

Notation Key

David Barrett's Lesson Material & Song Transcriptions

5th Edition

Notation of Technique

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

Keys




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



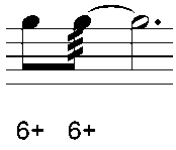



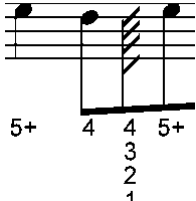

Reference Material

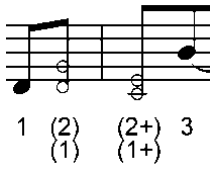

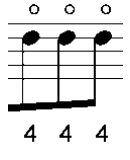
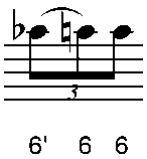

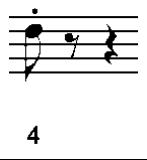

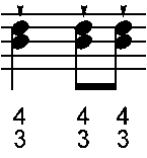

For the first time in blues harmonica history there is an abundance of lesson material available to study. At the end of this Notation Key I have provided a list of lesson material I have authored that I feel will help you to understand more about blues harmonica technique and its application. Next to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

Some of you will be referencing this Notation Key along with your studies at BluesHarmonica.com. For you, next to each technique I reference which study on the site you can learn more about it. Clicking on this link will take you directly to that lesson (you will need to be a subscribed member, and logged in, for these links to work).




Basic Notation & Common Techniques

Technique	Example	Description	Reference
Bend Slash(es) next to hole number		For each degree of a bend on the harmonica a small slash will be used following the hole number. The 3 draw half step bend (B \flat) is notated with one slash (3'). The 3 draw whole step bend (A) is notated with two slashes (3"). The 3 draw minor third bend (A \flat) is notated with three slashes (3'''). A full bend chart is diagramed at the end of this document.	C1 p60-68 BHTDVD12 S1 Bending Study 1
Blow & Draw	3 = 3 Draw 3+ = 3 Blow	When a hole number stands by itself (3) the hole is to be inhaled (draw). When a hole number is followed by a plus (3+) the hole is to be exhaled (blow).	All Books
Chuk Diamond-shaped note heads		This is a special notation used when a player hits a set of notes with a strong, staccato (short) attack. Articulations for this are commonly: chuk, tut, or kuk. Listen to Junior Well's instrumental "Chitlin Con Carne" for a great example.	Junior Well's "Chitlin Con Carne"
Cut Small upside-down "V" above a note		The opposite of a Dip—note starts at the natural pitch (unbent) and quickly bends downward (around a half step). The articulations Dow, Gow or Cow work well.	BH2 p11 William Clarke Study

<p>Dip Small “V” shape above a note</p>		<p>Note starts bent (around a half step) and releases quickly. Some players use the articulations: Ya, Gya, Dya, Dwa, Tya, or Kya. A dip is a more concise way to notate this technique compared to writing out the bent note with a slur to the non-bent note. When a dip is present on a bent note (3' B\flat), you will start below the pitch of the bent note (3" A)—ending at the notated pitch (B\flat).</p>	<p>C1 p69 BB p18 BHTDVD12 Bending Study 2</p>
<p>Double Vibrato</p>	<p>Double Vibrato</p>	<p>Throat vibrato with slow hand tremolo.</p>	<p>William Clarke's “Lollipop Mama,” 1st Chorus Tremolo & Vibrato</p>
<p>Fake Octave</p>		<p>Same mouth shape as octave embouchure, but notes are not octaves (in our example at left the interval of a flat-7th is played).</p>	<p>BB p31 C2 p21 BHHTDVD12 Tongue Blocking Study 4</p>
<p>Flutter Tongue Same notation as shake, but notice there is no second note for a shake</p>		<p>Same embouchure as slap, but tongue travels on (single note) and off (chord) the harmonica, alternating quickly between chord and single note.</p>	<p>C2 p26 BHTDVD12 EX3, BBC Tongue Blocking Study 3</p>
<p>Glissando Line ascending or descending to note head</p>		<p>Slide between the two notes that are connected by the glissando. When there is no starting note for the glissando, slide from two or more notes above or below the target note, depending on the direction of the line.</p>	<p>C1 p38 BHTDVD12</p>
<p>Grace Note Small note with slash on stem</p>		<p>A grace note indicates to play a note quickly before the next note. A grace note is used in place of a faster notated rhythm in the cases where the note is played so quickly that it does not make sense to place it in the normal stream of a line.</p>	<p>General Music Notation</p>
<p>Octave Embouchure</p>		<p>An embouchure where four to five holes are covered by the lips and the tongue blocks the middle holes to sound the notes on the left and right, producing an octave. All common tongue block techniques can be used on the octave (slaps, pulls, flutters, etc.).</p>	<p>BB p31 C2 p21 BHHTDVD12 Tongue Blocking Study 4</p>
<p>Pull Slash-shaped note heads</p>		<p>Tongue covers all four holes (no notes sound), slight pressure is built and tongue releases to sound chord. Unlike the Lift, the Pull is an articulation (more common).</p>	<p>BB p30 BHTDVD12 EX3, BBC, BH1 Tongue Blocking Study 3</p>
<p>Quartertone Small plus (+) above a note head</p>		<p>Half of a half step bend. Basically, it is a very slight bend. The example at left shows a half step bend for the tablature on the 3 draw (3' B\flat). The music notation shows the half step bend B\flat. The plus (+) above the note head indicates that the note should be played a quartertone higher than written. For this instance, you play a pitch between the 3 draw and 3 draw half step bend. Quartertones are used often in blues—especially on the 3 draw in second position. If you do not bend enough, your line will sound major (non-bluesy). If you bend the 3 draw too much, your line will sound dark (more towards sounding minor than bluesy). You will see in the notation (and hear on recordings) that players will use many variations of the bend on the 3 draw. Listen carefully and do your best to match the player's pitch.</p>	<p>C2 p14 BHTDVD34 Bending Study 4</p>

<p>Rhythmic Breathing & Ghosted Notes Thin, hollow-shaped note heads</p>		<p>Rhythmic Breathing is used by players for rhythmic effect between main musical lines. These are not just breaths on the harmonica, but rhythmic elements that if not played, present the song differently than the original. These should be played very softly. We commonly call these Ghosted Notes—notes felt more than heard.</p>	<p>Little Walter's "Rocker" or "Juke"</p>
<p>Roll</p>	<p>Roll</p>	<p>Note presented with the Spanish "R," as in "Rosa" or the top-back of the tongue like the Hebrew "Ch" as in "Chaiim."</p>	<p>Big Walter Horton's "La Cucaracha"</p>
<p>Side-Flutter Tongue Small squiggly line between note heads</p>		<p>Same embouchure as flutter tongue, but tongue moves left to right. Typically, the flutter is between octave notes; but you can use the tip of your tongue (covering fewer holes) for a larger chordal sound.</p>	<p>Little Walter's "Off The Wall," 5th Chorus</p>
<p>Slap Small open circle above note head</p>		<p>Same as standard tongue block (lips over four holes, tongue blocks three left holes), but the tongue starts off the harmonica, sounds the chord, and then slaps down to leave one note sounding (similar to saying "Hal"). This is considered a common tongue block technique and is not always notated in my method books and transcriptions.</p>	<p>BB p24 C2 p18 BHTDVD12 EX3, BBC Tongue Blocking Study 2</p>
<p>Slur Curved line above or below, connecting two note heads of different pitch</p>		<p>The slur indicates to slide (or in our case, bend) smoothly from the pitch of one note to the next. This symbol is also used for the Tie. The tie connects two notes of the SAME PITCH and directs you to combine the duration of the two notes.</p>	<p>General Notation</p>
<p>Shake Three slashes above or below note head(s)</p>		<p>Shake between lower and upper notes. Rule of thumb is to start with the lower note and then start the shake to the upper note. Most draw shakes start with a dip. You can open your embouchure a bit to allow a little of the other note to bleed for a dirtier shake. You can also shake in an octave or fake-octave embouchure.</p>	<p>BB p17 C1 p42 BHTDVD12 Blues Harmonica Fundamentals</p>
<p>Staccato Dot above note head</p>		<p>Note still receives its full note value, but is played short.</p>	<p>General Notation Bending Study 3</p>
<p>Throat Tremolo & Vibrato</p>		<p>A squiggly line following a hole number indicates for you to open and close your throat rhythmically (at the vocal folds... like a slight cough) for a throat tremolo (no change in pitch). Some players have developed their throat tremolo into a vibrato (change in pitch). Both have a similar effect, and thus the notation is the same.</p>	<p>C2 p15 BHTDVD12 Tremolo & Vibrato</p>
<p>Two Note Combination</p>		<p>The addition of an upper note for a thicker texture (sometimes referred to as a double-stop). The volume of the upper note (how much air you allow to flow into the upper hole) depends on how strong of a chord sound you want. If only a little bit of the upper note is added, I will use parentheses on the upper tablature hole number to show that only a little bit of air should leak into the upper hole.</p>	<p>General Music Notation Blues Harmonica Fundamentals</p>
<p>Wa</p>		<p>Note sounds with hands completely closed, then hands open quickly, creating a "Wa" sound. In old notations I used text Wa. Now I use the symbol at left.</p>	<p>BHTDVD12 Cupping & Hand Effects</p>

Chromatic Harmonica Specific Notation

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

Techniques Not Notated

Technique	Description	Reference
Hand Tremolo	Hand (right hand for a right-handed person) opens and closes rhythmically.	BB p7 BHTDVD12 Tremolo & Vibrato
Lift	Similar to a Pull, with no articulation. Tongue comes off the face of the harmonica to sound a chord.	Same Idea as Pull
Pucker	An embouchure where you use your lips to obtain a single note and any other desired note combinations. When no obvious tongue block technique can be heard (such as slap, octave, or flutter for example), it can be very difficult to hear whether the player is tongue blocking or puckering.	BB1 & CC1 Blues Harmonica Fundamentals
P.S. Pull-Slap	An articulate slap. Same as a slap, but tongue starts on the harmonica like the Pull, before it pulls off to sound the slap. This can be used in a single-note or split embouchure. Though almost all great players use this technique, you can hear it used most clearly from Rice Miller. I don't commonly notate this, but when I do, I place "P.S." above the slap symbol.	BH2 p18
Side-Pull	Tongue covers all four holes (no notes sound), right side of tongue pulls back to sound single note on right. Similar to a pucker "Ta." This can be used in a single-note or split embouchure. This is also commonly known as "tonguing" by wind instrument players.	BH2 p18
Straight Eighths	A passage where the rhythm moves from a swing (triplet-based) feel to a straight (eighth note-based) feel.	William Clarke's "Blowin' the Family Jewels," 6th Chorus
Tongue Block	An embouchure where you use your tongue to obtain a single note and any other desired note combinations. Mouth is commonly placed over four holes with the tongue (top) blocking the three holes to the left, leaving the single note on the right side of your embouchure to sound. This is the embouchure most used by blues harmonica players.	BB p24 C2 p18 BHTDVD12 EX3, BBC Blues Harmonica Fundamentals

Special Note Regarding Transcriptions of Technique

Regarding transcriptions (where I write down what another artist has performed)—It is not practical to notate every action taken in performing a note or sound on the harmonica. Over-notating can also make a transcription very difficult to read. In my lesson material I make it clear what I'm using and what I expect you to do. Regarding what another player is using, sometimes there is no way to determine the exact embouchure that was used. For these reasons, I do not specify embouchure (tongue blocking or pucker) for each note. Generally speaking,

tongue blocking should be assumed. In some passages, which embouchure is used will be obvious to you. From techniques such as octaves, where you must tongue block; in others, such as with triple tonguing, you will know to use the pucker embouchure; and in still others, you will have the choice of which embouchure you feel presents the passage best. Choose the embouchure YOU believe best reproduces a specific artist's sound—or produces the sound YOU want.

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

Method Book & Video Abbreviation Key

Harmonica Masterclass® Complete Blues Harmonica Lesson Series

Series 1 (Beginning)

1. Basic Blues Harmonica Method BK/CD (MB99103BCD) **BB**
2. Basic Blues Harmonica Method DVD (MB99104DVD) **BBDVD**
3. Blues Harmonica Jam Tracks & Soloing Concepts #1 BK/CD (MB99105BCD) **J1**

Series 2 (Intermediate)

4. Classic Chicago Blues Harp #1 BK/CD (MB99106BCD) **C1**
5. Blues Harmonica Jam Tracks & Soloing Concepts #2 BK/CD (MB99110BCD) **J2**
6. Scales, Patterns, & Bending Exercises #1 BK/CD (MB99109BCD) **S1**
7. Exploring 2nd Position BK/CD (MB99183BCD) **EX2**
8. Exploring 3rd Position BK/CD (MB99184BCD) **EX3**
9. Building Harmonica Technique DVD #1 & #2 (MB99107DVD) **BHTDVD12**

Series 3 (Advanced)

10. Classic Chicago Blues Harp #2 BK/CD (MB99111BCD) **C2**
11. Blues Harmonica Jam Tracks & Soloing Concepts #3 BK/CD (99115BCD) **J3**
12. Scales, Patterns, & Bending Exercises #2 B/2xCDs (MB99112BCD) **S2**
13. Exploring 1st Position BK/CD (MB99185BCD) **EX1**
14. Basic Blues Chromatic for the Diatonic Player BK/CD (MB99186BCD) **BBC**
15. Building Harmonica Technique DVD #3 & #4 (MB99113DVD) **BHTDVD34**

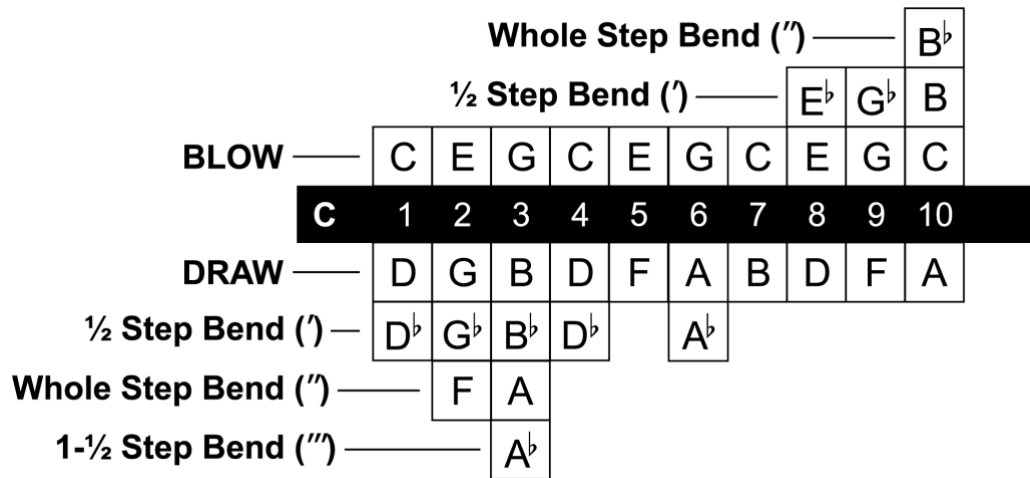
School of the Blues Lesson Series

16. Improvising Blues Harmonica BK/CD (MB20943BCD)
17. Blues Harmonica Accompaniment Playing (MB21385BCD)
18. Blues Harmonica Play-Along Trax (MB21055BCD) **BHJ**
19. Blues Harmonica, Level 1 (MB21053BCD) **BH1**
20. Blues Harmonica, Level 2 (MB21054BCD) **BH2**
21. Rock Harmonica (21979BCDEB)

More Books of Interest

22. C Harmonica Blues Play-Along Tracks 2xCDs (MB20004CDB)
23. First Lessons Blues Harmonica BK/CD/DVD (MB20180SET) **FL**
24. Blues Harp Licks Chart Bklt/CD (MB20719BCD)
25. Harmonica Position Chart (MB20720)
26. Minor Blues Harmonica (30453MEB)
27. Daily Studies for the Diatonic Harmonica (30456MEB)
28. Gig Savers: Essential Harmonica Theory (MB20170)
29. Gig Savers: Essential Harmonica Scales (MB20171)
30. Gig Savers: Essential Harmonica Quick Charts (MB20172)
31. Gig Savers: Harmonica Microphones (MB20173)
32. Gig Savers: Harmonica Amplifiers (MB20174)
33. Gig Savers: First Harmonica Gig - Everything You Need to Know (MB20175)

Standard Note Bending



Chromatic Note Layout (Referenced from Diatonic Harmonica)

