

Gary Allegretto: A Harmonica Player of Purpose

By Andy Garrigue



Gary Allegretto, a formidable harp player and excellent songwriter, is perhaps best known for his outreach to special needs children through Harmonikids. But he's also an actively touring performer, and one who has put out two highly acclaimed records in the last couple of years.

In addition he is an enthusiastic teacher, working at Elkins Blues Week, and with John Gindick, among many other places. All of it combines well with his purpose in life, which he elaborated on in a recent interview.

What's next for you?

I just put out a new acoustic album, from songs I had written during the *Many Shades of Blue* sessions. It's called *Harmonicoubooy*. It's not a departure from the blues, but another extension of the blues. There are some special guests on it. My dear departed friend John Cephas, my good friend Rich DelGrosso. I grew up on John Jackson and Blind Boy Fuller, so this acoustic style goes back to that. I hope to go to Australia in the fall.

What models do you use?

My workhorse is the Special 20. I like the consistency of the sound on them. I like that they're bullet proof, that they're so durable. I also use the Super 64 Chromonica and a CX-12 It has a completely different sound from the 64. The air is very tight. You can get some nice bends on them.



Who were your harp influences?

When I started, Little Walter, and especially Big Walter Horton, who I saw play when I was a child. That had a major effect on me. The first one I ever heard was my grandfather. It was a Chromonica. He gave it to me, and I still have it. From there I investigated everything I could: Junior Wells, Sonny Boy Williamson II, Sonny Terry, even Charlie McCoy – I like country harp. Deford Bailey blew me away!

What are you trying to achieve on the harp?

I try to tell a story with it. I hope people will hear a story in the music I'm playing.

Tell me about Harmonikids, when it got started...

I started volunteering at Sloan-Kettering, a cancer hospital in New York, in 1985. Back then, I saw how drawn the kids were to the harmonica. And Harmonikids started soon after. We became a 501 (c)(3) in 2000. Over the years I'd say we've given away thousands of harmonicas to kids facing challenges and with special needs. In North Sumatra, post-Tsunami, I gave away 1000. I gave away more than 500 after Hurricane Katrina.

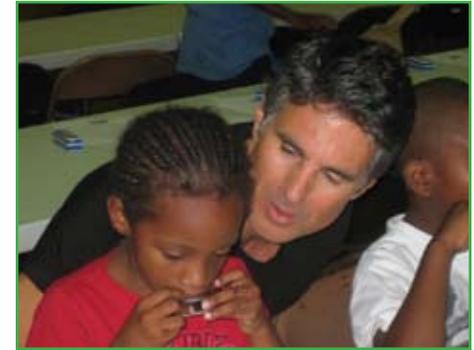
What is the essence of Harmonikids?

Harmonikids allows kids to be kids again. The kids we saw after Katrina, they had lost so much. When I got them playing, they started giggling, and being little kids again. That's it – that's the beauty of Harmonikids. I get them to play "Shave and a Haircut" and their self esteem goes through the roof! I taught one kid who was blind and had cerebral palsy, and I didn't know if I could do it, because I depend on visual cues. He was so excited he learned by ear what the other kids were learning by watching me. He learned "You Are My Sunshine," his favorite song. And then he sang it. That was one miracle I witnessed, and there's been more than one.

You have two really important pursuits with

the harmonica. One is performing. The other is this outreach you do. Do these go together?

I do both for my soul. My purpose is making people happy through the harmonica, and I can



*Gary teaching through Harmonikids.
Photo by Rich DelGrosso.*

do that as a performer and through my work with Harmonikids. I think that we all need to find our purpose.

You perform all over the world, and travel far and wide for Harmonikids as well. Does the harmonica come in handy?

It's gotten me through customs! In Indonesia, this Customs Officer didn't want to let me in with 1000 harmonicas. So I got out a harp and played "Untrainable," which is a "train" song from my first record. He started giggling, I gave him a harmonica, and he let me in. The harmonica is a great ambassador for me, all around the world. It's gotten me into some good situations, and out of some bad ones.