

Blues harp maestro and Mighty Flyers bandleader Rod Piazza is only 50, but he's already put in more than three decades as a hard-working bluesman, helping to create and purvey what's become known as the West Coast style of blues: a mixture of Chicago blues and swing, using fat guitars, upright bass, Otis Spann-flavored boogie-woogie piano, double shuffle drumming and jumpin' harp.

Jimmy Rogers and Little Walter planted the seeds for this style back in the '50s, but Piazza has honed it, adding a heavy dose of chromatic harp (influenced by his mentor George "Harmonica" Smith), not to mention dazzling arrangements and a dollop of California cool. Although he's been a major influence on a number of musicians over the years — and his band has served as a proving ground for many of the West Coast's best, including Hollywood Fats and Junior Watson — Piazza & Co. have become well-known in the international blues community only in the past six or seven years, partly a result of the CD era's reintroduction of blues to the public (some of his hard-to-find records, such as *Harpburn*, were reissued) and partly because, after a few years of concentrating on family matters, Piazza got his band out touring and recording again.

Successful projects for Black Top and Big Mo brought The Mighty Flyers to the public's attention, garnered the band several Handy nominations, and earned the group a reputation as the best blues band in the land. Such accolades seem to make him uncomfortable, but his band clearly is one of the top ensembles on the circuit these days, and perhaps no bandleader since Muddy Waters has managed to form and sustain such a high caliber outfit through various personnel changes and crises over so long a time. Now, with his new release, *Tough and Tender*, coming out on Tone-Cool, we thought we'd touch bases with Piazza, look back over his long career and discuss what he's learned about band leadership and, of course, harmonica playing.

Piazza began playing harp under the influence of popular, laconic bluesman Jimmy Reed. "When I got my first harp, I

was just trying to play the simplest things I had heard, like 'Big Boss Man' and Slim Harpo's 'Scratch My Back' and Buster Brown's 'Fanny Mae.' These were things I had heard on the radio," he explained in a recent phone conversation. By 1965, Piazza had formed a group called The Mystics, which formed the nucleus for The Dirty Blues Band, with whom he would record two albums in the late '60s.

"I still wasn't a very good harp player, so I was mostly singing," he recalled. Gradually, though, his playing improved as he fell under the sway of Junior Wells and James Cotton, both of whom were

can't at first. And I thought, 'Well, what's going on here?' So then it started."

Fortunately, there were a few older musicians hanging around Los Angeles who helped guide Piazza to more music by the undisputed King of Blues Harp. "You had guys like [Canned Heat harp player] Al Wilson and [Hollywood Fats harp player and singer] Al Blake; these guys were a little older than me, and they had a little head start on the records. Al Blake took me over to his house, and he had all the Little Walter 45s, and he'd play along with 'em and show me." Soon Piazza was making treks into Watts to acquire Little Walter records of his own. "By '68 you can kinda see that I'm moving toward Little Walter. And by the time the Bacon Fat thing happened [Bacon Fat was the twin harp band Piazza formed with George Smith], I had gotten deeper into Walter, and George was an influence, of course, so between those two things and really kinda pushin' it and step-pin' on it hard, I found my way."

Months of intensive study and memorization of those 45s

paved the way for Piazza to eventually develop a style of his own. "I'd be out playin', and all these harp players would go, 'Aw, you're the greatest,' but I knew that all I was really doing was just playing stuff I had learned from records, and I knew sooner or later, years down the road, these guys would be doing the same thing, and if I was ever gonna be somebody on the harmonica, I'd have to find something of my own to put with this and kinda mold it into Rod Piazza!"

Having memorized and assimilated Little Walter, Piazza

began the process of deconstructing his style. "If I did a Little Walter tune, I'd try to play different licks than Walter played, or if I wrote something of my own, I'd try to avoid being too influenced by Walter. I wanted to create something of my own, yet keep it in that traditional vein. I didn't want to jump out of it altogether. That

# ROD PIAZZA TOUGH *Tender* TRUE TO THE BLUES

by Tom Townsley

releasing albums at this time. Rice Miller also was an influence, but then one day an acquaintance gave Piazza a *Best of Little Walter* album, and the course of his life changed forever. "When I took that over to the house and put it on, the world turned upside down. I couldn't hear everything he was doing — as you know, you