

**THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST
OF AUSTRALIA**

Report by - NEIL GRAHAM - 2002 Churchill Fellow

**To research the latest trends relating to the needs of players
of the diatonic harmonica**

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INTRODUCTION

To research latest trends relating to the needs of players of the diatonic harmonica.

The Richter tuned diatonic harmonica is unique in many ways. Physically it has changed little from the time of its invention 150 years ago. The actual function of modern day instruments is identical to that of the original hand made instruments that appeared in Germany prior to factory production by Matthias Hohner in 1857. The Richter tuning originally allowed for the playing of chords, octaves and melody in the major scale. However in recent times harmonica players with a sense of adventure have discovered ways to play the missing sharps and flats by using interactive dual reed bends.

The result of these efforts at achieving the seemingly impossible is that the diatonic harmonica is not necessarily diatonic any more. I say not necessarily because not all diatonic harmonica brands and models are suitable to set up for fully chromatic playing. The first apparent departure from playing the harmonica in the major scale has to be credited to some unknown blues man or blues men who somehow discovered the phenomenon known as dual reed bending. More recently the mastery of what is known as “overblow” and “overdraw” techniques have filled in the gaps with the result that skilled players can play in all keys on the one instrument.

There is a good case to argue that the original inventors of this instrument had no idea that it would be possible to play sharps and flats on the harmonica.

Hopefully this report will draw wider attention to this most remarkable instrument’s transition from diatonic to chromatic. I trust it highlights the advancements made by some of the leading players and technicians who are pushing the boundaries of what used to be seen as a novelty instrument.

In my travels across the U.S. I was fortunate to experience American hospitality and friendship in all its fullness. My heartfelt gratitude to the following folk who made me so welcome and who were so supportive and helpful:

In San Francisco:	Winslow Yerxa Will Scarlett
In Everett W.A.:	Jim McLaughlin Mark Graham
In Austin Texas	Tim and Ellen Northcutt Glenn and Marilyn Davis Garry Primich Michael Rubin
In Chicago:	Corky Siegel and Holly Tucker Joe Filisko Howard Levy Doug Randall
In Ohio	Everybody at the Buckeye Harmonica Festival
In New Jersey/New York	Bob Meehan and Cecile Mastroeni Dennis Gruenling.

In Boonsboro Maryland Bruce and Gail Brong.
In Richmond Virginia Rick and Joan Epping.

In Australia. I would also like to thank the following family and friends who have given me so much.

At home Danuta and Naomi Graham
 Sasha and Leigh Woodham

In Sydney Jim and Helen Conway
 Douglass Stuart

In St Andrews, Victoria Jac and Tricia Smits
 Judy Jacques and Sandro Danati

And a special thank you to all my friends at the Churchill Trust!

Executive Summary

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Harmonica players of today have instruments available to them that are of a quality previously undreamed of, due to the efforts of technicians who have sought out ways to improve the playability of factory-produced harmonicas.

It was important for me to meet and talk to these pioneers of “customisation” and some of their clients - the professional harmonica players - and so improve my understanding of my own role as a supplier of high quality, customised harmonicas. Most players that I interviewed were dissatisfied with the quality of commercially produced harmonicas at some time in their playing career and had sought the services of a technician. All are endeavouring to raise the public perception of the diatonic harmonica to a higher level and were keen to point out that major advances in the development of their playing technique were largely due to the availability of better quality harmonicas.

Conclusions

As a result of my fellowship I have gained a greater understanding of my role as a harmonica technician specialising in the hand finishing of Hohner marine band harmonicas. I have learned that the role of a good technician must extend to an active interest in each player’s technique and style in order to successfully supply a personalised comprehensive technical service.

Within the American music culture exists a huge network of support and information. This type of network exists within Australia’s harmonica community but as yet without the vitality and power of its American big brother. I am dedicated to raising public awareness of our instrument to a higher level through my work as a technician, by publishing this report on my webpage www.jimconway.sydney.net/neilgraham.htm and by working to strengthen ties with our overseas friends, hopefully to open new doors of learning for Australian players.

I am also keen to promote the diatonic harmonica as a worthwhile instrument for inclusion in school curriculums. I strongly recommend that more research be undertaken in Australia in relation to the working of the reeds in the diatonic harmonica.

Program:

San Francisco, California.

8th March: recorded an interview with Will Scarlett.

9th March: recorded interview with Winslow Yerxa.

Seattle, Washington

12th March: travelled to Bellingham to attend open mike blues session at the Buffalo Bar.

14th March to 17th March: viewed rare collection of videos of prominent harmonica players and inspected collection of rare harmonicas with Jim McLaughlin.

20th March: recorded interview with Mark Graham

21st March: recorded interview with Jim Mc Laughlin.

Austin Texas: 22nd March to 1st April

Attended Joes Generic bar where the best Austin blues bands perform 7 nights per week

Attended Austin Players' production of Lady Sings The Blues.

Attended four performances by the Foscoe Jones band with Michael Rubin playing harmonica.

Recorded interviews with Garry Primich, Tim Northcutt and Michael Rubin.

Guest speaker at the Austin chapter of HOOT (Harmonica Organization of Texas)

Chicago Illinois: 2nd April to 16th April

3rd April: saw and heard Howard Levy play harmonica with the Kurt Elling Quartet at the Green Mill.

4th April: recorded interview with Howard Levy.

5th and 7th April: attended workshops on Dynamic Variation with Corky Siegel.

8th and 15th April: attended harmonica classes at The Old Town School of Music (teacher Joe Filisko).

14th April: recorded interview with Joe Filisko.

9th April: saw and heard Carl Davis Band with Joliet Joe playing harmonica.

Buckeye Harmonica Festival Columbus Ohio

18th, 19th, and 20th April:

Nightly concerts featured artists such as William Gallison, Peter Madcat Ruth, Joe Filisko and other great exponents of both the diatonic and chromatic harmonica.

Days were filled with workshops and teaching sessions.

New Jersey/New York: 23rd April to 4th May

Recorded interviews with Bob Meehan and Dennis Gruenling.

Saw and heard Little Sammy Davis.

Attended numerous bluegrass and Irish music sessions at various venues such as the Baggot Inn and Paddy Riley's Pub in New York.

10th May to 13th May

Visit Hohner's American Distribution Centre with Rick Epping.

Main Body

The purpose of my Churchill fellowship is to help me become more familiar with the needs of modern players of the diatonic harmonica.

Harmonica players of today have instruments available to them that are of a quality previously undreamed of. This is due to the efforts of technicians who have sought out ways to enhance and improve the playability of factory-produced harmonicas. It was important for me to meet and talk to these pioneers of “customisation” and some of their clients, the professional harmonica players. This helped me to gain an improved understanding of my own role as a supplier of high quality modified / customised harmonicas.

It occurred to me that a good way to gather the information would be to conduct interviews and record them on mini disc for future reference. Everybody I approached was most helpful and the content of the interviews is most revealing in relation to advances being made by players of the no longer humble, diatonic, harmonica.

As I travelled across the U.S. collecting interviews several things began to appear as main issues. Although the musical styles of these players was diverse they all had several things in common:

1. All had experienced a feeling of dissatisfaction with the quality of commercially produced harmonicas at some time in their playing career.
2. All are endeavouring to raise the public perception of the diatonic harmonica to a higher level and would like to see it viewed for what it is, a unique and powerful musical instrument.
3. Nearly all had developed a relationship with a technician and relied on them for the supply and maintenance of upgraded, customised instruments.
4. All those that used the modified instruments were keen to point out that major advances in the development of their playing techniques were largely due to the availability of better quality harmonicas.

This in turn made them totally reliant on their “tech.” for the continued supply and maintenance of these specialised personalised instruments. Joe Filisko first began to provide a technical service to harmonica players in 1990. Joe is a machinist and a prominent harmonica player and teacher. He began machining brass combs and shaping covers from brass sheet and offering these early Filisko harmonicas to players as an alternative to the factory produced instruments.

He was also able to demonstrate his uncanny ability to upgrade and so bring out the best in the Hohner 1896 Marine Band. Today his name is synonymous with excellence and his instruments and those of his colleagues, Richard Sleigh and James Gordon, live up to their reputation as being the best available in the world.

Soon to be released by Hohner is the Extreme Bender or XB 40. This revolutionary harmonica was developed by Rick Epping from a prototype cell designed by Will Scarlett. It employs the use of enabler reeds to facilitate the interactive dual reed bends on both blow and draw notes. Rick is regarded by his peers as probably the most knowledgeable person there is available concerning the harmonica.

Howard Levy, by sheer determination, discovered ways to play the missing sharps and flats on the diatonic harmonica. In his hands the diatonic harmonica is no longer diatonic and he has achieved the seemingly impossible, amazing everyone. These discoveries have forever changed the perception of the harmonica and of what can be achieved with it is history.

Howard has also been instrumental in helping to develop, with Joe Filisko, specialised instruments, set up and finely adjusted to the most demanding specifications to facilitate chromatic playing in all keys on the one instrument. This successful symbiotic relationship between player and technician has meant that the standard of instruments available has improved immensely within the last decade. Today harmonicas can be set up for individual players and styles by careful hand finishing and adjusting.

It was my pleasure to meet and talk with many harmonica players about their instruments and their music. Although the styles of music they played ranged from bluegrass through to old timey, country, Chicago blues, jump blues and traditional Irish fiddle tunes they all had one thing in common. They all shared a love for the ten hole 20 reed Richter tuned diatonic harmonica. Without exception, when asked what attracted them to the harmonica the answer was “its voice”. These harmonicas can be made to imitate the saxophone, clarinet, trumpet, trombone and more. Not to mention fox hunts, trains and a baby asking mama for a drink of water. They can also sound like someone playing the harmonica - that distinctive sound so easily identifiable as the ten hole Richter tuned diatonic.

Conclusions

As a result of my fellowship I have gained a greater understanding of my role as a harmonica technician specialising in the hand finishing of Hohner marine band harmonicas. This is a new profession and as far as I know I am the only practising professional technician of this type in the southern hemisphere.

It is most important to provide players with high quality instruments. It is just as important to service and maintain them in order to keep them at peak performance. I have learned that the role of a good technician must extend to an active interest in each player's technique and style in order to successfully supply a personalised comprehensive technical service.

There is, in America, a great history and tradition associated with the "roots" music or folk music peculiar to the U.S. A variety of styles such as blues, country, old timey, Jazz, zydeco, folk rock, bluegrass and more have become entrenched as a part of American culture. Within this music culture exists a huge network of support and information, which is available to those who seek to be part of that tradition.

In relation to the harmonica, new players will find that there are various organizations and harmonica clubs where they will receive encouragement and support, as well as festivals, workshops and teaching seminars that are designed to cater to any level from beginner to advanced. These workshops feature the best players in their field and the student can meet and interact with them and enjoy a great learning experience. The support network goes far beyond these organised events however and is most evident at the grass roots level where talented new players are given every assistance to achieve excellence even in this highly competitive environment. There are many protocols and unwritten codes of behaviour that govern this unofficial organization of harmonica players.

This type of network exists within Australia's harmonica community but as yet without the vitality and power of its American big brother. This is understandable because of our tiny population compared to say, the United States. We are fortunate to have players of world class such as Jim Conway who are actively working to facilitate the advancement of the instrument here in Australia. Despite the efforts of Jim and also Ian Collard and others Australia is still very much a backwater when it comes to hands on involvement with the harmonica world at large.

RECOMENDATIONS

There is a growing awareness worldwide that the diatonic harmonica has a lot to offer as a musical instrument. We here in Australia need to strive to do more to promote our music and our instrument. There is a strong case to support the formation of an organization that could truly represent the interests of Australian harmonica players both professional and amateur.

Last year I was able to attend the World Harmonica Festival in Trossingen, Germany. It was to me the epitome of what such a festival should be and full marks to the organisers for putting on a fantastic event.

The staging of the popular Sydney harmonica festivals 2000 and 2002 proved that such an event, albeit on a smaller scale, could be successfully held in Australia. It would be extremely beneficial for the harmonica playing community in Australia if such a festival was staged at an international level with both local and overseas artists contributing their knowledge through workshops and teach-ins.

Commercially produced harmonicas come in varying standards of quality. Some are little better than toys and are somewhat difficult to play. Others are a serious attempt to provide the enthusiast with an instrument that will satisfy his or her needs.

I am dedicated to raising public awareness of our instrument to a higher level through my work as a technician. I see no reason why the harmonica cannot be taught in Australian schools even at primary school level as an alternative to the recorder. I will do what I can to promote this idea through our "Aussie harmonica players network". I will also write letters to the relevant ministers to encourage the education authorities to take a look at the harmonica as a serious alternative to other instruments. A blues harmonica course for high school students is not such a bad idea. I think it would be tremendously popular and a lot of fun for the students.

Finally, there is still much to be learned about the actual workings of the diatonic harmonica and why the reeds behave as they do. More research is needed and it would be nice to see it happening here in Australia with a view to creating better instruments for future generations to enjoy.