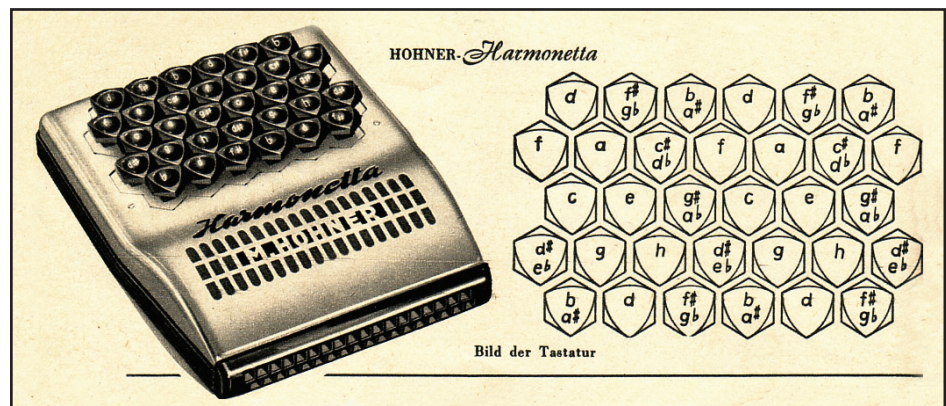
and fifth rows have six keys, the second and fourth have seven. At a glance the fingerboard might appear to be a random arrangement—the keys are organized diagonally back to right front in the Circle of Fifths. That would be F, C, G and D from the fifth row in the far left row for the left hand and keyboard center for the right hand.

The really neat thing about the Harmonetta is that one finger can play a chord. Basic triads like C E G are played by pressing the corners of the three keys. To make that a 7th chord, simply add the Bb with

the same finger pattern for scales with the root in the second and third rows. Eb, G, B and C, E, Ab.

Playing the chord harmonica is a lot easier than the Harmonetta. With the chord it’s a matter of playing the right chord. To play a C chord on the Harmonetta the player needs to be able to spell the chord: C E G so he can press the corners of the right three keys. With the chord harmonica the player doesn’t need to know the individual notes.

So a little bit of musical background would be helpful for playing the Harmonetta. Piano would



another finger. The Harmonetta surpasses the chord harmonica in versatility because it can play virtually any chord while the chord is limited to those built into it. Power Chords, no problem. Walking boogie bass line is easy.

Plus, chords can be played in the bass, middle or upper register of the Harmonetta by simply moving left or right on the mouthpiece. That’s because when the E button is pressed, all Es on the Harmonetta can be sounded because they are linked together. That’s why that C E G triad can be played in different inversions by moving up or down the mouthpiece.

In addition to the chords, the Harmonetta can play individual notes. All the major scales can be played using three patterns, or a fourth, if the scale is started from the first row. The Harmonetta uses

be helpful. That was Bob Herndon’s background. He played piano for about ten years before he picked up a harmonica at 21. He was also known as the Boogie Woogie Kid and won several contests, but that’s another story.

Bob and some friends formed a harmonica trio with bass, chord and chromatic lead. Bob was playing the bass and he was calling out the chords to the chord player because he didn’t know music.

Finally, the guy hands Bob the chord and says, “Here you play it!”

The trio was Jim Lohman on lead, John Featheringill on bass and Bob on chord. They started playing around Indianapolis supper clubs in 1953 and called themselves the Harmonikings, later the Midwest Harmonikings. In 1957, the trio came in second on the *Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts*, the 1950s ver-

sion of *American Idol*.

Then in 1957 the group was on both the Saturday night *Lawrence Welk Show* and the other

Knowing the keyboard is one of the tricks to playing the Harmonetta that Bob uses. "If you wanted to play a C chord it's in a certain

and let them fall naturally. That's the way you have to play the Harmonetta."

There is a certain technique to the Harmonetta that makes it easier to play.

"If you want to play a diminished chord, I play two notes with my left hand and the other two with my right hand," he says. "Now if you wanted to play a Db, Db is located in the middle. It's awfully hard to reach over there.

"So you play it on the right outside corner. And the same way a B. The B is on the outside corner and E is right below that and A is below that. You play those with your right hand. The ones I play with my right hand are B, E, A, D, Gb and Db. The only one I play in the middle is the Ab. Because you can't get it any other way.

"I know guys who split it; they put two on one side and two on the other side. That ties up both hands. So you can't go from the Ab to another chord. Two notes on each side Ab, C, Eb and F. The C and F on one side and the Ab and Eb on the other side. "That's ridiculous to play it like that because you have to be able to reach the next chord quickly. You have to be able to move your hands so you can play a different chord quickly, 'cause a lot of times these things go dah dah da dah like that. When you have these chords in succession like that you've got to be able to play them with both hands."

On the other hand, Bob makes it a rule to keep some chords in specific hands.

"I always play the C chord with the left hand," he says. "All the chords over on the right hand side are the G, B, E, A, D, Bb and Eb. Always play all of those with the right hand. Bb, Db, F, what I try to do is have my hands over the outside so I don't have my hands over the middle of the instrument. It's too



Welk show, on Monday nights, *Top Tunes and New Talent*. "And we came back to obscurity again," Bob says. "We played around town for quite a few years. We were together from 1953 until 1968."

Bob bought his first Harmonetta in 1956 for \$100. He owns four, two of them in good working condition.

"I was working with a jazz group in Chicago 1958 to 1962. I'd drive back and forth and played jobs with them. And I worked with Jim Lohman at the same time. I had a set of microphones made for the Harmonetta and when I got them back they were slightly higher than what I thought and I couldn't see the keyboard. I was sweating blood. I worked all day that day and played over and over seven or eight hours trying to remember my part so I could play without being able to see the keyboard. I spent the whole day playing so I could play that night. Made me learn the keyboard so now I can play with my eyes shut, no problem." The Harmonetta needs two microphones because its sounds come from the top and bottom of the instrument.

place," he says. "If you can see the keyboard you can put your fingers approximately where they go. I play all the chords with the middle finger. And I add other notes like a 6th with my ring finger. Major 7th or 7th I add with my index finger."

The later model Harmonetta have white rings on the E keys, for a point of reference. Mine lack the rings so I may get some hole protectors for loose leaf notebook paper.

"You play the triad (CEG) with your middle finger," he says. "That way you can add any note that you want with the other fingers. I play with my middle finger on all chords except the three across the bottom. Bb, D, F#. Those have to be split. You play the Bb and add the 6th to it with another finger. I always play the chords with one hand. And what I try to do is stay around the outside edge."

Anyone who has ever taken piano lessons has probably heard the admonition to arch the fingers naturally over the keyboard. According to Bob, the Harmonetta is played in a similar way.

"You have to have your hands in a natural position," he says. "Like you hold them up in front of you

awkward. An augmented I always play with my right hand.”

One of the things Bob has going for him is the fact that he used to practice a lot, playing a song through in all 12 keys.

“Take ‘How High the Moon’, that’s a hard tune. To start with, it’s in four different keys. I’ll give you an example. I can play ‘All the Things You Are’ in the key of B as easy as I can play it in the key of Ab, the key it is written in. Mainly because I practiced it.”

How many tunes does he know?

“About 500. At least 500. I came up through the Big Band era. I was an usher in the movie theaters in the 40s. I showed you to your seat. A quarter (25 cents) an hour. A lot of money back then.”

He plays a lot of single notes.

“I take the song the way it’s supposed to be played and play it my way. I’d play the melody in block chords.”

He doesn’t write chord charts or tab; it’s all from memory.

“I just happen to know in my head what that chord should be. It’s a God-given gift really. Because there’s not too many people can do that. I hear a song and I think that should be a 13th or that should be a 7th or a major 7th, that should be just a triad and so on. In my mind that’s the way it works. And I just play it.”

Bob has a shorthand system for finding the shape of a 7th chord.

“On the Harmonetta there’s a very simple way to remember 7ths,” he points out. “It’s in the shape of a seven.” For the C7th, the C and E make the top of the seven, the G the top of the stem and Bb the rest of the stem.”

Learning the triangle shapes is the key to the instrument.

“The majors are in a triangle and minors are in a triangle,” Bob says. “So either one, you just put your finger in the middle. Just one finger.

You put it in the center. “You can play a song, like ‘My Old Kentucky Home’, that does not require any 6ths, major 7ths; it’s just straight triads. Now if you play ‘All the Things You Are’ it’s got all kinds of

play background in jazz, it’s called comping and what you do is you just add little things to it. Instead of a straight rhythm, you put in a rhythm pattern like a guitar player dot-dah dot-dah.”

## “THERE’S SO MANY THINGS YOU CAN DO WITH IT. I PLAY RHYTHMS ON IT. I PLAY MELODY.”

possibilities: minor 7ths, 6ths, flat-7ths and all kinds of stuff. So you can play four-note chords on the whole thing. In ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ you only play three notes. So you make it fit the song.”

“I learned a lot of jazz tunes and many times jazz tunes are written over the chords of another song. There’s a jazz tune written over ‘Lover.’ A lot of times you can play a jazz tune by remembering the chords that were written in the original.”

“The Harmonicats used a lot of the straight chords because you’re limited on the chord harmonica. There’s only about two, three different chords you can get on a chord harmonica. The Harmonetta has more variations. You can get a 7th, a major 7th, a 6th, a minor 7th and that’s about it on the chord. You can’t get 13th for example.”

“And the Harmonetta is so versatile. There’s so many things you can do with it. I play rhythms on it. I play melody. My biggest problem is that I have a tendency to play the melody all the time. So every once in a while somebody will be playing the melody and I’ll be playing the melody, too.”

“And I’ll stop and go back to playing the background. When you

How does a novice determine whether a Harmonetta is in good condition?

“First of all they have to be airtight, he says. “When they’re airtight, you can blow into it without pushing any keys down and you don’t get any noise. With a lot of them, you can blow into them and hear the wind going through it because the straps are loose. The thing isn’t airtight.”

What about repairs now that Hohner no longer handles this service?

“You kind of have to learn to do it yourself. That’s a real job,” he says. “That’s a job and a half. That’s really hard to do. Taking it apart and putting it back together is a three-handed operation.”

“You’ve got to have somebody take the reed plate out while you hold the two top pieces apart. So that’s a job in itself right there. You have to be very careful, there’s a paper gasket. If you tear that gasket you’re screwed. It will leak air from one note to another. It’s like you’re having to play the bagpipes. One note sticks out all the time.”

How does a beginning Harmonetta player go about learning and eventually mastering the instrument?



“Primarily they would have to learn how to finger the instrument and get their fingers in the right place,” Bob says. “Holding the triads down and adding the other notes to it. And then the other thing is to start with one key, like the key of C, which is what everybody favors, especially harmonica players.”

“And learn it well. Learn how to play a C9th, a C13th, a C7th. How to voice it and get a C E G or E G C and so on. Stay with one key. Learn that key to where you can play it backwards. So you know exactly how to play that 13th every time. I can put my fingers right her and bang, I’ve got a 13th. Stay with one key until you’ve learned it.

“Then you go to the next key which would be F. Learn that one. The F chord. C F and G. Those are the main keys a lot of people write in and play in. Learn them well. You learn where all those chords are and where they are with both hands. Like an F7th is over here on the left hand side—it’s also over here in the middle. So you learn where both of them are. Decide which hand is easiest for you to play it. Like for example you want to play a C7th. Play it with your right hand. So, for example, you wanted to play a Bb. It’s awkward to get to because you are in the middle of the keyboard. Play it up on the corner.

“With a G minor, play it up on the corner. I play it with the index finger and the middle finger. Split them like that and you get it easy with the Bb. With the D# or Eb, you can play over on the left hand corner. Whereas if you play the D# on right side you are in awkward position. Your hands are not in a natural position.”

“Hold your hand up in front of you and let them drape down. Your fingers should be in a natural position when you play that chord. Now if you wanted to reach over here and play a D7th, now you’re in

an unnatural position. Go over here on the right side and play a D6th you’re barely in. You’re in two or three keys.”

“Whereas with this other one you’re awkward: you’re doing it with your left hand. Because it’s backward. Hard to do. Play a D7th over there. Learn how to play a D6th over on the right with your right hand and a D7th on the left with your left hand. Your hands are still in a natural position. The main thing is to learn the keys so you can play them with your eyes shut.”

“For example, if you want to play a Gb, you should be able to go there without looking. And automatically your hands go to Gb. Bang you’ve got it.”

“I used to do the country tune ‘Rocky Top’. That is one that requires tricky straight triads. It fits. You would not use 6ths or 7ths on that song because it doesn’t call for it. You kind of have to gear the song to the way it’s played. Once you’ve learned the three major keys, you can branch out to other keys. Like Db. A lot of harmonica players play in Db (on the chromatic) because that’s the easiest way to play. Do a big old key change. Sounds spectacular just by pushing the valve in. So you learn Db (on the Harmonetta). That one is a little difficult, because that one lays out on the outer edge of the right side. It still has to get that Ab in the middle. You have to get it with one hand or the others, whichever one is the most comfortable for you. Then branch out to Eb, Ab, you would learn Db but hardly anybody writes in Db. Harmonicats did ‘Peg O’ My Heart’ in Db. But only because it laid nicely on the chord harmonica.”

“You can also do things like rhythms. Learn some of the rhythms, if that’s what you want to play (he plays). That’s a plain old shuffle rhythm. Latin. Learn different rhythms just like you would

play on the chord. Same idea.”

What about playing scales to get oriented?

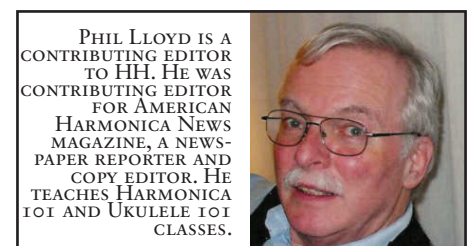
“My way is very simple. When you want to do a straight diatonic scale, two keys forward and two at an angle.”

“Melody is a matter of moving the mouthpiece. Pressing three keys together results in a first inversion triad. To get a second inversion, simply move up the mouthpiece. “

“If you want to play a melody, you voice it so the melody is on the right hand side of your mouth,” he says. “And so you move it back and forth according to what melody you’re playing. You try to cover about an octave. That would give you four notes, so you could play whatever you want with those four notes. You would voice the melody so it would be on the right hand side of your mouth. Most of the time when I play, I voice the melody on the right hand side (in the middle octave).”

“I don’t play too much on the top, those notes are too high, but every once in a while they come in handy. When you play any chord, doesn’t make any difference which one, two of the notes come out of the top and two of the notes come out of the bottom. That’s why they have the double rows.”

So the next time you see Bob Herndon at a harmonica convention, ask him to play one of his 500 tunes on his Harmonetta. You won’t regret it. 🎵





*The Harmonica Rascals on the marquis at the Moulin Rouge*

# Rascals at the 'Rouge

57 years in the making, a new short film stars the Harmonica Rascals

By Al Smith

Some people are always “going to write a book.” For fifty-seven years I was always “going to make a movie.” In 1954 I began filming.

While performing as one of the Borrah Minevitch Harmonica Rascals at the Moulin Rouge nightclub in Hollywood, a marathon nine-month engagement, I laid plans to film the act.

Shopping for a movie camera quickly revealed that the salary Minevitch was paying me made the whole idea a pipe dream. But unwilling to give up, I settled for a hand-held 8mm Bell and Howell wind-up camera that would run for about ten seconds at a time. I was ready to roll! But I had no cameraman. So each night before the show, I found someone in the audience willing to operate the camera.

Other problems immediately arose. Without reloading the camera, only three minutes could be filmed at a time and that was filled with gaps created when the spring

that powered the camera ran down and had to be rewound every few seconds. A few weeks into the project, the price of the film and cost of development forced another major decision upon me: I could eat or I could continue filming. Consulting “other people in the trade” at nearby movie studios, I found I could buy big reels of unexposed black and white bulk film very inexpensively. Unwilling to have the completed film begin in color and finish in black and white, I decided to restart the entire filming process.

With my budget stretched ever thinner after buying a projector and editing equipment, the cost and time required to send the film out for development became a major concern. Turn-around for development was several days and I worried that I would not finish the film before the Moulin Rouge engagement ended.

The apartment was soon filled with strips of film. In all fairness, I must give credit to fellow Rascals

Gene Demase and Les Magann, who shared the apartment with me, for tolerating film strips hanging from every available surface for weeks on end. I spent long hours hunkered over the tiny editing machine as I cranked the film through it with my eyes glued to the one-inch screen, selecting, organizing and splicing (gluing) hundreds of short clips into the correct sequence.

One particularly frustrating problem was that stopping to rewind the camera caused certain scenes to be missed time after time. Development turn-around was so slow that I would repeatedly submit hundreds of feet of exposed film and wait several days only to find the camera had missed the crucial few seconds I desperately needed.

For one scene that kept evading the camera, I persuaded all of the Rascals to gather backstage a few minutes before our spot in the show so we could film the scene with the same curtain behind us. At all times, the backstage area was a very



busy place with stagehands rushing about and dancers and various acts rehearsing movements. Adding six harmonica players to the melee was not easy.

We managed to film the scene but the lighting did not match the stage light, the curtain was not the same as the one out front and for a final blow, the camera was not focused properly for such a close shot. The “take” was a miserable failure but, as it turned out, I was lucky to have it. The scene was never captured by any of the camera operators and I had to use the hateful backstage “take” in the final splicing session that was accomplished in a complete state of panic shortly before we Rascals left Hollywood for our next engagement at the Las Vegas Desert Inn.

For the next fifty-seven years, the film was my constant companion. It survived in suitcases during my travels with the Harmonica Ras-



(l to r) Gene Demase, unknown Moulin Rouge dancer, Johnny Puleo, Carl Wright, Al Smith, Les Magann and Bill Walden

cals and lay many years in boxes stored in closets and under beds. It waited patiently while I raised four children and it survived the “closet cleanings” of two wives.

By the late 1970s my 8mm movie projector had broken down and been scrapped. But that didn’t matter because the film had fallen to pieces as the glue in the splices hardened and failed. Even then I still harbored hope to someday add sound to the film.

After the technology for videotape was developed, I reconnected all the broken splices in the film and had it transferred to VHS tape. Bill Walden, who played bass in the Rascals at the time of filming, had connections at Fox Studios in Hollywood and made arrangements for the transfer. I bought one of the early VHS recorders. It was quite expensive and had the capability of adding sound to the movie. But it had no editing features and my attempts were dismal failures. The silent VHS movie went back into the closet for another thirty years awaiting the invention of personal computers with video editing technology.

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# Ask the Hohner Service Center

## *Cleaning and Maintaining Your Chromatic Slide*

If you play chromatic harmonica, occasionally you will need to perform maintenance on the slide and mouth piece. Slides naturally get sluggish and stuck from use and parts might get worn or bent out of shape.

Correct removal and reassembly of the mouth piece and slide is essential for proper performance. In this article we will discuss the 10 and 12-hole wood bodied Chromonica designs. Place your harmonica on its back end with the mouth piece facing north. Remove the mouth piece by removing the screws on both ends.

Next remove the two bushings (we call them silencers) from each of the screw holes and put them aside, being careful not to lose them. The slide assembly consists of three parts (from top to bottom): the encasement, the slide (with button), and the base. Near the button end you will see a small metal rod protruding from a pin hole. This is the slide spring. Lightly grip both ends of the slide assembly and lift all three parts off the spring and away from the harmonica. Separate the three slide pieces.

The slide and mouth piece can be cleaned with warm, soapy water and a soft bristle brush. The pieces are thin, so be careful not to bend them. Rinse under running water and dry with a soft cloth. Set the parts aside to completely dry. You can wash your cover plates in this same manner if you wish.

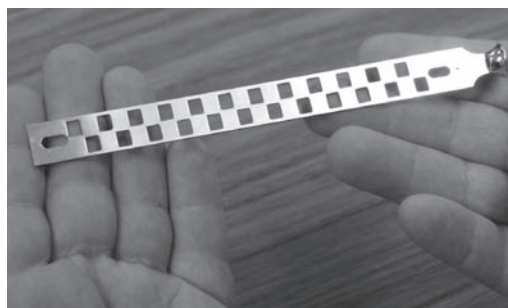
This cleaning method is not recommended for wood combs and reed plates. If exposed to too much moisture, wood will shrink or warp, reed plates will corrode and valve layers will stick together.

Although some players have success lubricating their slides, Hohner strongly advises against it. Solutions applied to the slide mechanism often cause reed or valve malfunction.

If any of your chromatic parts are worn or out of shape, you can order replacements with your credit card by contacting the Hohner Reed Service Center at 804-515-1900 or [harmonica@hohnerusa.com](mailto:harmonica@hohnerusa.com).

For reassembly, start with the base. There is no correct side up, but you will notice a notch on one end and three notches running lengthwise on both sides. The end notch is to accommodate the spring action. Place the base on the harmonica with the end notch on the spring side. Align the square holes on the base with the holes on the harmonica. The round screw holes on either end of the base should be aligned also.

Next hold the slide in your hand so that the button is on the right and the left most square hole is on the top row (see below). Keeping the slide in this position, place it on top of the base, threading the spring rod through the pin hole. Line the slide up with the base, making sure that the top row of holes is open and the screw holes are still visible.



Similar to the base, the encasement has an end notch to accommodate the slide and three very small tabs running lengthwise on both sides. Place the encasement on the slide with the end notch on the spring side. Line up the square and round holes. The lengthwise tabs should fit securely into the notches of the base if everything is lined up correctly.

Hold the mouth piece in one hand and thread a screw through one of the holes. It does not matter which side you do first. Once in the hole, cover the head of the screw with your finger, then slide a silencer onto the screw on the opposite side. There is a notch on one end of the mouth piece which is positioned on the spring side. Place the mouth piece on the slide mechanism while simultaneously lining the screw up with the hole. Give the screw a few turns until it is installed about halfway. Then repeat the process with the other screw and silencer while the mouth piece is not fully tightened down. Pause often as you tighten the screws, pressing the slide button a few times, to insure that the assembly stays properly aligned. Do not over tighten the screws or you risk stripping the threads in the comb.



Once you have completely tightened the screws you may notice that your slide does not move freely. In this case back the screws off a quarter turn or until your slide moves freely. Your chromatic is now back in action.

Attention to the care and maintenance of your chromatic means years of uninterrupted musical enjoyment.

***Just Breathe.***

**HOHNER**

*Any questions about this article or suggestions for future articles can be submitted to [harmonica@hohnerusa.com](mailto:harmonica@hohnerusa.com).*

During the 1970s I met the man who would become my partner in finally completing the movie. He was ten years old.

While touring the country performing as a harmonica quartet with my three sons, we met another harmonica family, Spencer Erickson and his two sons Rock and Randy. Even at age 10, Rock was an outstanding chord harmonica player. We became fast friends and remained in touch throughout the years. Because of our musical interests, we both became involved with computer applications for digital audio and eventually, video.

When once again my thoughts turned to the silent VHS movie of the Rascals, I realized that I finally had both the technology and the editing skills that would enable me to add a realistic sound track to the movie. I decided to call Rock Erickson—now founder of NRC Digital, an audio and video production facility in Menasha, Wisconsin—to discuss the project. We made plans to work together on the film. I would record the music on my computer matching it to the movie as closely as possible. Then, at the studio, we would transfer the music to the movie and edit it for precise timing. Rock would then add sound effects and audience sounds.

On my computer, I captured the movie from the VHS tape, then mailed the original tape to NRC Digital Studio so Rock could capture the video on the studio computers and begin his part in the creation. So many years had passed that, except for Johnny Puleo's tricky little "Obbligato" and his cute way of playing "Sweet Sue," I had long since forgotten the exact arrangements we had played in the act. But watching the movie carefully, I was able to determine tempos and write arrangements to fit the movements of the players.

I had a lot of problems playing

the intricate slide work in Johnny's "Obbligato." There is so much slide work that the harmonica shakes sideways making it difficult to play the correct notes. The only chromatic I was able to play it on was a rare old relic called a Machino. Unlike other chromatics, the Machino's lever button is located in the middle of the harmonica and it moves vertically flipping the slide up and down instead of sliding it back and forth. When all the music tracks were recorded, I downloaded them to a flash drive and flew to Wisconsin.

At the studio, Rock transferred my music tracks to the studio computer and the magic began. We were both excited as the Rascals came to life again. With meticulous care, Rock added audience laughter and applause. Then, as usually happens when Rock's artistic juices begin to flow, he exceeded my expectations by implementing sound effects that completely recreated the ambience of the original performance. Using ordinary objects already in the studio, rolling and sliding them about or dropping them on his desk, thumping his body, humming, clapping, clucking, clacking, grunting or yelling, he added every sound the movie needed. When the microphone is bumped in the movie, the natural feedback is heard along with the hollow thumping as it rocks back and forth. The sounds are very real because of Rock's attention to detail. It's all there: every footstep, the clacking of the slide on Johnny's chromatic as he twiddles it or the brushing of an imaginary piece of dust from the leader's coat.

The music and effects were so real that, as I watched Rock work, I often forgot the sounds I was hearing were not the originals. At one point, I even complained to Rock that the chord player, Gene Demase, was grunting. I said "He always grunted when he...", then I

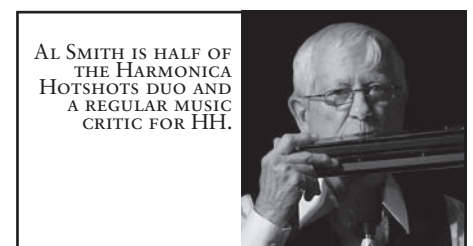
stopped short, red faced I'm sure, as Rock interjected, "That is your chord playing and your grunting."

The original silent 8mm film and the VHS video were in terrible condition, but using NRC Digital's state of the art software, Rock was able to sample the noise frequencies of the films images removing the telltale brownish aging and eliminating a great deal of the graininess of the poor quality bulk film I had used in 1954.

I am very pleased with the completed movie. Running fifteen minutes, it is a real piece of harmonica history showing the entire act of the Borrah Minevitch Harmonica Rascals as performed at the Hollywood Moulin Rouge for nine months, two shows a day, six days a week. Some of the routines in the movie were never seen on television shows because they were considered a little too risqué at the time.

It's over! It's done! Now, what will I do? 🎵

The movie *Borrah Minevitch Harmonica Rascals at Hollywood Moulin Rouge - 1954* is available for viewing on Youtube (Do an internet search for "Rascals Al Smith 1954"). To purchase the movie on DVD or to digitally download it, go to [www.nrcdigital.com](http://www.nrcdigital.com). For further information, e-mail [rock@rock-sroom.com](mailto:rock@rock-sroom.com) or call 608-243-1676.



# spah2011 factsheet

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- Grant Osborne: *Intro to Diminished Tuning*
- Peter Madcat Ruth: *Playing Harmonica in a Rack; Rhythms, Trains, etc.*
- Richard Sleight: *Harmonica Gymnasium*
- As well as Dennis Gruenling, Steve Guyger, Buddy Greene, Al and Judy Smith, Filisko's Teach-in and Paul Davies

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*Performance and seminar listings are incomplete and subject to change.  
Check [spah.org](http://spah.org) for updates. For questions, suggestions or **to volunteer**,  
please contact Elizabeth Atkison at [ema3395z@hotmail.com](mailto:ema3395z@hotmail.com) or 816.914.0223.*



# The 2010 Convention Report

Two takes on how you can improve your health with the harmonica.

By Terry Rand

The purpose of this year's Harmonicas for Health meeting in Bloomington was to share ideas as to where to go to provide our promotional work for good health and what steps to take to implement the programs. We seek ideas for addressing hospitals, assisted living centers and church groups. We have many SPAH clubs trying to accomplish these humanitarian programs and most are now asking how to get involved. Our guest speakers, Lee Ann Razor and Mary Jane Gormley, related some of their more successful experiences. The good news is that the health programs promoted by SPAH local clubs are expanding exponentially. As we are improving, the problem is we have no statistical follow-up. I would like to suggest a program to accumulate statistics as to what we are accomplishing.

I ask that you contact me at Terry@T3com.com when you put on a "good health" program. It is important that we begin to share our successes. I will then share those more successful programs on the Internet. Please send me any media coverage, tell me what model harmonica you are using and the costs involved. New testimonials will be welcome, especially some "good times" details. Humor plays as much of a role here as music. We want to entertain when we promote good health.

I love the humor when you get all these old harmonica players together at our conventions. The SPAH health meeting was as much

fun as it was informative. P.T. Gazell wins the prize for the best spontaneous humor. P.T. saw his old friend Jim Lohman and while shaking his hand vigorously he said, "Jim, Jim, my God, you look great, who is your embalmer?"

And, of course, Stan Harper blessed us with some of his wisdom contributing to his old age. Stan has the lungs and tongue of a young athlete and claims the rest of his body is worn out old parts and half bionics. In my opinion, this grand old man is the epitome of what playing the harmonica can do to extend longevity. I told Stan that he should include his mental acuity as part of his harmonica success.

Playing the harmonica has given Stan some wonderful memories and we enjoyed having him share with us at several of the SPAH programs. We maintain that playing the harmonica causes players to concentrate more, thus moving more oxygen to the brain. There are many examples of enhanced mental acuity among harmonica players. Stan Harper, at 88 years old, could perform a stand up comedy act if he was asked to do so. He has so many interesting stories about his past and all the wonderful people he met playing the harmonica as a professional. My point being, there is no better example than Stan in spite of his bad habit of enjoying tobacco. I think his smoking is another endorsement of the power of breathing therapy by playing the harmonica.

Another "grand old man" of harmonicas, the man who gives away the most harmonicas and lessons, is Buddy Wakefield. Buddy talked most about how much good we can accomplish by offering free harmonicas and lessons for everybody. Buddy said, "Remember our goals: we are promoting the instrument we love and we want to share our love with as many people as possible and constantly remind our friends and neighbors that the harmonica is the only musical instrument played breathing both in and out." Exercising our lungs is obvious, but exercising our brains while playing is equally important. Harmonicas not only promote good health, but the therapy includes the joy of music. What a great combination. The joy of music contributes to everybody's well being, forget all your troubles, come on and get happy, play a tune!

Our SPAH member, Ron Agnew, was a long time great harmonica player before he became a respiratory patient. How could that happen? Well Ron had double pneumonia and hypothermia while shoveling snow when he should have been playing the harmonica. He got his brain frostbitten and began losing his mind. Ron went into a coma and awoke nine days later with some very curious doctors who wanted to know why his lungs were so healthy in spite of his ordeal. Ron had quit smoking years before and credits the harmonica with saving his life. Our friend Bud Boblink visited Ron in the hospital

and they played music for other patients and a tradition was born. Bud Boblink is an honorary member of the health committee because during his professional career and at every performance Bud promotes harmonicas for good health.

The story is that Ron Agnew actually died and was resurrected holding his chord harmonica. I asked him if his hearing improved since he died and he said, "huh?" Ron Agnew is one of the great chord players and his testimonial is indicative of what harmonicas can do. We have to be careful when using testimonials and not promising miracles, but we can say that we have no examples of harmonicas not being beneficial and fun. I added my recipe for that early morning stretching of the lungs by playing a few bars of "Yankee Doodle." That little patriotic ditty is like a stretching exercise for your lungs causing about ten diaphragm push-ups against your lungs.

I must also mention that many other professional players highlight the health benefits of harmonicas. Al & Judy Smith are excellent examples of popular entertainers that do a great job promoting harmonicas for health. Add John Shaffer and Fifi the skunk to that list. John has given up his daytime job and is now a full time entertainer and, as he entertains at hospitals, clinics, churches and special children's clubs, John is an avid promoter of harmonicas and SPAH.

Charles Spranklin also gave a nice testimonial at the SPAH health session and Charles promotes harmonicas and good health at every occasion where he emcees. Charles writes for *Harmonica Happenings* and is also an honorary member of the health board.

The conclusion is easy to remember. The harmonica is the only musical instrument that is played breathing in and out. Playing the



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- Attend conventions
- Attend board meeting conf calls

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- Handle membership renewal efforts
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- Register convention attendees
- Maintain accurate membership and convention records
- Computer literacy
- Work with MemberClicks membership program
- Attend conventions
- Attend board meeting conf calls

It's also time to elect a new SPAH president and vice president (see the President's Letter in this issue). At the 2011 SPAH Convention, candidates for SPAH president and their vice presidential running mates will present their campaign platforms to SPAH members. Elections will take place in April 2012, and the new president and vice president will take office at the end of the 2012 SPAH convention. If you're interested in running or wish to suggest a candidate, please contact Election Committee Chair Winslow Yerxa at [winslowyerxa@yahoo.com](mailto:winslowyerxa@yahoo.com).

harmonica is a lung exercise. It can be used for therapy and is more often prescribed by doctors as COPD therapy. That is a fact. Music itself is therapy, so offer a double dose of good health. Spread the word, tell your friends to learn to play the harmonica... and by the way, tell them to join SPAH.

By Mary Jane Gormley

Several people at the Harmonicas for Health session at SPAH 2010 were interested in starting harmonica groups in their communities with a health focus.

For hospitals, the people to talk to would be in a respiratory (pulmonary) or cardiac therapy department with an outpatient rehabilitation program. Larry Vesely RRT and I have had a monthly program at Bloomington (IN) Hospital for four years now, open to anyone attending pulmonary or cardiac rehab; patients are encouraged to bring family members, and they can continue coming to the harmonica sessions after their rehab period is over.

You might try meeting with part of the staff. You could bring a few inexpensive harmonicas and demonstrate the benefits of harmonica playing.

Two basic points would be that we (most everyone on the planet!) are inefficient at breathing—even marathon runners can benefit from training their breathing—and that many highly effective relaxation and stress-reduction programs (yoga, etc.) make extensive use of attending to breathing, especially deep (abdominal) breathing.

An important consideration is risk management: Most of the infections we get are because we touch things and other people and then our faces. Have Purell handy—before you give out the harmonicas—and also give out paper

napkins to unfold as clean places for putting the harmonicas down on (saves your having to sanitize the table).

Outside of hospitals, support groups (post-stroke, Better Breathers, Parkinson's, and smoking cessation, for example) love to have "guests," and those groups tend to get really excited about a new approach. Not many people bring them fun stuff!

Finally, there are senior centers. I thought residential retirement centers would be ideal—the people all live there, and they could get together at any time—but it seems that many people lose all initiative when they move to a place where everything gets taken care of. I went to two for a year, and I just don't do them any more. My four-year-old program at a non-resident senior center is the liveliest I have, to the point where I am going to try to encourage them to get together more often than once a month in the morning (that's all I am able to do) and to move on with their music—they are way more musical than I am! I can start them off—they can move forward faster on their own.

Next I plan to get together with speech therapists. 🎵

*To purchase a copy of Harmonicas for Health: A Guide to Breathing Better by Mary Jane Gormley and Larry Vesely, RRT, send a check or money order made out to "HEARTEAM" for \$6 per copy to:*

*Harmonicas, Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation, Bloomington Hospital  
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*Please include your address, contact information and the number of copies you would like to receive.*



# Obituaries

Already this year we have lost a number of prominent harmonica players:

## Al Data

Februaru 26, 1936—March 2, 2011

Al was a staple at SPAH conventions and other festivals such as The Buckeye State Harmonica Festival in Ohio, The Valley Harpers in Virginia, and the Garden State Harmonica Festival in New Jersey. He was an excellent chord player who could provide any pickup band with good chords and rhythm for most standard harmonica favorites. He considered his 2-1/2 year stint during the 1990s with Jerry Murad's Harmonicats as the epitome of his harmonica career. Al passed away suddenly at his home in Aliquippa, PA.

## Albert Raisner

September 30, 1922—January 1, 2011

Born in Paris, Raisner received a musical education during his childhood he (piano and violin). At the age of 8, he discovered the harmonica. In the 50s, he formed Trio Raisner, the celebrated harmonica trio with Sirio Rossi and bass player André Dionnet. After the trio disbanded, Raisner became a radio host, then created and produced a popular French television variety show in the 60s. Raisner also wrote two books, including *Livre de l'Harmonica*. In 1977, he was knighted by the president of France.

## Ken Smith

January 26, 1931—March 3, 2011

Ken was born in Moncton, New Brunswick during the Depression. He played piano, bass fiddle, tuba, accordion, and he sang and arranged. His passion for the harmonica began when he saw the Three Reeds perform in the 1960s. He became the bass player for the World's Greatest Harmonica Band, which performed at the 1987 SPAH convention and included Bob Higgins. Ken most recently played in a trio with Ingo Andersen and Doug Pell in Burlington, Ontario. According to Ken himself, giving chord theory seminars at SPAH was one of his memorable pleasures.

## Chris Michalek

July 23, 1971—December 16, 2010

Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Chris was a teacher, customizer and musician with a distinctive sound. In the last few years, he was a fixture at SPAH teach-ins and a frequent performer. He was also a tenacious contributor to Harp-L. His playing and approach to music greatly influenced a number of younger players, some of whom counted him as a mentor. He is survived by his wife of 15 years, Laurie Michalek, of Gilbert, AZ, parents Maurice and Van Michalek of Arden Hills, MN, brothers Dominique and Patrick and niece Dasha Green.

All of these people will be greatly missed. We've lost wonderful people, excellent harmonica players, great supporters of the harmonica and of SPAH. We wish their family and friends well.



# Behind the Bash

What SPAH looks like from the host club's view

By Steve Watne

We wrapped up a successful SPAH convention here in the Twin Cities and the club really enjoyed hosting everyone who came and hope you not only had a good convention, but also had time to get our and see a bit of our beautiful cities.

The planning for the SPAH convention began over a year in advance lining up a number of potential hotels. SPAH board members visited these hotels and while they were in town, Paul Davies introduced me to Clint Hoover and we spent a wonderful afternoon at my house jamming with Dick Gardner and Dave Grebin.

Convention week started on Monday for many of the club members at the airport. We had been given a list of folks to pick up and I was the 'inside guy', trolling the baggage claim with my list and signs. I bumped into Will Scarlett while looking for Stan Harper and eventually Will and I squeezed into the jump seats in Dick Gardner's pickup with Stan riding shotgun. It was a short but fun ride back to the hotel with Dick and Stan telling stories while Will provided rhythmic accompaniment on some bizarrely tuned diatonic. I took Lars with me to pick up Rupert and Tachi-san. We found Brendan and gave him a ride back while I located Susan Sauter and Mario.

Days are long for the SPAH board members I found out. My main job at the daily meetings (at

7:00 AM) was to provide the coffee, so I was brewing it at 6:30. When the previous day ends at 2:00 AM, that coffee is really needed. I felt appreciated at those morning meetings!

Three boys from our club, David and Norman Patton and Jonathan Cain, formed a traditional harmonica trio during the convention. Many of you may have seen them in the Suzuki area 'testing' the chords, chromatics and basses. Al Smith grabbed them out of there and hauled them into the kids program to perform and they couldn't have been prouder! Two of these boys received very nice harmonicas from Al Smith and Danny G—special thanks to these two very generous men!

One of the highlights of my SPAH convention was performing with the club on Friday night with Jack Bacon, our club founder and arranger of many of our club tunes, in the audience and the special words from Paul Davies, Al Smith, Tom Stryker, and Stan Harper on our performance. The other moment for me was performing baroque and be-bop duets with Clint Hoover on Wednesday night. Clint and I truly had fun putting the material together and performing it and our audience really seemed to enjoy it.

I'm immensely proud of the Twin City Harmonica Society for all the work and wonderful energy they contributed before, during and af-

ter the convention. Special thanks go out to club members and their families: Betty Foster, Dianne Heglund, Gary Burton, Dick Gardner, Al Papas, Mark & Gloria Imsdahl, Doug Hair, Bill and Lucy Murray, Elroy and Eloise Kelle, Dave Grebin, Jean Mooney, Jody Norman & David Patton, Karine & Claire Watne, Ellen Lipschultz, Doug Hair, Jonathan Cain, and friends of the club Rafael Manrique, Jim Jeffers and Nellie Hewitt.

The hospitality suite was a focal point for many folks during the convention and would not have been such a success without the generosity of our donors. I would like to thank Dunn Brothers' Coffee on Grand, Lunds & Byerly's Markets, Kowalski's Markets, Sam's Club, Cadenza Music, Rainbow Foods, Davanni's Pizza, Perkin's Restaurants, Jerry's Hardware, and various anonymous club members (you know who you are!).

Thanks to everyone who came to Minneapolis/St. Paul for the convention and see you next year in Virginia! 🎵

STEVE IS PRESIDENT OF THE TWIN CITY HARMONICA SOCIETY. HE'S BEEN PERFORMING FOR 30+ YEARS, TEACHES HARMONICA AT THE PRESTIGIOUS WEST BANK SCHOOL OF MUSIC AND IS ACTIVE TRANSCRIBING, ARRANGING, RECORDING, AND REPAIRING.



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# Band of Brothers

The one and only Sgro brothers.



*Tony and Dominic Sgro*

By David Payne

I vividly remember the exact moment when I first knew I had to play chord harmonica.

It was my first listen to Johnny Puleo's *Vol. 2* record and the song was "Night on Witch Mountain." The chord harmonica was unforgettable.

The chord harmonica solo was so ominous and powerful—the instrument did not sing, it roared. I had heard several other great chord harmonica players, each having their own individual tone and style, however, I was a part of a generation that had virtually no exposure to the great harmonica music of days gone by.

There was something about this anonymous player's tone that really spoke to me and shook me to my musical core. I searched the album jacket, looking for some mention of who the chord player was. There was nothing. In retrospect, it's clear

why that was so—Puleo wasn't the one playing the dynamic chromatic leads, as the fresh listener would naturally expect.

Considering my career as an award-winning journalist, I'm surprised the solution to solve the mystery didn't occur to me sooner. All I had to do was ask somebody who knew. That anonymous player who had inspired me so was Tony Sgro and it was his brother Dom on those incredible chromatic leads.

Not only did I now know who it was, they would be playing at the relatively close Buckeye Harmonica Festival in a couple of months.

I was too excited to wait, so I found the Sgro's e-mail and fired off a message. A few days later Tony called me. As a newspaper reporter, I've met a lot of famous people: governors, senators, musicians, so overall, I was desensitized

to fame and never starstruck by any of those people. With Tony Sgro, it was different. With frogs in my throat and butterflies in my stomach, I asked him if he could tell me how to play "Witch Mountain."

I had imagined that to have executed what I consider to be one of the finest chord solos ever, that he would have practiced the piece for months, forever burning it into mental and muscle memory. I was, frankly, shocked by his answer.

"I have no idea how I played it," he said, apologetically.

Instead of the months of practice I had assumed, the song was unrehearsed.

"I only played it once," he said. "We (he with brother Dom and David Doucette) just went in and read our parts."

The amazement over that level of musicianship still astounds me. It would take me months to polish something like that and it still wouldn't be at his level, even though at this stage of life, I have been playing harmonicas much longer than he had when the recording was made. I have to remind myself, for my own sanity, that he does this for a living and I don't.

Like me, the Sgro's came from a musical family. Their parents were Italian immigrants and the boys started playing harmonicas like most of us did—with a childhood gift of diatonic harmonicas. As teenagers, they were, for a short time, part of Borrah Minnevitich's Harmonica Rascals, but left the group so Tony could finish high school.

During the Korean War, the brothers enlisted in the Marine Corps. As Marines, they served their country with their harmonicas, making numerous television (including *The Ed Sullivan Show*) and radio appearances as “The Marine Corps Harmaniacs.”

The brothers hadn’t been out of the Marine Corps for long when Johnny Puleo—who took over the Rascals after Minnevitich died in 1956—offered the brothers a contract. For the next few years, they were a vital part of Puleo’s ensemble.

Even after the Golden Age of the Harmonica ended—the instrument had ceased to be pop-culture phenomenon it once was by the early 1960s—they continued to work. They purchased a night club in Elmira, N.Y., saving considerable expense by providing the entertainment themselves. They performed several times on the Grand Ole Opry (the brothers are quite proud of their claim of being the first Italians to do so) and continued to record. They performed on numerous cruise ships and were even invited to the White House in 2004 to perform for President Bush.

The minute I walked into the Quality Inn Conference Center in Akron Ohio for the quite brilliantly resurrected Buckeye Harmonica Festival, I saw Phil Caltabellotta and Dom Sgro conversing at a table. I walked over and introduced myself and Phil, great guy that he is, makes up some excuse to leave and offers me his seat across from Dom.

Mind you, as a reporter, I once sat for an hour talking with Eddie Money in his tour bus and that didn’t phase me a bit. Finding myself alone with Dom Sgro, I was simply starstruck. He walks around (I presume wherever he is) like



*Johnny Puleo's Harmonica Gang*

he owns the place, but he treats you like you do. It’s an incredible combination. We talked about the old glory days that I wasn’t alive to witness and he signed some Puleo records I’d brought.

Later that evening, shortly before the Sgros’ show, I sat with a pocketknife and sandpaper, taking the paint off the back of my chord harmonica and sanding the comb down to smooth, bare pearwood so Tony could sign it. He did and I was also fortunate enough to get it autographed by other chord legends, including Al Smith, George Miklas and Bob Herndon.

As the Sgros went on, I expected to well, see a couple of guys in their late 70s play some great harmonica music. I was shocked by their youthful energy, enthusiasm and humor. Seeing the Sgros live is like glancing through a porthole in time to the 1950s in waning days of the Golden Age of Harmonicas. They still did their slapstick and executed it perfectly.

There was one moment where Tony’s chord shot out of his arms directly at Dom’s face and Dom reeled from it in Three Stooges fashion. It was so perfectly ex-

ecuted that I, who was paying the ultimate in close attention, wasn’t sure whether Dom actually got hit or not. The show was full of those moments.

The showmanship was incredible and they held back nothing. Dom was dancing around the whole time and Tony slinging his chord, literally in a blur as he played, with incredible energy. Tony Sgro did quite a bit of lightning-fast, difficult changes throughout the show, something the ensemble they put together gave him the freedom to do. The bass guitar and drums take away some of the pressure on the chord player to lay down a consistent rhythm. Thus, the chord harmonica is freed to become something of a second lead instrument—a role Tony fills very well.

There was, however, something more to that ensemble mix. It was a sound I had heard on Puleo’s last album, *Vol. 7*, in the instrumental version of the Beatles’ “All My Loving,” that I dearly loved, but had heard nowhere else. Imagine my enthusiasm at hearing a whole show’s worth.

They ended the show with a piece I had no idea they could pull off at their ages, “Lover Come Back to Me,” with no drums and with George Miklas switching from bass guitar to bass harmonica. It was like stepping back in time to the 1950s, when the Sgros recorded that with David Doucette on bass for Puleo’s final album.

I’m still starstruck. 🎵

DAVID PAYNE IS AN EMPLOYEE OF HARRISON HARMONICAS. HE PLAYS 48 CHORD, DIATONIC AND CHROMATIC HARMONICAS, PRIMARILY WITH BLUEGRASS GROUPS.

YOU CAN CONTACT HIM AT [DAVE@HARRISONHARMONICAS.COM](mailto:DAVE@HARRISONHARMONICAS.COM)





Harmonica Happenings  
SPAH, Inc.  
P.O. Box 865  
Troy, MI 48099-0865

# The Reed Choker



L.J. Atkinson