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— DOWNTIME —

by Austin Animal

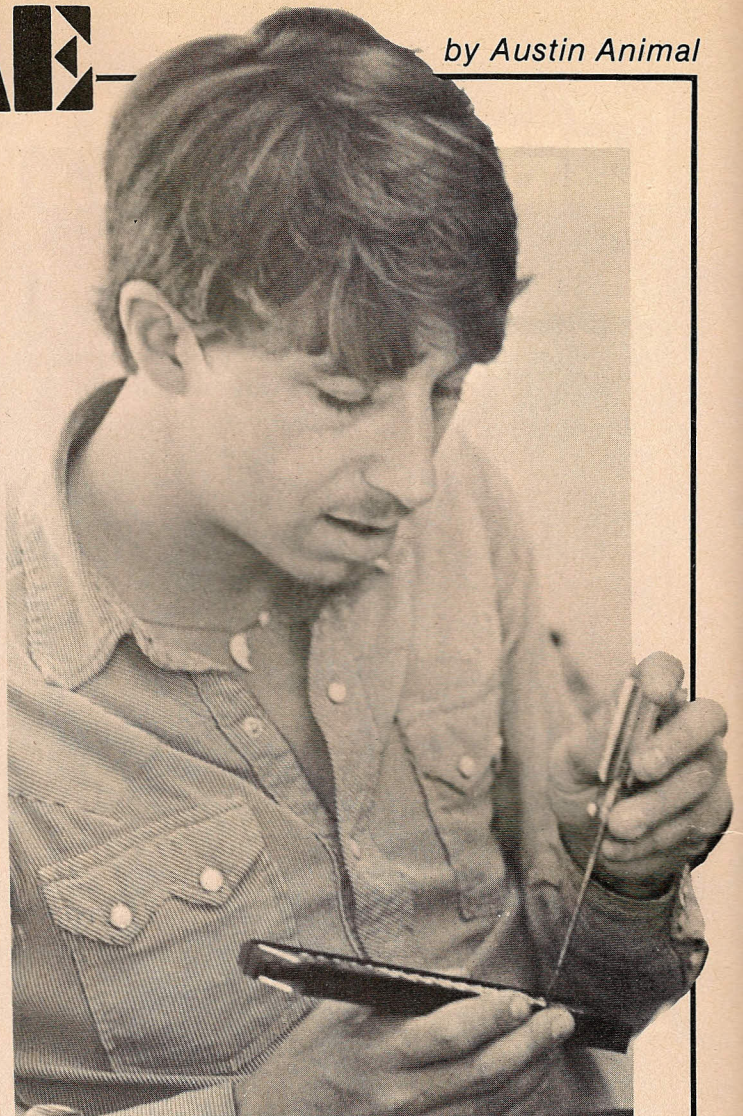
For my money, Norton Buffalo is the best damn harmonica player on the music scene today. Now, the name Norton Buffalo isn't exactly a household word, in spite of the fact that he's performed widely as a session musician with a great variety of artists — America, Commander Cody, Steve Miller, the Doobie Brothers, and the Marshall Tucker Band to name only a few. In addition, he's had supporting roles in a few movies, most notably as Bette Midler's manager in "The Rose." But, primarily because of poor promotion by his previous record label, Capitol, and his own preference to confining his touring to the West Coast and the Northwest, relatively few rock fans are familiar with his solo work. But believe me, this guy's too good to remain on the bench — he's a first-stringer in anybody's league.

I, too, would probably still be in the dark about Buffalo if my wild and woolly drinking buddy, Sport, hadn't talked me into going to see a magician about two years ago — that's right, a magician. It was a Saturday night and since we'd been guzzling tequila all day, we'd reached such new heights (or depths) of obnoxious behavior by the evening that our dates had split together, leaving us to sop up our suds alone, mumbling inco-

herent invectives about women and their notorious lack of a sense of humor. Then, out of the blue, Sport came up with the bright idea of riding into town and catching Ricky Jay at a local club.

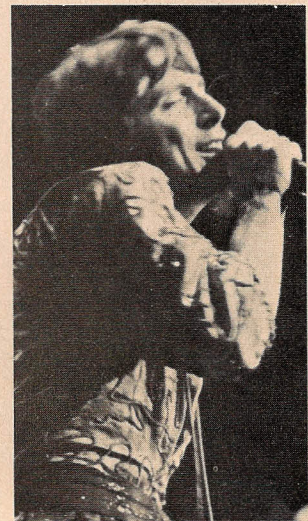
Ordinarily, I'd have refused, since a guy pulling rabbits out of his ass isn't my idea of entertainment. But Sport managed to convince me that this was something special, telling me Jay could, among other feats, fling an ordinary playing card with such force that it would stick in a watermelon. I was just drunk enough to find the idea intriguing, figuring maybe I could learn to do the same thing and someday surprise a poker shark by zinging a card into his face when he tried to hustle me. So we jumped on our scoots and cruised over to the club.

The opening act was announced — Norton Buffalo — and I steeled myself with more alcohol in anticipation of what I expected would be another loud and amateurish set by some local (I assumed) aggregation of post-adolescent punksters. My fears were reinforced when I saw the band and its lead singer. (I had made the assumption that Norton Buffalo was the name of the entire group, not the actual name of its leader, as was the case.) You can imagine my appre-



hension and depression when I saw a skinny dude with short hair take the stage decked in an outfit that looked like he'd stolen

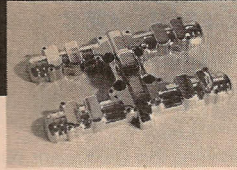
it from a creature from another planet — sort of a brocade zoot suit with a cummerbund that made it look *Continued on page 76*



Photos by Kim Peterson

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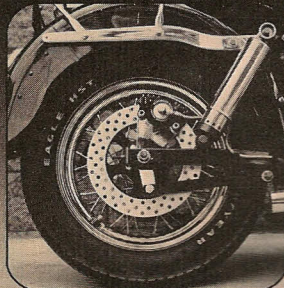
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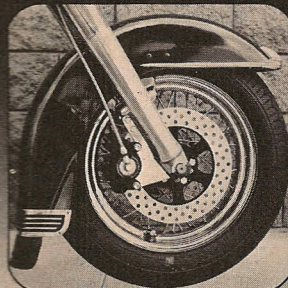
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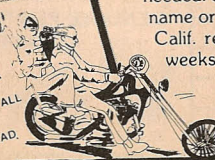
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Downtime

Continued from page 38

like a costume for a forties-vintage harem movie set in Hollywood's idea of Baghdad. This outfit was set off by a black skullcap bearing a large cloth representation of a harmonica that flopped wildly during the first number, after which it was discarded. I was certain this goombah would drive me right up the wall.

Was I ever wrong. Norton Buffalo proceeded to blow my shit into next week with some of the hottest harmonica playing I've heard before or since. Without exaggeration, I can say I couldn't believe the sounds coming out of the skinny weirdo hopping around on the stage in front of me. Warbling in a pure tenor voice that slipped easily in and out of falsetto blues breaks, running through a mixed bag of dynamite rhythm and blues, rocking pop tunes, and tasteful ballads, Buffalo readily demonstrated that, if he wanted, he could make it strictly as a singer. But his harp playing is just this side of unbelievable.

Thrusting three or four harmonicas into his belt, Buffalo whipped them out singly or in groups to blow some of the meanest virtuoso blues harmonica you'll ever hear, sometimes switching to a chromatic instru-



ment for beautiful, complex runs that left the audience dumbfounded and screaming for more. Needless to say, I became an instant fan.

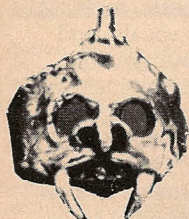
Perhaps the most-overlooked and frequently-disregarded instrument in pop music is the harmonica. Guitar players, whether lead, rhythm, or bass, tend to dominate discussions about who's the best on their instruments, the candidates seeming endless — George Thorogood, Pete Townsend, Eric Clapton, Jerry Garcia, Johnny Winter, Jimi Hendrix, Alvin Lee, Albert Lee, Bill



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Wyman, Carlos Santana, John McLaughlin, Joe Walsh, Ry Cooder, etc. But turn to the harp and only a few players come to mind. Of course, only a few rock, blues, or country bands employ full-time harp players. There are exceptions, naturally, like Kim Wilson of The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Magic Dick of the J. Geils Band, and Mickey Raphael, who plays with Willie Nelson.

Joel Tepp, who's played harp for Ian Matthews, Bonnie Raitt, and Maria Muldaur, calls the instrument's secondary role a time-honored prejudice; "The harp is a color instrument, and most artists don't like to color an entire set with it. As a result, you've pretty much got to double on another instrument in order to work. In the beginning I didn't double, and whenever it came time to go on tour I'd lose my job.

"I know it's a cliché, but the harmonica is really a very underestimated instrument. But I guess that's to be expected with any ax that you can pick up and make noises on immediately."

Harmonica players don't always labor in obscurity, though, and some, like Little Walter, Bob Dylan, and the previously-mentioned Mickey Raphael, have created styles so distinctive as to be instantly identifiable. But I'll stick by my guns and say the ab-so-fuckin'-lutely best harp player around today is Norton Buffalo.

I asked Buffalo about those assumed limitations of the instrument the last time he played in this area. As we sat in his hotel room he tinkered with a chromatic harp he had disassembled as we talked. "I just don't think the public understands the capacity of the little harmonica," he stated. "Like everybody thinks, 'Aww, it's just a little fucker.' But they don't really know what it can do. It's a chameleon, 'cause I can make that thing scream just like a sax. You can play those real beautiful melodies, and you can play that real screaming shit. The harp, because of its size, is unregarded. Everybody thinks it's real limited, but it's not."

While nothing will give you the full impact of Norton Buffalo's remarkable talent except hearing him in person, his two fine albums on Capitol, **Desert Horizon** and **Lovin' In The Valley Of The Moon**, serve as excellent showcases for this exceptional performer.

Desert Horizon, Buffalo's 1978 effort, is the quieter of the two discs, containing the brief, moody, tone-poem-like instrumental "Echoes of the Last Stampede" and generally

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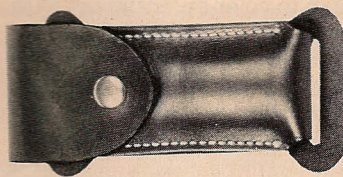
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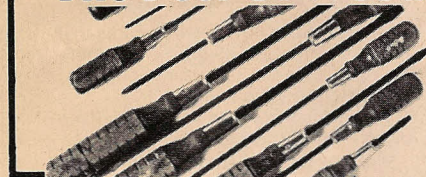
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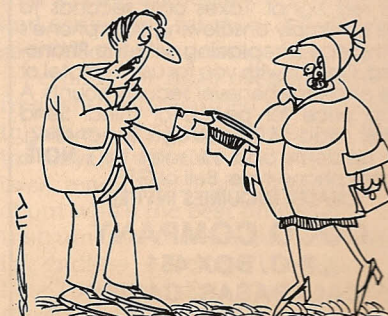
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devoted to more leisurely rockers like the title tune, "Hopin' You'll Come Back," and "High Tide in Wingo." Among the more upbeat stuff is "Age Old Puppet" and "Walk-in' Down to Suzy's." With a couple of exceptions, all the tunes were written by Buffalo himself, and you won't find a bad one in the lot.

Lovin' In The Valley Of The Moon, Buffalo's 1979 release, is the livelier and better of his two albums, full of great, enthusiastic, rocking music, accomplished vocals, and harp work to twist your gourd. Again, Buffalo wrote almost all the tunes, and from the opening title track through rockers like "One Kiss to Say Goodbye," "Nobody Wants Me," and "Eighteen Wheels," you're in for a solid musical treat.

Like I said earlier, the blasting, shit-scattering power of Norton Buffalo's full-bore work probably can't be captured on vinyl, but these are excellent albums and hold up to repeated playings month after month. A word of warning, however: You may have difficulty finding these records because he's no longer associated with Capitol and they never adequately got behind him and promoted him when he was signed with them. The albums are still in print, however, and should be available on order. If your local dealer doesn't stock them, tell him to get them or you'll brush his teeth with a crescent wrench. As this is being written, Buffalo is completing a third album and shopping it to various labels, so keep your eye peeled for a new release before long. If they've got a brain in their heads or a hair in their asses, the promo boys at this new label will push the new record and he'll receive the recognition he deserves. Based on his past performance, the new album should be a killer.

The late Mike Bloomfield called Norton Buffalo "the best cat blowing harp today" and I couldn't agree more. Pop music presents us with a talent of this stature only once in a while, so don't miss it. Remember, you heard it here first. ■



"It isn't for a drink, ma'am, it's for a laxative — I haven't shit in a week."

Easyriders