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WINTER 2018

Rupert.

by MARGIE GOLDSMITH - Page 4

Sugar Blue: The Harmonica Wizard

by MARGIE GOLDSMITH - Page 6

The Spirit of Live Music

by JIM CHESNUT - Page 12

Reed All About It

by MANFRED WEWERS - Page 14

Youth Scholarship Application

CALLING ALL YOUNG HARMONICA PLAYERS - Page 25

Call for SPAH Archives

from MANFRED WEWERS - Page 26

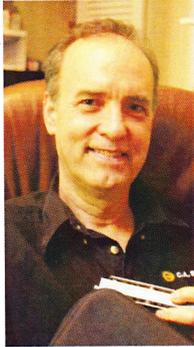
Member Snapshot: Jack Hopkins

by LJ ANDERSON - Page 27



Rupert.

by MARGIE
GOLDSMITH



RUPERT OYSLER, PRESIDENT OF SEYDEL USA, IS ALSO A HARMONICA PLAYER, TECHNICIAN, CUSTOMIZER, AND ONE OF THE EARLY PROPONENTS OF EMBOSSED HARMONICA SLOTS TO MAKE THEM PLAY BETTER.

"He is a really schooled and educated student of the instrument," says Greg Heumann, owner of BlowsMeAway Productions. "He's an outstanding player,

but more importantly, he's a tireless ambassador for the harmonica through his work with SPAH and Seydel."

"Without Rupert, Seydel would never have anywhere near a presence in this country," says Paul Davies, SPAH's entertainment director. "He's also a low-tone master who is folksy, gentle, never hard-edged, and a great musician with a very sensitive touch." Adds P.T. Gazell, "He knew about the overblow technique many years before it became popular. He's really a schooled technician of the instrument."

"Rupert has been a great asset to all of us in the harmonica community for many years," says Todd Parrott. "He was one of the first to begin sharing information on how to customize and repair your own harmonicas by way of his DVDs, a work that influenced many who went on to become great harmonica techs themselves. He introduced me to bending overblows when he demonstrated the technique in a phone conversation around 2001. His demo was the spark that ignited my pursuit and development of the style I play today."

"I believe his knowledge and ability to make harps play at their peak is one of the reasons he sounds so much better than the rest of us on super-low harps," says Jimi Lee. "His DVD, Harmonica Repair and Modification, revealed many harmonica secrets and also revealed Rupert's hilarious

dry sense of humor. To me Rupert Oysler is a Harmonica Zen Master."

"Rupert Oysler is an outstanding harmonica player and repairman," says Charlie Musselwhite. "He's also an outstanding human being with great enthusiasm for life and a tremendous sense of humor, too. I always look forward to seeing Rupert because he's always uplifting to be around. He's definitely what I call One of The Good Guys! And he really is a really good guy. I'm all the better for knowing him."

Born and brought up in the suburbs of Chicago, Rupert Oysler began his musical career playing a toy harmonica at the age of eight. At Brown University, he studied art and thought he'd be an artist or a teacher, but he preferred making music because sound happened in the present moment as opposed to a painting which could only be observed. It was the days of the transistor radio and, at 18, he taught himself cross harp by listening to records. By the time he graduated from university in 1970, he was getting paid to play in little coffee houses.

We caught up with him in Asheville, North Carolina, where he now lives.

You participated in the folk music

revival throughout the northeast U.S. and taught yourself how to play guitar, banjo and dobro. Why?

I just loved the music, the sounds, loved the way that I felt listening to music and loved the process of making it.

You taught harp, banjo, guitar and dobro for the next 10 years and developed a group teaching method that you presented at three colleges. What was that method?

I got involved with a banjo teacher who was really a trained classical bass player. I believe he played with the Knoxville Symphony but he had been a banjo player as a kid all his life. He took this professional kind of musical training and developed a banjo method that was like the Suzuki graded violin method—he based it on that. You learn something in lesson one and then you build on that in lesson two and then lesson three. By the end of ten weeks, you're playing some pretty decent stuff all built from lesson one. I used that as a model to build a little harmonica course to teach people.

In the early '80s you left full-time music to start a retail business and began training in the Alexander technique, a physical movement technique. Isn't that kind of far-fetched from your musical world?

Absolutely. My life kind of represents multiple incarnations.

But you were also playing and recording in Nashville in the '90s.

Yes, I kept my toe in music.

You also became a pioneer in

playing all the chromatic tones on a simple diatonic harp and you won two awards at the International Harmonica Competition sponsored by Hohner. How did this happen?

In college, back in 1966, there was a guy who lived upstairs who had some chromatic harmonicas, and I didn't have a chromatic. I didn't even really know what one was, basically. He was doing things like dripping solder on the reeds to tune them and he could replace a reed. This guy was kind of like the mad scientist and encouraged me to take apart little diatonic harps and try to make them work when they weren't working. At some point in the '80s, I decided to learn to read music because all my learning was based on tablature. It was certainly the easy way to teach harmonica. So I began training myself to read music with a chromatic harmonica and I actually contacted Robert Bonfiglio at the Turtle Bay School of Music in New York and took some lessons by cassette. That's what caused me to go to SPAH, to learn the background of so-called "real music." There, I was exposed to some chromatic players who worked on their own instruments. I met Jerry Murad; Pete Pedersen and Dick Gardner showed me stuff. I took some lessons from Stan Harper. The chromatic players all knew how to fix their harmonicas, knew how to make reeds out of bullet casings and springs out of diaper pins. I began to seriously learn about repair in the late '80s and early '90s.

What started you off on repair?

I was keeping my chromatics running. But then the whole diatonic movement of needing a better instrument to play these chromatic scales—from Howard Levy's influence—got a lot of us interested in "how do you create that, how do you make that happen?"

You said Seydel is the oldest harmonica manufacturer in the world and their instruments are still handmade in Germany. They're older than Hohner?

They started in business 10 years before Hohner.

And their instruments are handmade?

I mean they use machines too, but it's a true handmaking process in that each instrument is handled by a person and tested and tuned.

What do you hope to do with Seydel in the future?

Every year Seydel makes better and better instruments and improves what's already there. It's been a big help to the whole harmonica world in terms of some of the innovations we've come up with and some of the things that we create, so I hope to continue in the vein of what we are doing and to get the awareness of our company more in the mainstream. I think we are really, really well-known now among harmonica lovers and people who are on the internet searching things out, but the common, average person still hasn't heard of us at all. Every day I speak to somebody in an email or on the phone who says, "How come I never knew about you?" So it's really just to continue that growth of awareness that we are there.

Let's talk about your playing because you're really an accomplished harmonica player yourself. Do you have a practice regimen?

It varies. There are times I have practiced for hours every day and nowadays I try to at least get a few minutes in, but I don't play nearly as much as I want to. I work a lot of hours for Seydel so my focus has not been on the playing in recent years. My life has been funny. There have been a lot of things that have come through and taken my focus away from playing, practicing, and from learning like I'd like to. Lately, basically, it's just to try to make sure that I put the harmonica in my mouth at least a few minutes every day. And I am really lucky because I've been in a band with some guys for the last two years here in Asheville, so there's new material

to learn which keeps me going, and that's really good.

What's the best piece of advice you could give someone just learning to play the harmonica?

It's still: make sure the harmonica is in your mouth and begin to really fully listen to what's out there, to really fully listen to the sounds that are available. Whether it's on a harmonica or another instrument, just fully listen, begin to really hear what you love, and find a way to make those kinds of things come out of your harmonica.

And what about advice for advanced players?

I am not sure I am advanced enough to give any advice. I think it's just a continuation of getting more and more accurate about what you are doing and what you want to do.

When you're playing on stage, have you ever had a period when you were uninspired and feeling as though you were playing the same riffs every time?

Almost all my playing is in a role of support, so I am listening to the other musicians and I am really living off of that. It's not so much where I am in charge of creating... so I don't know if I have really felt that way. I might have felt like I don't have enough skill here to really do what I want to do or something like that rather than I am playing the same thing. I tend not to play things that I have learnt. I am playing something new every time.

What has music done for you?

Everything. Music is magic. It's something that for the person doing it, creates some sort of a magic environment in your brain, it puts something out into the world which is just terrific, and it communicates on a nonverbal level something again that really needs to be communicated. It's like another dimension. It's a gift to the world. 🎵