

A Brief History of the Harmonica

Circa 3,000 B.C. – The first free-reeded instruments are developed in China. Over the next several thousand years, free-reeded instruments will evolve and spread all over Southeast Asia.

1636 – Marin Mersenne describes in his letters the Sheng, an Asian free-reed wind instrument, thus introducing the principle of the free-reed to Europe.

1776 - French Jesuit Missionary P. Amiot ships several Shengs from China to Paris.

Circa 1780's – European instrument makers begin experimenting with free-reeds.

1816 – Johann Buschmann, a German organ builder, introduces his *Terpodion*, a free-reeded keyboard instrument that would serve as a predecessor to both the harmonica and the harmonium.

1821 – Christian Friedrich Buschmann, son of organ builder Johann Buschmann, registers the first European patent for a free-reeded mouth organ. He calls his invention the "Aura".

1825 – The first 20 note / 10 hole, Blow-draw free-reed mouth organ configuration is developed by a Bohemian named Richter. This is the basic configuration still used in most harmonicas today.

1827 – Christian Messner, a clockmaker from Trossingen, Germany, starts building harmonicas with his cousin, Christian Weiss.

1829 – The first mass production of harmonicas begins in Vienna, Austria.

1857 – After visiting the harmonica factory of Messner and Weiss, Matthias Hohner, a fellow clockmaker from Trossingen, starts to manufacture harmonicas in his kitchen with the help of his family and one or two workmen. During their first year they produced 700 harmonicas.

1862 – At the urging of relatives who had already immigrated to the United States, Matthias Hohner begins to export harmonicas to America with great success.

1867 – The M. Hohner Company produces 22,000 harmonicas.

1878 – Machinery developed by Julius Berthold enables metal reeds to be stamped out by machines, rather than by hand. Though the reeds are stamped out by machine, the M. Hohner Company still tunes most of its harmonicas by hand to this day.

1879 – The Richter note configuration is introduced to ten-hole harmonicas. This note layout would become the leading configuration for diatonic harmonicas.

1887 – M. Hohner produces 1 million harmonicas annually.

1893 – An American depression causes M. Hohner to cease exports to the U.S. and to start marketing to other countries, thus expanding the range of influence of the harmonica.

1896 – M. Hohner introduces and later patents its Marine Band model harmonica. Sporting revolutionary raised ornate metal covers and excellent construction features, it becomes the world's number one best-selling harmonica.

1897 – M. Hohner is producing 3 million harmonicas a year.

1900 – Matthias Hohner hands over control of his company to his five sons.

Dec. 11, 1902 – Matthias Hohner dies.

1911 - The M. Hohner Company produces 8 Million harmonicas a year.

Circa 1920's – The beginning of the golden age of the harmonica. Recording allows Blues, Country, Jazz and Jug Band artists to be heard for the first time by a mass audience. Vernon Dalhart's "Wreck Of The Old 97" becomes Country music's first million-selling record. Deford Bailey stars in the Grand Old Opry and cuts the first Country records in Nashville. Blues artists are recorded, first in New York and by the end of the decade, hundreds from all over the country have been recorded. Harmonica bands spring up all over the country and become the rage in Vaudeville.

1923 – Albert Hoxie, a philanthropist from Philadelphia, starts to organize harmonica contests and harmonica bands, complete with full marching band uniforms. This kicks off a national craze for harmonica bands.

1924 – M. Hohner starts producing chromatic harmonicas. It is also during the 1920's that Hohner creates bass, chord and polyphonia models in order to meet the musical needs of harmonica bands.

1927 - Entertainer and harmonica instructor Borrah Minevitch meets Johnny Puleo and The Harmonica Rascals are born. Combining harmonica music with slapstick comedy, The Harmonica Rascals quickly become one of the top-drawing acts in vaudeville and they attract thousands of players to the harmonica.

Circa 1930's – Harmonica bands are all the rage in America. Harmonica instruction is a part of the regular curriculum in many public schools. Harmonica bands starts appearing in movies. Larry Adler emerges as the first major soloist on the harmonica, playing Classical and Jazz pieces on the instrument. The Jug Band craze dies out until the Folk revival of the 1960's.

1930 – M. Hohner's annual sales reach 25 million harmonicas worldwide.

Circa 1940's – The outbreak of World War II temporarily halts the import of harmonicas from Germany to the U.S. Harmonica bands dissolve as many players enlist in the armed forces. A labor shortage in the north causes hundreds of Blues players to migrate north to Chicago and other industrial cities. Electric Blues begins as many players like Snooky Pryor experiment with amplifying their instruments.

1947 – The Harmonicats' recording of "Peg O' My Heart" is the number one best-selling record of the year. It would go on to become one of the best-selling single records of all time, topping over 20 million in sales. Its success also convinced the Musician's Union to change the classification of the harmonica from a "toy" to that of a legitimate instrument, thus allowing harmonica players to join the union.

Circa 1950's – While the larger harmonica bands virtually disappear, harmonica trios, spurred on by the success of The Harmonicats, grow in popularity. Amplified harmonica players, led by Chicago's Little Walter, dominate the Chicago Blues scene. Rock and Roll emerges as a new musical style. Guitar players dominate the new style and harmonicas are almost unheard of in Rock until the next decade. In England, Blues fans like John Mayall and Cyril Davies lay the foundation for the British Invasion of the 1960's. Jean "Toots" Thielemans becomes a major instrumentalist in Jazz.

1951 – According to legend, Little Walter becomes one of the very first to record Chicago-style amplified harmonica. While recording with Muddy Waters, Walter plugged his harmonica mike directly into a guitar amplifier, thus overdriving the sound and creating a new style of playing.

Circa 1960's – The Folk music craze, led by Bob Dylan, leads thousands to explore playing the harmonica. Jug bands make a resurgence as part of the renewed interest in Folk music. The Beatles lead the British invasion. John Lennon is often featured with his harmonica. Several British bands, such as The Rolling Stones and The Yardbirds are fronted by singer / harmonica players. By the late 1960's there is a re-birth in the popularity of Blues music led by three harmonica players from Chicago: Paul Butterfield, Charlie Musselwhite and Corky Siegel.

1962 – SPAH, (The Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica), is formed in the Detroit area. Over the next few years dozens of smaller clubs are formed that will provide a regular meeting place for harmonica enthusiasts.

December 16, 1965 – The harmonica becomes the first musical instrument in outer space when astronaut Wally Schirra plays "Jingle Bells" on a Hohner Little Lady model that he smuggled aboard the Gemini 4 spacecraft.

Circa 1970's – The harmonica experiences a decline in popularity as guitarists continue to dominate both Rock and Blues music, and country music shifts to an over-produced Nashville sound. The J. Geils Band and its harmonica player, Magic Dick, stands on the forefront of Rock harmonica. Blues music suffers from one of its periodic declines in popularity.

Circa 1980's – The success of The Blues Brothers helps to kick off another revival of interest in Blues harmonica. The Cham-Ber Huang and Lee Oskar Harmonica Companies open up new frontiers in harmonica design by introducing innovations such as new tunings and replaceable reed plates to the instrument. 1986 – The M. Hohner Company produces it's one billionth harmonica.

Circa 1990's – The emergence of Howard Levy, Sugar Blue and John Popper of the band Blues Traveler, push the frontiers of Jazz, Blues and Rock harmonica playing. A return to traditionalist Country music sparks a renewed interest in Harmonica in Country music.

