

ESSENTIAL HARMONICA TECHNIQUES FOR A FAT BLUES SOUND

VERSION 1.0
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PART 1 - TONGUE BLOCK TECHNIQUES

Slaps

Octaves

Pulls

Flutters

Part 1 - Accompanying YouTube link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wg7sd-TudqY>

PART 2 - GENERAL TECHNIQUES

Double Stops,

Shakes

Dips

Tremolo

Part 2 - Accompanying YouTube link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFOXcFFTto>

INTRODUCTION

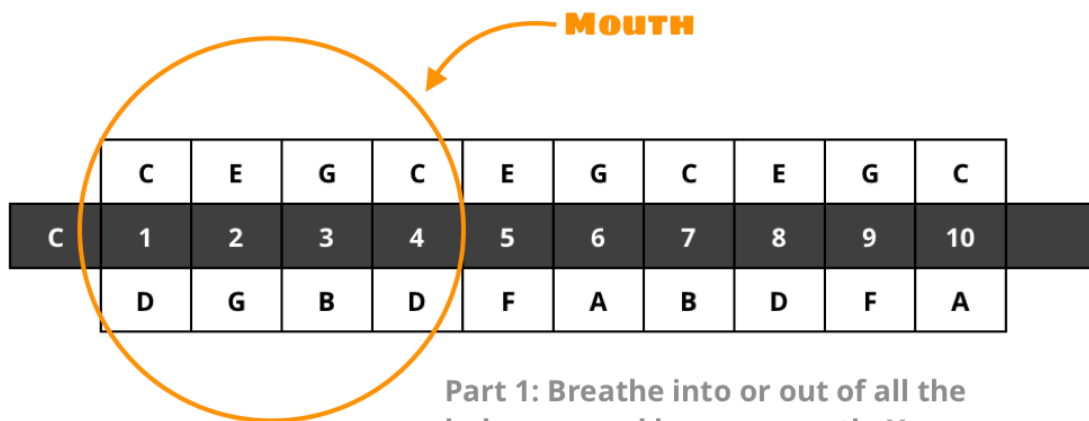
This document accompanies a series of short videos on YouTube in which the techniques are demonstrated. These are techniques and tips to beef up your playing and get you closer to the classic Chicago blues sound. It's not all about amplification!

This is intended more as a reference than teaching material. Although the techniques are described briefly, it's recommended that you work with a teacher to help you develop your technique if at all possible.

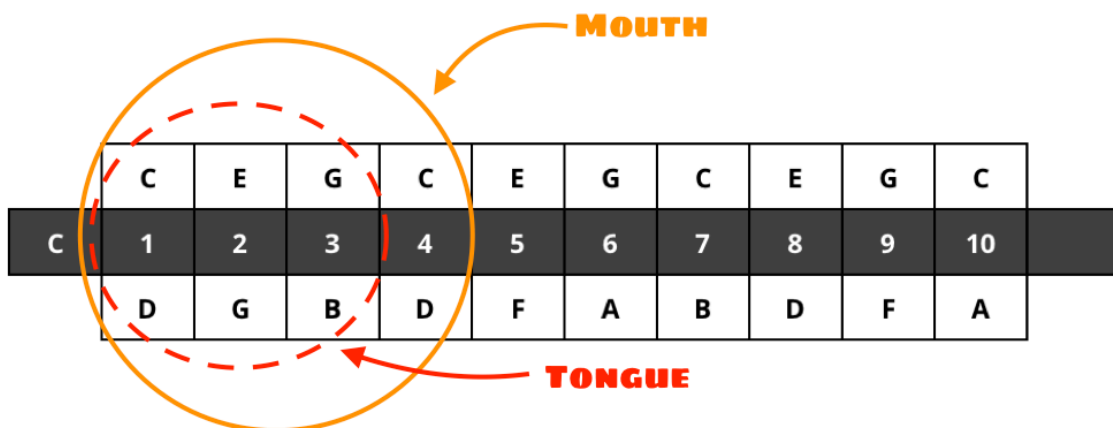
PART 1: TONGUE BLOCKING TECHNIQUES

THE “SLAP”, THE “LIFT” AND THE “FLUTTER”

The slap is very important. It’s the default method of articulating notes and produces a fat, percussive sound that adds a great deal of texture.



Part 1: Breathe into or out of all the holes covered by your mouth. Your tongue should be off the harmonica.



Part 2: While still breathing, drop your tongue onto the comb so that only the hole you’re aiming to play remains unblocked.

You can make the preceding chord sound last as long, or as loud as you like however most of the time it will likely be very quick and quiet. It will feel strange at first but practice will get you there.

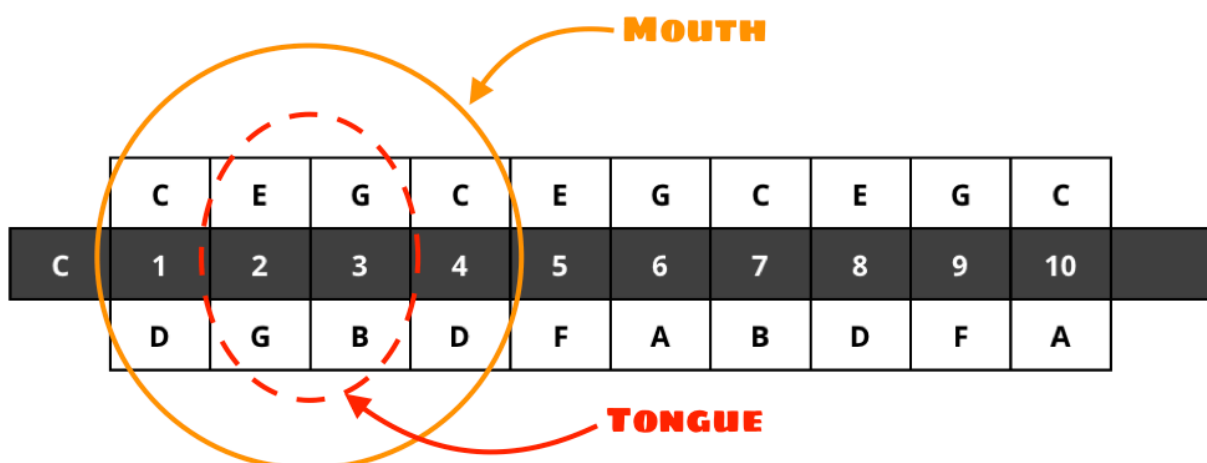
The Lift is essentially the opposite of the Slap. Instead of starting with a chord and resolving to a single note, we start with a single note then lift our tongue off the harmonica to create the chord sound.

The flutter is essentially as a rapid sequence of slaps and lifts on the same note. It's a very powerful and exciting sound. Play a 5 draw flutter for a killer blues sound.

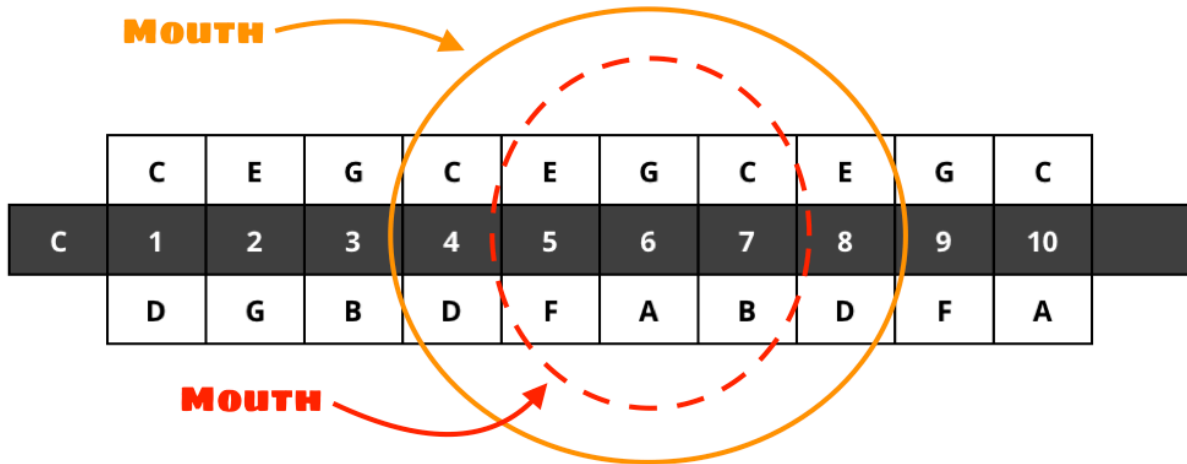
OCTAVES AND SPLITS

Playing an octave requires playing the same note in two octaves at the same time. This produces a large, horn like sound which is very powerful.

For example, both 1 blow and 4 blow are the same note, just an octave apart. This is achieved by covering four holes with your mouth and using your tongue to block the middle two.



Five hole octaves are also available on the draw side, as shown below. The technique is the same, you just need to stretch your mouth wider, and have your tongue cover three holes instead of two.



Remember: Five hole octaves are only available on the draw side.

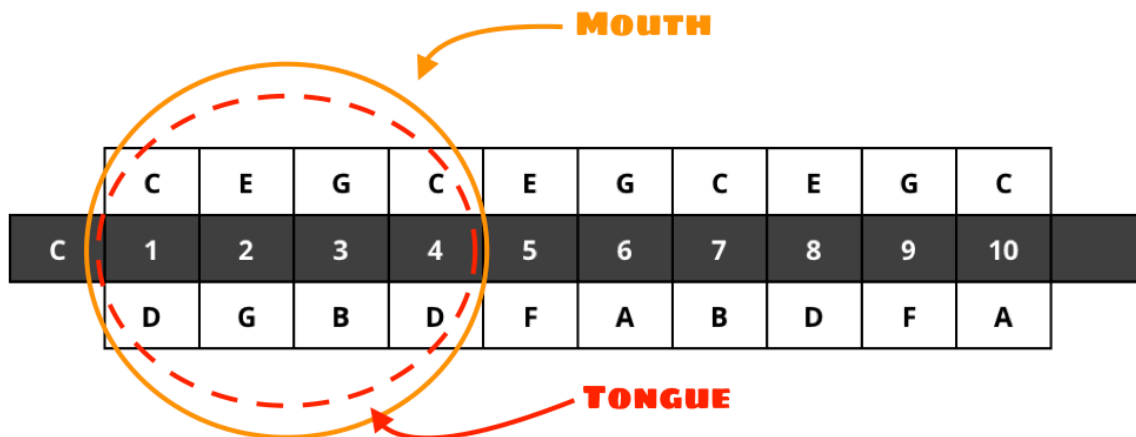
Octaves are available on the following hole combinations:

Blow holes:	Draw holes:
1 and 4	1 and 4
2 and 5	3 and 7
3 and 6	4 and 8
4 and 7	5 and 9
5 and 8	6 and 10
6 and 9	
7 and 10	

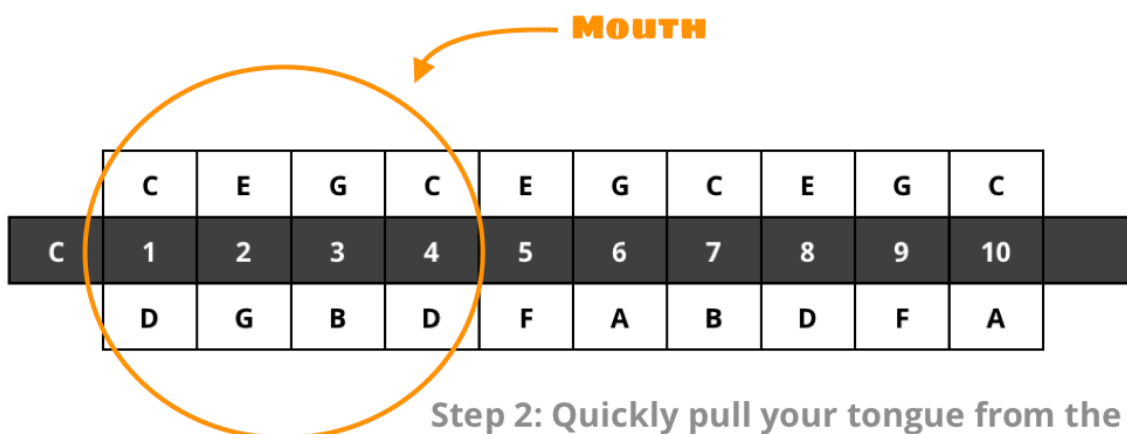
A split is simply two holes with different note names played at the same time. For example, playing holes 2 draw (G) and 5 draw (A) produces a root-b7 interval and is commonly used in blues.

THE "PULL"

This is a subtle but potent rhythmic effect. It is essentially a short, sharp chord sound with a strong articulation.



Step 1: Cover four holes with your mouth and cover those same holes with your tongue so that no air can pass through the harmonica.



Step 2: Quickly pull your tongue from the holes so that all the notes briefly sound.

At first, your pulls will probably sound quite loud but your goal should be to play them much more quietly than your single notes. You don't need much air at all. The suction caused by quickly removing your tongue should provide enough air to vibrate the reeds.

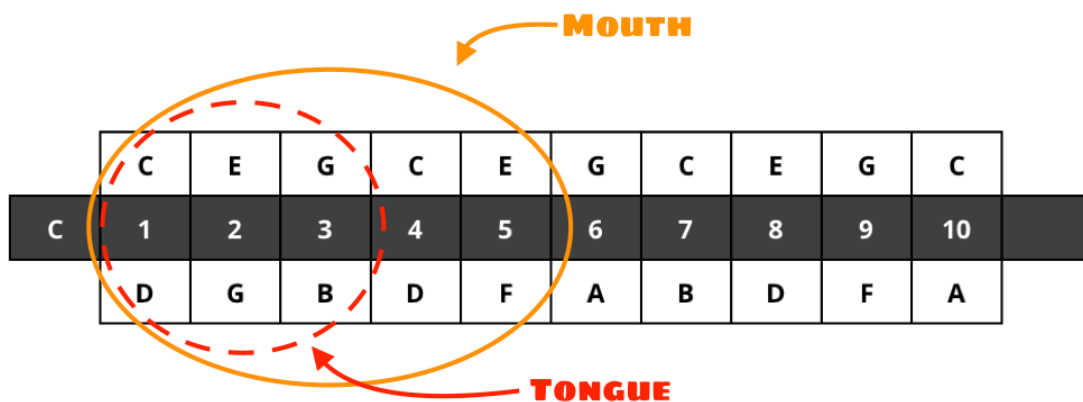
PART 2: GENERAL TECHNIQUES

DOUBLE STOPS

A double stop is simply two adjacent holes played at the same time. Most commonly this will be done on holes 3 and 4 draw, but you can play them almost anywhere.

To learn how to play double stops try normally tongue blocking the lower of the two holes and smirking the right side of your mouth out a little to let air into the hole on the right.

Of course if you're puckering you can just widen your pucker embouchure to cover two holes instead of one.



THE "DIP" (AKA "SCOOP" AND "SLUR")

This technique involves hitting a bent note and then quickly releasing the bend back up to the natural note. It takes a bit of practice to be able to consistently

hit a bent note in isolation - rather than hitting the natural note and bending down - but it's essential for this technique.

This is a decorative effect in the sense that it doesn't really matter if your bend is tuner-accurate, it's just important that you start flatter than you finish. The bent note isn't an important part of the melody you're playing, we're just dressing it up a bit. Sounds great!

THE SHAKE (AKA: "TRILL" AND "WARBLE")

The shake involves repeatedly and rapidly playing two adjacent notes. 34 draw, 54 draw and 45 blow are all good sounding and useful shakes.

To execute a shake you can move your head, your harp, or some combination of the two. There's not really a right or wrong, it's just down to personal preference. Experiment and see what feels more comfortable to you.

It's especially effective if you can bend and release your shake. This takes a bit of practice and keeping relaxed and reducing muscle tension is essential.

TREMOLO

Tremolo is a rapid change in volume (often confused with *vibrato*, which is a rapid change in pitch). It gives notes that are held for a while a more vocal like and expressive quality.

Tremolo is achieved by making a series of small coughing sounds as you breathe. This causes the vocal fold in the throat to briefly close, thus quickly stopping and restarting the air flow.

To begin with it's usually easier on the blow notes. Just an exhale with a series of "uh uh uh uh uh" sounds. On the inhale you need to fight your bodies natural

gag reflex so it takes most people a bit longer to get used to, but the technique is the same. Over time you'll be able to make both very aggressive and very gentle tremolo sounds.

CONCLUSION

This has been a quick run through of what I consider some of the essential techniques for achieving a robust Chicago blues sound on your harp.

Each one is fairly straightforward to describe but requires a lot of practice, repetition and patience to really dial in. There's a massive amount to work on which has been only briefly described, don't expect to pull everything off right away.

That said, I hope you enjoy the process. Experiment, experiment and experiment is the key. If you can I always advise working with a teacher, whether me or someone else. A teacher can spot problems you may not have noticed and give individual, tailored coaching which you can't get from books or YouTube videos.

Good luck!



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