

## Pucker or Block

### Pucker or Tongue Block

Both methods of playing are correct, neither is wrong. You should be able to switch comfortably between the two. So, which ever is alien will eventually need mastering. At first this is akin to using a knife and fork with the wrong hands. Given time it will drop into place, but you *will* have to be patient. Either way you are starting to *get your chops in* as we call it. In professional circles this is called developing one's *embouchure* (from the French word *bouche* meaning gob, chops, mush or laughing gear).

### Puckering

Puckering is the commonest way to start playing. I would say 95% of students who visit the harp surgery use the pucker method and it is certainly the easiest way to tackle blow and draw bends. First moisten your lips with a quick lick. Purse your lips to create the same aperture as if whistling. Now loosen up slightly and relax your lips. Locate the hole you want to play with the tip of your tongue and apply your pucker right round the harp. Get stuck in.



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You should be covering the numbers on the cover plate with your top lip and your index finger should be gently pushing the area under your nose. Now exhale gently and push from the diaphragm. Inhale gently, pulling from the chest and diaphragm. If you can hear more than one note that's fine at first, but you will have to learn to play individual holes. Listen and learn to adjust your pucker to narrow down the sound. Check out Beginner's Twitch to learn more about navigating and the geography of the harp. Remember that while you are aiming at one hole, you do have a margin for error – the dividing bridges either side of the hole. So the area you are aiming at is actually greater than it might appear.

## Tongue Blocking

Blocking takes time to master if you are a natural puckerer. It is ideal for that big tone and will give your sound a *chunky* quality (especially when amplified). Chord and rhythm accompaniment, tongue slapping, octaving, fluttering and some other great effects all become available once you crack this method.

Let's say your mouth naturally covers four holes. Blow and draw holes one to four on your harp. Now close down holes one to three with your tongue, until you can only hear hole four.



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You will probably need to adjust the corner of your mouth also, to eliminate any overspill into hole five. Once you are used to this position, try moving it up to cover holes two to five. Block off holes two to four until you can only hear hole five. This time you may have to adjust both corners of your mouth to eliminate overspill into holes one and six either side.

Move around the harp using this method. Try playing the major scale 4B 4D 5B 5D 6B 6D 7D 7B just tongue blocking. Experiment lifting and reapplying your tongue for chord playing or to create a rhythm. Practice starting with your tongue off the harp and slapping it on to play a single note. This is what gives that classic Chicago crunch and bounce. Like this:

I have focussed on 'right hand' tongue blocking. There are players out there who can tongue tongue block 'left handed' too.

### **U-Tongue or Finger Block?**

You will sometimes read about the U-tongue style for playing accurately as a beginner. Until last month (Aug 2007) this very paragraph advised everyone to ignore the style as I had never encountered anyone that used it in all my years of



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playing and teaching. Then, lo and behold, I had a call from a beginner who wanted coaching sessions: at our initial diagnostic session she disclosed that U-tonguing was the technique she employed. Fully prepared to revise my understanding and bias on the matter, we proceeded to run through some basic exercises together. The result reinforced my pre-existing opinion... This technique is useful in pinpointing specific holes, however it hinders the development of other essential techniques (such as tone building and reed bending) where alternative use of the tongue is necessary.

With a little persuasion the student in question learned to pucker. I hasten to add that she knows I do not dismiss any technique out of principle – as long as it promotes the best possible musical performance. If you use U-tonguing partially or exclusively in your playing, I would be very interested to receive your feedback!

On the other hand I once had a student who, when starting lessons, located notes by covering the holes either side with his forefingers. He had copied this method from a well-known harmonica instruction book. Even as a temporary aid to accuracy, I find this system highly dubious and do not recommend it in the slightest. More especially for anyone who has recently been peeling onions.



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## U-Tongue Feedback

Phil Lloyd writes: I don't U-block but maybe some day. [*Which is an interesting opener. Ed*]. It took me years to figure out tongue blocking because I thought the tongue was more active than it actually is. For tongue blocking (a misnomer) the key is playing out of the riight (or left) corner. It is really corner playing. That is why when people TB they are really playing out of the corner and the main thing the tongue is doing is getting out of the way to open that right side corner. Players who switch from left to right corners in order to make rapid jumps from say 1 Blow to 4 Blow call it Corner Switching. Had I understood the roll of playing out of the corner I would have picked up corner playing decades earlier.

Your statement that bending is impossible with U-blocking is probably not true. It is the rear of the tongue –where it is attached to base of the mouth – that causes bending by narrowing the passage and making the air go faster,, raising the pitch. Bending of course, is exactly like whistling on the inhale (for draw bends) and exhale (for blow bends). The problem is that most people don't whistle anymore and don't know how to do it. Whistle a high note G and then a low note C and notice how it feels. It's just like saying yee-ooow on the inhale. The yee or eee brings the note up to pitch and



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the ooww bends it down. Bending is possible with tongue blocking even though the front of the tongue is up against the comb. Same is true with U-blocking. The front of the tongue does not affect the rear and bending. Norton Buffalo was a U-blocker. But then he's dead now. I think people who play the harp like a cigar (hands-free) use the U-block. Phil.

*[Point conceded Phil. I've tried bending while keeping my tongue in contact with the harp – without doing so would be puckering in my opinion – and it can be done; although it feels cumbersome to a new user and would require some work to make it less awkward. But I still don't see what advantage this offers, or what need it serves, when you can accurately bend the same note without any contact with the tongue. Going back to your opening comment, I still welcome comment from any full-time U-tongue users. Ed].*

Danny Harris writes: Hi Mate *[Can you tell he's from Oz? Ed]* I was reading your site today and noticed you'd like feedback for U tongue blocking technique. I use this technique and it was initially great for isolating individual holes as a beginner. However, once I started to learn to bend it's not the best method. I completely agree with you. I use a bit of a hybrid approach. Rightly or wrongly I use my tongue to feel for the hole (phnar phnar) and once I've located it I then



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pucker. Like you said you just cannot do most techniques with U bending. Cheers and all the best mate. [QED. Ed]



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