

Happy Hour *with* Neil Warren

by Tom Ellis

Just over eight years ago, a new name started to circulate on YouTube—Rick Beato. Beato, after posting a video showing off his daughter's perfect pitch and ability to sound out notes within complex chords, would soon build a channel that examines songs and music from a variety of different viewpoints. Some of the best examples are his "What Makes This Song Great," or his deconstructing songs along with other videos on music theory, production, and often trenchant commentary on current music and musical trends. His videos, issued every few days, often have over one million views within days.

One of the best things about Beato is that although he has a serious background in music and music education he is, first and foremost, a fan. Especially of guitarists, running from jazz (Jim Hall) to pop (Christopher Cross) to fusion (Eric Johnson) to Heavy Metal (Kirk Hammett).

Beato also happens to be a great interviewer and brings out the best in everyone who shares camera space/time with him.

Which brings us to Neil Warren.

Quietly working from his home in the UK, Neil has become the Rick Beato of our harmonica universe. Starting out during the pandemic, Neil has been interviewing the musicians who inhabit our harmonica world, focusing on players from all different kinds of music.

Installments arrive on his Seydel-sponsored podcast—www.harmonicahappyhour.com—every other week. Amazingly, he's talked to over 90 players since inception, including names recognized and new. Quietly, with little fanfare, Neil has produced a veritable history of our instrument and its players in his one-hour shows. Like Beato, he's a great interviewer. And like Beato, he's not just an accomplished player, but he's also a fan of the harmonica and harp players.

"I started playing around the age of 15. I was self-taught, playing along with records. Then a guitar-playing friend and I started playing together—blues, Dylan, songs with a blues flavor. I formed my first band with him, Blue Waters, at 17. We were playing around at the clubs, but it wasn't just blues; we also played a lot of soul and R&B, and had a sax player. I was in college then, and from 16 to 18 the band was gigging quite regularly. We even won second place in a battle of the band's competition.

"But I was pretty isolated from the wider harmonica community. I'm from Lancashire, which you wouldn't think of as a hotbed of blues. But it was. There were also two blues festivals nearby and I was always at each of them. I got to see Cotton, Musselwhite, and the other English blues players, like the great Paul Lamb.

"Surprisingly, the influence that made me pick up the harmonica was Bruce Willis! I liked the television show *Moonlighting*, and as a teenager discovered he played harmonica when I bought a video of one of his concerts. That video really inspired me. And he had an album called *The Return of Bruno* which I got; he played some really good harmonica on it, including a song called "Jackpot," probably his best-known harmonica song. Ironically, I would have liked to interview him for the podcast but he has health issues. But he

was one of my first inspirations.”

Things would soon move Neil in new directions. “When I got to university I was still playing but my interest started to wane. Then I found out about The National Harmonica League and it became a big influence on me.”

The National Harmonica League, now known as Harmonica UK, was a club of

who plays violin. I have always felt that knowing a chordal instrument is important alongside the single note approach of harmonica.”

The NHL would provide the genesis of the thinking that would lead to the podcast. But it would have to wait until Neil launched and worked on his other great online project: www.harptranscripts.com.

and the styles. All the greats were in there but I was listening to as many players as I could from all different styles, not just blues.

“In addition to transcribing solos on the diatonic and chromatic, I have the harp keys pages. I think it may be the most comprehensive information on the internet. It also shows the positions used, too.”

And then there were the awards. “These came about when I entered the competitions the NHL sponsored. They held them annually and I entered mainly as a way to motivate me and make me work harder and push myself. I won the blues category on diatonic, playing an instrumental by Mark Hummel one year, and then I won the competition on the melodic/diatonic playing a fiddle tune. The jazz competition would come later and I won it by playing an Ellington song—Sophisticated Lady. I took inspiration from the Larry Adler version and my teacher Julian. A lot of improvising.”

The podcast also has its roots in Neil’s great love of radio and the spoken word. “I’ve always loved the spoken word and was really into hearing it on the radio when I was younger. I was even interested in becoming a radio journalist. And now I’ve done all of these podcasts!”

Neil was going for something different: “I got the idea from a mandolin podcast I was listening to. I didn’t want it to be lesson-oriented. It was about profiling the players. I wanted to know what made these musicians play the harmonica the way they did. What made them make the harmonica their life? Where and how they were influenced.”

Each installment is more than just talking heads.

There’s a list of linked articles, videos, recordings, and even other interviews. This makes the podcast interactive. You can hear and even watch performances of the music being discussed. It’s a perfect launching pad for someone who wants to go deeper into each artist’s work.

As the number of interviews has grown the

“Music expresses that which cannot be put into words.” – VICTOR HUGO

players that had been around since 1935. It started to come to some prominence shortly after the great American player Larry Adler relocated to England in the early 1950s after the activities of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, headed up by Joseph McCarthy, took aim at blacklisting artists throughout the States. “Larry Adler lived in London and he was a big star here in England. I actually saw him play music from the Gershwin album he released in the ’90s. He was a big celebrity.”

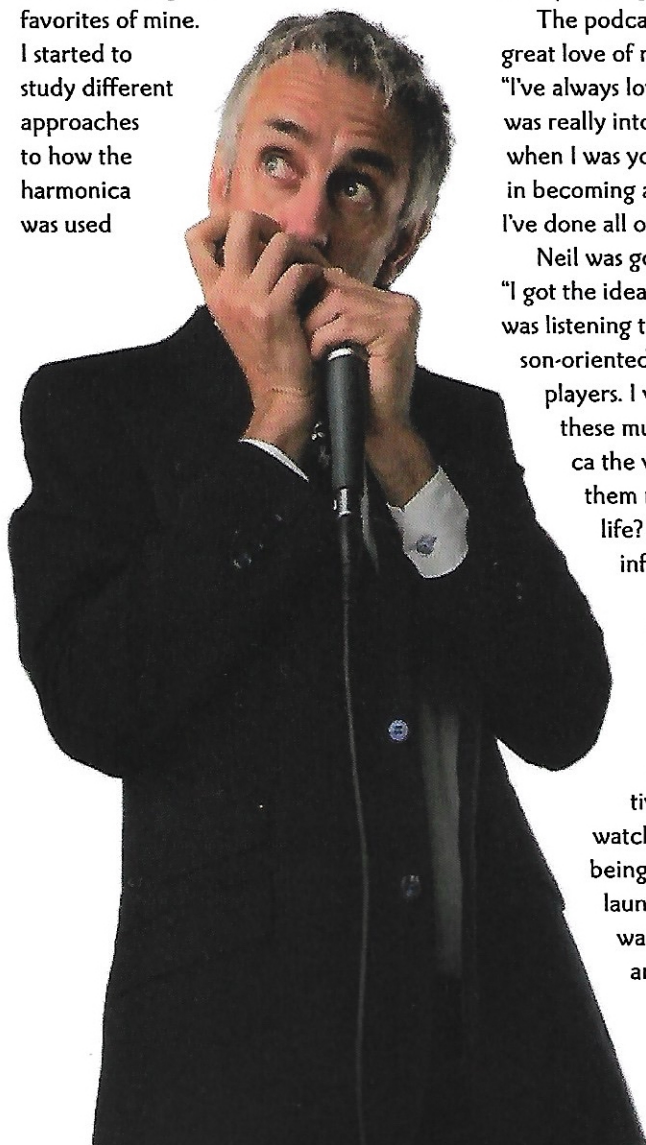
The NHL had started as a chromatic club, but at their annual festivals, they booked players of all styles, including players from the US, Europe, and Asia. “You’d never get bored at their festivals,” Neil remembers. “There were so many different styles of harmonica.

“They also had another festival over a weekend that was strictly chromatic, which I went to because I was getting engaged with the instrument. I ended up on the organizing committee for the weekend event, and after that, I got really involved with the NHL.

“By the age of 30, I really got serious about the chromatic and studied it seriously for ten years. I studied with a great jazz player named Julian Jackson. I was deeply into jazz. I taught myself to read music and started to play the violin as well — another of my projects during the pandemic. I found that learning from the classical approach really helped me in all of my musical interests. I also ended up taking up the mandolin, which is tuned like a violin. I took it up about eight years ago so I could play along with my daughter,

com. “I had put together a site listing all of the harmonica gigs in the UK, and after that had decided to assiduously collect harmonica recordings; I built a database, picking out the best songs, organized by the key of the song. So if a song used a C harmonica it would go into the C list, A in the A list, and so on. After a while, I had over 1,000 songs, all favorites of mine.

I started to study different approaches to how the harmonica was used



podcasts have become a repository of harmonica history, as players recount their harmonica upbringing, influences, and cultural engagement. This alone is an invaluable addition to the limited amount of harmonica history. And it's gathered in one place. "My intention for the podcast was not to record history, although some people now comment that this is happening.

"I do a lot of research before each interview. In my first 20 episodes, it was easier because they were the big names—Kim Wilson, Rod Piazza, Charlie McCoy, PT Gazell, and Madcat. Billy Branch was the first American; he came to me through my friend Giles Robson. As the podcast has developed, some of the players I interviewed have helped introduce me to others. There's been a domino effect.

"Then I started to branch out beyond America. I'm looking to highlight as many different approaches to the harmonica as I can, including people who may not be well-known outside their own country. People I'm aware of and a fan of. I bring on people who satisfy my interest in the instrument. I want to help the listener get a better understanding of it all. So I interviewed the product managers from Hohner or Seydel and they talked about the instrument and the business side of things. After all, we're in the golden age of harmonica production right now, and people need to know how good the instruments are right now.

"One of the things I want to expand in the podcast is the inclusion of more women players.

"Sometimes the interviews turn out to be something unexpected and unique. Mike Stevens is a good example—all the things he's done with the harmonica, his solo career, bluegrass playing, and the work he now does with indigenous people in Canada. Adam Gussow was another, hearing about the hostility he encountered playing with Mr. Satan on the streets of Harlem, the only white kid around. Hendrik Murkens—what a great story. He's German, and when he decided to learn Brazilian music he just moved to Brazil. Then when he wanted to expand his jazz horizons he moved to New York City. It was a great interview."

Neil is still gigging in two bands, adding mandolin to one of them. But he remains

dedicated to the podcasts. Long-range plans? "I ask myself this question a lot. Each episode is a lot of work. I learned so much from each one. And almost everyone has just been a joy to talk to."

As for number 100?? "I have a plan but I never announce the next podcast. I just get them ready and post them. So I'm just going to, as they say here in England, 'keep you in suspenders!!'"

The harmonica community can only hope Neil will continue this work. He's our Rick Beato. 🎵

Tom Ellis has been a harmonica player for over 40 years. He is a music writer and historian and an expert on vintage harp mics. He is an original founder of the H.O.O.T. club in Dallas, where he resides.

Harmonic Happy Hour podcasts not to be missed.

With over 90 hours of interviews available, Harmonica Happy Hour should be required listening for all varieties of players. I've listened to almost all of them, and every one of them is excellent. Here's a short list that makes for a great start.

ROD PIAZZA (May 2020): The best interview with Rod I've heard. His overview of the blues culture in Los Angeles, its vibrancy, and its cast of characters should be the basis of a great written history of the overlooked blues center that percolated in Southern California in his early days.

GREGOIRE MARET (July 2020): The Swiss player has been a mainstay of the New York jazz scene, playing with Herbie Hancock, Pat Metheny, Jimmy Scott, Kenny Wheeler, Cassandra Wilson, and others. He's inherited the mantle of greatness from Toots.

JUZZIE SMITH (October 2022): Australian Smith is the entire package as a one-man band, and can add another five instruments to the mix. He's a great rack player. A video shot of him busking would go viral; to date, it and others have had over 200 million views on YouTube.

JIM HUGHES (October 2020): Over 90 years young, Hughes is a walking history of the chromatic harmonica in the UK, with a perspective on the scene that is fascinating. His history as the harmonica player for the BBC for decades is fascinating.

MARCO JAVONIVIC (January 2023): German with Serbian roots, this player/teacher has mastered playing a vast array of music—Balkan, Arabic, Irish, Argentinian, and even Chamber music—on both diatonic and chromatic.

RACHEL PLAS (July 2020): A woman in a man's game, this French expat had tremendous courage and nerve as she carved a career playing pop, folk, blues, and even country, earning the moniker Queen of the Golden Melody.

PAUL HARRINGTON (June 2023): The great player from Texas built a career as a session man. His reflections on working with other artists and producers are full of advice on how to do it right. His work with the rapper Pitbull has been streamed over one billion times.