

HARMONICA 101

The following is a simplified guide to learning to play the harmonica as an accompaniment to a chord playing instrument such as a guitar, ukulele, or piano. It assumes a basic knowledge of chords.

Harmonicas come in different keys. Each "harp" can be played in 2 basic keys. If you play in the key that is stamped on the cover, it's called "straight harp". The other main way to play it is called "cross harp" or "blues harp."

There are 10 holes on a standard harp. We'll look at a C harp first as it is the most common.

If you blow out on the wholes, these are the notes from left to right (high notes on the right):

C E G C E G C E G C

These are the notes in a C chord. Any note you blow sounds good in while your friend is playing C. (If you get a rack you can accompany yourself). In music theory this is the "I chord", the key you're in.

These are the notes on the "in breath" (the suck notes):

DGBDFABDFA

The bottom 4 notes are in a G chord. The bottom 5 notes are in a G7 chord:

DGBDFABDFA

DGBDFABDFA

So the left side of the harp on the in breath is the G7 chord (the V7 chord)

You see the B and D reappearing on the right. So for a V7 chord you can actually play:

DGBDFABDFA

That leaves an A note which is a 9th. So on the in breath the harp is a C9 chord.

If you blow out you're playing the "I chord" (C). The in breath is the "V chord".(G9)

Most songs use the IV chord. In the key of C this is F. F is made of the notes F, A, and C.

On the inhale these are in breath notes in the middle.

DGBDFABDFA

or C notes on the out breath:

C E G C E G C E G C.

The main problem with straight harp is that it's hard to get the IV chord.

Straight harp is used by performers like Bob Dylan in songs like Blowin' in the Wind.

The more popular way to play the harp is called **cross harp or blues harp**.

You don't play in the key that's stamped on the cover. You make the V chord from straight harp into your I chord. Thus a C harp is played in the Key of G. **The Key you're in is now the inbreath on the left side:**

DGBDFABDFA

The inhale notes are easier to bend or "wail on" which give the harp it's unique sound.

The out breath now becomes the IV chord! **C E G C E G C E G C**

That leaves only the problem of what to do on the V7 chord.

Remember we're in the key of G now.

DGBDFABDFA on the in breath. The last note on the left is very useful.

This is harder because it doesn't have 2 notes next to each other. You can usually play the flat 7th:

DGBDFABDFA

So think of the harmonica in zones. Get the right one for the key you're in. Most people like "blues harp" Here is a brief list of which key harp to use to play cross or blues harp:

to play in E use an A

to play in F use a Bb

to play in G use a C

to play in A use a D

to play in C use an F

to play in D use a G

For example take an A harp and play in E. The E chord (the I chord) is inbreath on the left. The IV chord (A) is outbreath anywhere. The V7 chord (B7) is inbreath at the middle or at the very left or middle.

Don't worry about the names or the notes. You can sometimes play 2 or three notes together, or sometimes pick a note and bend it. Stay mostly on the left side and only use the high notes for special effects. Just try to find what feels right using the aforementioned zones as a guide.