

JOE FILISKO "OPEN HARP SURGEON" BY LUDO BECKERS

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I would have loved to go deeper into technical harmonica questions, but our readers are subscribed to a blues-magazine in general.

Please keep in mind this is an unedited version. Transcribing and then translating into Dutch took some time, there's none left for 'cleaning up' another version (back to my harps now;-)).

Hope you enjoy it anyway.

Ludo Beckers

JOE FILISKO - open harp surgeon

Many readers will be wondering who in the world this Filisko may be...

Joe is known in the harmonicaworld as the number one harpcustomizer ().*

He specializes in the type of harmonica, or 'harp', favoured by most bluesplayers: the Marine Band 1896/20.

Among his customers are: Howard Levy, Kim Wilson, Gary Primich, Jerry Portnoy, Peter 'Madcat Ruth', Corky Siegel, Dennis Gruenling... to name but a few.

He's also a 'harmonicaplayer's harmonicaplayer'. A German harper sent me a copy of a live recording, on which he had simply written: 'The Great Joe Filisko'.

Larry 'The Iceman' Eisenberg, another respected harpplayer, describes Joe's basement as: 'a wonderful 'mad scientist' laboratory of precision machine shop tools, harmonica parts and a wall of cassette tapes of obscure harmonica performances/performers/recordings collected and sent to him from around the world.'

*Joe Filisko was awarded the SPAH (**)'Harmonica Player of the Year Award' in 2001.*

Joe, can you tell us how you got in touch with the instrument originally?

I was born in Giessen, Germany, and my mother had purchased a harmonica for me...

there were always harmonicas lying around.

When I was a teenager, I purchased a 12-hole '364 Marine Band', and tried to fool around with that.

But it really wasn't until I was in College. I was playing guitar with a guitar-ensemble

called 'The Wolf Pack' (which had a write-up in 'Guitar Player' magazine). We worked some blues songs into the repertoire. I was fooling around with open tunings, bottleneck slide-guitar stuff, and some finger-picking ragtime. I started listening a lot more to blues, and the bluesharmonica kind of hit me.

The first time I've seen the movie 'Crossroads'. The very opening of the movie is a representation of Robert Johnson standing at the crossroads, while Sonny Terry was wailing on the harmonica. I thought that was like the coolest sound. It just sort of hypnotised me. It was this sort of sound (plays some Sonny Terry style). It gave me goosebumps. Actually I still get goosebumps when I listen to it.

I got curious about the instrument, and interestingly enough, the more I investigated the more it intrigued me, because I realised that so few people really seemed to know much about it.

In the late eighties I went to a NAMM show - they still had them in Chicago at the time - and I went to the Hohner booth to kind of 'interrogate' the people working there.

Even they didn't seem to know that much, but through them I got connected with a club that meets in Chicago, called the 'Windy City Harmonica Club'.

At the club I met one of my best friends, the infamous 'Buzz' Krantz, who you may read about if you read about some of the American harmonica festivals. Things really sort of opened up the doors from there, and I really haven't lost my interest or passion for the instrument. I'm managing to still figure out ways to learn more and more about it. I'm just having a blast even to this day.

I've heard you have a huge preference for pre-war harpstyles, and that you studied them extensively. Who, would you say, are the main players to listen to from that era?

I don't know if I'd say huge, but I'm very fascinated with how effectively one person with one harmonica can create a full sound.

When I got associated with the 'Windy City Harmonica Club', I ran into Peter 'Madcat' Ruth He'd given a performance at the club, and I just think he's a real master at being a one man harmonica show. Just his playing and singing really took me. It was at that point that I started. I had time to do research in the libraries for miscellaneous records that had harmonica pieces on them. I remember an obscure record that I made a cassette tape of that had one of my favorite - even to this day - harmonica pieces on it called 'Lost Boy Blues' by Palmer McAbee - it's actually a piece more commonly known as 'Lost John'. It has this ... (plays). That sort of stuff just took my breath away. I thought it was amazing that so much sound could come out of such a little instrument like the harmonica. I started to hear the train imitations and when I bought the record on the Matchbox label - I think it was called 'Great Harp Players' (nowadays on cd: Document 5100).

Hearing Palmer McAbee do that train imitation just blew me away. I couldn't imagine that an instrument as small and as unassuming as the harmonica could imitate something as huge and ferocious as a steam engine train. So the early styles spoke to me, resonated with me emotionally sooner than a lot of the other blues styles did.

So, what players to listen to? Well there weren't all that many: DeFord Bailey, as I said Palmer McAbee, (*****) ...players that could do a good train, a good fox-chase piece.

A couple of cd's that, besides the one I just named, are important to check out are 'Harmonica Masters' (Yazoo 2019), 'Harmonica Blues' (Yazoo 1053), 'Harp Blowers' (Document 5164), 'Devil In The Woodpile' (Indigo 2032). Those pretty much cover some of the names that I mentioned - great, great stuff.

You use some unusual techniques, like for instance a growling trumpet- or trombone- like sound. Did you develop these from older examples? Gwen Foster is one I recognize...

Positively it was not something I developed. I don't know even if I had a desire to be an original. I'm just trying to study some of the stuff that's already been done. I think half of those early names I mentioned all incorporated that to a degree.

I think the player that I studied the hardest trying to imitate it was Gwen Foster, which I think is one of the more original, unique harmonica players that ever played. I know I practised consistently for 3, 4, 5 years before I felt I could get a good command of that growling sound. If I could've had somebody to explain it to me, probably I could've gotten it in a fraction of the time.

So any of the techniques that you heard is stuff that I got listening, running over and over again, and trying to understand it. The secret is listen, practice, listen, practice, listen, practice and listen. That's what I do to get it.

A friend of mine heard you say at a workshop one time, that a bluesplayer should practice a train imitation every day.

Yes, I feel like that's an important thing. Anybody that considers themselves a blues harmonica player should be able to play a handful of things, including a train.

Most harpers these days though stick to trying to get a Little Walter-like sound under their belt. What do you think of this trend?

I don't know if I agree with that. Most players I run into are not that concerned with the history at all.

There is definitely a post-war bluestradition of getting a sound that is sort of a mixture of Little Walter, Big Walter, Sonny Boy and George Smith, but there's not many players trying to do that. Today you have the keepers of the flame which include Kim Wilson, Jerry Portnoy, Rod Piazza, Gary Primich, Mark Hummel to

name a few.

But I find there's not that many younger players that are trying to study Little Walter.

Isn't there a huge part of harp tradition that is almost lost these days?

Sure, I definitely think so. The train and fox-chase pieces are nearly extinct. Very few players do them with authenticity, and the question is why...

There is a lack of good instructional material. I think that by and large a lot of the instructional stuff that was put out prior to maybe the 1990's could be more destructive than helpful to people. It was largely written by players that weren't that accomplished themselves.

Most of the players that were accomplished, it seems, didn't have time to write/teach, and probably were mostly illiterate anyway. So the traditions are not really passed on.

DeFord Bailey was kind of booted off the Grand Ole Opry, and it is still sort of a mysterious thing that happened, but I suspect part of it was that those traditions that he was preserving, were slowly becoming an embarrassment to a more progressive society. The harmonica in many regards represents poverty, some of the traditions are dying because of that reason.

You are very close friends with Howard Levy. Do you think the overblow technique he developed will ever really catch on with the blues players?

Well, I don't know that it will ever become a part of the post-war blues tradition as I described (Little Walter, Big Walter, Rice Miller, George Smith), as it's passed on down, but there's definitely more of a fusion-blues, more of a rock-blues tradition that's embracing it.

I would say kind of like the - not so much what Paul Butterfield or Mark Ford are doing - but people that have been inspired by them are incorporating it a lot more.

I think it's a real shame actually having that distinction. It's a disservice to a player like Howard Levy to be known for being an overblow player, because what he has done for the harmonica is really so much more than that.

It's more of his ability to play the instrument in more keys than just first, second and third position, and getting those so called missing notes is just part of what he has done and it happens to be known as using overblows. But just because a player can use the technique doesn't at all mean that they are in a league of what Howard Levy is doing. That is absolute for sure.

We are pretty good friends and it's definitely an incredible honour to know him.

I think to some degree the blues players are going to be influenced by him and what he has done, but blues has largely been - as played on the harmonica - kind of a modal sound. Getting all the chromatic notes is really not that important for blues.

Although it's nice to have, if you can do it it's a great thing.

The pre-war Marine Band harps that are so wanted - what's so special or different about them?

Well, number one, you can't buy them unless you find one used - they're not being made.

Number two, the blues that is so respected today - those where the type of harmonica that were used. So naturally people are gonna look into these instruments with a lot of reverence.

I can't really speak in terms of chemistry. Is the wood different? I don't know - is the brass different? They say it is. That's never been of an interest to me.

I wouldn't say I'm a collector of harmonicas, but I do have quite an assortment of various diatonics, mostly Marine Bands. I kind of think of it as my library.

I try to stay in touch with what was available then - what players were playing on.

One thing definitely was the quality, the playability, the airtightness. Just the overall responsiveness and quality of the harmonicas that were made prior to the early 1960's seem to be very high. Harmonicas I've seen from the fifties are awesome playing harmonicas.

In the mid 1960's there was a little trend - about the time they introduced the 'Bluesharp'(***) - it appears that the quality somewhat steadily started to decline. What does that mean? It looks like less effort was taking place to set the reed action and the curvature of the reeds. If that's not set correctly, the harmonica is just going to appear to be leaky and unresponsive.

So one of the obvious reasons why the early harmonicas are coveted is because they by and large generally played better.

Also there's a thing that confuses people: the harmonicas that were made prior to the 1970's, the tuning was adjusted with what is called just intonation. Which means that the chords were perfectly in tune. So you get these harmonicas (plays chords) which had these velvety smooth chord-sounds, versus whereas harmonicas tuned nowadays tend to be rougher, with a lot more dissonance in the chords - equal temperament (plays just intonation harp).

The problem is that some of the notes are flat compared to a piano (plays separate notes on both harps).

In a letter from January 1996 you mention brass custom harps with rounded comb holes. Did you stop making these for a particular reason? I don't see any mention of them on your current website.

In the same letter you said the delivery date rarely exceeded a maximum of twelve weeks. I guess things have changed drastically since then?

Around 1994, the new harmonicas that were coming out - definitely the Marine Bands, Special 20's, Golden Melodies... were unbelievably bad.

They just had a goof-up in the responsiveness. It was hands down some of the worst harmonicas that I've ever played, including cheap 2 dollar harmonicas.

It was that period where I just started to get inundated with requests and work.

The professional players that I've gotten to know had heard of the harmonica work I was doing. They were calling me up asking about was there anything that I had available.

The reason why they backlogged and why the work got pushed back so much, is that I was trying to accommodate the professional full-time touring, working players by getting them stuff as soon as possible.

Ofcourse the price that other players had to pay was that they had to wait.

Unquestionably the most stress-full time in my life. I was in my late twenties and coming to the realisation that if I was going to keep living with this much stress, that I wasn't going to live to see 40 years old.

So when I got more on top of things and I met Richard Sleigh and started working with him and Jimmy Gordon, I started sending more work their way.

Eventually when the stock harmonicas from the factory - their quality control improved (ofcourse I have to say to Rick Epping's credit, the quality is exceptional now). The business tapered off a little and I decided to take a hiatus from doing the brassharmonicas. Quite simply put, I was loosing my ass doing the work on the things. I was doing them because it was different and I think they are quite beautiful and quite the museum piece, but sadly the only people that could afford them were almost always the people who couldn't play.

I may continue them in the future, but the opportunities for myself doing writing, research, teaching, lecturing, playing and performing... that's much more interesting to me then sitting in a workbench and making a brassharmonica.

On Richard Sleighs site there is mention of you and him writing a guide to rebuilding harmonicas. Is that a project still in the running?

Well, yes but it's in the running slowly. It's something we hope to do, but it's more important to make money right now than to write a book.

In an interview with Cathi Norton you talked about researching different music styles like country, jazz and world-music.

Is blues still your main music in terms of passion?

In the last year I've been doing a lot of research on the hillbilly harmonica styles throughout the south, and been trying to collect recordings. I'm eagerly searching out recordings of harmonica players doing the train imitation, the fox-chase, the 'Lost John' piece, the mama blues or 'I Want My Mama' talking-harmonica piece - these

are some of the southern traditions - to study and learn from them.

The one thing about blues is that - obviously it speaks to me, and I'm immensely passionate about it - but one thing really special about blues and the harmonica is that the bluesmusic genre is really the only genre of music that has really fully embraced the harmonica. Since John Lee Williamson recorded 'Good Morning Little Schoolgirl' the harmonica has been a legitimate bluesinstrument.

Although today it's somewhat less popular as in the 1950's - at least in blues - but blues still embraces it. I don't think that other genres of music can say that about the harmonica.

It's possible that country music had embraced it for a period here and there, but it never seems to be an essential ingredient, so blues is always gonna be music that I'm passionate about for that reason.

*At your website www.customharmonicas.com there is a complete discography of Walter Horton. (***)*

He is considered by many harpers as being even more influential on their playing then Little Walter. Does that go for you too?

A big reason for that is that Horton was a lot more predictable then Little Walter was.

Little Walter was an unbelievable genius on the harmonica; not to say that Walter Horton wasn't, but for most players grasping Walter Horton is a lot easier than it is grasping Little Walter.

When you think of Walter Horton doing some of these harmonica pieces - 'Easy' comes up or 'Walters Boogie' - these tend to be a lot more easy for players to work their version of, then some of the stuff Little Walter did, which is just absolutely amazing. I don't know that anybody to this day in the bluestradition has surpassed what Little Walter does.

For me, the one player that had a big influence on me blueswise was George Smith. Definitely Big Walter, but I really find that George Smith... especially how he seemed to be more of a minimalist. I love his use of octaves and I love his throat tremolo. His whole tone-approach is amazing.

Lot of times when I'm doing accompaniment stuff I'm thinking: 'What would George do?'

The bluesplayers that were the biggest influence on me were Little Walter, Big Walter, Rice Miller and George Smith. To a lesser degree Jr. Wells, James Cotton and down the line a group of players.

Can we expect any recording material of yours to be released?

Almost certainly I'll be recording in the future. I'm just really in no rush. I have so much fun playing and studying, and I really do not like being in a recording studio. So

naturally I'm in no rush to run off, but I definitely have a vision of putting together a cd of solo-harmonica material. Possibly with transcriptions.

In September 2003 Steve Baker organizes a 4-day masterclass-workshop in Trossingen, Germany.

Joe Filisko, Carlos Del Junco, Brendan Power and Steve are maestro's on duty.

Info:

<http://www.stevebaker.de>

<http://www.harponline.de>

<http://www.hohner.de>

About the workshops Joe finally says:

I think it's gonna be a good time. I enjoy the festivals! Looking forward to get there. Get to know people, work with people, and give a 100 percent of my time and energy. To have a good time studying and teaching blues.

() harpcustomizer: someone who improves diatonic harps through modifications.*

*(**) SPAH: Society for Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica.*

*(***) Bluesharp: A model similar to the 'Marine Band'.*

*(****) Joe also wrote the harmonica section for 'Encyclopedia of the Blues'. Routledge publishers.*

*(*****) George 'Bullet' Williams, Eddie Mapp, Kyle Wooten, William McCoy, Freeman Stowers, Jaybird Coleman, Lonnie Glosson, Salty Holmes, Henry Whitter, Gwen Foster, Daddy Stovepipes, Noah Lewis, Will Shade, Jed Davenport, Hammie Nixon, Jazz Gillum, Sonny Terry, Sonny Boy I.*