

The Lesson

So, I decided on this balmy August night that I would tuck my sweetie into bed and cruise on down to Harry's Blues Bar in Hyannis to check whoever was playing. I arrive a little before the Rick "King" Russell, the house band, goes on. The place is packed. It's open mic night and every harp player and guitarist within a 20 mile radius is in the house. I have my harps. I'm armed.....and dangerous.

I'm leaning on the wall adjacent to the entrance. The door opening is between me and a guy who looks vaguely familiar but I can't place him. I can tell that he's "somebody", because he's wearing a denim jacket with a giant golden sun over the left breast pocket. Underneath the glowing sun are the words; "Sun Records".

As I'm trying to figure out who this guy is, Rick Russell's voice comes over the PA system. "I know that we don't usually start calling people up to play so early in the evening, but I have a special guest here tonight. Jerry, would come up and blow a note or two? Ladies and gentlemen....Jerry Portnoy".

I about died. Jerry Portnoy played with Muddy Waters from 1974-'80. More recently he played with Eric Clapton and his work can be heard on Clapton's "From the Cradle" album; arguably the best blues album in the last 10 years. I can't believe that anyone could hear the harp work on this album and not think that they are perhaps hearing some of the best playing the world has known. Jerry may not agree with me on this, but he'll just have to write his own piece on the issue.

Jerry played a couple of songs and as he was leaving the stage I was right there to greet him. I introduced myself and said how great it was to finally get to hear him play, LIVE. I told him that I had just released a new CD and asked if I could give it to him for his input. "Do you have it with you?" he asked. "Yeah, right here in my harp case". "Grab a copy and come with me" he said.

We left Harry's and walked about a block down the street to a pale yellow Caddy. "Get in" was all he said. I had no idea where we were going or what we were going to do. I didn't much care, either. Jerry looked at me with my CD and said, "I don't have a CD player in this car, but I have a cassette player. Would you like to hear my new album, 'Down in the Mood Room' with Duke Robillard?" Remarkably I did not faint. "Sure" was all I said.

As we sat in his car listening to his work I heard a particular riff; a percussive chop actually and asked him to stop the tape and replay that small riff. After doing so I asked how he was able to get the sound. "Oh, that?" and he fumbled in his dashboard and like almost every harp player in the world (who drives) he had a stash of harps right at his fingertips. He immediately replicated the chop.

Here I am sitting in Jerry Portnoy's Cadillac listening to him play along with his own new album. Kill me now, because I doubt life could get any better than this. As we hung

out I asked him if he would ever consider sitting down with another player to do a critique. He said that he does, on occasion, give lessons and might be open to the idea. We exchanged contact data and went back to the club.

Rick Russell sees me walking back in the club with Jerry and immediately comes up to me and say, "You've got to get up and play with these guys who are on stage right now". You don't argue with "King" Russell, so I walked up on stage, introduced myself and got ready to play with none other than Kid Bangham; former guitarist with the Fabulous Thunderbirds.

All in all, not a bad night.

Fast forward. Over the following months I e-mailed Jerry to discuss if and when he could see me. We mutually decided upon the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Since I would be at the Cape for the holiday that day would be perfect.

The Tuesday before the holiday I called Jerry to get directions to his house and confirm that we were still on. As that conversation was winding down I asked him if he had had a chance to hear my CD yet. "Yeah" was all he said. After a pause that lasted, oh, about 3 hours, I said, "Well, what'dya think?" "What do you want me to say", was his reply. OUCH! Another 3 hour pause and then I hear through the earpiece of my phone, "OK, I'll say this; you will benefit from spending an hour with me".

I mean really! How dare he! I'm a great harp player, after all. I suck it up and drive to his place on mid-cape. I'm my customary 10 minutes early for the 12:00 p.m. appointment. As I'm about to pull into his driveway I have this wave of anxiety wash over me. "I can't do this" I say to myself. This guy is going to take my musical ego, roll it up into a ball and stomp on it. I have an image of me running out of his house screaming, shaking and drooling simultaneously. I see suicide on the near horizon.

Snap out of it, for Chris sake! How bad can this be? I pull into his drive and get out of my car. Jerry greets me at the door, but before we can get to work he needs to have a cigarette. We sit on his porch and get (re)acquainted. We talk about nothing really. I can feel his intensity; he undoubtedly can feel my nervousness but thankfully he's too much of a gentleman to comment on my state of mind.

"Let's go downstairs, but not before removing your shoes" he said. In stocking feet I descend down into his office/studio. I'm praying that there are no holes in my socks, which thankfully proved to be the case. The room has been newly renovated by his son. Soft, beige carpet with a southwestern motif rug dons the floor. Against the wall on my right is a very comfortable looking wine colored sofa; next to that a matching chair. His stereo system is in the back left corner at the end of the row of mics. The room smells new.

I am instantly struck by the row of vintage microphones on short stands that are in a perfect line on top of a waist-high bookcase on the wall to my left. My eyes don't linger

there long, however. The walls are adorned with framed posters advertising the various performances of the Muddy Waters Band. Then there are the photographs. Oh my God! Pictures of him with Muddy and the band. A great black and white of Jerry with Albert King, Freddy King and Buddy Guy at the Royal Albert Hall in England.

I have not taken a breath for at least 3 minutes. I slowly turn to my right and there it is. Framed and mounted there hangs the first actual gold record that I have ever seen. It's "From the Cradle" and it's signed by Eric Clapton. I may never breathe again.

From someplace far off in the distance I hear a voice say, "Have a seat". I snap out of wherever it is I have just gone to and take a seat on the sofa. Jerry sits in the chair. "Play something", he demands. In a nanosecond I have just forgotten everything I have ever known about playing the harmonica. I look around this room and begin to realize just where it is that I am sitting. I suddenly feel like Garth of "Wayne's World" and I hear Garth/Bob saying "I'm not worthy....I'm not worthy".

I place this alien piece of tin and wood in my mouth and to be honest I have no idea what I did or what I played, but it didn't last very long, thankfully. Jerry says, "Stop. That's enough. You have no foundation. You don't know where you're going". Why I am alive today is anybody's guess. A weaker man would have died right on the spot. I am now thinking that I just might live forever, since I have lived through this one moment in time.

"Let's go back to the basics. Let me hear you play the scales" is Jerry next request. I have never played the scales on the harmonica in my life. But thankfully I know where the bloody notes are and accommodate his wishes.

"OK, now let's hear you play the scale but do it with tonguing". Well, you see I'm not exactly sure just what tonguing is. I know what I think it is, but is it what he thinks it is. What I ended up doing was double tonguing which, of course, is nothing like slap tonguing, which is what he was looking for.

"What was that?" he asked with his eyes burning holes in my shirt. "Uh....tonguing?" I replied. Another long, uncomfortable pause ensues. "You don't know how to do tonguing, do you?" Well, I may not really die, but I could easily be sick right about now. I am feeling so inadequate; so inferior that the only thing I can do is resort to the one and one weapon/resource that I have left (thanks to my Dad, Big Jim Stannard). I went to humor. "This must be the musical equivalent of you finding Big Foot, eh?". It was the only time I saw him smile.

The previously agreed upon, one hour lesson lasted until 3:30 in the afternoon. He tried to charge me for only 1 hour. I paid him for two. Amazingly, he agreed to have me come back. I can't wait!

Fast forward again. It's now Friday, March 4, 2005. Jerry has agreed to see me for a two hour session beginning at 10:00 a.m. I drive to the Cape Thursday afternoon and that

night end up at Harry's. Rick graciously allows me to sit in with the band for a tune. Friday morning I had back down to Jerry's place. Over the past couple of weeks they have had an unusual amount of snowfall; well over three feet. It's hard to picture my summer vacation spot looking some much like my own backyard.

Once again Jerry is sitting on his porch waiting for me to arrive. I'm feeling much better about this session, although I must confess there is still a hefty twinge of nervousness in the air. There is no need for pleasantries and I kick off my shoes and follow him downstairs.

Now you'd think that since I've already been here, I could get by the memorabilia hanging so perfectly on the wall. WRONG. It has almost exactly the same affect that it has last November. I am again awestruck at the life that has been led by the man who is about to make a gallant effort to teach this old dog some new tricks.

We get down to business. Jerry asks me to recap what we covered last time, which I do. I think that perhaps because of the amount of time I have invested into this tin sandwich you know as a harmonica, he feels comfortable moving around rather quickly from one technique to another. It's not long before I trip and stumble. He really can work magic with this instrument and I find myself being left firmly in the dust. The comparison of his teachings to those of my Martial Arts Sensei, Jon Bottomms, is poignant to say the least. There may be nothing in the world more satisfying than to have another human being willing to share their knowledge with you with a firm desire to make you better at whatever is you choose to work on. Does this mean to imply that it is always nice? Cordial? Fair, even? Ah, NO. It can be very painful, indeed. But through dedication and perseverance the council and advice being given can be absorbed (hopefully) and given back to others.

My two hour lesson on March 4th ran four and one-half hours. Time flew by. Much ground was covered. But it was more than just covering ground. I will be painstakingly trying as hard as I know how to do the particular technique being offered. I will be so close to getting it, but then again...not quite. "Do it again" he roars, and I do. And again. And again. And suddenly I hear it, but Jerry hears it first. As I start to feel a moment of great pride in hitting the technique on the head, his right hand shoots out; index finger pointing directly at me, "YES", is all he says.

There may not be a better feeling in the entire world than having one of the world's best harp players share in your enthusiasm at having finally gotten it right. But that's just one little teeny, weenie, tiny technique. There are hundreds of them just waiting for me to discover. My goal, as I have expressed to Jerry numerous times, is to be able to live long enough to learn how to really play this Mississippi saxophone. If I get there....or even get close, it will be because this man from Chicago with credential to die for, decided to go to Harry's Blues Bar on a hot, August night.....as did I.

All this does is simply confirm that I am the luckiest man alive!