

# **PRACTICING FOR SUCCESS**

**OR**

**“WHAT TO DO IF YOU WANT TO GET  
GOOD AT BLUES HARMONICA”**

**PART 1 (V1.0):  
THE BIG PICTURE**

By  
Kevin Bishop  
for

**[WWW.LEEDSHARMONICA.UK](http://WWW.LEEDSHARMONICA.UK)**

# INTRODUCTION

This document outlines some general, tried and trusted guides for effectively using your practice time, and giving yourself the best chance of success. It's organised in Question and Answer format.

It's important to remember there is no magic bullet for this stuff, no hidden shortcut.

Experts are not born, they are sculpted, bloody fingered, from the hard granite of experience. The process is long and the end-point vague. Each minor breakthrough unlocks new and unexpected possibilities. The trick is to embrace the pain along with the joy and commit to the journey.

Although this is geared towards harmonica practice the guidelines are mostly very broad and could be applied to almost any practical skill. I'm planning part 2 in which I'll dig into some nitty gritty, but for now I hope this is of use.

# HOW OFTEN AND FOR HOW LONG SHOULD I PRACTICE?

Daily. Practice every day. Even better, practice multiple times a day. The trick is to keep the harmonica in your mouth as often as possible.

You're asking your body to do some very alien things it's never tried to do before. It takes time for repeated motions to create what is commonly referred to as "muscle memory". That's the point where it happens almost without you thinking about it. The point where it's almost easier to do a thing than not do it. The only way to do that is by regular and frequent repetition.

Aim to spend at least half an hour a day practicing. If your playing is more of a hobby than a vocation thirty minutes should provide you with quick enough progress that you feel rewarded and motivated to continue.

If you're serious and aspire to perform, aim at practicing one to two hours (or more) a day. If you're super-motivated and want to be the next Walter (Big or Little) you'll need to structure your life around your playing rather than fitting your playing into your life. That could mean anything from four to eight hours *every single day*. Not many can commit to that!

Here's the trick though. No matter the total time you practice, do it in small chunks. For example split your thirty minutes practice into five minutes in the morning, five at lunchtime and twenty in the evening. The frequency of the practice is as important, if not *more* important, as the duration. When you put the harmonica in your mouth you want it to feel natural. You don't want to waste time re-familiarising yourself. This kind of frequent practice means you're off to a running start every time you pick up a harp.

You'll progress better this way than playing for five hours every Sunday afternoon but with nothing in-between. Guaranteed.

## WHERE DO I PRACTICE?

The ideal situation would be access to a dedicated room where you can have all your harps, and song sheets etc to hand, you're soundproofed, free from distractions and someone leaves a fresh cup of tea outside the door every half hour.

Of course, not many people have that luxury. The reality is that your practice space can be almost anywhere. The spare room, the car, the conservatory, the shed, the subway, in the middle of a field.... whatever. The main requirement is that the space is private and comfortable.

You really do need a space that's yours, is not overlooked or overheard. You're going to be making some pretty unpleasant noises and you need the confidence to allow yourself to fail without being self-conscious. You also don't want to subject your family or housemates to your practicing, especially if you don't want all your harps to be thrown in the river by an angry spouse or cohabiter.

Old-timers often call the practice space *the woodshed*, because folk used to go out to the woodshed to practice for their privacy. The harmonica is super portable so you can get very creative with when and where you practice. Don't forget that little and often is the key.

## WHAT DO I PRACTICE?

This depends very much on your skill level and what your goals are. Hopefully you have a good teacher who can guide you. Here are some very broad guidelines for blues players.

- **Scales are important.** I know lots of folks find scales dull, but they're really useful to learn. It's almost impossible to improvise well without a good knowledge of the scales you're playing over. How would you know what holes to hit? Which scales to concentrate on is dependent on your goals but it's sensible to have a good grasp of the major scale, the major and minor pentatonic scales, the blues scale and the natural minor scale across the whole range of the harmonica.

- **Always have at least one (and preferably two) songs on the go.** Whether these are study songs written by an instructor or a classic recording. Learning to play songs and solo's all the way through is excellent training. It introduces you to new ideas, maybe new techniques and it's great for your listening skills. It also has a positive impact on your improvisation skills.
- **Don't be scared of theory.** The terror created in some folk when theory is mentioned is extremely unhelpful. Why are you scared of information? How can knowing more about your craft have a negative impact on it? Even a small amount of theory, once learned, is hugely beneficial. Even if it's only enabling you to talk to other musicians. And you *do* want to be taken seriously by other musicians. Harmonica players have a very poor reputation in this area (frequently well-deserved). As a serious player it's up to you to do what you can to improve this. Learning theory is a long process that interweaves with your practical skills as you progress.
- **You need to practice your improvising.** Which sounds a bit bonkers at first, but improvising is a skill that takes a long time to develop. It requires good physical skills, a knowledge of theory, good listening skills and a deep understanding of the music you're playing. There are structured ways to go about learning blues improvisation which demystify the process, and are great fun to boot. I'll look at this when we get into specifics in part two.
- **Practice where you are weak.** Sounds obvious but people have a strong tendency to like to play what they are good at. Which is great because it's fun, but it does nothing to advance your skills and will lead to stagnation. If you're struggling to play octaves, for example, and they're becoming annoying then you need to be practicing those octaves! Bite the bullet and dive in.
- **Record yourself often and listen critically.** Again it's very common for folk to be averse to doing this but it really is one of the best ways to learn. It confronts you head on with what you *actually* sound like (which is quite different from what you hear in your head when you play) and gives great incentive to improve.

## **WHAT CAN I USEFULLY I DO WHEN I CAN'T PRACTICE?**

There's actually a fair bit you can do to help your progress even when you can't actually play.

Critical listening is the most obvious thing. If you want to play a style of music you need to immerse yourself in it. You need to actively listen, which goes way beyond passive enjoyment. There's a lot to go into here and I'll explore it a little in part two. For now just listen to as much as you can, and not just the harmonica parts.

If you need to be quiet you can dive into some theory (yeah, not letting that one go) . That can be as simple as memorising the note names on your harmonica ([here's how](#)) and testing yourself to recall them quickly.

You can also do some very simple breathing exercises which will benefit your playing. Again, more on this in part two.

## **WHY DON'T I FEEL LIKE I'M PROGRESSING?**

You probably are progressing more than you realise. Again, this is where recording yourself can be invaluable. If you record something today, then record the same thing again in a month or so, as long as you've been practicing you'll almost certainly hear a significant improvement. This is a great boost for your confidence and your enthusiasm to continue.

In fact, if you were super motivated and organised you could pick a day of the month to record whatever you're working on and put a reminder in your calendar to re-record and review the month after.

This process will highlight not only your achievements, but your areas of weakness too. You can use what you learn to inform how you structure your practice.

## **I DON'T LIKE RECORDING MYSELF, CAN I SKIP IT?**

Sure you can. But you'll stymie your development. You just need to get over it. It's not so bad once you've done it a few times. If you don't want to hear yourself what makes you think other people will?

## **SUMMING UP - IT'S A PROCESS!**

Okay, that's a lot of words to absorb. Hopefully it stays on the friendlier side of prescriptive and preachy. The intent has been to outline tried, true and trusted methods, proven to produce results. That's not meant to imply in any way that the same shoe is going to fit every single player. You do what feels right for you, absolutely.

Remember, learning to play harmonica, learning any skill in fact, is a process, a very long process which never truly ends. And it's the process which is important. People will develop at different rates, and have their own joys and sorrows, achievement and setbacks along the way. No two journeys are the same. The trick is to get comfortable with your own path. Keep listening, keep learning, keep playing and most importantly keep *enjoying* it.

Thanks for reading, I hope you come back for part two. In the meantime, if you have any questions or want to share advice or experience please get in touch via [leedsharmonica.uk](http://leedsharmonica.uk) .

All the best.

Kevin Bishop



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