



Editor - Brendan Power described the history of the new Suzuki SUB30 UltraBend in the August magazine. He has asked two of the early pioneers of the development of the three reed harmonica to contribute guest columns.

Veteran (draft dodger) Harmonica Player Will Scarlett Discusses Overblowing and the Evolution of the Three Reed Harmonica.

An interview with Joe Mackessy

Having the perspective of more than 50 years of harmonica playing really leaves me amazed as I look around and see the advances in blues harmonica playing. In the past twenty years harmonica players have advanced their abilities in a manner that I see as analogous to the evolution of skateboarding.

Young harmonica players today are starting out with information and instruments which are opening new musical doors to expressions that have yet to be explored.

My harmonica journey began at the age of 4 when my sister gave me a Hohner 'little lady.' I played 'straight harp' until I was a junior at Berkeley High School in 1965 where my friend James Waldman turned me on to 'bending reeds' in the blues harp tradition. This expanded my musical vocabulary.

While exploring this new technique I would occasionally produce a 'chirp.' The 'chirp' was the key which opened the door to overblowing, but it wasn't until 1968 that I realized that it was allowing access to the sharps and flats missing in blues harp vocabulary, thus completing the chromatic scales on the diatonic harmonica.

In 1966 I was deep into playing 'freight train' rhythm harmonica when I got a job as a live-in janitor at the Jabberwock, a folk club in Berkeley where Dan Paik taught me to play 12 bar blues.

In 1967 I became even more acutely aware of the notes missing from the blues harp vocabulary while accompanying Steve Mann's very chromatic gospel blues. At this time I was accompanying Steve at the Lion's Share and Jorma Kaukonen would come by and occasionally sit in while his wife taped the shows.

Later in 1968 I returned to Berkeley after my first road gig with Brownie McGhee. This tour was a 6 week stint in Eastern Canada, where I had the pleasure of playing "Backwater Blues" with Lonnie Johnson and Brownie in a dressing room.

It was after I returned home from this tour of Canada that I realized the musical significance of overblowing and began learning to play 12 major scales exclusively on a G Navy Band harp.

It was at this time (1969) that Jorma Kaukonen called, asking me to record with him on the first Hot Tuna album. I told him that I had just begun playing chromatically and was not ready yet. He said *you play good enough, let's do it.* We rehearsed once for about 20 minutes at Jorma's house before recording (6 nights, 12 shows) at the New Orleans House in Berkeley.

Listening back to those first two Hot Tuna records where I played one G harmonica exclusively I realized that my chromatic overblowing would not have gotten the recognition that it did had Jorma not insisted that I play on that first live album.

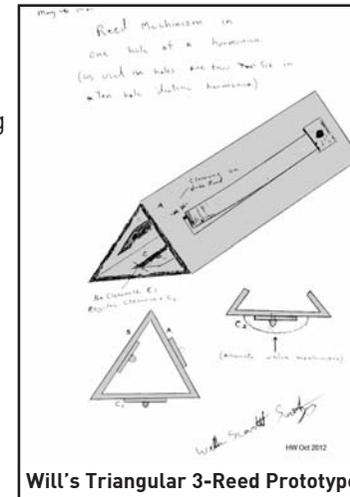
Jorma and Jack's popularity kicked my unpolished chromatic playing into the spotlight, demonstrating the chromatic potential that "overblowing" allows access to.

I worked on developing this style for a few more years. Around 1975 I returned to playing traditional cross harp style on multiple harmonicas, feeling that I was sacrificing music in pursuit of technique. Back in 1966 I began customizing my own harmonicas, machining aluminium and brass frames upon which I put wooden covers for greater tone control.

I was given a sheng - a Chinese forerunner to the harmonica that consists of a gourd with free reeds attached to resonant tubes - and the idea occurred to me that adding a third reed to the harmonica adjusted with no clearance at the tip - like the sheng reed - or with a wind saving valve on the same side of the plate as the *ultra reed* tuned a whole step below the lower of the two reeds in a given chamber would allow for chromatic access using

traditional blues technique by causing the lower of the two reeds to work in conjunction with the ultra free/sheng reed.

In short, a player could now access a complete chromatic vocabulary utilizing only traditional blues bending techniques without having to learn to overblow.



This is the easiest and most natural approach for a player to transition from traditional blues harmonica to chromatic blues harmonica.

Brendan Power thought of the triple-reed idea independently in New Zealand and created a working 30-reed prototype harp in 1989, which he presented to Suzuki in 1991. The principles of this design are incorporated in the Suzuki UltraBend SUB30.



I believe that Richard Sleight, Pat Missin and Joe Filisko were also developing similar concepts, independently, at about this time.

In early 1980 I attended a seminar for inventors hosted by the U.S. Patent office, and at their recommendation I authored a detailed, dated journal cataloguing my idea and had this journal witnessed and signed by several friends. One of the witnesses of my invention developed a harmonica utilizing this concept in the form of the over-engineered XB40 while employed by Hohner.

In the court battle that ensued, with the help (I felt) of his greater resources, his patent of the XB40 prevailed. It utilized my design without acknowledging me as the inventor of its underlying concept. All that aside, now that the XB40 patent has expired I'm glad to see my original intentions being realized and I'm looking forward to the further refinement of this concept.

I wonder how Sonny Boy and Walter would have utilized this increased musical freedom. The harmonica is currently enjoying an unparalleled era of incredible advancement by players and manufacturers alike.

As this new generation of players builds upon these innovations we are witnessing the legacy of the original bluesman realized in new and dynamic ways.

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Pat Missin has a new book out, *The Harmonic Minor Tunebook - 101 Tunes for the 10 Hole Harmonica in Harmonic Minor Tuning*. This is the first ever book devoted to what to play on this tuning and is available from all Amazon web sites for about £12

Zygmunt Zgraja will celebrate his 75th birthday on 28 October in Myslowice, Poland, with Dietrich Wolfram and Trio Con Brio.

Sarah Watts has written a piece of music for Music for Youth. *Jigsaw Jam*. It is a set of short pieces for beginner instrumentalists. They use only the first notes learned on each instrument - strings, brass, woodwind, pitched percussion, recorders, ocarinas, harmonicas, ukuleles, and guitars. Great for schools. More information and a video on their website.
www.bit.ly/PahpQT
www.sarah-watts.com

John O'Leary/Alan Glen Allstars with many guests including Laurie Garman, play on the last Monday of every month at *Back to the Flamingo Club at the Bulls Head - Barnes, London SW13 9PY, 8.30pm* They also play two nights of a *Tribute to Chess Records* on Sunday 21st October, *Hideaway Club - Empire Mews, Streatham, London. SW16 2ED. 8pm.* Wednesday 7th November, *Eel Pie Club, The Cabbage Patch, London Rd, Twickenham. TW1 3SZ. 8.30pm.*