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# Harmonica Club Breathes Life Into a Lost Art

by Kelly Nicholaides, Photos by Jamie Winters

**Editor's Note:** The following article is one of two that ran in the local news. The following is from the South Bergenite, while a second article ran in the Community News titled "Harmonica Club Members Bringing Instrument Back": Ms. Nicholaides visited our second monthly meeting in May to interview members and brought along photographer Jamie Winters.

Harmonica playing seems like a lost art, shelved alongside jazz, folk and blues vinyl records.

But the Garden State Harmonica Club, which celebrates 39 years in September, has dusted off the instrument that many of their grandparents kept in their coat pockets for breaking out into



Phil Caltabellotta and Frank Grova belt out a blues tune at a recent meeting of the Garden State Harmonica Club. The group aims to elevate and advance the harmonica into modern music.

song at a moment's notice—whether on a porch rocking chair or at a party.

The group has 100-plus members range in age from nine to 91. Members meet the first and third Monday of every month at Grace Episcopal Church rectory in Rutherford to play the free reed wind instrument. The club

was founded by George Osterman in 1971. An annual festival is held Nov. 18-20 at the Holiday Inn in Hasbrouck Heights and attracts international attention.

"We need to keep the tradition of harmonica alive and encourage people to get involved," said Valerie Redler, the group's president, who joined the club 14 years ago when her boyfriend, Phil Caltabellotta, invited her.

A member for three decades, Caltabellotta, a retired New York City firefighter from Tomkins Cove, NY, plays a 48-chord harmonica and a chromatic. Caltabellotta plays rhythms, chords and chromatic lead. He can also play bass harmonica and he plays with Harp Beats, featuring George Miklas, formerly of the Harmonicats.

He reflected on the instrument. "You can play classical to jazz to ensemble playing, which is a lost art, popular in the 1930s and 1940s and with the Harmonicats in 1947. It had the effect rock n' roll had in the 1950s," Caltabellotta said. "Now harmonica is diatonic, bluesy, like Neil Young and Bob Dylan incorporated it. But Dylan was more of a poet than a harmonica player."

Introduced to the instrument at age eight, Caltabellotta is an endorsee of Suzuki harmonicas. The model he played at a recent meeting is a 14-hole Sirius chromatic.

The harmonica comes in several types: Chromatics feature a button-activated sliding bar to redirect air and can be played in multiple keys from one instrument. Diatonics are designed for playing in one key, although a Richter-tuned diatonic can be played in several keys. Tremolo harmonicas provide a wavering, warbling sound. Orchestral melody and chord harmonicas are designed for ensemble playing.

The instrument ranges in price from \$4 to \$3,000, depending on the model, reeds, pipes and plates. A basic harmonica comes in a choice of keys. The group brings in basic harmonicas in every key to suit their song.

Playing the harmonica involves inhaling and exhaling strongly against resistance, opening and closing the hands quickly around the instrument for vibrato in a "shaking" sound and "head shaking," frequently used in blues techniques, in which the player moves the lips between two holes very quickly.

Caltabellotta, Tom Scerbo and Frank Grova are members of Melody Men. Grova plays the chromatic harmonica, the lead instrument.

"Diatonics icons were Howard Levy, who took it to new level," Grova said before the group launched into a rendition of Tom Jones' "Love Me Tonight."

Grova was 14 when he heard professional harmonica players. He plays a chromatic four-octave Hohner.

"It gave me incentive to play. Nobody teaches this instrument," Grova said. "Ninety percent of the time, you're self-taught."

George Honsch of Piscataway plays chromatics in C. He plays classical Mozart and Beethoven.

"I started out as a kid, using a little instruction sheet," Honsch said.

"I love that it's portable. You can take it anywhere," Honsch said. "It's one of the instruments that you can't see what you're playing, unlike a guitar where you see the frets and neck.



It's all about what you do with your mouth. It's all by feel."

Pat Maturo, who oversees locomotive operations at railroad yards, has been a member for three years. He plays diatonic blues, folk and rock. Playing harmonica gave him incentive to use his lungs to make music.

"I quit smoking cigarettes, so I figured I'd blow into a harmonica," said the former painter from Pompton Plains.

The group launched into rendition of "Oh, Suzanna," featuring an Echobel 1920s replica rhythm harmonica.

George Pepe of Bayonne learned about the harmonica from his grandfather. "I'd sit on his knee while he played 'Whispering,'" he reflected.

Mark Giannullo of Bayonne has a long history of music, as he played with a drum corp. for six years. He plays diatonic harmonica in G.

George "Skip" Pepe of Bayonne learned to play from Giannullo.

Treasurer Ann Van Wetering, 80, of Midland Park, got involved after her husband, Frederick, who played with the group, died three years ago. She is now the group's treasurer.

Members pay a \$25 annual fee.

For more information on the club, visit [gardenstateharmonica-club.org](http://gardenstateharmonica-club.org).