

Rick Estrin Reveals!

Secrets, Subtleties & Tricks of the Blues Harmonica

By Grant Kessler

There is a short list of living blues harmonica masters, and Rick Estrin deservedly holds a place high on that list. He toured over 30 years with the band Little Charlie and the Nightcats until Little Charlie Baty's recent retirement. Now he has regrouped as Rick Estrin and the Nightcats, and he leads the band with fantastic harp playing, witty songwriting and a flashy, dynamic stage presence. Seeing an Estrin performance is always a treat; it will blow you away musically and you will be charmed and entertained by the lyrics. Rick dresses the part in stylish suits that grab your attention and he's got the moves to go with the clothes. Rick Estrin is the full package: incredible harp player, songwriter and entertainer. He has just released an instructional DVD, *Rick Estrin Reveals! Secrets, Subtleties and Tricks of the Blues Harmonica*, that will give aspiring blues harp players insight into the playing skills and stage moves that are his hallmark. For the purposes of this review, I tried to count Rick Estrin's hot suits as they changed from segment to segment, but I quickly lost track because I was so taken by his great playing and the material he was teaching. He may be a showman with the clothes, the humor, the babes and all, but beyond that, he's a fantastic player, and this DVD shows he's thought a lot about what makes great music. He's done a careful job of finding ways to communicate and organize his ideas. If you're a blues harp player with some basic skills under your belt and the desire to take it to the next level, Rick can help you.

The disc consists of six segments, each covering a different topic. Rick appears in a different suit in each, outlines some great ideas to advance your playing and follows each idea up with 12 bars of example. This is a fantastic formula that will help players understand his techniques.

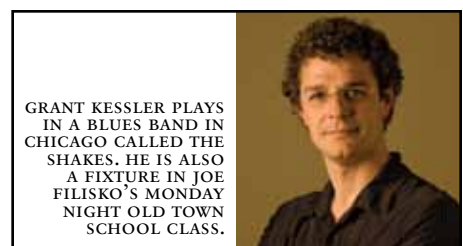


One of the nicest things about the DVD too is that you get all that personal time with Rick. He talks with you as though he were in your living room, and you get a chance to understand his personality—if you always wondered where his great songwriting came from, now you'll know that sense of wit and straight talk are what make up Rick Estrin. That and his affinity for the ladies in all shapes and sizes!

First up is the segment titled "Hold That Groove." Rick makes the point that a blues player needs to have and feel a groove by him-

self and not rely on the band to produce it. Throughout this DVD, Rick backs up his ideas with incredible playing examples—here we see him moving and keeping time and he helps us understand how important that is to blues playing. We are teased by having Rusty Zinn standing in the background throughout this piece, guitar in hand, but he never actually plays—a testament to Rick's solid internal groove. If you can watch this and not move in your seat, you're missing something because his rhythm is so infectious and solid. Rick makes it clear that learning to groove is the foundation of great blues playing.

Rick follows the groove talk with a segment about listening. He puts it best: "Listening isn't passive; listening is an activity." He stresses the idea that you need to spend a lot of quality time listening to the recorded masters and studying their techniques. An example he gives is John Lee Williamson's [the original Sonny Boy Williamson] use of the 2 draw/3 blow on the diatonic. One of Rick's incredible strengths is his Sonny Boy playing, and he is certainly qualified to explain and demonstrate how to milk those two notes which seem to be the same. Study the Walters and the Sonny Boys for the subtleties they played, and Rick will help you hear them.



GRANT KESSLER PLAYS IN A BLUES BAND IN CHICAGO CALLED THE SHAKES. HE IS ALSO A FIXTURE IN JOE FILISKO'S MONDAY NIGHT OLD TOWN SCHOOL CLASS.

The next two segments outline outstanding ways to vary your phrasing. Part I gives example after example of variety: contrast your riff, rhythm, and melody patterns; alter tone, texture, and volume; and don't forget things like altering legato and staccato phrases. All these ideas will get players more strongly rooted in varying phrasing rather than stringing unrelated phrases together. When you hear Rick demonstrate these techniques, you see a clear vision for stronger soloing and improvisation. In Part II he talks about "playing with the time" by choosing to play on, behind, or even ahead of the beat to create blues tension and interest. This segment wraps up with a strong philosophical message to help players move beyond "just playing licks." Rick explains that a player's goal is to achieve a vocal, conversational tone so you "reach" your audience.

Phrasing is one of the key ways to do that.

There is debate about the value of learning songs by the master players note-for-note and Rick comes down clearly on the side of "in favor." We are trying to learn to speak the language of the blues, after all, and what better way to do that than by spending time understanding what those who originally wrote the language were saying? Rick would have you dig into the blues canon and make that language your own by studying the great players.

If you've ever seen Rick perform live, you know there is no one better suited (pun intended) to discuss the subject of the last segment, "Performance Tricks and Showbiz Devices." Rick reveals things you can do on stage in addition to your actual playing that can have an impact with the audience. Techniques he titles "The Look," "Damn, This

Is Deep," and the "Rule of Three" can all lead to you having stronger stage presence if you internalize them and feel comfortable with them. And lastly, in perhaps his biggest revelation, Rick describes how he achieves the Sonny Boy "no hands" harp playing that he is so good at. If you've dreamed of wowing audiences with this bit, this DVD is for you!

The genuine Rick Estrin comes across on this DVD. He gives it to you straight and plays incredibly solid examples. If you're looking to improve your blues harp playing and your stage presence, I suggest you get your hands on all the original masters and listen "actively" to them. Then get this DVD to learn from a living master. After that, if you've got it all together, get yourself a tailor!

Available at www.filmbaby.com

HARMONICA WORKSHOP at the 2009 Kerrville Folk Festival

Tues. June 2 - Thurs. June 4, 2009

Spend 3 days under the trees and stars at the Kerrville Folk Festival and learn from three of the best harp players around. Join **ROB ROY PARNELL**, **MICHAEL RUBIN** and **NORTON BUFFALO** as they explore various harp techniques and styles. Your \$165 registration fee includes tent camping and parking fees, lunches, Festival access and admission to Sundown Concerts for class days.



To Register on-line and to get more info on the Kerrville Folk Festival visit www.kerrvillefolkfestival.com. You may also call (830) 257-3600. Make checks payable to "Kerrville Folk Festival" and mail c/o Kerrville Folk Festival, PO Box 291466, Kerrville TX 78029

**KERRVILLE
FOLK FESTIVAL**
Quiet Valley Ranch
Kerrville, Texas

**TEXAS FOLK MUSIC
FOUNDATION**
A 501(c)3, non-profit organization that is dedicated to promoting public appreciation and support for songwriters and the art of songwriting.



ROB ROY PARNELL



MICHAEL RUBIN



NORTON BUFFALO

Just
\$165
if paid by 5/10/09
(\$200 after that)

**ATTENTION
HARMONICA
PLAYERS!**

(intermediate level and above)