

Little Walter did some great harp switching on several of the recordings he did with Muddy Waters for Chess in the 1950's. By harp switching, I mean using different key harps to play in different harmonica positions during the course of a song that stays in the same key throughout. Now Walter did do some harp switching on his own recordings for Chess in the 1950's, but it was always to switch between 2<sup>nd</sup> position diatonic and his standard 3<sup>rd</sup> position chromatic. He did this on *Blue Lights* (1954), *Thunderbird* (1954), *Flying Saucer* (1956), and *Rock Bottom* (alternate take) in 1958. *Blue Lights* is the one song out of this group where Walter switches twice - he goes back to the chromatic at the end of the song (for the last 12 bars) after having switched to the diatonic at the beginning (after the first 8 bars).

The one exception to this general pattern is *That's It* from 1953, a song in the key of C. Walter plays mostly in 3<sup>rd</sup> position on a diatonic (Bb) harp, but takes a quickly aborted (after 12 bars) chromatic harp break where, in my opinion, he is using a C chromatic to try and play in 3<sup>rd</sup> position, but he is doing it with the button in. My theory is that he knew he wasn't playing in D, which is the button out key for 3<sup>rd</sup> position on a C chromatic, so he tried playing with the button in. Unfortunately for him (and for the rest of us!) the song wasn't in Eb either, which would be the button in key for 3<sup>rd</sup> position. He doesn't seem to realize until it is too late that he is not in the right key. I am fairly convinced that Walter was not trying to play in 1<sup>st</sup> position here (as other harp players have suggested to me), simply because I think he would have done a better job of it if that's what he was actually doing. Note: This song, which is really great but was unreleased almost certainly for this reason, finally came out in 1995 on the *Blues with a Feeling* CD.

So as it turns out, it is on the Muddy Waters recordings that Little Walter actually does his coolest harp switching. There are 6 tunes that stand out in my mind - all of them are original Chess recordings. They are: *They Call me Muddy Waters* (1951), *I Just Want to Make Love to You* (1954), *My Eyes keep me in Trouble* (1955), *I Live the Life I Love* (1956), *Nineteen Years Old* (1958), and *Walking Through the Park* (1958).

A note for harmonica players, which I'm assuming means anyone who has read this far: If you are familiar with your positions (and I'm speaking here of 1<sup>st</sup> position or 'straight harp', 2<sup>nd</sup> position or 'cross harp', and 3<sup>rd</sup> position), and can recognize the difference in sound between the chromatic and the diatonic (regular 10 hole) harmonica, I suggest you listen to these songs again (or for the first time, if that is the case) before reading on. Try and see if you can figure out where Walter is doing his harp switching. If you cannot quite get it, don't feel bad - Walter was very good at making one position sound a lot like another. As to *why* Walter did the whole switching thing in the first place, I see several possibilities. Little Walter was an extremely musical cat, so he probably was just doing it to make his shit sound better. However, his shit already sounded pretty damn good without the switching, so he could have just been doing it just to show off. I also can't help but think that he was doing it to mess with Muddy's head, and everyone else who was there in the studio at the time, and maybe even everyone who would be listening to his recordings. This would definitely jibe with what we have come to know about Walter's personality! Anyway, enough with the preamble. Here we go....

#### They Call me Muddy Waters (E)

Walter's earliest experimentation with harp switching is notable because of his use of 1<sup>st</sup> position. Walter didn't do that much 1<sup>st</sup> position playing on record. In fact, there is no 1<sup>st</sup> position playing on any of his own recordings for Chess. He did use 1<sup>st</sup> position with Muddy a couple of times though, on *I'm Your Hootchie Cootchie Man* (1954), *I Want to be Loved* (1955), *My Eyes Keep me in Trouble* (1955 - see below), and *I Got to Find my Baby* (1955). He also used it a couple of times with Jimmy Rogers, on *Luedella* (1950) and *Chance to Love* (1951). BTW, that's Big Walter playing 1<sup>st</sup> position on *One Kiss* in 1956. And of course I should mention the John Brim songs *Ice Cream Man* (1954) and *Be Careful* (1956). Walter is switching between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> position on that last one - check it out, if you haven't already. OK then, back to *They Call me Muddy Waters*: Walter starts out in 1<sup>st</sup> position (E harp). At the end of the second verse (after the 9<sup>th</sup> bar) he switches to 2<sup>nd</sup> position (A harp) to take his solo, and he stays there for the duration of the song. When he comes out of the solo he mimics the line he was using in 1<sup>st</sup> position. Is he being musical or just fucking with you? You decide! Note: Muddy recorded *Lonesome Day* during the same session, and Walter plays this line again, this time in 3<sup>rd</sup> Position!

#### I Just Want to Make Love to You (D)

Now I was pretty much oblivious to this switch for many years, but it is there. Walter is playing 3<sup>rd</sup> position diatonic (C harp) and 3<sup>rd</sup> position (his standard) C chromatic - can you hear where he is switching? This song has a very unstructured form - it stays on the *one* except for the bridge, which goes to the *four* and then to the *five*, and Muddy and Walter both start singing and playing at off-beat times. OK already - here I go: Walter starts with the diatonic. There is a 3 bar intro, then Muddy jumps a beat and starts singing. The first verse is 8 bars and the second verse is 12 bars. After the 10<sup>th</sup> bar of the second verse, Walter puts down his diatonic harp and switches to the chromatic, which he starts playing on the 12<sup>th</sup> bar. He repeats the line from this 12<sup>th</sup> bar on the 1<sup>st</sup> bar of his solo verse, so technically his solo starts on the 2<sup>nd</sup> bar of this verse and lasts for 12 bars. Then comes the 8 bar bridge and the final 12 bar vocal verse, which fades out on a couple of extra bars. Walter stays on the chromatic for the rest of the song. If you doubt this switch

compare Walter's playing on the first verse with his playing on the last - you will be able to hear I think that he is playing the same line, but with two different instruments!

### My Eyes Keep me in Trouble (C)

Walter begins this song in 1<sup>st</sup> position on the diatonic (C harp) and then switches to a C Chromatic for the solo. Now this is very interesting. Many harmonica players have assumed that Walter was trying to take a 1<sup>st</sup> position chromatic harp solo here, but I would make the case that this was *not* the case. I think he is doing the same thing that he did two years earlier on *That's It* - he is playing his C chromatic with the button in and trying to play in 3<sup>rd</sup> position. Technically speaking, this would mean he was playing 6<sup>th</sup> position harp (he is playing in C using a Db harmonica). Now I doubt Walter was thinking about playing in a different harmonica 'position', but it is possible that he was trying to cultivate this particular part for its chromatic playing. However, I can't help but conclude again that if this were case he would have done a better job of it - I mean come on man, this is Walter! He does better with it here than he did on *That's It*, but not by much - he only plays for 8 bars of the break and then aborts, laying out for a couple of bars and then coming back with the C diatonic, with which he finishes out the song. It must be a mistake, again, no? Why else would he have cut it so short? You might ask, what are the chances of Walter using the wrong harp in the same way on record twice? I'd say given that it is two years later the chances are pretty good - after all, Walter did like his weed, in addition to his wine women and song, so to speak! Ultimately of course it is impossible to say for sure - we can figure out *what* Walter is doing on these songs, but we can never really be certain about *why* he is doing it - it's all part of the great mystery of life....

### I Live the Life I Love (E)

This switch is so brief and seamless that you should be able to forgive yourself for missing it if you did. Walter plays 2<sup>nd</sup> position (A harp) for almost the entire song except for 4 bars where he plays 3<sup>rd</sup> position (D harp). Where? Right at the start of his solo. *Very Cool* - check it out!

### Nineteen Years Old (B)

Another very cool switch takes place here. It is notable too because it is the only song other than *Blue Lights* and *That's It* where Walter switches harps and then switches back again. OK, here goes: Walter starts off in 3<sup>rd</sup> position (A harp), switches to 2<sup>nd</sup> position (E harp) for his solo, and then switches back to the A harp after his solo. Details: he stops playing his A harp on the last vocal verse before the solo (at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> bar), switches harps, and resumes playing with his E harp for the last half of the 12<sup>th</sup> bar. You can clearly hear this quick 2-note cross harp pick-up into the solo - he plays the lower bend of the 2-draw followed by the 1-draw. That's the flat-7 (A), and the 5 (B) for all of the real musicians reading this! Walter blows his E harp through the entire turnaround after his solo, then switches back to his A harp and resumes his playing on the 2<sup>nd</sup> bar of Muddy's returning vocal verse. *Bravo!*

### Walking Through the Park (B)

Walter is using an E harp (2<sup>nd</sup> position) and an A harp (3<sup>rd</sup> position) on this song. Can you hear where he is switching? This switch took me a long time to notice, because Walter is doing perhaps his best job of using one position to closely imitate the pattern of another. OK, then, here it is: Walter starts the song in 2<sup>nd</sup> position. He does this for the 12 bar intro verse and for 11 bars of the first vocal verse. He then switches harps and starts playing in 3<sup>rd</sup> position at the beginning of the second vocal verse. He stays in 3<sup>rd</sup> position for the solo and for the rest of the song. Now since my claim of this switch is the one that is likely to be the most contested by other harp players, I will make my case as clearly as I can: Walter's playing on the intro of this song really sounds a lot like 3<sup>rd</sup> position, and indeed you can play most of what he's playing here in 3<sup>rd</sup>, but the operative word here is *most*. You cannot play *all* of what he is playing in 3<sup>rd</sup> position! Here's the first giveaway that he is in 2<sup>nd</sup> position on the intro - he does a bend that cannot be gotten from an A harp in 3<sup>rd</sup> position. Where is it? It is on the last beat of the 8<sup>th</sup> bar, right before the band goes to the *four*. Hear It? It's that lower bend on the 2-draw again, the flat-7 (A). This is pretty cool because he hits the bend first and then goes up to the straight 2-draw. If you try and play this intro in 3<sup>rd</sup> position, you can get a similar bend, but not the *same* bend. You can bend the 4-draw to get a major-7(Bb), but that's as close as you'll get. If you listen to the beginning of the intro (the 3<sup>rd</sup> beat of the 1<sup>st</sup> bar), you can hear that Walter is doing that same 2-hole bend. And if you listen carefully to this whole part (the intro and the first vocal verse) you will be able to hear that it just sounds like an E harp and not an A harp. If you're still not convinced, listen to the very end of the intro. Walter's last 4 notes are 2-draw, second bend (A), and 3 draws on the 1 (F). Try getting those notes in 3<sup>rd</sup> position! BTW, the one bend you can do exactly the same in 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> position here is the one that Walter does right at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> bar. In 2<sup>nd</sup> position it is on the 4-draw and in 3<sup>rd</sup> position it is on the 6-draw. They are both the 5 bent down to the flat-5 (F-sharp to F). It is a slight bend, and it is subtle, but it is there, and Walter used it quite often to great effect - try it some time!

Well all right then, that's all for now folks - more to come soon....