

Tongue Effects

Tongue slaps

This is a technique which goes hand in hand with the tongue block method of playing harmonica. Instead of pursing or puckering, you are covering about four holes with your mouth, blocking off three holes with your tongue and playing the remaining hole. Typically this means blocking the three holes to the left and playing the remaining hole on the right. So you might block holes 1 to 3 and play hole 4 (blow or draw). The reverse can also be true however – you could block 2 to 4 and play hole 1 (blow or draw). Either way the result is a system of playing where you work from the side of the mouth rather than from a central pucker. Tongue slapping is achieved when you briefly catch all four notes before 'slapping' your tongue onto the harp to single out the one note you need. It adds a crunch effect to the sound. By repeating the process, a jig or shuffle rhythm can be created.

Tongue Rolls

This is when you roll your 'r' like a Scotsman (She was a bonny girrl) or Spaniard (Muy grrrrande). It is only possible on blow notes. When used lightly on lower notes you can mimic a cat's purr. On upper notes you can mimic a cricket or 1970's trim telephone.

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Triple Tonguing

By articulating with your tongue, you can give the impression of playing single notes rapidly. Try saying either 'Ta-ta-ta' or 'Diddley' as you blow or draw. Your tongue does not actually touch the harp, but stays inside your mouth. For the record, I find diddling easier and faster than ta-ta-ing! For a great effect, try alternating rapidly between draw 2 and blow 3 using a single 'Diddley' in each direction. This an effect Mark Feltham uses on 9 Below Zero's fantastic album 'Live At The Marquee'.

Fluttering or Dabbing

Check out the very start of Whammer Jammer or Walter's Boogie. In both cases Magic Dick and Walter Horton use what I call the dabbing technique. In effect it is octaving or note splitting across 4 holes, while quickly uncovering and covering the two middle holes to produce an intermittent chord. This is achieved by rapidly and repeatedly 'poking', 'dabbing', 'fluttering' or 'tongue slapping' with the end of your tongue. It's an in-out movement rather than a side-to-side movement.


In Whammer Jammer, Magic Dick plays a direct bend on hole 4, moves into a straight 4 draw and then splits draw holes 2 and 5, with dabs on holes 3-4. The bridge between holes 3 and 4 is the target point for the dab. In Walter's Boogie, Walter

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Horton plays a very quick direct draw bend on hole 3, through a straight 3 draw and then octaves 1 and 4, with dabs in holes 2-3. The bridge between holes 2 and 3 is the target point for the dab. He then transfers up to draw split holes 2-5, back to octave draw 1-4, up to draw split 2-5, up to blow octave 3-6, and finally up to draw split 4-7. In each case (except for the 4-7) the dabs are played in a sequence of four triplets. Lots of puff needed for this one!

Articulation

Any of the sounds produced with the tongue during speech can be articulated through your harmonica. Try 'ka', 'tah', 'tuh', 'dah', 'doh', 'deh', 'doy' and 'diddley' (articulation can also be produced from glottal stopping vowel sounds – see Glottal Stops). Articulation can help to trigger the start of a note, separate a sequence of notes or lend certain sound qualities to specific notes. An extreme version is Doc Watson's 'Mama Blues'. Using hand wah-wah and articulation, he mimics an infant saying 'I want my Mama!'.

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