

# BLUES IN BRITAIN

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TBELLY

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*"I was five  
 years old. My  
 creativity came  
 when I played  
 the piano."*

*Russell Keefe, TBelly*



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# THE INSTRUMENT

## Dannecker Harmonicas

Quality is a word that has so many meanings. To say something is 'quality' or is 'of good quality' or is 'quality made' seems to be, like so many things a function of the trust you place in the person making the claim combined with individual standards we each apply to determine 'what is good' and 'what is bad'. Like determining 'what is beauty?' we know these standards vary person to person, but I'm curious: are there universal truths to achieving high quality that transcend subjective opinion and relate to everyone universally regardless of background, bias or prior experience?

I believe the illusive answer lives in the meticulous process of a master craftsman; someone whose life's work centres on achieving the highest quality, with the pursuit of perfection, of one's craft.

The Dannecker family has devoted their lives and legacy to the perfection of the harmonica. But heritage alone does not make a craftsman. The quality of the products themselves must live up to the name, and in Dannecker's case, they do.

When I bought my first Dannecker harp I'd never experienced such a magnificent instrument. It played like an extension of my vocal chords and enabled me to execute difficult bends, blows and achieve expression I had been struggling with on inferior harps. So, I ordered a few more and struck up a relationship with Antony. I've been playing Antony's harps for close to five years now and their quality has stood the test of time. Every time I put one to my lips, it seems to play itself with little effort. I don't claim to be a good harmonica player, but whatever skill I have as a musician, is easily revealed on one of Dannecker's harps.

Curious about Dannecker's process, I set out to find out how he achieves this level of perfection in his instrument and his craft. What is it that makes Dannecker's harps so special? John Ruskin wrote "Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort." So, I approached Antony in an attempt to understand his own personal "intelligent effort." Through a series of conversations and emails, Antony described to me his philosophies as a master craftsman. "Mainstream harmonica manufacturers have mass produced harmonicas for over a century. To keep the instrument as affordable as possible the use of inexpensive materials such as wood, machine pressed tin for the cover plates as well as hollow cast plastic combs were used. These materials were selected simply because they were readily available and cheap to manufacture but did nothing in terms of improving the sound. If you start with inferior materials, nothing else matters. Neither craftsman skill, nor technological innovation can overcome the



disadvantage of manufacturing with poor quality inputs"

For Antony Dannecker, studying the techniques of the masters was easy and it hit close to home. His training started from a young age as he saw the pride his great grandfather, grandfather and father took in their work at Hohner. Antony learned all about the harmonica, from perfecting the purity of the tone to the mechanics of the instrument, Antony developed a passion for learning what made a good harmonica great. But even as Hohner continued to perfect its techniques, Antony saw opportunities to improve nearly every aspect of the instrument: "In these early years little was understood how best to enhance and improve the dynamic sound and resonance that could be achieved from a free reed mouth blown musical instrument. As Doctor of Music and a Fellow of the Institute of Musical Instrument Technology together with a long family history in the harmonica industry I was placed in the unique position to be present in top recording studios and was able to discuss with harmonica players as well as sound technicians the exact areas which they felt lacking in performance from their existing harmonicas."

Antony knew that, at its core, the harp had to sing so he trusted his expertly trained ears and developed an instrument that sounded as good as it looked.

Preservation of timeless beauty and classic design does not mean a craftsman closes his mind to innovation and improvement. A true craftsman has the sense to know when to incorporate newer technologies and manufacturing techniques

and when to rely on old-world know-how. Antony recounted how he achieved this innovation with his two flagship harmonica models: "Having formulated a blueprint for this new generation of harmonica I acquired an ex-aerospace trained chief engineer who embraced my remit that Dannecker harmonica component parts also needed to possess absolute and uncompromising precision. With the Dannecker Optimus and Centurion harmonicas, our ultimate goal has been realised: achieving harmonic purity and profound air-tightness which enables players of today to broaden the dynamic soundscape and playability of the diatonic harmonica to previously unheard of dimensions."

Talking to Antony, it is clear he has a passion for what he does. He knows that every harmonica he ships is a direct reflection on him as a craftsman. After all, every harmonica Dannecker produces bears his family's name.

Antony told me that his "absolute guarantee of quality is maintained with the fact that every harmonica is hand assembled and fine-tuned by Antony himself." If that's not the ultimate statement of pride in your work, what is? Ask yourself: how many documents, deliverables, reports, presentations, or memos [or whatever your business work product may be] would you take that much pride in that you would forge your name into it for all to see?

Antony does it on a daily basis, and with a level of consistency that even his great grandfather, Carl, would be proud of.

**Justin Greis**

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