

SICKOS UNITE BY CATHI NORTON

Joe Filisko is a slender, blond, 28-year old machinist and harmonica wizard who lives in Joliet, IL and enjoys a growing reputation as a master craftsman of custom harmonicas. In my search for some background information on Filisko I obtained a wonderful assist from the excellent Winslow Yerxa, editor of the Harmonica Information Press. Thank you Winslow!

"Joe went to technical school, became a machinist, and bought a one-man business (Ravco, Inc.) Straight out of school. He was attracted to the sort of renegade (his word) aspect of the harmonica - there are no rules - and started not only to play it, but to seek out the masters of technique and tinker with the instrument itself. He found masters like Howard Levy, with whom he works closely, as well as traditional masters like Lonnie Glosson, Gwen Foster, and DeFord Bailey -- all of whom were pre-war southern players whose considerable artistic achievements had never been understood by the harmonica community, and whose techniques contained amazing possibilities that had likewise been overlooked. The prewar diatonic is something he really studied closely. Joe can make a harmonica play and sound like most players insist that it should, even though they have never in their lives owned such an instrument. The longing for that instrument, once thought mythical, is something that he and I refer to as 'harmonica lust.'

"Joe continues to refine, evolve, and innovate in the design, construction, and adjustment of the diatonic harmonica, proving that inside this mass-produced little instrument lies a huge potential that can be unlocked by a master like him. At the same time, he continues with a subversive program of performing for the most antediluvian and hidebound members of the harmonica community using the most radical new techniques on an instrument they have always despised, and making them love it. And he's teaching a whole new crop of players in Chicago things that surround the so-called Chicago sound from all angles - old techniques, new techniques, and solid musicianship and taste."

Joe continues his work with Howard Levy, Charlie Musselwhite, Gary Primich, Corky Segal, and Kim Wilson - to name a few. A great weekend chock full of wonderful harp players at the Buckeye Harmonica Festival in Columbus, OH, this spring brought the opportunity to hear Filisko give some very informative seminars on the nature and playing of harmonica. He played a solo concert and was a welcome addition to some great late-night bull sessions and jams. I grabbed him right out of the hallway (playing harp while he walked!) one day and sat him down to get his take on some questions I had.

SICKOS UNITE BY CATHI NORTON

CATHI: I want you to tell me a little bit about - I know you teach harmonica; you have theories about it; but you build harmonicas that everyone likes. That seems to be the thing I hear about you first. You seem to be very involved with the theory of what actually happens when you play harp. . . not "here's where the notes are placed." And in your seminar you were talking about relaxation techniques and how the sound comes out. Tone...you were going after tone.

JOE: Well, the harmonica - they call it the "blind man's instrument" - they call it that simply because there's no visuals involved. This is something that, often people play and don't realize themselves: there is nothing to see when you play the harmonica. There is nothing as far as what the player is doing. And there is also nothing to touch. When you play guitar, think about how much of it is hand-eye coordination. You memorize the "fee" through your fingertips, and visually what bar chords look like. And it's sort of like this shape. You have this little shape in your head of what an open "C" chord looks like.

CATHI: A pattern.

JOE: Yes, but on harmonica you have none of that. There is nothing involved with you fingertips. There's nothing involved with doing and seeing with your eyes - no visual cues to anything you're doing. On the harmonica you have no visual cue, you can get lost in a distance of about this much (indicates with fingertips slightly apart). In one inch you can get lost. And it's just such an interesting thing how that makes harmonica difficult - the lack of hand-eye coordination.

CATHI: But don't you get a visual pattern in your head of what's happening anyway? Imaginary?

JOE: Well eventually you do. You listen to somebody talk, like Howard Levy, and he says that he can visualize the keyboard in his head, or in other words, he visualizes one guitar string - the chromatic scale laid out on a guitar string. And because I play guitar and have somewhat of a command of music I found that I could translate a lot of guitar ideas to the harmonica. When I found the blues potential of the harmonica, I found out the real power it has; it overwhelmed me. I sort of became intoxicated with the whole thing. Take for example: you can find people humming country or folk melodies, but you don't really find people singing, humming, whistling blues melodies. And there's a reason for that in that blues melodies are largely based upon improvisation - much more abstract. That's always been one of my big questions: how do you teach that? How do you teach improvisation?

The thing about blues is that often you are floating from one chord tone to another. But you're playing those blues notes, which are usually a half-step below the

SICKOS UNITE BY CATHI NORTON

chord tone. So if you're playing a "C" major chord, you're singing in G flat - that kind of blues notes; that flat fifth - that's a really powerful note. It really draws people's attention. But to teach people to instinctively know how to use that to create tension, relieve tension, and make it nice - that's something else. Because that's the improvisational part of it. I think how you work those notes to move people and to stir people up, and then of course to resolve it; that's one of the really beautiful parts of blues and improvisation.

CATHI: Well I don't come from the theory end. I come from the end of "how does it feel?" How does it affect? How does it land? How do you control it; how do you move it? And then I come in the back door to theory. Where I've met people here and elsewhere, that start from the theory and go from there - finding themselves suddenly in "moving" and "affect." And then suddenly after years of playing they're worrying about "tone!"

JOE: Well the really interesting thing about music theory, as far as I see it, is that music theory is just a tool to teach people to do what you're already doing.

CATHI: (Laughter) Oh God!

JOE: Really!

CATHI: Well, I take a lot of grief because I don't know it!

JOE: Well, it's a tool...but see this is where the ego comes in. It's like "I know music theory..." (laughs). "You can't read music...you're not a musician." Well what's the point? The point is to make music! And who cares what your tools are if what you do sounds good? Then who cares?

You know, you've got to really think about the consequences of these words, because when you start to say if you can't read notes, you're nothing, you're saying in the same breath that these guys that invented this music are void; that that doesn't really count - that's no good. And so there's a lot to consider.

CATHI: Do you think learning musical theory makes playing stiffer?

JOE: Welllllll, I think that you always gotta keep your focus on what the end result is. I can say with a lot of confidence that if it wasn't for musical theory I wouldn't be as accomplished as I am - assuming anybody thinks I am accomplished (laughs). I learned a lot by doing musical theory; because it kind of points me - probably the best way to look at it is this: musical theory really points you in the direction that you should look to do and what you shouldn't do.

CATHI: Like tone?

JOE: One of the real folklore-like things - I feel pretty comfortable using the word "folklore" because it sort of is this old wives' tale. There may be some truth in the whole thing, but it's gotten really diluted and distorted as it's come down from generation to generation - is the whole idea of tone.

I found that the best description, the most general description for tone, as applied to playing harmonica, is the ability of the player to make a small harmonica sound bigger - precisely that. How can you get maximum sound out of the harmonica and still be musical? And then I sort of analyzed and dissected and studied and pretty much found that it was narrowed down into - at this point - three categories which were: melodic tone, which is the player's ability to make one single note resonate in a warmer sound. harmonic tone, which is the illusion that a player creates of a bigger sound when he uses more than one note at the same time - a harmony note. Playing a single note and he's adding either an octave or some third or another note that creates the feel of more going on than actually...you sort of hear one note but you might hear more and you can't really define it.

CATHI: Chording?

JOE: Yeah, but depending on how good the player is, it can be more subtle than that. Like the idea of using octaves; you get two notes but you've got a big, thicker sound - something like that.

And then the other was the percussive tone, which is the player's ability to use the tongue-blocking technique to create a percussive element in the individual note played. Little Walter and Big Walter Horton - classic players - are real good examples of that. And I sort of lumped it all together because I found that those were like "tricks" in some ways, that players use to get more sound out of the instrument. They fell loosely under the "tone" of the player.

Generally if you don't consider these three things then you are left treating the harmonica as a melody instrument. And it's more than melodic. And a real, real important part of it that people don't really understand, in general, is that you can play more than one note. And when you can do that you have sounds available to you. You see, if you play one note, it's really difficult to make that little reed, that little harmonica, sound gigantic. But when you sue more than one note at the same time, you're creating a sound that's more aggressive.

CATHI: So when you're teaching someone you have to help them imagine what that is and what it feels like for them to be able to do it?

SICKOS UNITE BY CATHI NORTON

JOE: Well, it seems like in the last number of years - the last couple of years - things have started to change for the harmonica. Information is becoming more accessible. And of course I'm working with players and trying to help create an instrument that will challenge them more. I mean Howard Levy's a perfect example. The stuff he is doing defies actual description, it's so phenomenal. And of course I'm now definitely a big part of that from working with him, closely, and trying to find something - a way to make an instrument that will enable him to play better!

CATHI: Ah...this is a whole new thing. So you actually get with players; suss out the way they play; and apply that to what you know about the instrument itself so you can make it more conducive to their style?

JOE: Oh yeah, I've done some stuff, in varying degrees, a lot of consultation with Charlie Musselwhite, Corky Segal. He actually - I was very honored - he actually wrote a song about....

CATHI: What's the name of the song? Do you remember?

JOE: (Laughs.)

CATHI: Filisko's Blues or something? (Laughs.)

JOE: Filisko's Dream it's called.

CATHI: (Laughs.) OKAY!!!

JOE: (Acts offended)...what are you trying to say?!?

CATHI: (Laughter.)

JOE: Lately I've been doing a lot with Kim Wilson. Pretty unanimously people kind of think of him as the modern-day Little Walter. He's the forerunner of what's going on. And he certainly is in the best situation to educate and expose people to the harmonica. He's got the T-Birds, which is the sort of pop thing, and then he's doing his blues stuff. So I've been working pretty much on all his harmonicas too. People are realizing that harmonica is an instrument and are starting to do a double-take on it.

CATHI: As opposed to a "child's toy" as we always used to tease Gary (Primich)? (Laughs.)

JOE: Right! And it's a real low blow!...real dirty! Cheap shot! But well deserved (laughter)! It's a very well deserved title, because you find a lot of people that really

SICKOS UNITE BY CATHI NORTON

just sort of have a little bit of energy, a little bit of an idea of some of the nuances - some of the easy things that you can do with a blues harmonica, and they go out and play, with little-to-no skill.

CATHI: Yeah, It's enough of a novelty that you can get away with murder.

JOE: You definitely can! I realize that. You definitely can.

CATHI: When people ask you for help with their harmonicas, do you do a specific thing for THAT person, or are you just kind of developing a Filisko harmonica?

JOE: I try to be pretty open-minded and . . . There's a big difference between a harmonica that somebody wants to use as a melody instrument to the degree that Howard Levy is - where he's treating a diatonic harmonica as a chromatic harmonica. He's treating it where he's getting all the notes. There's a real big difference between when I put something together like that, and when I put a harmonica together for somebody like Gary (Primich) who plays Chicago blues - to best describe it. There's a big, big difference in the way the two harps are put together.

CATHI: Cool. So you're really kind of a scientist - an inventor in that way?

JOE: Well I'm learning a lot myself. I must say that I was talking about the mystery of blues and the harmonica in general. It just sort of overwhelmed me; I really found myself being swept away with the ability to control these unknown factors . . .

CATHI: (Laughs) He confesses!

JOE: Well...! I worked very hard - very hard, at studying different styles, playing and finding out stuff. Like I believe for the most part that I understand the nuances of what Little Walter did. Of course I build harmonicas for Howard so I really know...that's like a new direction of harmonica. So I know what it takes to make a harmonica work that way. In that respect I'm pretty diverse, but I still love to just play the harmonica... (plays "She'll be Comin' 'Round the Mountain").

CATHI: (Laughs.)

JOE: That's beautiful!! I love that!! Who else can do that...on any other instrument...you know? Right out of your pocket! It's just such a wonderful thing!

CATHI: I notice a lot of the players here (at the Buckeye Harmonica Festival) favor chromatic. Is that an age-group thing?

SICKOS UNITE BY CATHI NORTON

JOE: Oh, that's very easy to answer. The heyday of the harmonica was during the depression. The vaudeville harmonica acts all the way up, which I believe - I could be wrong, but the harmonica trios evolved from the vaudeville, big-band harmonica. Like the Harmonicats - they evolved out of that. And I think probably the best way to understand it is because of the inexpensive nature of the harmonica, that where people didn't have any money they could get harmonicas. So you had this generation that grew up during that time where there was no money. They just fell in love; that was their instrument.

Well, once WWII came and there were jobs, if the harmonica is going to represent the depression, then it is kind of associated with that, and you didn't want it anymore, In a lot of ways the attitude changed. The bands, the harmonica groups that were playing during the depression and afterwards were primarily using chromatic harmonicas. They perceived it (diatonic) as an imperfect instrument. But it's the flaws that end up being the strengths of it.

Probably a good way to think of it is it's a pretty easy instrument to play, but it's the hardest thing in the world if you really want to play it well. And people are still sort of finding out crazy things that you can do with it. A lot of it is keyed to the fact that there are missing notes that require a good deal of skill to achieve. And simply the fact that you can't see what you're doing. It requires a lot of focus and imagination to feel out what it is you're doing.

CATHI: So you play and work on harmonicas for a living?

JOE: Well...(squirms)...

CATHI: (Laughter)

JOE: I didn't sit down one day and say "I'm going to make harmonicas for a living." This is something that continually shows itself. It's pulling me along; it's got a life of its own and it's dragging me into it! I really wanted to learn how to become a better player. That was really where it was at, and my approach was very simply to locate the players that I thought were doing something special and get to know 'em.

CATHI: Yes, it seems whatever I do for a living, music continues to drag me along.

JOE: Well, it's a DARNED good thing!

CATHI: (Laughter). I don't know. Well, like you say, it's no longer a choice; it hasn't been for a long time. The whole life has pulled me along.

SICKOS UNITE BY CATHI NORTON

JOE: Yeah, probably the way I'd put it is that my general enthusiasm and curiosity about the instrument has kept me pushing forward and trying to study players' styles. I'm a learning addict is really where the truth lies. I really seem to have an endless curiosity for the way things work. So that fuels me and it just sort of snowballed. The more I would study one style; the more I was able to gain the attentions of other players doing other styles; and vice versa.

CATHI: So you play the rest of the time?

JOE: I play as much as I can, which - it's a battle - of course if people want to perceive me as being this harmonica-builder-guy then I can't talk about my playing too much you know?

CATHI: Nonsense...you don't have to worry about how they perceive you.

JOE: But it's just my enthusiasm for the instrument and what it does and can do that keeps me moving on. And there's something about an eclectic group, an eclectic thing like the harmonica - like blues harmonica - that when you find somebody that really knows.... It doesn't have to be said; there are no words spoken. When somebody's got it, there's that "Oh...you too?!!" (Laughter.) And it's funny...in a way a lot of these conventions are about that.

CATHI: Recognition?

JOE: It's a union of all the sickos you know?

CATHI: (laughter)

JOE: And nothing needs to be said. It's like "Oh yeah, you're sick too! It's wonderful to know you!"