

## HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT - The Untapped Potential of the Slide Harmonica by Brendan Power

For a long time, harmonica players have self-divided into two main camps according to the type on which they specialise: the diatonic or the chromatic. Diatonic dudes assert their simple un-valved 10-hole harp is superior in terms of earthy expression for popular forms of music like blues and rock, whilst chromatic players feel their finicky fully valved slide harmonica is the only instrument capable of playing more 'refined' genres like jazz or classical. This choice follows naturally from the contrasting construction of diatonics and chromatics, which means they have always sounded and played quite differently. But it doesn't have to be that way! I think the time is ripe for some productive cross-fertilisation between these two primary sub-species of the harmonica family.

In the world of canine evolution, it's accepted that mongrel dogs are often hardier and more adaptable than the pure breeds. The same can apply with harmonicas: if we allow the diatonic and chromatic to borrow traits from each other, we can arrive at hybrid harmonicas that surpass the abilities of each type on its own.

In particular, I feel there is huge untapped potential in the slide harmonica - for players on both sides of the current divide. It's

remained pretty much unchanged for 100 years: in Solo tuning, with two reedplates a semitone apart (eg. C and C#), and fully valved. That's simply how a slide harmonica IS in most players' eyes, as if divinely pre-ordained: an unchanging, immutable object, to either like or loathe. I find this restrictive attitude puzzling - because every aspect of the traditional chromatic harmonica can be altered to give exciting new playing possibilities!

For example, take the note layout. Solo Tuning is undoubtedly an excellent scale for the harmonica, giving even blow/draw patterns in all octaves. This makes it easier to learn than Richter, which is different in each octave. But Solo Tuning, like any other, is not perfect: it has strengths and weaknesses. If you want to achieve new effects, it's simply a matter of removing the covers and altering the pitches of the reeds - something more and more players can do. With some simple changes the instrument changes from a stock set-piece to a chameleon, capable of a huge new range of tonal colours.

I've been hacking chromatics ever since I got my first one, in New Zealand in 1980. As a diatonic player up till then, I was initially disappointed that I couldn't bend notes as I did on my 10-hole harps. I soon worked out it was those little plastic valves, or windsavers, that were the cause of the problem. By selectively

removing some valves from the outside of the reedplate and leaving the inside ones alone, I found that my diatonic bending technique DID actually work on the chromatic! Thus Half-valving was born.

I liked it so much, I soon applied the principle to my blues harps too. Half-valving is now quite widely used amongst diatonic players, PT Gazzell being its best-known exponent. This is a perfect example of the cross-fertilisation I mentioned earlier: an element from chromatics (windsaver valves) being selectively used in diatonics to enhance their sound and playability. Result! But the most powerful new expression can be gained by combining half-valving with altered tunings on the slide harmonica.

Solo Tuning doesn't allow bending on the even-numbered holes (2,4,6,8 etc) because on them the draw reed is only a semitone higher than the blow. Here it is shown in two octaves, slide-out on top and slide-in on the bottom:

SOLO TUNING

S-Out	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
Hole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8							
Sl-In	C#D#	F#F	G#A#	C#C	C#D#	F#F	G#A#	C#C							

Diatonic-style interactive reed bending (where the blow and draw combine to make the bent note) requires the two reeds to be a semitone or more apart. So the next step I took in those early days was to modify Solo Tuning to overcome its bending deficit on

the even-numbered holes. I changed the scale to enable ALL draw notes to bend a semitone:

POWER-CHROMATIC TUNING

S-Out	C	D	E	F#	G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	G	A	B	C
Hole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8							
Sl-In	C#D#	F#F	G#A#	A#C	C#D#	F#F	G#A#	A#C							

This gives a LOT of extra soul to the chromatic slide harmonica. Not only can the draws be bent for bluesy effect, but the semitone bends increase the available note options by 50%! For example, a C# note in hole 1 can now be played as a slide-in blow, or a slide-out draw bend on the D. And the D can be played as a slide-in D# bent down a semitone. This principle can be applied on every hole. The added note options give the player pleasing new choices for note timbre and ease of playing tough passages.

I call these new notes Bend Enharmonics. Incorporating them in your chromatic playing utterly transforms the way the instrument sounds and plays, in a very good way! Here the chromatic borrows an important ability from the diatonic (interactive reed bending) and hence gains a lot of that soulful blues harp expressiveness we all love.

I'll explore more alternate tunings and other modifications to the slide harmonica in Part 2 of this article, in the next issue. See you then!

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