

Douglas Tate 1934 - 2005



A bookplate made for Douglas Tate by Marie Whitby about 1970.

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Douglas Tate:1934 to 2005

When I wrote Douglas Tate's obituary following his death in November 2005 I realised he had lived through some big changes in the way the harmonica community was organised. What follows is an attempt to celebrate what Douglas did and to show how things have changed since the 50s.

Douglas William Richard Tate was a Yorkshireman, born in 1934 in Yarm-on-Tees, where his father was chief engineer at the ICI ammonia plant in Billingham. He always had an interest in engineering and music from the time he left school at the age of 18 to become an apprentice in London. He rose through the ranks to become the Head of Research and Design for what had become the largest computer firm in Europe, ICL. His interest in the harmonica brought him into contact with the National Harmonica League (NHL).

There have been harmonica organisations since the 1920s, and the Hohner Songband League (HSBL) was formed in 1935. The Second World War closed down many clubs, but when newsprint became available again, the HSBL was reformed in 1951, and soon became the National Harmonica League. It was run by Hohner and it involved top players like Larry Adler and Tommy Reilly. Ronald Chesney was its first President.

The number of people playing the harmonica privately, in bands or clubs was much much higher than it is now. This led to a very competitive environment and very high playing standards. Much of this can be felt by reading the early copies of Harmonica News, the magazine of the NHL in the 50s, and later the Accordion Times. When the NHL became independent under John Walton in 1981 it launched Harmonica World.

In what follows, we have tried to use original materials as well as personal memories to illustrate what has happened over this time. The profile of Douglas Tate on page 3 shows the amount of competition in Britain the 1950s. Some other personal views of World Championships follow on from this. We still have four players from this period amongst our membership who remember these days well. Jim Hughes, Gerry Ezard, Dave Beckford and Johnny Pluck - prizewinners all - plus the late and much loved Ken Howell.

Jim Hughes was involved from the start. He had completed 6 years in the army in Germany where he had learned to play by ear. When he was demobbed, he saw the announcement of the first British harmonica championship (1953) and he entered. He came third behind Dave Beckford, and never looked back. These days it is hard to imagine that both Douglas and Jim could not read music when they first competed.

From this beginning Douglas rose to prominence in the British and European Harmonica community, and later the US harmonica community. He moved into the parallel world of education where he again rose up the teaching ladder in music and computing. Following his short stay in the US and the development of the Renaissance chromatic, he returned to Britain for his final years where his unique abilities were recognised by the University of Singapore and the NHL.

Brain cancer was diagnosed early in 2005 and Douglas died later the same year just as he had achieved the success he had always wanted. He left behind his wife Barbara, his second wife Hilary and their three grown up children, his older sister and some very close friends in the USA.

Roger Trobridge - Chairman - National Harmonica League
<http://harmonica.co.uk>

OUR LEADING AMATEURS - No. 1 By COLIN KIRBY

DOUGLAS TATE

THE urge to play a harmonica first came to Douglas Tate six years ago, while looking at his school notice board. Among the rules posted there, one simply stared him in the face - "Mouthorgans Forbidden."

One can just imagine his grin. "After all," he says. "Who could resist that?" After three weeks, however, his enthusiasm waned, and it was two years before he took up a harmonica again. This time he "played" while at work. And, because everyone laughed at his efforts, he became determined to master the instrument. He did, and another two years later he gained fourth place in the 1955 All Britain Championships - a very satisfying result for his first appearance in public.

But that contest held a surprise for him. Until then, he hadn't realised that harmonica players also read music. Not to be out-done, he straight away began studying theory and has never stopped since, going on to the really advanced stage of chord sequences and pure improvisation.

Douglas Tate has come a long way since the first contest. In 1956 he came fifth in the National contest, and then second place at the Wembley Music Festival. As if that wasn't enough, he entered for the Gosport Music Festival and won the advanced section.

1957 has proved to be another successful year. He returned to the Wembley Festival and won it. Also, his fourth place in the All Britain Championships made him eligible to enter for the World Championships at Luxembourg -an experience which he greatly enjoyed.

As his results show, he is no longer a newcomer to the stage. He has performed in two local pantomimes, in three variety shows, won several talent competitions, and has had various degrees of success in other musical festivals.

His only lessons have consisted of several one or two hour sessions with Tommy Reilly, who has helped him a lot with musical interpretation. "The main thing about having lessons from Tommy Reilly is listening and watching him play. You see and learn how the effects are obtained."



HARMONETTA EXPERT

Representing Great Britain in the Harmonetta Section at the 1957 World Harmonica Contest at Luxembourg, was Douglas Tate of Letchworth.

In the competition, he played a cadenza composed by himself. He also played in the Chromatic Solo Contest.

Douglas Tate has given several lessons himself, and his advice to beginners is sound: "Learn to play from music but don't try stuff that's fantastic. Start with very simple tunes and try to improve your tone.

When you think you have a tune perfect, listen very carefully and make sure that you have. Then leave it for a week. When you play and listen again, you'll be amazed at the difference."

Douglas believes in practising what he preaches- especially regarding tone. Being under the impression that playing with Jazz Bands and his own group, "The Monarchords," has tended to coarsen his tone, he is at present studying both Tommy Reilly's throat vibrato, and Larry Adler's tongue vibrato.

Douglas stepped up his practice for the World Championships from four hours to six hours every day! Half an hour before work, all lunch breaks and two to three hours every evening.

And to prove his versatility he not only played in the chromatic section, but the harmonetta section as well. Considering that he has only been playing this new instrument seriously for a few months, he must have had to work very hard indeed.

His main ambition, he tells me, is to turn professional. "But," he adds, "that all depends on what happens in the next few years."

From his results on stage already, his enthusiasm and willingness to work hard, I'd say that his ambition has every chance of being fulfilled.

Douglas Tate: 1934 to 2005 (cont)

Douglas had some success towards the end of the 1950s in the British Championships and as a result he was chosen to play in the World Championships from Luxembourg 1957, Paris 1958, Innsbruck 1959, Barcelona 1960, Strasbourg 1963, Delft 1965 and his biggest year, Karlsruhe 1967.

He had done well in the earlier years, and won the diatonic class in Innsbruck and Barcelona, and was second in the Harmonetta section.

On one occasion Douglas used some native cunning and performed in the diatonic class using a chromatic with no slide. This loophole was quickly closed. These were the first wins by a British player in these World Championships.

These experiences led to Douglas getting even more involved with the the British harmonica associations and he was soon active on the board of the National Accordion Organisation (NAO), which also looked after the harmonica players, and soon rose to the position of Deputy President.

Douglas was determined to win the Blue Ribbon



event - the chromatic class. Willi Burger won in it 1955 and Franz Chmel in 1963.

He set about it like the engineer he was and went back to Tommy Reilly for lessons and also spent time working out what the previous winners had done to win. Tommy had asked a London silversmith to make him a silver harmonica, but when he got it he had to ask Douglas to finish it of and set it up.

Douglas used this experience and his own ideas to build a special stainless steel bodied 270 which he completed just days before the 1967 World Championships. He used it for the competition, and it may have been the final piece of the jigsaw. The result was reported in the harmonica press

DOUGLAS TATE IS GREAT BRITAIN'S FIRST WORLD HARMONICA CHAMPION A Brilliant Victory at the Karlsruhe Competition

Playing in the International Amateur Harmonica Championship in Karlsruhe, Germany, on Saturday, June 24, NAO Deputy President Douglas Tate of Stotfold, Hitchin, Herts, won the Chromatic Solo Competition and so became the first British player to secure the title of World Harmonica Champion.

The Competition is organised every second year by the Federation Internationale de l'Harmonica in one or other of its member countries. The Harmonica Guild of Great Britain invariably sends contestants, and on this occasion had entered three soloists - the others were Brian Chaplin of Cheltenham and John Tyler of Colchester.

There was a good entry, representing the best players from fourteen member countries in the Solo Championship. The test Piece was the original composition for harmonica and piano "Impromptu" by the well-known British composer James Moody. As his Own Choice Piece, Douglas Tate played the Roumanian Rhapsody No. 1 by G. Enesco arranged by Larry Adler. He was accompanied on piano by his wife, Janet.



Douglas Tate: 1934 to 2005 (cont)

Ivan Richards remembers his own success in 1975, and the support he got. By then, Hohner were not supporting the event in the same way, and the contestants had to look after themselves.

I went to see Douglas Tate at his beautiful cottage in Ampthill. He showed me a harpsichord he had made himself. Absolutely beautiful. Douglas Tate was a superb engineer as well as a great player. Then I noticed his World Championship trophy was being used as a doorstop!! Nice touch.

The idea was that he would re-engineer my newly acquired Hohner silver harmonica to eradicate some air leaks in preparation for the forthcoming world championships. He asked me to play for him the two pieces I had chosen and had been rehearsing with Jim Hughes, my tutor at the time.



One of these was the James Moody 'Impromptu'. Douglas had actually won his World Championship in 1967 playing this very piece. He then played a recording of himself playing the Impromptu and we compared and went over many points together. We also went over some techniques he'd used for rehearsing the 'pressure' that would be experienced. He made me play on stage in the music hall adjacent to his cottage, under test conditions, over and over again.

The combination of this advice plus the tutorship of Jim Hughes - probably the finest harmonica tutor there has been, as well as one of the finest harmonica players - was the best possible grounding a wide-eyed 17 year old could have wished for and contributed greatly towards my becoming world champion in 1975.

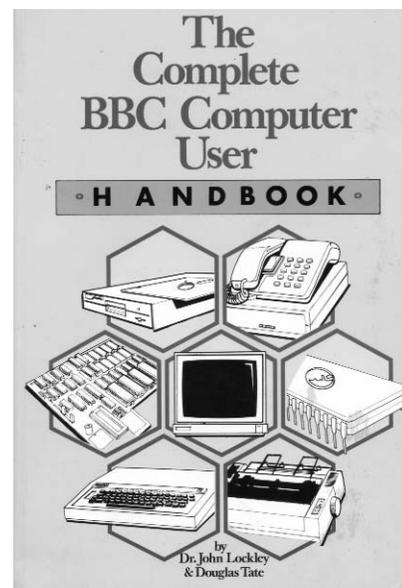
Things have continued to change, and the World Championships in 2001 and 2005 at which Philip Achille was successful were very different. All Hohner sponsorship of National Organisations had gone, and it was up to individuals to decide to take part in the event.

Douglas was still working for ICL Computers when he won his World Championships. He had many successes to his name including the design of dot matrix printers, card readers, constant current welding machines for the auto industry, and teaching machines for schools and the World Health Organisation.

In 1970, Douglas decided to change career. He retrained in Luton as a general teacher with music as his main subject. After two years in a junior school, he was asked by Michael Rose, the head of Music for Bedfordshire, to take over a music department in Dunstable, and was soon in charge of music at Wootton Upper School. This was a productive period for Douglas, and he set up many music clubs and developed teaching procedures in the schools where he worked.

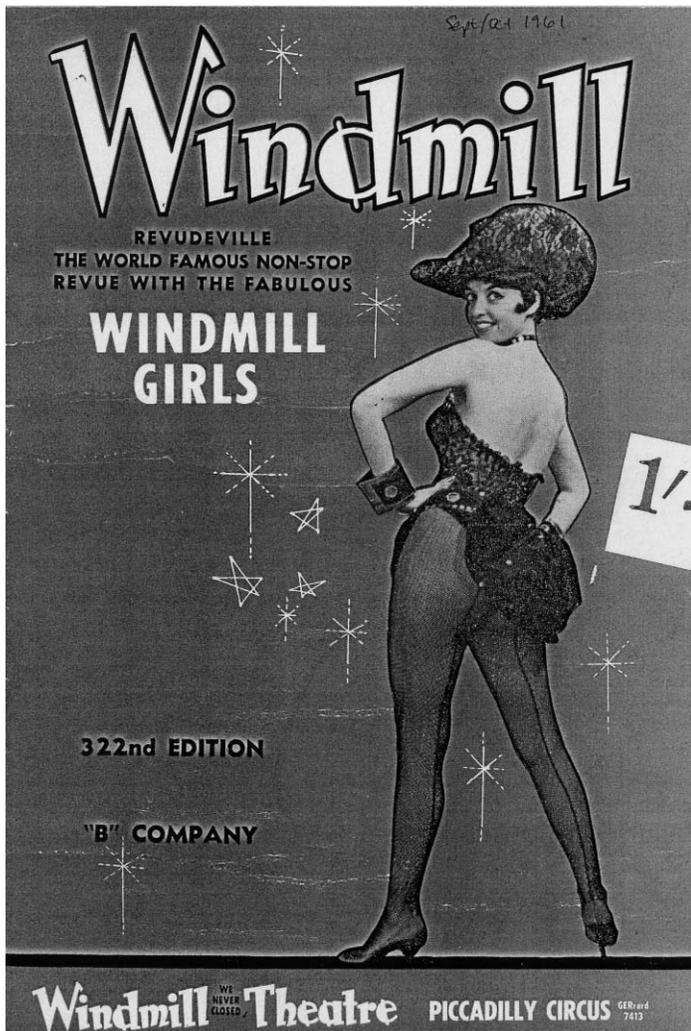
In 1984 Douglas was asked to become Head of Computing in a Business Studies department of a secondary school, a post which he held until his retirement in 1996.

His experience at ICL led to him to becoming involved with the development of computer services and networks for schools. He wrote some computer software for education, but he is probably better known to many parents as the joint author of *The Complete BBC Computer User Handbook*. This computer went into most UK schools, and many homes.



Performing music was always an important part of Douglas's life, even when he was working with ICL or teaching. He had wanted to play full time, but it was always a part time activity.

In the late 50s and early 60s Hohner established and ran a series of Teachers' Summer Schools in Worcester College, Oxford University, in harmonica and other instruments - guitar, recorder etc. Douglas taught at some of these as did Jim Hughes. They brought contact with senior people in the school music establishment like Dr Leslie Russell, and Albert Rowe and Gareth Walters, the authors of the *Harmonica and Recorder Teachers' Manual*.



Douglas made over 250 appearances at the Windmill Theatre in London, in late 1961. He appeared as the Tate Brothers. They played between two burlesque dance routines, *Jungle Fantasy*, and *A Matador in Mexico*. It was Douglas's only spell of professional work.

There is an image in Albert Rainer's 1960's book *Le Livre de l'Harmonica* of *The Tate Brothers*. No one seems to know who the other player is.



Whilst still working as an engineer, Douglas gained entry into other areas of performing after meeting Herfordshire's Head of Music, one cold wet night. They found they shared similar tastes in music and he soon had Douglas playing Bach in schools, and also for the BBC. First there was a theme for the TV show, which led to work with the composer, Phyllis Tate (no relation). She liked the sound of the harmonica and wanted him to play in a new composition for string quartet, piano and tenor voice, to be performed live on National Radio at the prestigious Cardiff Festival. It was the first time he'd ever played a piece of music where the harmonica was given equal value with all the other instruments.

Douglas started playing the oboe parts with a local string quartet. They showed him how to play Baroque music and it totally altered the technical and musical side of his harmonica playing. He was much more aware of single notes and phrases.

He played with orchestras like the London Philharmonic, the London Symphony, and the Hallé. Other work involved themes for BBC like *The Last of the Summer Wine* and some recitals on BBC Radio Three. He also recorded with rock musician Rod Argent (synth) and Janet Edwards (piano) under the name, *Electrio*, and did some studio work with the Beatles.

This exposure for the harmonica led to other composers writing works for the harmonica, which Douglas was able to premier. A list of these works is available on his web site. One of Douglas's final projects was to search out and archive the manuscripts of all the harmonica music he could find. This is now included in other collections on the Internet.

Douglas has only one commercial recording, but tapes do exist of radio broadcasts and other concerts. These are currently being transferred to a digital master and a CD will be released.

Douglas was always interested in improving his harmonicas to make them play better and stay in tune longer. Tommy Reilly was aware of his ability and on receiving his first Silver Harmonica he asked Douglas to set it up correctly. Larry Adler also used to send his harmonicas to Douglas for tuning.

The main areas where Douglas had been active were in the air-tightness and length of movement of the slide and the shape of the top slots in the comb - the Tate Ramps which he made by filling the slots with shaped fibre glass resin plugs. He also favoured polishing the reeds, which he knew removed stress points and prolonged their life. He

published these ideas in his books and on the Internet. There will be more on these topics in a future issue.

Douglas used his modified 270 for over 30 years without further work. One of his final requests was that Pat Missin - no one else - should check it out. It was found to require only minimal retuning on one reed. Douglas had asked that Pat did not remove the reed plates as he thought that any adhering material might have contributed to the stability.

Douglas was an early user of the Internet. The first harmonica mailing list HARP-L began in Oct 1992. Douglas was posting by early 1995. He was soon at home there, and he helped many players this way. Through email he met an American, Cathi Norton, who visited Douglas in the UK when touring with her guitarist husband. She took away a cassette tape of Douglas's harmonica recordings and shared it with Jack Ely in Columbus, USA. Jack invited Douglas to appear at the 1996 Buckeye Festival and they became great buddies. It opened the door to the US for Douglas - a new horizon and a new audience who lapped up the sense of humour and talent of *Sir Douglas*.

The Internet also introduced him to Bobbie Giordano, a designer, whom he met at the 1996 Buckeye. Together they took the ideas Douglas had been testing on his old 270, and produced the Renaissance, arguably the best chromatic harmonica available.. The first prototype appeared in public at SPAH in 1996, and the second nine months later. The first production model was available in August 1997. It was an immediate success despite its high cost, and over 50 have been made. The striking design features screw-free, smooth silver plated cover plates around a stainless steel comb, with a short throw, airtight slide assembly.



The Renaissance was always work in progress - an evolving design in search of the perfect chromatic. Some of the credit for the Renaissance should go to one of Douglas' pupils, Bill Henderson, who supported the development. He put up some of the money for the initial prototypes and is the proud owner of Renaissance #1.



Following the diagnosis of Douglas's cancer it was decided the Renaissance should continue after his death, as long as its quality could be maintained or improved. After due consideration, the new owners of Seydel Söhne made this commitment, and Douglas worked closely with them so that they could adopt the same techniques he had set up. The first Seydel models are due in 2006.

Douglas had a long experience of the Harmonica and Accordion Organisations in Britain and he was spending long periods of time in America, so it was not such a big surprise when his new friends in the USA asked him to become President of SPAH, (The Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica) in 2000. They had problems and needed an experienced hand. It was the UK's loss and the USA's gain when he accepted.

Douglas got things back on an even keel and put his stamp on the organisation. He invited artists from around the world to appear at the SPAH conventions - Brendan Power, Fata Morgana, Philip Achille, Donald Black, The Adler Trio, Yasuo Watani ... - and he set out to remove some of the age and music style conflicts. Like the NHL he also needed to find a new, younger committee to carry on the work he had started. This was not in place by the end of his first three year term and he was asked to stay for a second term. He agreed, despite my reminding him he was living in the UK again, and becoming active within the NHL. He helped with the contest, children's events, and played in the concerts. He continued to run SPAH from home in England, using email, phone

conferencing, and occasional trans-Atlantic flights for the personal meetings needed to select venues for the SPAH Conventions. He resigned after two years of his second term when his condition had been confirmed.



The two big interests in Douglas's life were education and harmonica construction. At the very end of his life these came together in Singapore Youth Harmonica Festival Singapore, in Dec 2004.

Douglas gave workshops on the developments in musical instrument design and the techniques of playing, TV and Radio interviews, a master class, and spent lots of time with the children at the festival.

He played in the main festival concert and included a duet with his friend Yatsuo Watani. They shared a sense of humour and began by getting their chromatics in tune by pretending to turn the buttons.

The University offered him a year's residency, or multiple visits. It was a great disappointment to everyone concerned that he could not be there to see the completion of what he had helped to create. Douglas's wish for a graded examination system for harmonica is coming to fruition through the University of Singapore.



He was very pleased that young people like Philip Achille and Jamie Dolan are pushing back the boundaries to the recognition of the harmonica as a serious musical instrument.

Some of Douglas's wisdom is available through his two books. *Play The Harmonica Well*, and *Make Your Harmonica Play Better*.

Douglas was buried in a simple funeral in the presence of his wife Barbara and his close family. When it was over we went to his local pub where we reminisced and laughed a lot and cried a bit at the memories we all shared.

Two items on the table seemed to hold great significance for Douglas's daughters. One was the bookplate which Douglas had inside all his books. It was from a woodcut by Marie Whitby, and it is on the front of this tribute. The other was his 270 chromatic and its battered old box, closed with a rubber band, which they all remembered their father playing as they were growing up. Here it is, back after its check up by one of the rare harp specialists that Douglas would trust - Pat Missin.



Douglas wanted to expand the chromatic harmonica repertoire. Part of this involved finding and restoring some of the older music which had been written specifically for the harmonica. His widow Barbara has continued this work and some pieces by Tommy Reilly are already done and are being played by NHL members. She also intends to re-issue more of Tommy Reilly's teaching material including his chromatic harmonica course inc CDs. Barbara has collected all of Douglas's recordings and the plan is to get them remastered or cleaned up so that they can be made available again. For more on these developments, check her web site, <http://www.douglastate.com>