

Audio Paper script

M – Mikael Bäckman
CM – Charlie McCoy
BG – Buddy Greene
MC – Mike Caldwell

All harmonica, except for what is played on the interview parts with Charlie McCoy, is played by Mikael Bäckman

0.00

MB – This is about

BG – Charlie McCoy

MB – and myself.

MC – Charlie McCoy

MB – is a

BG – a harmonica player,

MB – so am I.

BG – Charlie McCoy

MB – has recorded more than 14 000 sessions, which is likely to [have]

BD – made him the most recorded harmonica player in history.

MB – The aim of this paper is to show how McCoy's idiolect was shaped. In the words of Alan More, "Idiolect refers to the individual stylistic fingerprints of a performer" (2012, p. 166). I want to show how McCoy found his own voice. Naomi Cumming talks about voice as "the perceptible result of an individual's patterned choices within a social domain, those characteristic manners of forming sound or gesture that distinguish him or her from the 'crowd' – a personal 'style'" (2000, p. 10).

MB – Then I will show how I am transforming my own idiolect by imitating McCoy.

Research questions are:

What influenced Charlie McCoy when he shaped his idiolect?

And, how can I use McCoy's recordings in order to transform my own idiolect?

In the left speaker you will hear the voice of Mike Caldwell, in the right speaker the voice of Buddy Greene, both distinguished country harmonica players. In the center you will hear Charlie McCoy, myself, and the harmonica.

01.50

"Orange Blossom Special" ¹

BG – Charlie

MC – A better harmonica player

CM – The harmonica

¹ Orange Blossom Special is McCoy's signature tune, his harmonica adaptation of a classic fiddle tune which he frequently performs live. The tune appears on his recordings in 1968, 1969, 1972, 1973, 1978, 1986, 1988, 1995, 1998, 2003, 2004, 2004, 2012 & 2018.

BG – Country Music

CM – Country, bluegrass thing

BG – To country music...to country music

CM – Uptempo country song maybe, or a bluegrass song

BG – Country music...Charlie McCoy records from the 70's...I mean it's just so country!

02.26

MB – So, what was McCoy's musical background before he moved to Nashville?

CM – When I first came to Nashville, this is 1960, I had my first session in 1961 with an unknown girl from Sweden named Ann-Margret.

MB – Right.

CM – And I only played blues, Little Walter, Jimmy Reed, that's what I played, I was...So I came to Nashville and, that's what I did, I played the blues. And that first big hit record I got to play on by Roy Orbison which is the one that started my phone ringing, was nothing but blues.

03.12

"Candy Man" ²

CM – That's what I did, I played the blues

MC – He appreciates blues

BG – I think his approach to blues playing was

CM – Was nothing but blues

BG – And then he could play the blues real well, he understood that

MC – For a little white guy he's got a lot of blues in him

CM – Blues

BG – Chicago style blues, blues pentatonic

CM – That's what I did, I played the blues

03.31

CM – I heard a Jimmy Reed record

"Honest I Do" ³

CM – Jimmy Reed...Jimmy Reed

04.01

"Juke" ⁴

CM – Little Walter

MC – A Little Walter

² The harmonica part from Roy Orbison's 1962 Candy Man, which was the first hit record that McCoy played on. As played on the original recording.

³ A version of Jimmy Reed's 1961 Honest I Do. As played on the original recording. Guitar: Leo Holmberg

⁴ A version of Little Walter's arguably most famous instrumental recording, Juke, recorded in 1952. As played on the original recording. McCoy has recorded a version of his own in 1975. Guitar: Leo Holmberg

BG – Little Walter would do
CM – Little Walter
BG – or Little Walter or something, you know
MC – Little Walter yeah
BG – Little Walter’s...blues pentatonic...I think his approach to blues playing was...Chicago style blues playing...Little Walter had
CM – I moved away from the blues
BG – Little Walter stuff
MC – He appreciates the blues
BG – And then he could play the blues real well, he understood that
MC – Harpin the Blues album
CM – That’s what I did, I played the blues...was nothing but blues... I moved away from the blues, although I still can play the blues you know, but

04.50

MB – So, what else did McCoy learn after arriving in Nashville?

BG – Back to Charlie

CM – But as time went along, they would start asking me...

05.00

“Candy Man”⁵

CM – Could you play maybe, not quite such a funky tone, or could you maybe play the melody a bit more? So one day, about 1962, hey,

05.16 “He Stopped Loving Her Today”⁶

CM – I’m feeling pretty good about myself, I’m playing with big stars, I’m playing with the Nashville A-Team, I’m making good money, you know. And I was probably overanxious, so we go in a recording session, we did a first take, and boy I was... And after they say, ok we’re gonna have a playback and Grady Martin walked over to me and he said: come outside a minute. So we went outside and he said; you’ve got what it takes to stay around here a long, long time but I’m telling you right now, you’re playing too much. He said listen to the words, if you don’t hear every word and understand the meaning, you’re playing too much. And, was that a wakeup call, you know, for a 21 year old kid. We’d go in and I’m kind of in shock, and then we start the song again and I start listening to him [Grady Martin] and I said, I understand it now. And right after the session, [an]other great guitar player named Harold Bradley, by the way, both of these guys are in the Country Music Hall of Fame.⁷ Harold Bradley walked over to me, and he said, I saw Grady took you outside, what did he say? And I said, he told me I was playing too much and he was right. And Harold said to me this, and this is, this sums up Nashville recording: We call, we think the song and the artist as the

⁵ The harmonica part from Candy Man once again.

⁶ The harmonica part from my recording of He Stopped Loving Her Today, where I am deliberately playing too much.

⁷ So is Charlie McCoy, which he neglected to tell me in his typical understated manner.

picture, we're [the session musicians] the frame. Our job is to frame the picture, not to distract from it. And from that day on, for me, less is more.

07.02

CM – The one that echoes Grady Martin...

“He Stopped Loving Her Today”⁸

CM – what he told me, the best, there's a record by George Jones called He Stopped Loving Her Today. And, the producer forgot I was on the session, he was over there at the piano running the song down because we had, on the session was Hargus Robins, “Pig” Robins, whose a blind piano player. Brilliant piano player, he's in the Hall of Fame as well, but, you played it for him one time and he's got it, right. So, he was over there at the piano playing, and George Jones was singing the song, and every musician in the room was looking around at each other and like, oh my gosh, this is something, this is gonna be big. We could, just the song, just everybody there was excited. So, [the] producer gets up and he said I'm gonna go in the control room and hear it in there, on the mics. And as he walked by me he stopped and he said, uh, get something on the second verse, and he went into the control room. And that's what I did: (sings) kept some letters by the...dadadadadadada. The simplest thing I've ever done on a record, and maybe the most effective.

08.20

CM – George Jones, called He Stopped Loving Her Today, get something on the second verse.

“He Stopped Loving Her Today”⁹

CM – Find the space... You're playing too much... You're playing too much. Find the space... If you don't hear every word and understand the meaning, you're playing too much... But I'm really good at laying out the first verse, playing something the second verse... When someone else is playing or singing, I stay out of the way.

(All at once) MC – Well the fills on He Stopped Loving Her Today BG – I think he was a master of doing fills. CM – Less is more.

CM – The simplest thing I've ever done on a record, and maybe the most effective.

BG – He could support a vocal really well, he knew how to stay out of the way.

CM – Find the space

BG – [how] economical he was with what he had to say

CM – Less is more

MC – He's tasteful, I think if I had to use one word

CM – Find the space

BG – You know economy...

CM – Find the space

⁸ The harmonica part to He Stopped Loving Her Today, as played by McCoy in the original recording.

⁹ On the first verse, where McCoy did not play in the original recording, I am deliberately playing too much. On the second verse, I play what McCoy did on the original recording. Vocals and guitar: Ulrika Weinz, Bass Harmonica: Mikael Bäckman

BG – ...and sitting out was just as important...

CM – Find the space

BG – as, you know, anything he was gonna play

CM – Less is more

BG – Back to Charlie

09.46

CM – See I, I was just new to country music, really, and I got into it and I was loving it, the fiddles, the steel guitars, the dobros. You know, and I'm trying to play the licks that I'm hearing these guys play and that's, that's kind of what created what people call my style. You know, in country music it's kind of a thing that a lot of songs are started off by playing the last line of the song. There was a great record by Jerry Lee Lewis called What Made Milwaukee Famous (Made A Loser Out Of Me). And me and the steel guitar player [plays the intro]. You know that's steel guitar stuff right there, but when you play it on the harmonica it kind of takes on its own thing.

10.42

CM – Jerry Lee Lewis called What Made Milwaukee Famous (Made A Loser Out Of Me).

“What Made Milwaukee Famous (Made A Loser Out Of Me).¹⁰

CM – You know that's steel guitar stuff right there

MC – Or steel guitar

CM – but when you play it on the harmonica it kind of takes on its own thing.

BG – I mean cause back in the day I never heard anybody do that but Charlie. Back to Charlie.

11.15

CM – Remember a lot of these are influenced by fiddles and steel guitars and, you know which is what I was really into and I, that's probably the key of, how I developed the style I have, is listening to all those people. And you know, God, there's so many great, there here [in Nashville], there on every street corner, you know. I mean really, it's unbelievable, it really is. And I'm trying to play the licks that I'm hearing these guys play and...

BG – He was listening to the other musicians around him

CM – That's that's kind of what created what people call my style

MC – Learning from other musicians, it's great

CM – that's probably the key of, how I developed the style I have... listening to all those people

BG – So I think he picked up a lot of things like that just from listening to other, you know, other players on these sessions... players around him

¹⁰ The harmonica part on the intro of Jerry Lee Lewis' 1969 What Made Milwaukee Famous (Made A Loser Out Of Me). Originally played in unison with a pedal steel guitar.

12.12

CM – It’s something like a fiddle would play probably
“Harmonica playing”¹¹

MC – That sounds like a fiddle

BG – What a fiddle player would call double-stops you know

MC – Fiddle licks

BG – Fiddle players

CM – I’m influenced a lot by fiddles

12.32

“Harmonica playing”¹²

BG – I think he picked that up more from the fiddle

CM – The fiddle

BG – Sound more like what a fiddle player would do

MC – Fiddle

BG – Really trying to emulate the fiddles

CM – Remember a lot of these are influenced by fiddles

BG – You know, emulate the fiddle

BG – I mean cause back in the day I never heard anybody do that but Charlie

12.51

CM – The Real McCoy

“The Real McCoy”¹³

CM – You know that’s steel guitar stuff right there

MC – Or steel guitar

CM – A real steel guitar... steel guitar kind of thing... steel guitar... the steel guitars, the
dobros... steel guitars and, you know

BG – Oh, it was called the Real McCoy

13.15

BG – There was a song he did called Grade A

“Grade A”¹⁴

MC – Like, like guitar licks

BG – Telecaster... maybe even just guitar

MC – Yeah, that’s totally a guitar lick

BG – Chicken picking... there was a song he did called Grade A

13.39

¹¹ A harmonica part from McCoy’s 1975 Columbus Stockade Blues where he adapts the fiddles double-stops to the harmonica.

¹² My version of Cajun-style fiddle playing, inspired by McCoy.

¹³ The harmonica melody of McCoy’s 1968 The Real McCoy.

¹⁴ The harmonica melody of the A-section of McCoy’s 1972 Grade A. On this recording, McCoy is playing in the style of guitar *chicken-picking*, hence the reference to eggs in the title of the song. Bass: Mikael Bäckman

“Grade A”¹⁵

BG – Guitar players... and guitar players... from hearing a guitar player chicken pick... I mean cause back in the day I never heard anybody do that but Charlie

13.53

MB – By the way, the harmonica playing you have heard, besides what McCoy plays in the interview snippets, is played by me, aiming to sound just like the original recordings. I have transcribed 13 albums by Charlie McCoy and learned to play them as close to the original as I am capable of. From these transcriptions, I have extracted licks that I found particularly interesting. These licks I have then transformed in order to add new material to my own lick vocabulary.

14.30

Harmonica lick.¹⁶

CM – That sounds like something I would play [laughs]

BG – Tell me a minute Mikael, what’s your schoolin? Charlie McCoy

MC – Think of different licks that I didn’t hear him do

14.45

Harmonica lick.¹⁷

BG – Trying to come up with licks that weren’t Charlies licks you know

14.50

Harmonica lick.¹⁸

MC – That’s what we all [do], we strive to have our own style

14.54

Harmonica lick.¹⁹

BG – I was really trying to develop more of my own style, so...

14.59

Harmonica lick.²⁰

MC – Cause we wanna make our own style

15.03

Harmonica lick.²¹

MC – I need to learn my way to do it

15.07

Harmonica lick.²²

MC – Think of different licks that I didn’t hear him do

¹⁵ The harmonica melody of the B-section of McCoy’s 1972 Grade A. Bass: Mikael Bäckman

¹⁶ A lick from McCoy’s 1968 Jackson. It is a lick that McCoy has recorded many variations of throughout his career.

¹⁷ Lick 10A, my variation of the previous McCoy lick, inspired by pedal steel guitar playing.

¹⁸ Lick 10B, variation of lick 10A.

¹⁹ Lick 10D, variation played on a country tuned harmonica.

²⁰ Lick 10D1.

²¹ Lick 10D.

²² Lick 10E. Inspired by McCoy and by generic pedal steel playing.

15.13

Harmonica lick. ²³

MC – That’s a good one, let’s play it

15.17

Harmonica lick. ²⁴

MC – There you go, that’s it

BG – I mean it’s just so country

15.24

MB – In conclusion, McCoy’s idiolect was shaped by his early exposure to the blues, in combination of what he learned from the other session musicians in the Nashville A-Team. Unlike myself, McCoy did not learn to play country music by copying what he heard on records, he learned to play country music by copying what he heard while making records. Regarding my own idiolect, it is in the process of being transformed, by creating a new personal vocabulary, based on my favorite Charlie McCoy licks.

Thank you!

²³ Lick 10F. Variation of 10E, played on a country tuned harmonica.

²⁴ Lick 10G.1.