

Lead by Gary Allegretto, the Harmonikids performance thrills crowds at the Place Saint-Bernard Stage, Tremblant International Blues Festival, 2011.

Photo taken by Irene Ippersiel.



## Gary Allegretto's Harmonikids At The Tremblant International Blues Festival

By Gary Allegretto

Last February I was honored by the Blues Foundation's prestigious Keeping the Blues Alive Award in education in Memphis, Tennessee. The award was presented to me largely for my non-profit global humanitarian work with children ([www.harmonikids.org](http://www.harmonikids.org)), my 'Blues in the Schools' educational programs, as well as my Blues harmonica workshops at festivals and events. At the awards luncheon, the president of the Montreal Blues Society (MBS), Irene Ippersiel, approached me to provide a Harmonikids session in her area that would integrate all of these. She passionately spoke of her devotion to helping children with severe economic and social challenges in Quebec through music. Her vision was to bring these children to the Tremblant International Blues

Festival where I would teach them to play Blues on harmonicas. The idea was directly in line with my programs as an educator, as well as an opportunity to perform at a first-rate festival as an artist; so naturally I accepted the proposal with enthusiasm.

### A Team Effort

The Harmonikids event in Tremblant was accomplished through the collaboration of several organizations and individuals. First, Hohner, Inc. provided harmonicas to the children and generously sponsored my Harmonikids involvement. Irene Ippersiel (MBS) contacted Dr. Julien's Foundation and Garage A Musique to organize children they aid in an impoverished area near Montreal called Hochelaga/Maisonneuve. As Irene

relates, "for many of these children, the light has gone from their eyes and all hope is lost when faced with a life rife with difficulties." The Tremblant Blues Festival and resort hosted the event at its wonderful venue in the village. Blues festival director Brian Slack offered the kids transportation, a classroom in which to teach, followed by a time slot on the main stage for the children to perform what they learned. They also organized children from a nearby area called Laurentian who face similar difficulties; many living in foster care under the protection of the government. Tremblant Resort Director of Operations Linda Lloyd describes their plight as having "little stability in their lives" and "difficulty integrating into society".

## First Class

On the morning of July 17<sup>th</sup>, an absolutely perfect summer day, eighteen children arrived in the beautiful village at the base of Mont Tremblant. The kids were taken to a classroom area where I met them. Their ages varied widely from six to seventeen. One of the youngest of the bunch was a little boy who already had his own harmonica on which he was happily blowing notes. He stood out to me, perhaps because the rest of the kids seemed somewhat apprehensive and nervous; enough that I felt a bit like a headmaster in an after-school detention session. This is not unusual for children in classrooms, but especially when they are survivors in difficult environments. It's also important to keep in mind that to them I was literally an alien – an American. Since Quebec is a French-Canadian province, none of the kids spoke English nor did their directors speak English fluently. For this reason, I relied heavily on the assistance of Irene and Linda to be my interpreters. I introduced myself through them and then entertained; playing a fast solo train song, a Blues song using my ipod as my “band”, and performing an illusion in which I convincingly and comically play harmonica out of my ear. Suddenly the energy changed dramatically- the kid's eyes widened in wonderment, and the room filled with giggles and unanimous applause. Having erased the language barrier, it was time to teach.



## A Lasting Gift

When the shiny new Bluesband harmonicas that Hohner donated were distributed, there was a sense of awe in the room. When I told the kids they were a gift they could keep, they were astonished. One asked Linda, “WOW! Are you sure we get to keep them?” She later explained their disbelief, “They're not used to receiving presents, especially from strangers.” The lasting gift of music was next. Through my Harmonikids teaching method, music sheets, and my newly acquired French vocabulary of numbers accompanied by direction of breath; (“soufflez” for blow and “tirez” for draw), I was able to have the kids playing the first song in 30 seconds! None had ever played a song before. Of course they were delighted and proud of their newfound skill and

the room buzzed with laughter and excitement. They were all intensely focused and committed, something that surprised their directors. Linda later told me,

**“You are a born teacher! The children were mesmerized by your presence. The language barrier didn't affect the session, because of your calm tone and sometimes comical anecdotes. The coordinators that accompanied the children were most surprised of their good behaviour and capacity of concentration. I think that the subject, “music” and the way that you demonstrated how easy it could be, helped them be attentive, because they all felt that they could accomplish something by listening and trying. It seems even more effective with the younger group, which surprised me, because I thought it would be the opposite.”**

**Linda Lloyd, Tremblant Resort  
Director of Operations**

We continued to play the beloved New Orleans Gospel Song “When the Saints Go Marching In” with great ease and enthusiasm. Many of the kids wanted to show off their abilities, so I let them take turns “soloing”. They were such natural performers, so when we got to Bo Diddley's famous “I'm a Man” Blues harmonica riff, they picked it up quickly. When Ian Espinoza stepped in with his guitar, I took the lead around their steady rhythm, and the kids really got into it. It had only been an hour and a half, but it sounded like the band was ready for stage!

## On Stage

The Place Saint-Bernard stage is one of the main platforms for performing artists at the top of the village in Tremblant. It is massive, and accommodates an audience of thousands. It could potentially be rather intimidating to a seasoned performer, let alone a small child's first show. I sensed nervousness even from the Tremblant staff and was asked more than once "Do you really think you can pull this off?" Truthfully, I never force kids to play, let alone bring kids on stage unless they express that desire, and I told the kids from Quebec it was entirely up to them. Back in the classroom, most of the kids expressed a strong interest in performing, but this was understandably daunting to anyone. Director Linda Lloyd said to me afterwards:

*"During the lunch break, we had to open up a few rooms so they could practice for the show - they were really into it! We almost didn't make it on time to the stage. Surprisingly, a few of your students had backed out once back stage. As soon as you arrived, you grouped them together, made a special hand shake, you said a few words ("Long live the Blues") and all of the sudden, they all followed you out on stage! The children all got on stage with a bit of "stage fright", which I can understand. But as soon as they heard you (and Ian Espinoza) play, and when they jumped in, the atmosphere changed. They all left the stage with a great big smile. The next time a challenge comes up in their life, they will have the same feelings and will know that they have to try,*



A View from the Stage.  
Photo taken by Irene Ippersiel.

*persist, and afterwards they can be proud of what they accomplished."*

They performed beautifully, and finished to a standing ovation. We took a group bow, and shouted out to the audience in unison "MERCI BEAUCOUP!" As we filed back stage they were literally beaming with pride and overflowing with emotion. There was laughter, hugs, hooting, and even tears of joy. It's something I know they will never forget. A teen girl, who had been tentative in the classroom, was now so keenly interested in entertaining, she asked me repeatedly if she could sing next time!

I left them exhilarated, to prepare for my own afternoon festival stage performance with Ian (where they would show up later in the front row, harmonicas in hand). The kids were given VIP treatment all day at the resort, including a gondola ride to the top of the resort mountain. According to their director,

*"They kept the harmonicas with them all afternoon when they were visiting the site. At the summit of Tremblant, they climbed a tower, and let the wind play their harmonicas! It was magical to see them! It's fascinating how such a little instrument and a little time from a talented and dedicated teacher, can give them the feeling of being able to accomplish anything and see the future in a more positive way."*



Gary Allegretto and Ian Espinoza Duo Performance.  
Photo taken by Xiren Wang.

## Bringing Magical Music into Dreams

The Hohner-sponsored Harmonikids event at Tremblant delightfully illustrates the remarkably positive impact that can be made through partnering organizations devoted to making a difference in children's lives. The Montreal Blues Society envisioned and organized the collaboration, Tremblant hosted and literally set the stage, and Hohner and Harmonikids supplied the tools and means. The result was nothing less than magical. In fact, my favorite testimony to what was accomplished comes from this deeply touching quote from the smallest participant, as witnessed by Linda in the afternoon following the session,

**"The smallest girl, dressed in pink, said that the harmonica was now going to be her new bed toy. She said 'it's small enough to put under my pillow and it will bring magic into my dreams just like it makes magical music with the wind!'"**

~Gary Allegretto



### Some Quotes from the Children

*"Génial! (Awesome!)"*

*"We would like the session to be longer so we could learn more songs."*

*"We would like to have a job like yours and work at Tremblant!"*

*"We want to hear a recording of our performance!"*

*"I would like to sing on stage if you come back!"*

*"Do you have any children? And do they all play the harmonica?"*

*"How many sessions in total have you given?"*

**"WE ALL WANT TO COME BACK NEXT YEAR!"**

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