

## SPA#

# Harmonicas live up our musical lives

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

Scene: The first sergeant takes out his faithful Marine Band harmonica and the melancholy sounds of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" walk through the trenches. The very young soldier, fresh off the farm, is seen to furiously wipe away a tear or two.

Scene: A group of tired cowboys gather around the campfire after a day of herding steer toward market in Armarillo. Cookie has just finished dishing out dinner and the appealingly dirty cowpoke toward the back of the scene takes out his harmonica. "Yep," he says, as he raises the instrument toward his mouth, "we'll be in the Long Branch by tomorrow." Then he proceeds to play a snappy little prairie tune on the mouth harp.

Paul Metris of Rochester knows that the preceding two movie scenes just aren't true anymore. The harmonica has managed to make its way from the pool halls to the concert halls.

With a little help from the Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica (SPA#) and its local chapter, Harmonicas of Michigan, the lowly mouth harp is elevated to a splendid object of musical study.

To prove that players can do more with a harmonica than the melancholy wa-wa sound heard in the trenches of World War I movies, SPA# will conduct its convention on Sept. 6-8 in the Detroit area.

METRIS and fellow harmonica buff Tom Kuczajda, also of Rochester, will be on hand to watch the Principle Pops Conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Richard Hayman, coax sweet sounds from their favorite musical instrument at the convention.

For the 48-year-old Metris the journey on the road to harmonica perfection began when he was a 6-year-old growing up in a Pennsylvania coal town.

A friend of his had a harmonica and the young

Metris was fascinated by the sound. So he borrowed the mouth organ and learned a song by ear.

"I practiced behind a tree until I knew the song. Then I came out into the open," he remembered.

Metris hasn't gone into hiding behind that tree since.

He plays at weddings of friends and relatives. He plays at gatherings. He plays with other harmonica playing friends in his basement rec room.

And he collects different varieties of his favorite musical instrument. Harmonicas come in all keys and sizes. There are chord harmonicas which are double decker affairs on hinges. There are tiny four-note harmonicas which sound as reedy as the instrument the fictional first sergeant plays in the trenches.

And not to be neglected in the era of specialization, the hardy Marine Band harmonica in the key of C still lives on as the first mouth organ usually purchased by a potential SPA# member.

KUCZAJDA'S STORY is similar: He started playing the basic Marine Band in the key of C when he was about 17 years old. His father and sister played the harmonica so it seemed natural that he would pick up the instrument, too.

He did what many other harmonica buffs do when faced with the instrument for the first time: he picked it up and tooted out a nonsensical little tune. It was music to his ears, at least, and he was hooked.

"You play it and something comes out — even if it's mangled," Metris explained.

"You're addicted," Kuczajda will take his harmonica on a long bus trip to help while away the time. His skill at entertaining travelers has him half seriously wondering if it's him or his harmonica that's asked along on trips.

The secret to the harmonica's popularity is simple, according to Metris. "It's a happy instrument. All the way around the world, you can pull

out your harmonica and people will identify with it," he said.

As with every other hobby, no matter how seemingly simple, there are techniques which separate the novice from the master. In the harmonica world these are the techniques which separate the cowboy around that campfire from the symphony conductor on stage wielding his harmonica.

MASTER HARMONICA players are at least acquainted with the chromatic harmonica perfected by Cham-Ber Huang and called a CBH in his honor.

With a CBH harmonica, the player can slide the notes around, making

them easy to reach and resulting in a smooth sound instead of the melancholy wa-wa of the movies.

Another method practiced by the master is blowing out each note clearly. When accompanied by other harmonicas, this technique results in a full-bodied harmony.

When playing alone, even the master harmonica virtuoso will stoop to a technique called tonguing. This gives the illusion of chords being played on even a basic harmonica in the key of C.

The player places his tongue on the note that he wants, thereby involving a few extra notes and

getting that rich if slightly jerky sound that's heard on television prairies and in trenches.

The drawback with the system is that the player is more apt to involve notes he'd rather leave silent. But he sacrifices musical purity for a fuller sound that audiences have proved through the years that they prefer.

Harmonica players like to extol the other virtues of their instrument.

WHEN THEY get ready to attend their bi-monthly meetings at the Elks Club of Clawson on Big Beaver in Troy, the members casually reach for their favorite musical sound and stick the har-

monica in their shirt pockets.

"You can't do that with a piano," Kuczajda explained.

Another benefit of the harmonica as seen by the group is its ability to level out social classes.

"We're millionaires and peasants. We don't care. We throw out the outside and play and have a ball," Metris said.

When SPA# and its local branch gets the urge to perform for non-harmonica players, they visit hospitals and nursing homes. "People forget their troubles listening to us. They know that somebody cares about them. They're part of one big harmonica family," Metris said.

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