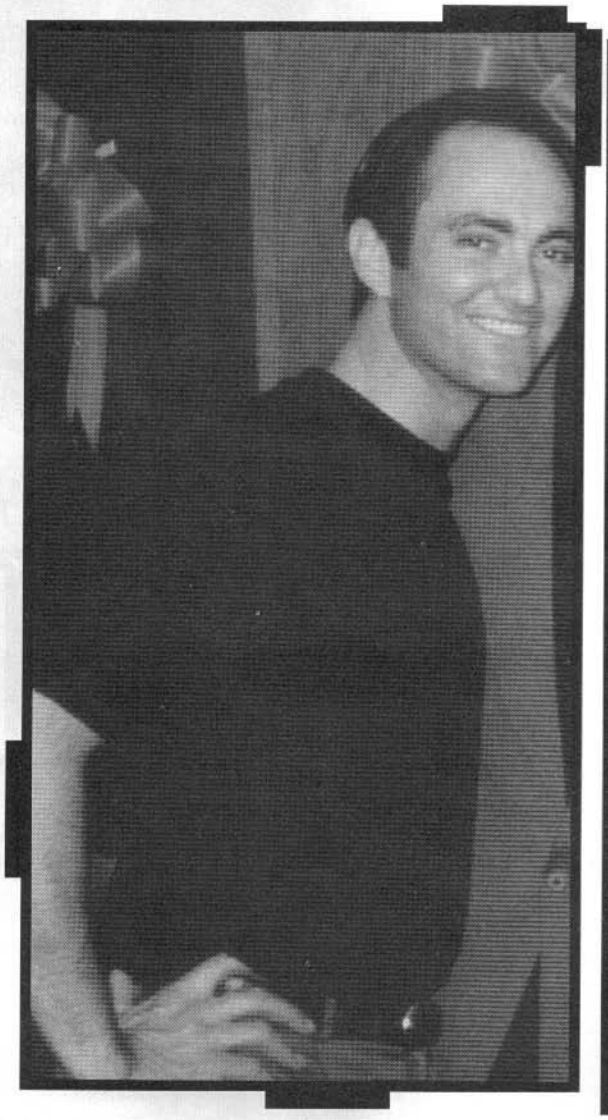
would have been too easy."

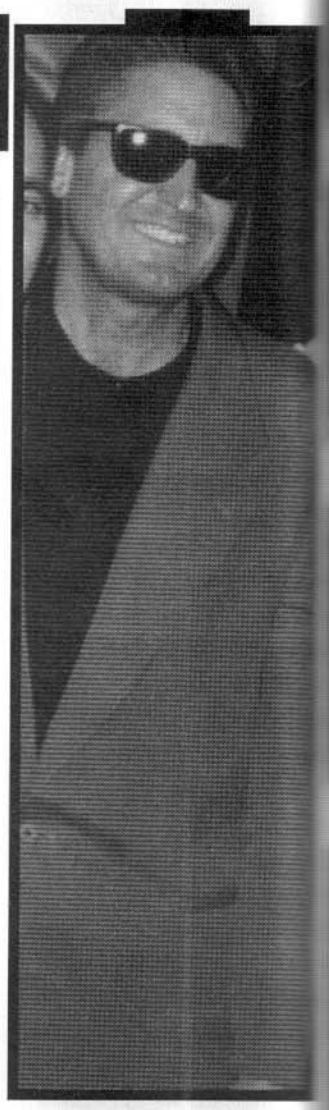
Forging his own approach to the instrument was a painstaking process. "There are subtle nuances that make things different on the harp. I really made an effort to start solos different ways and vary my turnarounds, play a different octave or blow when you'd expect a draw, just generally try to make it a little more intricate, but not just to be intricate, just to be ... myself." The swiftness with which he mastered his craft belied the hours of intensive, even obsessive, practice he put into his instrument. "Today I'm sort of a technique mishmash, man. I just try to get out of it what I get out of it. Don't look to me for technical consistency. I don't really play any one way. I'll play something one time through tongue-blocking it, and the next time through I won't block it. Sometimes I'll purse up on it or curl my tongue, y'know?"

With the ability to radically alter his embouchure now second nature, Piazza is capable of producing an array of tones and textures. Still, perfectionist that he is, he searches for new and better ways to play. "I listen to my stuff, and I'm never happy with it. Well, sometimes I am, but it's very rare. On the chromatic I don't feel that way, but on the small harp I do." Piazza's chromatic playing is, of course, his benchmark. Few have ever played the blues style of chromatic better. Here he had the benefit of playing and talking shop with another of the greatest chromatic players, George Smith. Piazza's affection for the blues veteran shines through his voice, even on a bad phone connection.

"When you want to get tough on the chromatic, George was the guy. He was more proficient on the chromatic than Walter, although I love Little Walter's 'Teenage Beat' and different things he did — the 'less embouchure approach,' y'know? But George had those big octaves. He always used to tell me, 'Rod, get that harp back in your mouth. Get that harp deep!' And I'd be thinking, 'Man, I got this thing to where it's almost hitting my teeth.' Then I realized he actually had his teeth over the harp; his front teeth were almost to the back of the cover. And then I realized that's the only way to get what he's doing." Just as he had to diverge from Little Walter's diatonic style, so, too, did he eventually develop a chromatic style of his own, built on what Smith taught him. He always admits Smith's influence and has paid tribute to him on record more than once.

Piazza first met Smith in 1968, outside a club where Smith was rehearsing with Big Mama Thornton. Piazza ventured to speak to the harpmaster and got an invitation to visit him at his home, but he was too intimidated to accept the offer. "Then I saw him six or eight or nine months later, playing at The Ash Grove. The Ash Grove had Big Walter booked, and I hadn't seen Big Walter yet, so me and Richard Innes and a couple of girls drove up there and went in the club. There was hardly anybody in there yet. So I looked up on the stage, and there's Pee Wee Crayton setting his shit up, a guy named Bob Denny on drums, a guy named Ben on bass and George Smith dumping his harmonicas out of his satchel onto the stage — just a mess, dumpin' 'em out! So I'm trying to figure out what's what, y'know? And some guy in the back yells out, 'Hey, Mr. Smith, can I play guitar later?' George didn't even look up. He just goes, 'Yeah.' And so we sat right down in front of the stage, and I'm feeling pretty cocky about this time about my playing, so I said, 'Gee, I'd like to try and play some harp, too.' Once again he didn't look up; he just said, 'Yeah.'





Rod Piazza with an earlier incarnation of the Mighty Flyers and actor/harp player/Piazza fan Bruce Willis

"So we're sitting there, and by the time the show started, the club's filled up about three-quarters full and we're sitting right against the stage and people were packing in behind us, so there was no movin' at this point. So they start up with a little four-piece band, and George is playing through this old Astatic [microphone] and this old red Silvertone amp that he had reupholstered with red vinyl. I've got that amp now. And the show goes

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