





# **Exploring the Diminished Harmonica**

A Guide to Playing 10-hole, 12-hole,  
and 13-hole Diminished Harmonicas

**Jason Rogers**

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# Foreword

One night, about thirty years ago, I had a particularly vivid dream. In this dream, I took a Hohner Marine Band 364S (a 12-hole solo-tuned diatonic harmonica) and retuned it so that the blow notes gave a C diminished seventh chord, and the draw notes gave a D diminished seventh chord. I then dreamed of using it to play complex chromatic phrases without the need for overblows or overdraws, as well as being able to transpose from key to key with relative ease. The next day, I immediately set about recreating this experience in the waking world and found the results to be equally satisfying. Not long afterwards, however, I learned that I was not the first person to have had this idea. Diminished tunings for harmonica have been patented at least three times in various countries, and I have heard of several other harmonica players who came up with the same idea independently. Given the eminently logical structure of this tuning, this should probably not be too surprising.

The traditional tuning of the diatonic harmonica was intended to make playing simple melodies easy, along with some very basic chordal accompaniment. This is something that it has done extremely well for over a century, and although it was invented long before blues and jazz existed, talented and creative players adapted it to those styles with spectacular success. However, if the harmonica were to be designed from scratch to play tunes such as Coltrane's "Central Park West," rather than "O Du Lieber Augustin," knowing what we now know about how note bending works on the harmonica, it is much more likely that an arrangement of notes like the diminished tuning would be chosen, rather than a layout based around the major diatonic scale and its tonic and dominant chords.

Given the preceding, it may come as a surprise to hear that although I have frequently dabbled with this fascinating tuning, I have not yet thoroughly dedicated myself to it. Thankfully for you, the reader of this book, the same cannot be said of Jason Rogers. Drawing from his countless hours in the woodshed with several types of harmonica, especially those in diminished tuning, along with his extensive experience in the wider fields of music and education, he has put together this guide to making the most of the Dimi. With valuable lessons and ideas to take their playing to new levels of creative enjoyment, this detailed and thorough book is sure to take its place as a new classic in the harmonica literature collection of open-minded harmonica players of all levels and abilities.

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I'm known as someone who enjoys and promotes alternate tunings for the harmonica. Over the years I've created many of my own, some of which have become quite widely known (e.g., Paddy Richter, PowerBender). I've always enjoyed exploring other alternate scales too, and became aware of diminished tuning about ten years after picking up the harp. I was instantly impressed by several of its features: a regular breathing pattern throughout the harp (draw note always higher than the blow); repeatability of the scale in every octave; and the ability to bend every draw note with expressive interactive-reed bending. The intrinsic logic of these characteristics already makes diminished easier to learn and more expressive throughout the range than most other harmonica tunings, from the get-go.

But where it goes beyond virtually all others is the fact that it makes the diatonic harp fully chromatic, using easy draw bends. This allows players who love the small size and funky tonality of the diatonic harp to play not just folk/blues/pop music, but also more harmonically sophisticated styles like jazz, which modulate between key centres. That's a powerful USP! The fact diminished tuning can easily be played by anyone in all twelve keys (with only three breath patterns!) gives it the potential to be a game-changer in the diatonic harmonica world.

But a great tool can only be appreciated and adopted if it is widely known and understood, and to date that hasn't been the case. If someone wanted to try diminished tuning, it wasn't easy to learn about it or (until very recently) even find a suitable harmonica. That's where Jason Rogers' *Exploring the Diminished Harmonica* comes in! This incredibly comprehensive book, lovingly written by a real devotee and fine player of diminished tuning, will spread the good word and answer every question about this uniquely wonderful harp layout. I can't think of any other harmonica tuning that would deserve a book like this—but diminished does!

Not only is this a wonderful source of knowledge about all things diminished, but it's also an excellent instructional book for anyone wanting to give the tuning a try. I'm sure the exposure and assistance it gives for diminished tuning will lead to far more players giving it serious consideration when they embark on their diatonic harmonica journey. That could be as their primary harp scale, or as a useful second tuning to learn for when they need to play music which requires full chromaticism. I congratulate Jason on his inspiration and hard work in creating this magnum opus, and look forward to hearing its good effects in years to come.

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# Preface

In the mid-1990s, I lived in Boston, Massachusetts and was piecing together a living, as musicians do, teaching six or seven days a week at different institutions, including New England Conservatory and Northeastern University. I offered lessons through my own private piano studio as well as giving various other lessons in theory and improvisation. I had the good fortune of working part-time at Gunther Schuller's GM Recordings during this time. I toured Europe and Japan, played at a presidential inauguration, worked on a cruise line, and premiered a microtonal composition for trombone. I giggered around the Northeastern United States: New Orleans jazz, avant-garde and modern jazz, klezmer, wedding bands, R&B, hip-hop, and any other band or performance situation requiring a trombone. Around this time, I was just starting work with Ran Blake on his book, *Primacy of the Ear*.

In my spare time, I found myself listening to free-reed instruments. I was fascinated with the variety of accordion designs and models from around the world. I remember listening to William Schimmel, Guy Klucevek, Frank Marocco, Richard Galliano, Jo-El Sonnier, Michael Doucet and BeauSoliel, Clifton Chenier, Hermeto Pascoal, Sivuca, Astor Piazzolla, Nesho Neshev, various Irish and Canadian accordionists, Scandinavian accordionists, and many others. I enjoyed hearing classical accordion performed on C-system or B-system chromatic accordions with free bass or piano accordions with free bass.

I wanted to try the many accordion models, but they weren't easy to find, even if just to try them for a moment. If I could find them, the price was beyond what a musician with little money could even consider. I visited the Tosi Music Company, the accordion shop in Boston's North End a number of times (a fascinating store where they sold accordions on one side and guns and knives on the other) but couldn't afford much.

I rented a piano accordion from Tosi's for a little while and played a few gigs and a recording session. I bought a single-row diatonic accordion on one occasion. The New Orleans trio I was in, with my good friends Artie Barbato and Dave "the Knife" Fabris, humored me for a while as I put down my trombone and attempted to play Zydeco on the piano accordion, and Cajun music on the diatonic accordion, with them. Years later, I played piano accordion with my daughter's high school chorus; at the time of this writing, a video of it is still on YouTube.

While I was dreaming accordion dreams, I was also listening to harmonica recordings by the master musician, Toots Thielemans. His combination of intellect, emotional expression, and physical mastery was inspiring. The one thing the harmonica had that the accordion didn't was the ability to bend notes, and Toots used that expression masterfully. I had been aware of, and admired, Charlie Musselwhite and Junior Wells, and John Popper of "Blues Traveler" was frequently on the radio at the time, but it was really Toots who spoke to me the most.

I purchased a Hohner 270 chromatic harmonica from a music store display case. I recall loving it but feeling there was something wrong with it. I highly doubted that the instrument I was holding could be very much like the one Toots played. It seemed leaky, and the mouthpiece had sharp edges. The slide didn't seem to move at playing speed. I could play in the midrange for a few minutes, but that was about it. I also had a couple of blues harps, but I found that having missing notes was frustrating, and at that time, I had no idea about the master musician Howard Levy or overbending. I'm not sure about the

exact chronology here, but when I first heard Howard Levy recordings, I was mystified, as my ears told me he was playing notes that shouldn't be on a diatonic harmonica. Yet, I didn't think he was playing a chromatic harmonica either. For all of these reasons, I gave up on playing the harmonica on any serious level.

Fast forward to 1999. My wife and I were expecting our daughter, I had started a technology job, and the Internet was a lot livelier. I started tuning in to harmonica forums and learned that harmonicas routinely needed extra work to make them optimally playable once you got them home.

I read everything I could find online about harmonicas. After my experience with an unplayable chromatic harmonica, I was mesmerized by the website of virtuoso player, master craftsman, and creative inventor Brendan Power. In 2000 or 2001, he was selling custom harmonicas that fixed the issues with stock harmonicas. But even more exciting to me was that he offered a menu of alternate tunings he could provide for both chromatic and diatonic harmonicas. I first ordered a bebop-tuned CX-12, but very soon after, I began to analyze the Dimi, began imagining its potential, and purchased my first Dimi chromatic.

I was taken with the tone Brendan got from his half-valved CX-10 blues harp, and I imagined the potential of a half-valved diminished chromatic. Over the course of time, I purchased many of Brendan's albums and instruction books; at one point, years later, I went through all his Irish harmonica books and tried to quantify how they worked on the diminished.

At about the same time, I was reading a website named "Harp On!" by Greg Dyer, who called himself "G." His short but descriptive paragraphs on a variety of altered note layouts on the chromatic were very influential. Coincidentally, at that time, I was a systems administrator at Lycos, and one of the sites I maintained was [angelfire.com](https://www.angelfire.com/music/harmonica/index.html), where Harp On! was hosted. Harp On! is still there, very much the same as it was at the time: <https://www.angelfire.com/music/harmonica/index.html>.

G's site included a page called "Musings on Altered Tunings for the Chromatic Harmonica" by someone named Pat Missin. I was impressed by the well-researched content of Pat's article and only later came to fully appreciate the extent of Pat's encyclopedic knowledge, much of it offered at [patmissin.com](https://www.patmissin.com/tunings/tunings.html). The information includes Pat's exhaustive catalog of known harmonica layouts called "Altered States," offered for free at: <https://www.patmissin.com/tunings/tunings.html>.

I first came to speak directly with Pat with a request for him to build a diminished harmonica for me, and over the years, he did many for me, including Hering chromatics, Hohner/Hering hybrid chromatics, CX-12s, half-valved CX12s, and various 10-hole diminished harps. His valved CX-12s became my favorites for a long time and were what I played on sessions for composer Rich Lamanna. I was lucky to engage Pat so often; Pat is an expert technician and has customized instruments for some of the best players in the business, as well as those interested in altered-tuned and fine-tuned harmonicas.

Pat was always a friendly and personable correspondent. On many occasions, he generously served as an informal advisor as I sent him ideas and questions on harmonica. At some point, Pat read an article on the Dimi chromatic I had written for *Harmonica Happenings* magazine. In the article, I had dropped hints about further writings on the topic, and Pat encouraged me to go for it. We discussed ideas on self-publishing, which Pat has quite a bit of experience with. If you haven't yet, check out his website, his books, and videos of his playing.

In summary, the writings of Pat and G. illuminated the various chromatic tunings sufficiently for me to analyze each and conclude that diminished was the altered tuning to pursue. This information, along with the easy availability of altered tunings from Brendan's website, made it realistic for me to start down this path.

I knew, too, that I was in a somewhat unique position to explore these tunings, as I had the musical background to grasp the advantages of an altered tuning yet none of the investment in traditional tunings that many lifetime players would have to leave behind. In addition, I was no longer making a living from music and could afford to experiment.

I focused on the diminished chromatic harmonica for many years, but I flirted with the diminished harmonica a bit as well. A few years ago, I was going through a period of exploration with diminished harmonica and discovered, while playing along with a Paul Delay recording, the “Ain’t That Right” scale (covered within). I realized it served as the Dimi’s “easy scale” with no bends, and it sounded tonal and bluesy all at once. This was almost like playing the diatonic scale on the traditional harmonica, except all the octaves of the Dimi are the same, making it very easy to traverse the range of the whole instrument. In my mind, this “easy scale” dispelled the myth that any scale (other than the diminished scale itself) requires at least one or more bends to be played on the Dimi.

I found that all it takes to play major and minor blues scales is one easy half-step bend, making it no more difficult, if not easier, than playing them on a traditional blues harp. In addition, these single-bend scales can be played in four different keys on a single Dimi.

I also discovered that double stops could be used in effective ways that really work, and that dispelled the myth that the Dimi is only good for single-note melodies. With these discoveries, the Dimi seemed to open up to me, and the rest quickly fell into place.

My hope is that, with some clues from this text, things fall into place for you and your Dimi as well.

# Introduction

The diminished harmonica is an effective and powerful variation on the traditional harmonica. Its layout is extremely simple: every hole has the draw reed one whole tone (aka a major second) above the blow. The next hole always starts one semitone (aka a minor second) up from the last draw. This layout provides all twelve chromatic tones with four blow notes, four draw notes, and four draw bends.

The Dimi, which can be played in all keys, is in some respects more complex on the surface than the traditional diatonic harmonica, which contains only the notes in a single key. A beginner can blow and draw on the traditional harp and hear notes in the desired key, but the Dimi, much like any other fully chromatic instrument, requires a little more knowledge to get started. This book will serve as an on-ramp to efficiently getting the most value from the Dimi.

The musical examples within are written for a diminished harmonica that starts on the note "A," but a Dimi starting on any note will be compatible with the tablature provided with every example.

The book is written as a "survey course" of possibilities with the hope that it will serve as a springboard to each reader's personal journey of discovery. The examples within are drawn from personal musical knowledge and experience; my hope is that these will suffice to illustrate concepts but ultimately inspire new connections and possibilities from each reader's personal musical ideas and history.

My daughter, Madelyn, who served as a fantastic editor for my sometimes overly complicated writing, joked with me that this is a somewhat impossible book. She was referring to the fact that it tries to address everyone, from beginner to expert. It attempts to provide an entry point into the Dimi for the beginner while illustrating the potential of the Dimi to advanced musicians. Therefore, I am counting on you, the reader, to work with the book to find the level-appropriate material you need for your purposes.

Many styles of music are represented within, but it is beyond the scope of this book to delve deeply into the practice of any specific style; in-depth performance practices, improvisation techniques, stylistic ornaments and embellishments, and microtonal implications appropriate to any particular style will not be covered. Jazz improvisation is referenced frequently, but this is not a course on improvisation or jazz. Likewise, klezmer, bluegrass, blues, folk, rock, etc., are referenced but are not covered in depth. It is expected that the reader will begin their own research when a topic of interest arises or when some additional background is needed.

I would encourage the reader to stay open to possibilities. If you are looking only to replicate everything a blues harp can do, then it is possible you should just stick with a blues harp. Pick the right tool for the job; if you are interested in opening up new possibilities on the harmonica, then the Dimi will provide plenty of opportunities. Some players may be interested in making the Dimi their primary instrument. For others, it may make sense to add the Dimi to their arsenal for doing the things it does best while sticking with the Richter diatonic or other reed layouts where they work best. Yet others may study the diminished harmonica for gaining experience they can apply to other harmonicas such as the half-valved diminished chromatic harmonica.

A note on the major scale tunes found in the "Major Scales and Major Scale Tunes"



chapter: The strictly diatonic tunes are included as an exercise to help you learn your way around the Dimi in multiple keys with tunes and scales that are familiar to the ear. They are not necessarily included as suggested performance repertoire. Nor are they included because they necessarily work “better” on Dimi than any other harmonica layout. For example, it may be more practical to perform an Irish tune at speed on a Paddy Richter layout harmonica, but the tune has been included here as an exercise to learn that key and scale on the Dimi. My recommendation would be for the reader to practice and enjoy all the diatonic tunes as a stepping stone into areas beyond. In my opinion, the Dimi reveals its potential once it gets outside of the strictly diatonic tunes. The blues and pentatonic scales, altered scales, and chromatic scales offer exciting possibilities on the Dimi.

A note on the naming of the Dimi:

For a 10, 12, or 13-hole diminished-tuned harmonica with no slide (the topic of this book),

I will use these terms:

- diminished harmonica, diminished harp, Dimi

For the traditional harmonica as played by Little Walter, Charlie McCoy, and Howard Levy, I will use these terms:

- traditional harmonica, Richter harmonica, diatonic harmonica, blues harp

For the chromatic harmonica as played by Larry Adler, Stevie Wonder, Toots Thielemans:

- chromatic harmonica, solo-tuned chromatic

For the chromatic harmonica that has been tuned to diminished:

- diminished chromatic harmonica, Dimi chromatic, Dimi

In general, the nickname “Dimi” may be used to refer to either a diminished harmonica or a diminished chromatic harmonica depending on the context. However, in this book, “Dimi” will only ever refer to the diminished harmonica we are using in the study of this book.

Good luck with the Dimi and the materials in the book. I hope it leads you to many exciting discoveries and inspires you to create and innovate. I look forward to hearing what you do with it!

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Madelyn Rogers, my copy editor, who put herself in the shoes of a diminished harmonica student and who I leaned on heavily to clarify the text.

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Bobbie Sweeney, my mother and first music teacher.

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So many others that frequent the online forums and who have offered so much wisdom on playing, performing, practicing, and harmonica.

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**Section 1:**  
**Introducing**  
**the Dimi**

