


Powers' harp often tango-ed up in blue

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Portland harmonica player is hailed as one of world's best



by: COURTESY OF JOE POWERS - World-renowned harmonica player Joe Powers of Portland has released a new album, 'Just Duet!,' and it features duets with 12 different instruments.

Most folks who celebrate Christmas can't even remember what they got in their stockings as children. But Joe Powers, 34, of Portland will never forget.

"My first harmonica was a Christmas stocking stuffer from my Aunt Susanna, when I was just 2 years old. I grew up playing on the thing."

However, he says, he didn't get truly serious on the harp until he was 13 or 14.

"I've always loved the sound of the instrument, so close to the human voice and the fact that I can put it in my pocket and take it anywhere."

And anywhere is exactly where Powers has taken it, from Belgium, where he won the Crystal Harmonica Award in classical music in 2008, to Japan, where he met that nation's leading jazz guitarist, Yosuke Onuma.

Powers and Onuma are set to perform "Adventures in Harmonica & Guitar" at 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 30, in Portland's Old Church, along with Merlin Showalter, percussionist for The Emerald City Jazz Kings.

Powers and Onuma met a few years back in Japan, when a mutual friend introduced them after one of Onuma's concerts. Prior to that, Onuma had only played with one other harmonica player, Toots Thielemans, the greatest jazz harmonica player ever.

Powers laughs when asked if it was intimidating having to follow such a rare company, but quickly adds: "When I play with Yosuke, I feel like we have a psychic

connection. I feel like he can read my mind."

"I like harmonica's tone," Onuma adds. "I can play more passionately. I play melody, bass, percussion and harmony. I try

to use all kind of music techniques when I play with Joe.”

During the past decade, Powers has become one of the world’s best diatonic and chromatic harmonica players, conquering the worlds of blues, jazz, classical and tango.

In addition to being nominated for a Muddy Award by the Cascade Blues Association when he was a member of the Rose City Kings, Powers also won fourth place in Jazz Diatonic at the World Harmonica Championship in Germany in 2005.

Powers has also released a number of critically acclaimed albums, including his debut solo album, “Amor de Tango,” recorded in Buenos Aires in 2007, as well as 2009’s “Melancolie,” a collaboration with Grammy nominated British composer-pianist Michael Hopp, featuring classically inspired New-Age melodies. He’s also played with Pink Martini and Jamie Cullum, as well such tango bands as Narcotango and Otros Aires.

His newest CD, “Just Duet!”, features tango and Brazilian choro as well as jazz, Chinese, Japanese and classical music. The album boasts duets with 12 different instruments, including Hammond B3 organ, bandoneon (a concertina popular in Brazil) and banjo.

Despite his numerous accolades and international career, however, Powers is about as down-to-earth a world-class musician as you can find. He still pops up at local jams whenever he’s in town, including Arthur Moore’s Tuesday night “Harmonica Party” at Shaker & Vine (formerly Vino Vixens), 2929 S.E. Powell Blvd. Here he rubs shoulders with amateurs, professionals and all harp players in-between. Powers doesn’t care how good you are on the harmonica; if you love it, he wants to hear you play.

“I would love to be more active and foster a harmonica community in Portland as well,” he says, noting he’s taught a couple hundred local harmonica players.

Powers was a teenager when he first learned to munch the tin sandwich by jamming with Moore, about whom he speaks like a son talking about his beloved father. Powers says he still plays one of the first songs Moore taught him, “Georgia On My Mind.”

“I really admire Arthur for creating a community,” Powers says. “It’s just so much fun to participate in his jams.”

Moore says Powers was the youngest student he’d ever taught and “was really into it.” He would even show up for Moore’s shows at bars he was too young to enter.

“He would sit outside and listen to us play,” Moore says, noting that Powers would take in the sounds of such harmonica icons as Paul deLay and Curtis Salgado as their riffs seeped out the tavern walls. “I didn’t even know he was out there till years later when he told me,” Moore adds with a chuckle.

Tango tunesmith

In a world overcrowded with great blues harmonica players, Powers may have made the wisest career choice any player has made since John Popper decided to imitate Eddie Van Halen on the harp in Blues Traveler — Powers specialized in tango harmonica.

“I really got into tango dancing when I attended the University of Oregon, where I studied music, and decided that I wanted to go to live in Argentina after graduating,” he says. “So I studied Spanish and went down there, stayed for a year and a half, dancing most every day.

“While I was there, a friend told me about a harmonica player named Hugo Diaz, who was primarily a folk musician but recorded some tango albums in the ‘70s. I got a hold of the CD and became very inspired. When I got back to Portland, some friends and I started a tango band.”

He’s worked with such folks as Emilio de la Peña, Raul Luzzi and Japan’s top tango ensemble, Orquesta Aurora. Powers is an apostle for tango music, and has often worked alongside fellow fanatic and Portland tango dancer-musician Alex Krebs of Tango Berritin Dance Studios.

“Sometimes I’m trying to emulate the sound of the bandoneon, the sound of the violin or the sound of the singer,” Powers says of his style. “I’m using techniques like bending or hand effects, for example, that you might find in blues, but I’m still keeping true to the tango idiom.”

A strong believer in daily practice, Powers advises all harmonica players to never stop jamming.

“Always bring a harmonica with you everywhere,” he says. “There are always opportunities to practice, for example, when you’re stuck in traffic, walking down the street, waiting in line at the movie theater and opportunities to spontaneously jam with other musicians. Never be afraid to experiment and try new things in your music, even if it goes against the popular consensus.”