

on, and I asked someone, 'I thought this was supposed to be Big Walter tonight?' And they go, 'Yeah, Big Walter Smith.'

"He came out and started blowing, and you know what he sounded like. He just wailed through that amp and the Astatic, and I'm going, 'What the hell! Damn! Oh shit! I don't wanna play!' So he comes over to me about halfway through the set and says, 'So you're the guy who

me up onto the stage by pulling on the cord! And the whole time, the crowd's yelling and screaming, y'know, so I got up onstage, and I hurried up and played just about one or two progressions more, ended it and quickly gave him back the harp. I tried to shake his hand, y'know. And Pee Wee's clapping me on the shoulder going, 'You're outta sight! What's your name? Rod? Rod, you're outta sight!' Him and

shuffle off, and I'm going, 'Oh, f—.' I could barely make the change on a chromatic. So he comes over and does the same thing again, sticks it in my face, and I'm going, 'No, no!' And he made me take it, stood back and waited till I started blowing. And he quickly realized I could barely make the three chord changes, so he took it back and said, 'Let's give him a hand.' Everybody claps, and he lets me go.

"So at the end of the night, I went up to him and said, 'Man, George, really, thanks for letting me play. You're so great. I gotta come by sometime and let you show me stuff.' And he said, 'Yeah.' Didn't really look up. About two months later, I had the gig there with my band. We're opening up for Wolf. And I'm up there playing. I think I was doing 'Off the Wall' or something, and I have my eyes closed, and everybody starts to clap, and I'm thinking, 'What the hell's going on?' And I open my eyes, and here's George standing next to me on the stage, looking down at me, like, 'OK, I gave you your chance. Now you give me mine!'

"So I handed him the harp, and he just commenced to tearin' it up with my band! They were well rehearsed to playin' the Little Walter shit, so George could just play whatever he wanted, and they could back him up. And it just sounded great! Then I went back up there, and we played a couple songs together, and the crowd went wild. Wolf got all pissed off. ... So we played out the week with Wolf there. And George was, like, 'Let's get a band together, Rod!' And I said, 'Two harps?' And that was the start of Bacon Fat."

The two harp format was unusual, but for Piazza it was a godsend, affording him the opportunity to travel with and learn from one of the masters of the instrument. Together they traveled throughout the United States and Europe, often touring with Big Mama Thornton and Pee Wee Crayton, among others. Back home they opened for and backed up nearly every major blues act that passed through Los Angeles. It was the sort of musical training no school could offer. And Piazza was serious about learning all he could. "My mom died when I was 15," he said, "and I kinda made up my mind that I wanted to do something with my life and strive to be the best. I'm not saying I ever became the best, but striving to be probably kept me from getting too drunk every night when I was playing. I really tried to

wanted to play? OK!' And he sticks the harp and the mic right down in my face, like, 'OK! Take it! And I'm thinking, 'Oh, shit. I ain't playing.' And he's like, 'C'mon! You say you can blow, so blow!' " Piazza said, laughing.

"So I took the mic and started playing, and he looked at me like, "What the f—? Who's this guy?" So he grabbed the cord and pulled the cord in the air and made me stand up in my seat, then jerked

George were always at odds, one bailing the other out of jail, always at odds over who was running the band, so he wanted to build me up in George's eyes, acting like 'Oh, Rod's great, George. You're nothing.' So I went and sat right down, feelin' really lucky. Then George goes, 'OK, we saw what he could do with the little one. Now let's see what he can do with Big Mama.' And he reaches down and pulls out the goddamn chromatic! And he starts this

