

On Buying a Harmonica

As with most things, when buying a harmonica you get what you pay for. You want a harmonica which is air tight, responsive, and in tune. Generally speaking, lower priced harmonicas may be poorly made with cheaper materials which may result in the instrument not performing as you would like. Consequently, it can make the job of learning to play more difficult. A few extra dollars can mean the difference between frustration and pleasure. Music stores sell many different kinds of harmonicas ranging in price from less than ten dollars to several hundred. As a beginner, you might do well to not purchase from those extreme ends. Harmonica prices have increased in the past few years but it is still possible to get good quality ten hole diatonic instruments in the \$25.00 to \$60.00 range.

It is difficult to "test drive" a harmonica as you would a guitar. As a general rule, if your lips touch a harmonica, you own it! Many stores have a hand operated bellows which allows you to pump air through the instrument without your lips touching it. There are two settings or holes on the bellows. One allows you to play single notes while the other allows you to play several notes at the same time. If at all possible, play your prospective instrument on a bellows before putting your money down.

Your lips and tongue will be in contact with the instrument. Sharp edges may make the harmonica uncomfortable to play. Visually inspect the harmonica for sharp edges, burrs, etc. and then rub your hands over the surfaces to feel for any potential trouble spots. Gaps between a harmonica's parts may trap moustache hairs so if you have facial hair, pay special attention to potential gap traps or your performance may contain an unintended "Ouch!".

The centre section of the harmonica with the holes in it is called the comb. Combs can be made of wood, plastic or metal. Neither material appears to affect the tone of the instrument. Both the plastic and metal combs are very stable in terms of size. However, wooden combs can absorb moisture from the player's saliva and breath and can swell. That being said, Horner's Marine Band model has a wood comb and remains one of the top selling harmonicas in the world. It is really personal choice as to comb material.

Three of the more common brands to be found in local music stores are Horner, Suzuki and Tombo. Each is slightly different and each has its fans. You will have to decide for yourself which brand and model suits your needs and individual style. Some manufacturers have suggested models for different types of music. For example, harmonicas designed playing the blues may have more flexible reeds to make note bending easier. Consult the manufacturer's literature and website as well as store sales staff for information on various models. Many harmonica players own some models from several different manufacturers.

Gary Green