

Mp3 Will Vogtman - A Step Out Of The Blue



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Explores the use of the diatonic harmonica (blues harp) as an ensemble instrument in a jazz setting. 11

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***** Where My Music Comes From The first music I can recall listening to was jazz. My dad had a few albums that I played over and over--TIME OUT by The Dave Brubeck Quartet, WALKING IN SPACE by Quincy Jones, THE BLUES AND THE BEAT by Henry Mancini, and a live album (THE BEST OF THE CAPITOL YEARS contains most of the original cuts) by Cannonball Adderley. I can't remember a time when I didn't know these albums. I can remember my dad teaching me how to find the beat. He'd take my hand and tap it on the end table in time to these albums. When I'd lose the beat, he'd grab my hand and put me back on it. (It was nearly a scene out of THE JERK.) When I entered school, I found that I really enjoyed music class with Mrs. Showalter. It was just a general elementary school music class, but it was where I started making music. One day, in second grade, I found my voice in that class. I was singing in tune with a record--It's a Small World, I think. I didn't know what resonance was, but I can remember feeling it in my chest. It grew louder and stronger. Mrs.

Showalter stopped class and called me over to her piano. I thought I was in real trouble. I slowly approached what seemed to be a monolith of a piano. I guess in the spirit of 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, it was my monolith. As I walked around the huge piano, she smiled at me and asked me if I would like to try out for a choir at Frostburg State College. I was quite surprised (and filled with relief that I wasn't in trouble). I said yes and she called my parents that evening. I auditioned for the Allegany Boys' Choir a few weeks later, and spent a year with the choir. We performed a few local concerts, and were the extras for a Frostburg State College production of AMHAL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS. The next year, the choir folded. In the fourth grade, I chose to join the elementary school band under the direction of Emerson Miller. I showed an interest in sax, but my dad directed me toward the clarinet. He played both clarinet and sax himself. He told me that most good sax players are required to play clarinet and flute cues. So I trusted him (although I still thought the sax had the cool factor hands down). I started to show a little promise on the instrument, so my folks decided to sign me up for some private lessons. Jean Miller (no relation to Emerson that I know) became my clarinet teacher for the next ten years. Starting at \$5 per half hour and ending at \$7 per half hour, I truly received more than my money's worth. I really learned how to read and interpret music from her--although I never did get the sight reading thing down. I did, however, learn how to woodshed a piece for solo and ensemble performance-a skill I just can't live without. Mrs. Miller also helped me through a period of time that might have been tragic for my musical life. I attended a relatively small high school in Western Maryland. As a result of supply and demand, I was able to play 3 sports and play in the high school band. There was a point in time when I considered putting the clarinet down for good. After all, it looked quite silly in the hands of a lineman. Mrs. Miller told me that my sports would be short-lived. She also told me that my music would last a lifetime. She was correct on both accounts. I had two band directors in junior high and high school. My first was Frank Munson. He was quite a stoic individual when I had him at the end of his career. But I looked up to the man. He had a tough reputation as a semi-pro football player and could play the hell out of a trumpet. My second band director was Martin Crump. I started sax in the tenth grade under him. He worked with all of my coaches and nearly bent over backwards to keep me playing. During my senior year, he took quite a risk. He allowed me to arrange and perform a version of Take Five for clarinet and small ensemble during our spring band concert. It was a great experience and personal triumph made all the more sweet by the presence of my future wife in the audience. I also had a vocal influence throughout high school. Linda

Croft conducted the Frostburg United Methodist Youth Choir. She recruited me in an eighth grade music class. Mrs. Croft taught me most of what I know about vocal phrasing and conducting. She coached me both as a soloist and an ensemble member. She also showed me the personal meaning and connection that music can convey (more on that later). I entered Frostburg State University in the fall of 1990. I signed up for the jazz band under the direction of Jon Bauman. I was told many horror stories about this man and how he treated people. I ignored them and decided to make my own decision. I found him to be quite patient with me as I learned to perform in that setting. We even shared coffee on several occasions while I was considering a major (I ended up in math). Dr. Bauman gave me not just a love of music, but a healthy obsession for it. He exposed me to sounds and charts that I would never have encountered (with flute and clarinet cues, just like dad said). We played everything from Goodman, to Monk, to Spirogyra. I got married during this period of time, and nearly decided to change majors to music (a thought my wife supported). But I knew that math would provide a much more stable career. My wife then told me to pursue the things that made me happy. I should have listened to her. But, then again, my journey would not have been the same. During my junior year of college, a local blues band (The Channel Cats Blues Band) was looking for a horn player. The vocalist, T.J. Jenkins, asked me to sit in and try things out for a while. (My wife bought me a card congratulating me for getting into the band--she's a keeper.) I was quite excited and nervous. After a few gigs, I relaxed. Guitarist Terry McManus taught me how to play a blues scale--what an epiphany! I spent about two weeks learning that scale in F#, B, D, (tenor sax analogues to E, A, and C). It was like magic. I ran out and bought Muddy Waters' Hard Again and a long-forgotten import. I really dug the stuff and I started buying more and more blues albums. About six months later, I was asked to leave (too little money, too many people in the band). I was inspired by that experience to develop some more marketable musical skills (at least that's what I was thinking). I picked up a bass, and my father-in-law gave me my first guitar. On the bass, I learned the standard walking patterns and scales. On the guitar, however, I was drawn to the open tunings of the delta slide players. I read about the diddley bo's they used to make on the sides of their homes. I was hooked on that sound. I still love that raw, acoustic blues--a great portion of my heart is there. In that spirit, I set out to build my own guitar. I started with wood that my dad had saved from the lot our house was built on. The whole process took about a year. The body was cross-cut cherry. The neck was oak. The fret board was walnut. The adjustable bridge was made of bicycle chain links, nuts, bolts, and epoxy putty. The nut was carved from

one of dog's chew bones. Sadly, it was stolen (along with a PA head and speakers) about two years ago. But I learned a great deal in the process. I still have a picture of it on my harp case. It's still a part of my music. About a year later my first son was born (second is on the way). He was held constantly as an infant while I was finishing school. When my wife went back to work, he expected me to hold him constantly as well. One problem-every instrument I played at the time required the use of both hands. Enter the harmonica and Musical Idiot Press. I played the harp in one hand and held my son in the other for about 6 hours a day during the summer of 1995. I sold my clarinet for a Green Bullet and a set of Lee Oskars. Soon after, my brother Todd assembled his second band, Clay Hill Antrum. About 6 months into their existence, I joined as a harp, sax, flute player, and occasional vocalist. The band (mostly my brother) penned a series of 8 tunes that ended up on our only album, Six Foot Wind. We sold about 350 of the 500 copies (that my mom and dad assembled by hand) at our shows throughout Western Maryland. Eventually, my brother got tired of the bar scene. He now records and writes at home and plays guitar in church. During the Clay Hill Antrum stint, I sat in with The Channel Cats a few times again. (Bass Player Pat Sullivan still holds this band together through thick and thin.) Eventually, I was asked to leave. Clay Hill was my primary band at the time. The Channel Cats were not a priority for me at that time. All parties were aware of the situation, tried to give it a go, and it just didn't work out. A period of time elapsed without performance for me. By that time Pat had finally stabilized The Channel Cats line up after a long period of hiring good friends as sidemen. We crossed paths once again. After sitting in a few times, I was asked to join on a permanent basis. I have been with Pat and The Channel Cats ever since (now with solid drummer Bill Ryan--so deep in the pocket that lint blocks his view of the sky). In April of 2003, Dr. Bauman organized a reunion concert (in part, to celebrate his retirement). I was honestly surprised when he asked me to play. I really enjoyed the jazz band, but I never did consider myself a very good player. I couldn't (and still can't) sight read very well at all. I had to spend hours woodshedding to make anything remotely musical out of a piece of paper--a personal weakness. About two months before the concert, I received the charts in the mail. As time would permit (about four days a week) I would work on them to the point of enragement (much to the displeasure of my ever-so-patient wife and son). The concert went off better than expected. A post-concert jam session was organized. I knew they would be playing jazz standards and changes, but I still decided to take my harps. Of the instruments I play, I consider harp to be my primary. I have the most experience with it live (The Channel Cats Blues Band). As the session

progressed, I found that I could actually hold my own with real professionals. I didn't stand out--neither positive nor negative. With the two experiences so close to one another, I started to wonder What role could a harp play in a small ensemble setting? The exploration of that question started the writing and recording of A STEP OUT OF THE BLUE. About a month later, Charlie Croft (Linda's husband) organized a United Methodist Youth Choir reunion. A wiser man has never graced the earth. A fraction of the souls that that woman touched showed up that day--probably approaching 1000. Those people got to thank a great woman for her contribution to their lives. Ailing from her bout with cancer, she left the hospital against medical orders to attend the concert. She stood up out of her wheelchair and conducted HER choir for the last time. I cried then and I'm crying now. She was going to be a part of that music even if it killed her. I can relate to that. I admire that. I aspire to that. A few months later, she lost her fight. But she lives on in the people that remember her and in my music. I am here now. That's much more profound than it sounds. I love the blues and intend to keep playing them for the rest of the foreseeable future--to the very end as Linda did with her music. The Channel Cats are stronger than ever and have been my primary gig for about 2 years. I love the harp-amplified and acoustic (with guitar playing bassist, Ted McGreevey). It's built for blues (although not intentionally). But from time to time, depending upon inspiration and perspiration, I will take a step out of the blue. Will Vogtman Special thanks to AMERICAN HARMONICA NEWSMAGAZINE (July August 2004) for printing this story.

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