

Carlos del Junco, Blues Harp Virtuoso

Peter Narváez

*On February 6, 1996, I interviewed one of the finest blues harp players on the planet, Carlos del Junco, in his basement apartment in Toronto. Carlos lodges in a single-room laid out for a working musician. A massive model of a Hohner Marine Band harmonica adorns one wall. A small keyboard, desk, and work table cluttered with CDs, harmonica parts, and tools strategically cram an adjacent wall and corner. I was surprised to find that Carlos keeps his trophies for winning best diatonic blues and jazz categories in the annual Hohner World Competition, Trossingen, Germany (1993) in his furnace room; he's confident, yet modest. While they symbolize an honour, he feels that his trophies would prove "embarrassing" on a shelf, for they would predominate his small living space. A Cuban by birth, Carlos emigrated with his parents to Canada in 1959 when he was a year old. My interview with him focused on his musical development, particularly his adaptation of Howard Levy's "blow-bending" technique, enabling one to play chromatic scales on ten-hole diatonic harmonicas, and his CD releases, accompanying acoustic bluesmen the late Bill Kinnear (*Blues, Big Reed Records BRRCDJ-01*) and Thom "Champagne Charlie" Roberts (*Big Road Blues, Old Way Blues OWB CD001*), and fronting his own band (*Just Your Fool: The Carlos del Junco Band—Live, Big Reed Records BRRCD-1*). Anyone interested in hearing Howard Levy might start with *Trio Globo* (Silver Wave Records SD806).*

PN—Carlos, how did you get interested in playing blues harp?

CDJ—I picked up the harmonica when I was fourteen because a friend of mine played it on a rack and I really loved the sound of it. It really intrigued me. The first blues record I ever bought was a Paul Butterfield record [*The Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Elektra EKS-7294*], so instead of going back to the real roots, like Little Walter for that urban style, my first influence was a guy who had a more progressive style. The first Butterfield record, when he does "Thank You Mr. Poobah," has some incredible jazzy little licks in there. So that blew me away. I had this reel-to-reel mono tape deck that my parents had, and I used a turntable with variable pitch control to make sure it was in pitch first. I'd tape the solos that I liked, and then slow it down to half speed and start learning the solos.

PN—So you learned blues harp by copying Butterfield's solos?

CDJ—Well, yeah, and anything that had harmonica on it intrigued me, even a stupid little song by Supertramp, the very first Supertramp record that has harmonica intro. I used to go in the stairwell in my high school to try and sound like the guy on Supertramp. Then I somehow discovered Lee Oscar, I can't remember how, and his style. I'd try to play melodically like he did. Then I discovered guys like Sonny Boy Williamson [Rice Miller] and Little Walter and learned in a backwards historical progression. I started from a progressive point of view and moved toward the traditional.

PN—What was your very first gig?

CDJ—It was in high school with my math teacher Bo Basiuk, one of the stalwarts of traditional blues in Toronto [founder and editor of *Blues Magazine*]. We did something for a student talent night they had once a year. Bo played Leadbelly's "Midnight Special" and "Good Morning Blues" and a couple of other blues songs. They were tricky tunes for a guy who was learning to get around the chords. I really worked hard at the solo. I

played a specific solo, it and actually got a round of applause.

PN—When did you start using a mike through an amp in the Little Walter style?

CDJ—In my early twenties when I went to OCA [Ontario College of Art] for four years [1978-82], I majored in sculpturing. I always had an inclination towards visual arts. While there I started jamming with some people locally and had a couple of basement bands. One of the bands actually got into a couple of bars. The band was called Eye Level. Those were the first gigs I did in bars. We did a third blues, a third Latin, like Santana material, and a third R&B. I used to do some lines with the guitar player when we played Santana songs like "Black Magic Woman." It was fun. I was still learning the ropes at the time.

PN—So you spent four years studying sculpture? Did you do anything with it afterwards?

CDJ—Well, I studied sculpture in Italy for a time, and when I got back, within a year I started playing with bluesman Buzz Upshaw in a house band he started. He paid me out of his pocket, and that lasted for about a year. The next three years I continued sculpturing, and eventually it all became irrelevant. Each time I got up to play a solo I realized that the musical moment is there and then it's gone. Either you are cutting it or not. And that immediacy really attracted me. Sculpturing is a methodical, slow, snail's-pace process. I just loved the immediacy of music, and I really wanted to get connected and to put more effort into it—to play music full-time.

PN—You were freelancing in both of these fields?

CDJ—Yeah, I sold more than over half of the sculpture I made. Even though I really never developed a distinct style, I was good at it. I also had a day job working at a poster shop, working for my old high school art teacher, who opened up a poster shop. I still work there part-time, a day-and-a-half a week.

PN—When were you playing with Upshaw?

CDJ—It was around '85 or so. I started playing with him. That became quite regular. Me and the bass player Kevin Cook ended up to be the two main guys in the band. We went through different drummers. We tried to push Buzz into becoming more serious about music, but it really never happened. So eventually Kevin and I formed our own band called The Delcomos. We did traditional blues and progressive blues. It was eclectic.

PN—Why wasn't it called *The Delcooks*? Where did the "comos" come from?

CDJ—The Monis brothers were playing guitar and drums, so it was *The Delcomos* [laughter]. It had a nice little ring to it. Kevin was writing a lot of interesting instrumentals and a few vocal tunes, and so some stuff was very jazzy. I did most of the singing at the time. Kevin did some. It was mostly bluesy, really, and then eventually Kevin one day said, after we were getting very serious trying to get promotional material together, "I don't want to play with the band any more." So that was my signal to try to get my own thing happening, and I did. And I have been doing that for about the last three or four years almost now, and that's that.

PN—So The Delcomos actually lasted for more than a couple of years then?

CDJ—Yeah it did. We played Albert's Hall [Toronto] a few times. Three times in one year or something like that. We did a couple of demos, but we never actually ever got to record anything.

PN—Did you record anything before the two CDs you just released?

CDJ—Between the Delcomos and last year, '92 or so, I met a guy named Bill Kinnear. I started playing with him, and eventually we did a CD. He sang on most of the tunes, and he was a really unique, minimalist player. He came to music late in life. He was thirty-five when he came to it. But what he brought to it was his minimalist, primitive style; he had a big heart and soul. He really taught me a lot just about minimizing my playing. People used to criticize me for being overly technical and not really getting to the point of the music. I was always struggling, especially when I started playing with Howard [Levy]. I remember there were two years when I felt that I was getting worse, because I was struggling with all these ideas. And I am still really struggling, but it is all coming together in the past three years. I feel that I can really say something in a real musical way.

PN—When did you record with Kinnear?

CDJ—We released one CD, on the Big Reed Records label [Blues, BRRCDJ-01] which I started up. We only pressed a thousand. Bill died just over a year ago. He was only fifty-two.

PN—I'm sorry to hear that. And subsequently you've played acoustic style harp with Thom "Champagne Charlie" Roberts?

CDJ—Yeah, I play classic country blues with him on the new CD [Big Road Blues, Old Way Blues OWB CD001].

PN—So your becoming a full-time pro blues musician fronting your own band has been gradual.

CDJ—Right, yeah. I didn't really decide what I wanted to do until I was thirty, after I heard Howard Levy. I first heard Howard through a friend of mine. Then someone gave me Howard's phone number, and he told me about a master harmonica class he taught. That's where I first met him. He would hold these classes for ten people at a music camp on a university campus in the Appalachian Mountains in a little town—Elkins, West Virginia. The actual place is called the Augusta Heritage Center. I went for four years in a row while he was teaching the class. He's moved on to bigger and better things now. The way he played a chromatic scale on a diatonic harmonica just blew me away. I put all my energies into that. I don't have a strong musical background in another instrument, so I've taught myself music. I have been more of an ear player although I am teaching myself the rudiments of the music theory and using a computer to help me read slightly.

PN—Yeah, but the harmonica, especially played in blues style, has a tradition of being an instrument played by ear, an instrument for which there hasn't been any printed music.

CDJ—Absolutely. Certainly for the diatonic harmonica, the traditional ten hole harmonica, because you've got twelve different harmonicas playing each key, so if you are trying to read sheet music, unless you are playing a C harmonica in the key of C, you have to transpose every time you pick up the harmonica to play every piece of music. Howard can do that, of course, because he is such a maniac. He is one of these guys who plays several different instruments really well, excelling on the piano as well as on the harmonica.

PN—You talk about your mentor being Howard Levy, but Levy is not a blues player; you are. You've adapted his technique to blues style.

CDJ—Well, the thing is I love blues, and it has always been the main thing I have been playing on the harmonica, and the record I just released [Just Your Fool: The Carlos del Junco Band—Live, Big Reed Records BRRCD-1] was all blues material, except for the last track ["Jersey Bounce"]. I want to take the ideas and style Howard uses, to be able to play, like, a flat five substitute on a blues change and be able to get away with it and make it sound musical. How to play two fives on one jazz change, that's the stuff that is a challenge for me. Every now and then I go back, and there is the element and the nitty gritty of what I should be doing. I think I have been playing long enough to have a sense of what that nitty gritty and the essence of the music is. Otherwise I wouldn't have gotten as far as I

have, playing the blues music that I am doing, you know?

PN—Have you done much studio work?

CDJ—Well, probably my first studio gig was six years ago. Someone handed me a gig another harmonica player couldn't do. It was a sound track for a movie. I had a really brief spot with this old guy who was playing the harp. That is exactly what they needed. I did it in one take. It was about twenty, twenty minutes. I got \$300. It was alright [*laughter*]! It was the fastest \$300 I ever made.

PN—When did you start singing?

CDJ—Oh, not until I was thirty. Yeah, I did it out of necessity and fear. I knew that if I wanted to start gigging regularly I would have to start to sing because if I wasn't going to always back someone else up I would have to do my own thing. So I did it out of necessity, but now I'm starting to enjoy it. There are nights when I actually enjoy it, and there are other nights where I am terrified.

PN—So you're working with your voice now?

CDJ—Yeah, I am working with it now. It was really funny to read a review recently. The reviewer said that "not only is del Junco an amazing harmonica player, but he's a top drawer vocalist." "Top drawer vocalist!" I loved that, you know.

PN—How are you enjoying fronting a band?

CDJ—I just want to play good music. I have heard so many other people say the same thing. I'm not a real stage performer, not the kind of front person personality that tries to get the audience to clap their hands. I primarily play music, so I have to rely on my dexterity and musicianship, and really that's what matters the most. But it is true that charm and personality can get you a hell of a long way in the music business.

PN—Who are the musicians you play with on the band CD?

CDJ—Well, the core band still plays together once every three months at Quigley's. Kevin Breit, the guitar player, is a real talented monster. There's a guy, who is not a traditional blues player but very imaginative. He will play punk motifs and quote little songs, too, like purposely, and make them work in a blues context. He is on his way up. He plays with a great band called the Breit Brothers—Gary and Greg, drummer, keyboard player, and singer. They write a lot of original material. Anyway, Kevin has played with Holly Cole, went on the road with her and a jazz singer from New York, Casandra Wilson, an up-and-coming major star.

I met him at a session. He was playing, producing a session and playing guitar on it, and I asked him if he was working much these days. He said, "Not really." So I asked, "Do you want to play with my band?" He wasn't playing much out at all in live situations. He was happy to have a chance to go out and

play my material.

PN—What about Al Duffy?

CDJ—Al Duffy, great, great. There isn't another roots bass player in Toronto that I like as much as Al. He's got a wonderful touch. He really understands that old style music, the material I play. He's played with Morgan Davis for years and years, and he's often played with Geoff Arseneault, the drummer, who also played on the record. They've worked together as a rhythm section for Morgan for almost seven years. Geoff has got a feel like no one else in Toronto. For certain feels like the New Orleans beat on the song, "Just Your Fool" [Walter Jacobs], no one else plays it as well, and I have played with great players in Toronto. Al and Geoff are very locked in, so when I recorded that record, live at Grossman's, Kevin had been playing with the band for about four months and maybe on the average once or twice a month. Geoff had done the gig off and on for about a year and a half to two years, but very sporadically. There is some great stuff on the record. I was really lucky; things worked out for the best. The way the publicity worked—also the recording. I got a little write up in the [Toronto] Sun just prior to the recordings, so it was like a packed house although it doesn't sound like it on the CD because we didn't have a mike on the audience. There was a crazy audience eating up what we were doing. There was lots of energy.

PN—I understand that for a lot of gigs you assemble your band from available musicians.

CDJ—Yeah. You have to, especially in this day and age. If you're older than thirty and thirty-five, it's a dog-eat-dog world. You are defending yourself. It's a rarity to have a group of people over thirty who are going to stick it out together and really try to make a name for themselves unless you are writing all original pop material. I've got a blues band, and it's inherent in the nature of the music that you free lance. I am always on the gigging scene. But I'm always aware of a core group of players who can back me up.

PN—For those of us who are harmonica players and are interested in your technique of blow-bending the notes, what is the best harmonica you can buy for that?

CDJ—Well the old harps all work very well, Marine Band, Blues Harp, Golden Melody, or Meisterklass 580 [all made by Hohner], the old style, that is. Before they changed the shape of the reed. You can still buy them. They are still producing those hand tuned harmonicas. But now they have a different type of metal. I don't know if the alloy is different, but the shape of the reed is slightly wider and maybe shorter. It changes the sound. It maybe plays easier, but for the over-blow thing, nah. It doesn't work. Also they don't seem to be as responsive to over-blowing as the Golden Melody or Marine Band, where the reed plate is actually in contact with your lip. A lot of harp players argue about this. The reed is a little bit closer to your mouth. It's better for overblowing.