

BLUES FOR THE CHROMATIC AUTOHARP

CHORDBAR LAYOUT
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CHORDBAR LAYOUT

I use 18 for ONE KEY when I play blues. You don't need to run away now. We'll add them one "position" at a time, and you'll see that it's not as complex as it sounds. But if you are going to set up a 'harp, you need to plan on at least 18, so you might as well go for the full 21. I need at least that.

Which Chords?

Well, my choices here were driven by two main factors:

1. What key(s) are my best singing keys?
2. What keys sound best on the autoharp?

Factor number one is completely subjective, and does not remain the same for all songs. If you do not sing, then factor one is moot. I merely have to put out there that after playing and singing for close to twenty years now, I find I can do almost everything in the key of D. That's me. If not D, then G. So everything I teach in this tutorial will be based off D, and I leave it up to you to transpose it to your key.

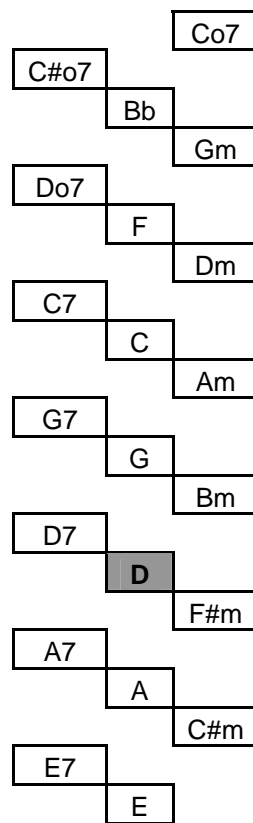
Factor number two is not quite so subjective, given the standard length of strings and standard autoharp sizes out there. What keys sound best on a standard autoharp? Well, the way a chromatic Autoharp is set up, F, C, and G are the best sounding keys. One on the flat side (F) one on the sharp side (G) and one down the middle (C). This is because of the way the bass end is strung up. If your "home key" or main key is going to be one of these (keep in mind what you sing in best), then you are well set to make up a blues autoharp in one of these keys. If not, you'll want to change out your bass strings for better support for the key in which you choose to play. More of this later under "Strings and the Bass End". I had to change everything around for key of D.

Given that I'm going to teach everything off of the key of D, I'll say that that chord (or whatever chord is "Home Plate" should sit in slot number 15. That's the 15th bar down from my face as I hold the harp on my chest. I basically use the "Bowers" arrangement. That puts majors in

the middle row, 7ths in the treble row, right next to (and above) the major chord of the same name (for example, in the middle row I've got D and right above it—again as related to my face—is D7 and the minors are in the bass row. I've got all 3 diminished chords up towards my face, which means there are some other chords I had to leave off in order to open up slots for them

(Note: since I wrote this, I have come up with a chord bar arrangement that jettisons the E chord in favor of the F7, which is a little better. Blues in D seldom uses the E chord.)

All this being said, here's my layout, with the tuning pins to the top, and the treble strings to the LEFT, just like they are when you hold the 'harp on your chest: (not as viewed from the front like another person was playing)



Notice that the order of diagonals is interrupted at both ends. Normally one would have all the diminished chords lined up on the treble row, but that would sacrifice the C7 or they'd all be in the first row diagonally in slots 1,2 and 3 (from the face) and that would sacrifice gminor, and I'm not willing to part with either of those chords, for reasons you'll see later. Again, this is for key of D as the primary blues key. Key of G is almost as good for blues on this harp, and A is really good too, except for the fact that it's too far down to the anchor end of the harp and sounds a bit choked as those keys tend to do. Both G

and A lose a chord in blues. That is why you want whatever is to be your main key chord to be in that #15 slot (where my D is.) It will be the most complete blues key. My blues in D jumps all the way up to the gm and the Bflat quite regularly.

If you choose another key, just put it in that #15 slot and transpose everything accordingly. (I can help with this if you can't do it yourself.)

STRING SCHEDULE IN THE BASS OCTAVE

How exactly I arrived at my current tuning would be too hard to go back and re-fabricate; and it applies to me only. I feel it's ideal for me, given the keys, chords and harp I use. It can be adapted in a number of ways.

First off, let me go back to saying how lucky I am that key of D is a good one for my voice, because it's also one of the very lowest (if not THE very lowest) keys that you can successfully tune a standard autoharp to without getting too weak in the bass. So I really have 2 reasons for favoring D for blues. Obviously if you can't sing in D or if you don't sing at all, you'll want to make other choices.

As a sidenote, I've since realized that E might be even better and stronger, both for my voice, and the Autoharp. But it'll take me a lot of work to get there, given the work I've done on D, so I'll stick with D for the time being.

Now. On to the bass strings.

I currently use a big, 40 string autoharp with additional bass notes as my way of getting more bass out of a harp. Obviously this is a commitment no one will make right off; so it's more my mission to tell you how to get good bass out of a standard 36 or 37 string 'harp; but for the sake of revealing all, here's my tuning of the low octaves up to middle C:

D E F G A C D E F F# G A A# B C

From there on up it's chromatic. After the highest C there's a high D for a total of 40 strings. If I had it to do over, I'd do 41, adding a low G# to help out my E chords. Or I'd do everything up a whole step for optimizing key of E as mentioned above.

Notice that every note on a standard chromatic is there, with the addition of low D, E, and A.

All of this could be done on a standard 36 string harp, but you'd run out of strings in the top octave at A. (not a bad tradeoff if you ask me) The string

gauges would need to be changed to do this.

But that's not what I did when I played 36 string; instead, I used standard tuning, like this:

F G C **D E** F F# G **A** A# B C

With the **BOLD** notes being DROPPED AN OCTAVE. That's right. The strings in the bass were not in order of pitch.

Now I know what your are saying to yourself....you're saying, "Doesn't that leave big holes in the tuning?" Well, yes, and no.

See, if I kept the same notes but strung them in order:

D E F G C (GAP) F F# G A# B C

...there would be a big gap. But by retaining the original order, and just changing the strings for big fatties that can be substituted without re-cutting the felt, I could:

1. Experiment with the lower strings and see if I liked the sound of the harp with the low bass
2. Get those notes on there without cutting felt.
3. Have beefier chords on D and A (and E).
4. Hide the gaps where the notes were missing an octave higher, because when my melody finger came down to that point (and it seldom did) there was a note there, of the right name albeit an octave lower. It would sort of "fake out" the ear of the listener, who would, without thinking, move that note an octave higher. Usually a note in the melody is a quick one, and you don't hear it or stay on it very long. This usually effected the A note in the #9 slot. The other dropped notes, D and E, were too low to catch any melody playing, and they would just sound down there under the thumb in deepening the bass, and their position $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch further up the harp made little difference.

I played with my harp like this for years; and well before I started playing blues. I just wanted more support for that key of D on my chromatic. I used to play diatonic, and usually on a D/A instrument that went down to D...so when I switched back to chromatic, I missed that low D and E; I have to credit Julie Davis for initially suggesting I drop my D string an octave. I took it further to the E and then the A.

You don't have to go with a bigger 'harp, and you don't have to re-tune your bass octave to use the left hand techniques of 2nd through 6th position playing that I will be going on to. For me, having a beefier tone just made sense for the sound of the blues, instead of the higher "harpier" sound that we love for Irish,

traditional, old time, bluegrass, etc.

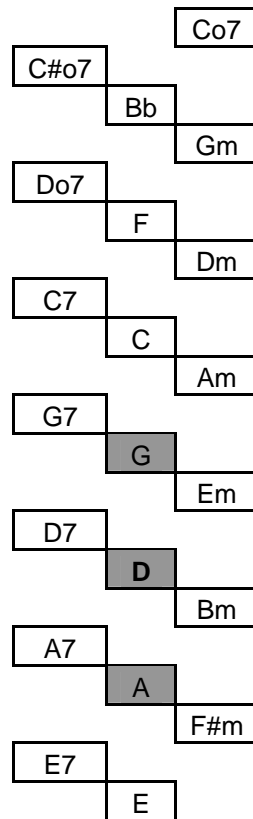
There are other ways of getting a bassier sound, or sprucing up the bass that you do have, so it can be heard by those who don't have their ear on the side of the harp...that is, your audience. These include resonator backs, tables, and amplification.

POSITIONS 1-6

Let's move on to something you can DO instead of just talking about setup. I have come to call this technique "cross harp" playing (copped from the harmonica)...I find this term to be pretty accurate. It involves (so far) 6 different "positions", each with it's own type of sounds, that get mixed around as you play. If that seems like a lot, don't worry, **at the end I'll show you how it's really only 3.**

1ST POSITION: "Straight harp"

First position is standard autoharp melody position. In the layout we have discussed, the I chord (D in this case) falls under the middle finger. The IV chord (G) is under the index and the V chord (A) is under the ring:



Nothing new here. I want to point out that when we play melody with our hand in this position, we don't think, everytime we use the index finger, that we are using

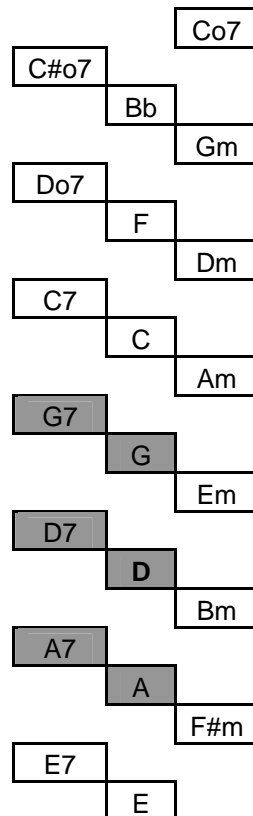
the IV chord. For example, let's say our tune starts with the harmony chord on I (D). But to play melody, we have to use the G and A chords as well, while the harmony (let's say we have an accompanist on guitar) sits on D. We toggle all around, always coming back to D. I point this out now, because it's going to get important when we start looking at 3rd thru 6th positions.

I don't need to sit here talking about 1st position, because we all use it in standard playing.

2nd position: "basic blues"

If there was one thing you could carry away from all this, only one thing you could apply, I'd recommend this one. It's easy as pie, and so simple I'm amazed I don't hear it in jam sessions more often. And when I use it, I look around the circle and see faces light up and smiles all around. When playing along on a bluegrass-y tune, when you get to that IV chord (not all the time...wait till the right moment...) throw in a IV7 instead. That's G7 for key of D. It's that simple. Really PUNCH it though. Simple huh? Go try it. Right now. This one chord, more than any other, will do wonders for making your playing blues-ey. This is the beginning of second position.

Second position is where we use the parallel 7ths. I and I7, IV and IV7 and V and V7.



Don't just shift your hand over and use the sevenths exclusively. Like I said, use them interchangeably...D and D7, G and G7 and A and A7 (key of D). Try this one:

Each chord gets 4 full beats:

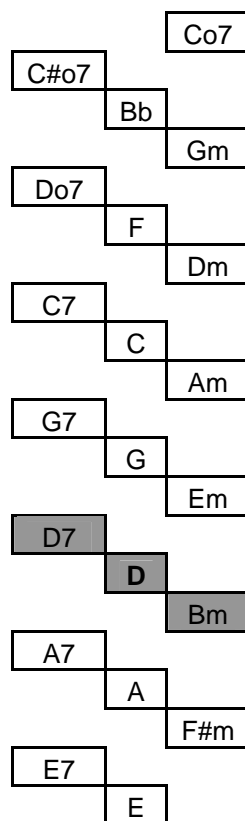
D---D7---G---G7---D---D---A7---A7---D---D7---G---G7---D---A7---G7---D---

This is a nice, blues-y "Precious Lord, Take My Hand". Swing it and think of Elvis or Aretha singing it. I especially like that G7 near the end.

So that's Second position. Using the Sevenths intermittently with the non-sevenths. Remember that IV7 chord especially!

Third position: "boogie woogie"

Now, when you are ready, we'll look at **third position**. If you are using the "Bowers layout" as I mentioned earlier, rotate your hand so that your fingers line up along a "teir". For example, your middle stays on D...but your hand rotates so that your index falls on the bminor and the ring is now on the D7.



***This is the Left hand position for the I CHORD ONLY.

I want you to think of all 3 of these as your I chord in this position. When it's time to play the IV chord, you will SHIFT YOUR WHOLE HAND OVER, with the middle finger on G, the index on e minor and the ring on G7. For V, you will skip over the I chord, and put your middle on A, your index on F#minor and the ring will be on A7.

*****FOR ALL THE POSTIONS 3-6 MY LEFT HAND CHART (AS ABOVE) WILL SHOW ONLY THE I CHORD. FOR THE IV CHORD THE WHOLE HAND SHIFTS UP ONE TIER AND FOR THE V CHORD THE WHOLE HAND SHIFTS DOWN ONE TIER, KEEPING THE SAME BASIC SHAPE.*****

Let's play:

Each chord gets ONE beat:

D D bm bm D7 D7 bm bm DD bm bm D7 D7 bm bm
G G em em G7 G7 em em GG em em G7 G7 em em
D D bm bm D7 D7 bm bm DD bm bm D7 D7 bm bm
A A f#m A7 G G em G7 DD bm D7 A7 A7 A7 A7

This should come out sounding relatively "boogie woogie". Make the beat shuffle.

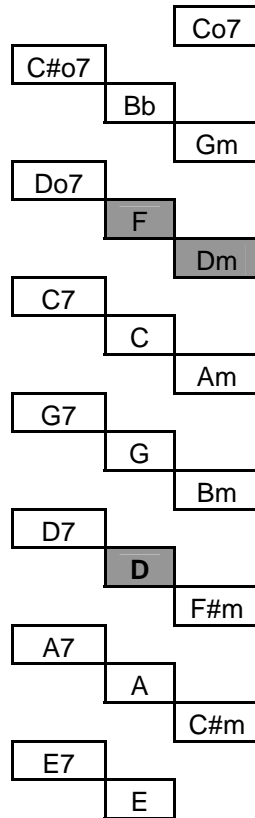
4th POSITION: "Delta Blues"

4th position emphasizes the flatted 3rd in the blues scale, which is the same note that's brought out with that all important IV7 chord when we play in second position.

To play in 4th position, we use the main harmony chord (I, IV or V) along with it's parallel minor (i.e. dmin along with D maj) and the MAJOR FLAT III chord.

The MAJOR FLAT III chord is F major in the key of D. (The third scale degree is dropped down half a step and a major chord is built on it).

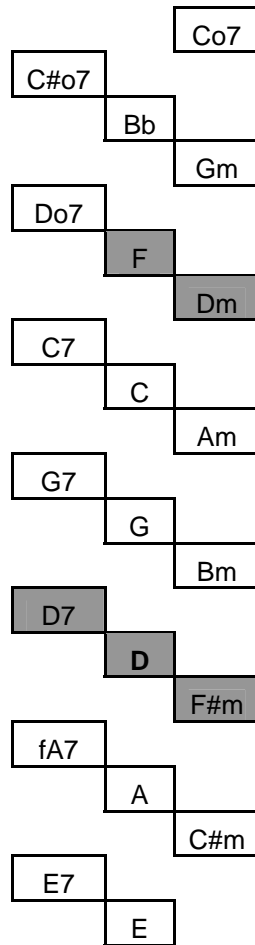
The Parallel minor is the minor chord of the same name as the major (i.e. D major and D minor)



Toggle back and forth between D and Dm or D and F. This is for the I chord. When you switch to the IV chord, you'd use G Gm and Bb. Notice that the hand shifts over keeping it's finger positions the same over the chord buttons. Just like in 3rd position. For the V chord, use A, Am and C.

4th and 3rd positions are usually combined. Here's how: use your thumb for the parallel minor and the flat III. Your fingers will cover the 3rd position chords. Use the side of your thumb, not the tip.

(3rd and 4th positions combined)

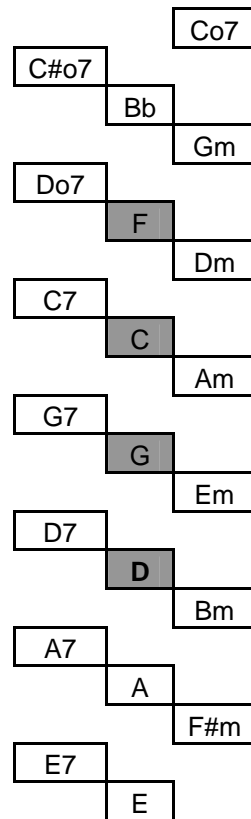


Clear as mud? Yes, no, maybe so?

If 3rd and 4th positions are combined, why aren't they just ONE position? Well, in some ways they are. But usually I find myself playing the 3rd position stuff, and then switching to 4th for a different sound. Their sound separates them, at least in my mind and playing. It's really a way of simplifying it and not having one position that has 15 chords in it! (Count 'em! For the D chord you'd have D, D7, bm, dm, and F. That's five. Add the IV and the V and you have 15.)

Let's go on to **5th POSITION**: Rock

5th Position starts where 4th left off. You have your Harmony chord (again, let's say D) and your thumb on the flat III (F). Just fill in in the major row with the two major chords in between them. (C and G) So you have D, G, C, and F all in a row.



When you shift to the IV chord, (G) you shift the whole hand over to cover G, C, F and Bflat. Again, for the V chord, it's A, D, G and C.

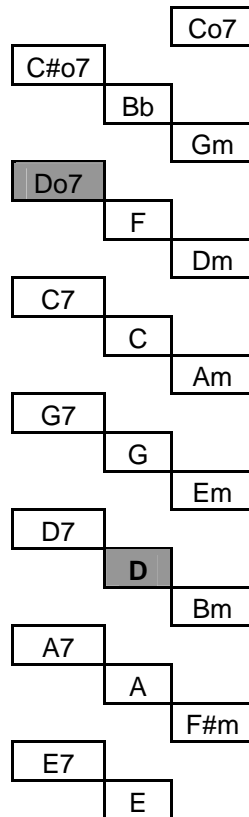
Try this: in melody playing using these four 5th position chords, make sure that you come down on the home harmony chord (D for example when the harmony is on the I chord) on the first beat of the bar, and then use the other 3 for all the other beats. This is not a rule but an example. You want the ear to hear that root chord often. As an example, think of playing melody back in 1st position. Remember, you all already know 1st position. When in D, we use D as “home plate” as long as the accompanist (Guitar?) sits on that D (I) chord. But we “toggle” away from it and come back often, which gives the ear the overall impression that D is the main thing. When it changes to G, (IV) the “home plate” chord changes and G predominates. Same thing in any of these other positions. Remember which chord you are on, and try to emphasize that one in your

toggling around on the other chords. The first beat of the bar (if you are feeling/counting 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, it's the 1.) is a good place to come down on the home plate chord.

I think the sounds that come out of 5th position sound like rock.

6th POSITION “quick melody runs”

Use your thumb to toggle between the main chord (or it's 7th; D or D7 when on the I chord in key of D) and THE DIM7 CHORD THAT HAS THE SAME NAME. (i.e. Ddim7.)



Now I need to explain that there are only 3 dim7 chord bars on your harp (if you don't have them, get them!) but each one has at least 4 names! This can be confusing, especially if you have the button labeled. For example, Cdim7 is also Eflat dim7, F# dim7, and G dim7. Not to mention the circumstances where it's called D#dim 7 or Gflat dim7! That's why I suggest not putting a letter name on the chord bar button but a number instead. I call them 1dim7, 2dim7 and 3dim7, by their respective positions in the chordbar layout. That's just my preference. You have to get used to what notes are in which chord. To make it easier, just remember that when you play the I chord, (D) that chord has a corresponding dim7 that makes a lot of the notes “slide down” a half step. Try it. I: D, Ddim7,

D. IV: G, Gdim7, G. V: A, Adim7, A. This all works out great with the 7th of the home chord, too.

Better still is when you go up and down a scale, simply by toggling between the home chord (D or D7) and it's corresponding dim7. Try it, changing between I, IV and V. This is what I mean by calling this position "quick melody runs".

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

It is especially challenging to attempt to provide words as to how all these positions wrap together.

First, let me say a thing or two about improvisation. Improvisation is the heart of the blues; making it up on the fly, as it were. If you want to learn a blues tune that doesn't involve improv, say St Louis blues, you really don't have to use this system of fingering, because you just learn the changes to play a set tune. But when you want to jam, there are advantages to these hand positions, because each one has a characteristic sound, and if you want to produce sounds with that position's particular "flavor" you just use that hand position, and the felts do the rest (well, almost!).

In other words, don't bother learning this system and then go to sheet music, expecting to find these patterns there as the chordal basis for a song. These are more for the melodic element of songs. Autoharp is a fantastic instrument to improvise or "noodle" on, because even if you don't know what you are doing, the felts are very forgiving and as long as you have a button pressed down, it's going to sound good. The trick is to keep whatever rhythm going with your right hand no matter what your left hand happens to fall on. That way, you can say "I meant to do that"...and folks will believe you! Just keep the pattern, the beat, the strum, the pinch, whatever, moving the music forward thru time, and have a button pressed down always. These patterns I'm suggesting for blues will give it a blues flavor, and several variations on blues flavor depending on the position you choose.

I generally "morph" from one position to another, and this comes from experience and experimentation. I seldom use just one position for a song, and I seldom use all of them in a song either.

All of these "positions" I've been writing about are just a way of breaking down the 18-21 chordbars used in blues into chunks so they can be learned a little at a time. If you are learning this system, what you will find in the end is that there are **really only 3 hand positions**:

1. The hand with index, middle and ring on the I, IV and V and/or their respective 7ths simultaneously **(This is 1st and 2nd positions combined.)**

2. The hand with index, middle and ring on the I, I7 and vi (relative minor) and your thumb up to play on the parallel minor (i) the flatted maj III and the parallel diminished chord (for example, Key of D, during the D (or I) chord you would have your middle on D, your ring on D7 your index on bmin, and your thumb up to cover the dmin, the F and the Ddim7.) All of this “shifts over” one when you go to the G (IV) chord, and then all of it jumps over the I to the A (V) chord with your fingers all in the same positions, just covering different buttons.! **(This is 3rd, 4th, and 6th positions combined.)***

3. The hand down 4 buttons in the middle: for example, during the D or I chord, you would use ring finger on D, middle on G, index on C and thumb on F. Again, it ALL shifts over one for the IV chord (ring finger moves to G, and all fingers move over) and they ALL shift down two for the ring on A (V chord). **(This is 5th position)**

*I've been asked why the middle finger doesn't cover the I, I7 and vi (D, D7 and bm) like it would in first position playing. The answer is that in this style, there's a lot of shifting (what I call toggling) between vi and I7 and it goes too quick to do it with the same finger. If you were playing in first position with middle finger on D and a melody had you going bm D7 bm D7 bm D7 back and forth, you'd have to finger it a different way. This is the way to do that. The hand rotates up pivoting on the middle finger, the middle finger still stays on that I chord, but the index becomes the finger for the bass row and the ring finger is the finger for the treble.

Given that the 6 positions are really played with only 3 positions of the hand, I really might end up re-naming these groups of chordbars and the fingers that play them. Further, since #2 above combines my 3rd, 4th and 6th positions, and #3 above is my 5th position, it might be better to renumber the positions and trade out the numbering for 5th and 6th positions. This would result in #2 above covering 3rd, 4th and 5th positions, and the final one, #3 above covering 6th positions. (6th position is currently numbered as 6th just because I thought of it last; the original handout that I did for the California Autoharp Gathering in 2006 only covered positions 1 thru 5.)

To make it simpler (?) #1 and #2 above use your middle finger on the home plate chord. It's like a pivot when you change back and forth between those two hand postures. #3 places the ring on the home plate chord. If you like, you can keep your middle finger there for this position as well, but then your thumb must do double duty between the flat VII chord (C in the key of D) and the flat III chord (F in the key of D). It's up to you, and if you are just using that position for a moment, you can do this quite well.

EFFECTS PEDALS

I'm no expert on electronic effects, but I've found many that are pleasing, and I thought I'd put in a note about what they are and what they do.

First of all, it takes an electronic pickup of some sort. You can use a levalier or internal mic also, but feedback is much more likely, and the impedance is different, so you have to be more careful.

Effects are like pizza toppings; you can buy them individual, (called stomp boxes in the music stores. These are little boxes with a foot switch that turns them on and off.) or you can buy them all put together in one unit. These are called multi-effects pedals. Multi effects pedals i think start at about \$250.

I like the multi effects pedals because they give you so much to play with. Lots of it is not pleasing, however. But for the price, you get a lot for your money, and don't have to use the ones that don't sound good for autoharp.

Some of the more pleasing autoharp effects are Chorus, Reverb, Flange, Phase Shift, Delay, Envelope Filters, Wah, Pitch Shift, Compression, Octaving and Harmonizers. All of these are in there in a multi effects unit.

The advantage of a multi effects unit is when you dial up a good sound, you can store it in the memory and recall it with the touch of a button. The downside is you have to get there by going thru menus like: "How much Reverb do you want, 1-10?" Do you want Reverb Type 1, 2, 3, 4, 5....? Now how much Flange do you want? How Fast? How Deep? You put in a number do indicate how much you want of each effect. You can layer them on top of each other. The other advantage is the price.

The advantage to individual stomp boxes is you can dial up the sounds with big fat knobs, and control things that way. But you cant store the information. You have to dial it up each time.

Let me try to tell you what each of these effects are:

Chorus: Roughly, chorus makes you sound like a lot of Autoharps

Reverb, Makes you sound like you are in a tile bathroom or a big concert hall or even the Taj Mahal

Flange, adds a kind of swoop to the sound, either fast or slow, shallow or deep. Slow, deep flange can sound like a glider swooping thru your music.

Phase Shift, another kind of swoop. This one sounds like the music is turning around and you are hearing it from the other side; like a revolving neon sign.

Delay is simply echo.

Envelope Filters add a kind of wow wow wow every time you pinch. It's the classic Jerry Garcia sound. I love this one.

Wah, is a rocker pedal that every time you step on it, it opens the sound up and every time you rock back on your heel it closes the sound up. Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughn.

Pitch Shift, Lots can be done with this. It can make your harp an octave or two higher or lower, or it can add different notes in, say a 5th or 3rd higher or lower. If you do this, say at the 5th, it can really mess up your chords. But if you put it in way in the background at a very low volume, it can be very interesting. Organ players do this kind of thing, adding in dissonant overtones. Chorus is a kind of pitch shift because in order to make you sound like a bunch of autoharps, it adds in several, slightly detuned. Pitch shift can also create that musette tuning sound, where the two strings on a diatonic harp are tuned slightly different than each other. But you can do it on a chromatic 'harp! I like pitch shift to create a lower octave for myself. It can sound really subterranean; this along with the original sound at the same time. Really fat bass. Very blues-ey. Also, if you step on that rocker pedal, Pitch Shift can do whammy bar stuff. Now you can bend notes on the autoharp, just like a steel guitar. Problem is, all the notes in the chord bend, sort of like a barre chord on a hawaiian style lap guitar.

Compression, squeezes the sound. Difficult to describe this one. Makes it sound like your harp is going thru a juicer.

Octaving and Harmonizers. Well, I covered this under pitch shifting.

Distortion This is one I use less than the others. It's that grungy, trashy sound. I do use it in tiny bits on blues. Or go full out for the kids, just to get a rise out of them. I like it less, personally. Distortion sounds angry to me. We need less of that in the world; we all live with enough noise already, don't need it in music. That's just my opinion, tho.

So there's a rundown of what's out there. I wish I had more time to play with effects. It takes some time to pull them out and tweak with them. They don't fit with my "less is more" philosophy, but they can be great. I sort of have a love/hate relationship with them.