



Joe Filisko

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Harmonica player, instructor, historian and master harmonica technician Joe Filisko is an often-heard name in conversations of the harmonica. We caught up with him this week to learn a bit more about him and his life experiences.

DC: Let's start at the beginning. When did you and the harmonica become one?

JOE: Good question. I've had an interest in the harmonica from as far back as I can remember. My mother gave me one when I was a child. I sniffed around with it then, and I sniffed around with it again when, I think, I was in middle school. But it wasn't until the beginning of 1989 that I got "bit by the bug." I was playing guitar and I was very interested in blues at the time when I had gotten a guitar magazine that had a beginning blues harmonica lesson in it. It was sort of an introduction to the blues harmonica. I checked it out and read through it. It intrigued me so I went back and dusted off the harmonica again. And in the words of Walter Horton, "I started from there and I kept on pushing."

DC: Blues as a musical style that interests you, that interest goes way back?

JOE: Well, I've always been interested in music but I think I really started listening to blues seriously when I was in college.

DC: Going out to clubs and venues in the Chicago area? Or settling down with LPs and playing them until the needle broke through?

JOE: More with the LPs. I've never been a big nightclub type, club-goer person. Certainly I've seen plenty and gone out to numerous festivals. But my face has never been a frequent one on the nightclub scene.

DC: You must have gone through a couple of needles during those years?

JOE: Yes (laughs). That was really where I got my greatest exposure, listening to recordings; going to the library and getting records; ordering stuff through the mail. I remember the first two harmonica records that I had purchased were "The Best of Little Walter" and "The Soul of Blues Harmonica" by Walter Horton, "Shakey" Horton as it says on the album cover. And that intrigued me. A couple of things that I think were unusual for your typical harmonica player were that I had picked up an album, I think it was called "Great Harp Players" on the Match Box label. Let me look here. Yeah, "Great Harp Players" Match Box Blues Master Series #209. On that record were a bunch of fox chase type pieces and train imitation pieces. And that REALLY intrigued me. The concept of the small harmonica mimicking the enormity of a train had really captured my imagination and has never let go. So I was listening to a lot of the early stuff right from the beginning including the Yazoo CD called "Harmonica Blues of the '20s and '30s." That was also something that I had made one of my listening bibles.

DC: So as you mentioned a moment ago, when you talk about “going back to the beginning” (of harmonica blues), you went back—much further back, back to the music and recordings of the 1920s and even earlier as contrasted to a lot of people thinking beginning as the Chicago blues in the late ‘40s for your starting point.

JOE: It wasn’t a conscious thing. It merely was a matter of me being interested and essentially going to music stores and looking in the blues section under harmonica and buying just about anything that they had. I remember ordering records through Elderly [Instruments] in Michigan, the Elderly store, and getting a whole big bunch of blues albums that featured the harmonica. In Chicago the biggest record store is the Jazz Record Mart, which is owned by Delmark. Bob Koester’s Jazz Record Mart. I remember at that point in time when I found out about the store, the first two times I went I clearly remember spending more than \$100 each time. Being the college student, that was a lot of money for me at the time. But I had to have the stuff. Kind of an extremist response. I was interested in playing and I just picked up any record or whatever that seem to feature the harmonica.

DC: At that time they weren’t costing \$15 a piece, were they?

JOE: Well, the records that I was buying were definitely more expensive records. They were \$15 apiece because they were a lot of the limited pressings and imports.

DC: Not that I’m trying to date you in any way, but I was thinking \$5 or \$6 an album. But \$100 of music is still a good handful.

JOE: Right. Definitely a lot of the contemporary albums of the time were, sure, \$5, \$6 or \$7. But the rarer imports that featured the pre-war type recordings were a lot more money.

DC: Of those pre-war type recordings, who comes to mind that had a strong influence on you?

JOE: DeFord Bailey. Palmer McAbee. There are only two recordings that he did, “The two recordings of Palmer McAbee.” George “Bullet” Williams.

DC: That’s a great nickname.

JOE: Yeah (laughs). Quite the fierce harmonica player. Jaybird Coleman. And Gwen Foster.

DC: I would say that some of those players would be new names for some players reading this interview.

JOE: You can get a good cross-section of those performers if you purchase the “Harmonica Masters” CD on the Yazoo label #2019.

DC: Did this interest in the harmonica and blues music drive you, as it often does other players, into joining a band?

JOE: I had never had a need to play out and be in the spotlight. It was mainly driven by an interest, an intrigue, and a curiosity of myself. Certainly that can only go so far and then the inevitable is going out and playing. And now because I so seldom run into new things, new recordings or new information, the way that I have to get my fix is to go out and play now. That is definitely what I am into now. But it was not something that I really felt like I needed to do.

DC: A fix. That's probably an apt term.

JOE: Well, in my case it really describes it well.

DC: What did you study in college?

JOE: Machine tool. I basically studied to be a machinist.

DC: Did you pursue that when you graduated? Was that your first "real" job'?

JOE: Well an interesting thing happened. Because of a neighbor I ended up being turned on to a business that my neighbor told me that he had seen for sale. Basically it was one-man machine shop. I literally bought that at the same time that I was getting my degree and graduating from college. I paid \$10,000 for a bunch of equipment and the know-how to make a certain industrial assembly tool. I borrowed money from all my friends and all my relatives (laughs) because at the time having \$200 was a lot of money. So buying that business was really the start of my official self-employment career. And it turned out that it gave me some free time to experiment doing harmonica work and also it happened to give me some of the equipment necessary for milling out harmonica combs.

DC: Yeah, I was going to ask about when the "marriage" of your technical expertise from college and your interest in the harmonica took place. Is this taking place in the 1980s?

JOE: Yes late 1980s.

DC: So is it fair to say that this resulted in you producing our first customized harmonica?

JOE: Well, I have an infinite curiosity that knows almost no bounds. I frequently have to make efforts to suppress it. And so naturally I wanted to understand how the harmonica worked. Why does it do this? Why does it do that? Why doesn't it do this? The natural progression was to start taking it apart and fooling with it; modifying this and rebuilding that. At the same period in time I was naturally interested in being the best player possible. I quickly found that the instructional material of the time wasn't able to answer many questions and teach me what it was that I wanted to know. And the best source for learning, besides doing my own research and listening, was getting to meet players that were known to be great players of the time. That's when I meet Howard Levy and Charlie Musselwhite, Peter "Madcat" Ruth to name a few. It wasn't as though I took private lessons from them, but just being in able to be in the presence of somebody that was an accomplished player was a priceless opportunity for me.

DC: Either by osmosis or by occasional questions, it gets underneath your skin.

JOE: Right. Exactly

DC: Did you work at your industrial machine shop business for a while before you became deeply involved with your customized harmonica business? Or did the customized harmonica activities sneak up on you and your interest in harmonicas just gradually took over your time?

JOE: The business has always been a part-time business. It was then and still is now. I still do it, but it usually takes an average of two days a month of my time to keep it going.

DC: And the rest of the time? Do you do any teaching?

JOE: I teach one day a week. I've been doing it since 1992. It's usually about a 10-hour teaching day. The rest of the time I'm basically involved, in one form or another, in doing harmonica work. I guess you would say custom harmonica work.

DC: But you also travel doing some workshops as part of the broader definition of teaching.

JOE: I do perform at most of the festivals I teach at. Although I don't really try to promote myself as a performer first and foremost. I really promote myself as being a teacher, educator and historian. And almost always in those situations they want you to perform, and that's fine too. Of course I thoroughly enjoy performing.

DC: Your students over the years, have they been mostly intermediate and advanced players, or do you get involved with beginners?

JOE: Anybody who has ambition, I'll take. Makes no difference to me. I have a lot of beginners and I absolutely love teaching beginners. I have never ever gotten remotely bored with it. A lot of times when I go out of town and teach at a festival, I usually find that it's easiest for me to teach the level that the other teacher or teachers is least comfortable with. Of course I love teaching the advanced students, but I learned when I started teaching that the best way to get advanced students was to teach them how to be advanced.

DC: Over the time you've been teaching, have you seen certain problem areas that are common with beginning students? Something that you can almost anticipate will be a problem knowing that they will get this certain idea or technique but not this other technique. One thing that you might note as being the most difficult?

JOE: Yes, there positively is. That is learning to relax and breathe through the harmonica. I've had some amazing results taking students that know nothing about playing and getting them to pretty impressive level in a pretty short time. But the hardest students are the ones that have been playing for six months and play with too much force, not enough relaxation. They are trying to suck the reeds out of the thing. Those students are the hardest ones to deal with because then you have to back pedal with them. That is definitely the mortal sin of beginning players. Number one: playing too hard, too aggressively.

DC: With the students that are further along, such as high intermediate or advanced player, with some good and bad habits, what is the hardest thing to get across to them? Are there some common things that would help this group of players or are the problems more individualized because they are more advanced in their playing

JOE: Well, yes it really depends on what their goal is and what sound they are trying to achieve. Usually I find myself giving the advice which consists of a few things. Number one; don't play so hard. Play quieter. That usually solves a multitude of problems they are having, especially technical playing problems. The second thing is to listen to great recordings. I find that players may put a lot of energy into playing but they don't tend to put enough energy into listening. And the two most important things that I think any player or musician should listen to are recordings of great players that they are trying to emulate and recordings of themselves. If they don't make it a habit to listening to recordings of themselves then they are missing a dimension of their own playing.

DC: Yeah I think some players are a little hesitant to record themselves for fear of what they will hear. But in the end it is one of the most important things to put any ego aside and listen, because you are going to learn a lot.

JOE: I agree with you 100%. It's a lot less embarrassing to listen to recordings of yourself before you go into the studio to try to cut a demo CD than to do it after you get it out and

pass it around to friends and other people and they ask you, 'How come you always play that note flat?'

DC: You mentioned before that you often go to festivals and workshops and do a lot within what I will call the harmonica community, is there something driving you to work this way to keep this community alive and expand it? You associate with it so strongly.

JOE: Good question. I feel that numerous people have been very generous towards me and I find that I want to reciprocate that. Another thing is that is I just like it when the kettle is continually boiling. I guess I need a lot of stimulation. And yes I guess I am always in there working it. And another thing is, quiet simply, I don't have a lot of respect for people that talk a good game but so slow to get involved and actually do something. So therefore I choose to lead by example. Anxiously awaiting for somebody to come along that can do a better job than me so I step aside.

DC: Coming back briefly to the post-war Chicago era, you mentioned some notable players in the pre-war era, what about some other players that may not be as well known in the post-war era? Most everyone is going to know and have heard Little Walter, James Cotton, etc. Can you mention a few players that people may have missed or passed over in their listening because they are not as widely known?

JOE: Well, I am very fond of Poppa Lightfoot. He certainly is a lesser-known player. That's a good question. I've been greatly inspired by George "Harmonica" Smith and the many thing that he does. In some circles he is very popular, in other circles he is much less known. In terms of kind of a country blues, I've learned a lot recently from the harmonica player that accompanies Mississippi Fred McDowell by the name of Johnny Woods. Those are a few. But really it is the same old guys. There are really not that many new names. But the Chicago type, post-war blues players are well known; Little Walter, Walter Horton, Rice Miller and George Smith are definitely the really big ones.

DC: Certainly can't go wrong listening to those great players and absorbing some of their licks either directly or inspired by. You can't go wrong doing that

JOE: It hasn't felt wrong yet!

DC: Some of the other people doing custom harmonica work like Richard Sleigh, were they students of yours? Did he approach you to get involved working with you?

JOE: I met Richard Sleigh in 1992. He read an article that the Associated Press did on me with the harmonica work that I was doing. He came to Chicago to share with me an invention that he was working on which was a different way of going about the XB-40 harmonica that Rick Epping has put out on the market through Horner. I was very impressed with Richard's skill, with his musicianship, with his character and we have known each other ever since. A few years later he moved from Philadelphia back to his hometown in Phillipsburg and didn't have any jobs lined up. We both kind of simultaneously came together. He asked me if I would be willing to work with him and get him started doing harmonica work and I volunteered the information and said, "Hey, why don't you think about doing harmonica work." I started doing harmonica work full-time in 1995. It was about that time where I was completely overloaded and was thrilled to work with somebody of his skills and character. I have certainly learned much from him. My business is certainly a fusion of ideas of myself, Richard Sleigh and Jimmy Gordon.

DC: Sounds like a win all around.

JOE: Yes, absolutely. We work to create maximum opportunities for everyone.

DC: Thanks for your time and consideration Joe. Any last parting bits of wisdom that I may have glossed over that you want to be sure that our readers get?

JOE: I think we covered a lot. Any other bits? You know the most important advice is really keep the thing in your mouth, keep playing and keep working at it.

DC: Thanks again Joe. I appreciate you setting aside some time to talk today and share some of your experiences and knowledge. See you in Chicago at the Harmonica Masterclass Workshop in October

JOE: You're welcome. See you then.