

Faculty Spotlight with **Nick Conrad**

When did your passion for blues start and how did you get into playing blues harmonica? When I was about 14 years old, my best friend Alan Meckley and I entered a lip-sync benefit that my sister-in-law organized. We did a Blues Brothers bit, and I bought my first harmonica as a prop! There were long-term ripple effects of that “performance”. Alan and I became hooked on learning more about the real blues music that Blues Brothers were copying. This wasn’t easy in pre-internet days in small-town Pennsylvania. We had little information about blues and almost no access to the actual music. One of the few blues albums that our local chain store had was Muddy Waters’ 1977 *Hard Again* album. The sound of James Cotton’s harmonica on that record simply blew me away. With lots of encouragement from Alan and zero musical knowledge I decided to try and learn to play blues harp (a.k.a. harmonica).

Do you have a favorite song you play? That’s impossible to answer—no way I can pick one! I’m constantly practicing songs of the masters, particularly of the Holy Trinity of Blues Harp: Little Walter (e.g., “Rocker”, “Juke”, “Boogie”), Sonny Boy Williamson II (e.g., “Trust My Baby”, “Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide”), or Big Walter Horton (e.g., “Easy”, “Trouble in Mind”). Despite attempting to play these songs for decades, I still don’t do any of them “right”; there’s always more nuance to be learned. Even if I could play these perfectly, that’s still not the goal because blues is an improvisational music. The greatest satisfaction comes when I’m able to play something that reflects the blues masters but is my own interpretation. That’s my zen.



Nick's current collection.



1968 Fender Champ with an Astatic JT-30 microphone, a favorite for harp players.

Have you ever played in a band or in front of a crowd?

Not for a very long time. I’d like to, but it’s so hard to come to a new city and get into the music scene. Also, harmonica players have a well-deserved reputation for overestimating their skills, so if someone tells a working musician they’re a harp player they’re met with more than a little skepticism. That said, when I was an undergrad at Penn State, I was active in the State College music scene. I was in a band that had regular happy hour and weekend gigs at the local bars. I also frequently sat in with other local musicians when they were looking for a harp player. In fact, there’s a few songs with me playing on Spotify and Amazon if you know where to look (but I’ll never tell!).