

IN CONCERT : Harmonica Convergence — Now celebrating its 20th anniversary year, the Mark Hummel-led 'Blues Harmonica Blowout' has spotlighted some of the finest living blues harpists, including Mark Hummel

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MARK HUMMEL, 'BLUES HARMONICA BLOWOUT,' featuring KIM WILSON, ROD PIAZZA and RUSTY ZIN

When: 8 p.m. Thursday

Where: SOhO Restaurant and Music Club, 1221 State St. (upstairs)

Cost: \$23 general, \$18 with dinner

Information: 962-7776, sohosb.com



Courtesy photo

For whatever reason, blues harp has had an unusually strong and gusty presence in California, including Santa Barbara, proper. Important blues harmonica aces have lived and played in this beach town for years, including current resident Tom Ball, longtime Santa Barbaran-turned-Los Angeleno Mitch Kashmar (now playing with War) and, as legend and history have it, the great Kim Wilson, aka "Goleta Slim."

Wilson has long since moved on, playing with Fabulous Thunderbirds and establishing himself as one of the pillars of the scene, but his "Goleta Slim" mystique remains. In other Californian blues harp news, the dynamic Rod Piazza is a surfer from Riverside (who recently blew the roof off Warren Hall in a Santa Barbara Blues Society-hosted show).

Blues harp roads converge next Thursday at SOhO, when the Bay Area-based harpist and mover-and-shaker Mark Hummel brings his "Blues Harmonica Blowout" to town, with Wilson and Piazza in tow. Hummel, who has led his band Blues Survivors (he is the lone survivor of the original line-up) since the mid-'70s, began hosting these all-star "Blowouts" 20 years ago. The saga continues.

On the phone from home close to Oakland, Hummel talked about his long musical saga, and his

pet project. Hummel's multi-harpist "Blowout" fests began modestly enough, as a special occasion for the first Martin Luther King holiday at a club in Berkeley back in 1991. It went so well that the club owner invited him to make it a regular tradition. Hummel seized on the idea, taking it on the road and extending the invitation to more and more heroic figures in the blues harp world.

As Hummel recalls, "It just got to be bigger and bigger every year. I started adding pretty much everyone you can think of who plays harmonica, other than Stevie Wonder. He's one of the only guys I haven't had on this thing yet. In the blues harmonica world, I've had pretty much most of the people you can think of."

Included on the long and growing list of participants are James Cotton, Charlie Musselwhite, Huey Lewis, Carey Bell, the recently belated Norton Buffalo, Billy Boy Arnold and James Harman, not to mention former Santa Barbarans Wilson and Kashmar. As it happens, many of these players hail from the Golden State.

What is it about California that has made it such a fertile soil for blues musicians of note? "I really don't know," Hummel comments. "All I can say is that certain seeds were sown quite awhile back. Musselwhite moved out here in '69. Rod (Piazza) grew up in Southern California, and George Smith moved out here in the '50s. I just think there was a number of blues guys who ended up out here — including Francis Clay and John Lee Hooker."

For Hummel himself, a native of New Haven, Conn., who grew up in Los Angeles, California offered much in the way of support and opportunities, especially once he moved northward. "Los Angeles always had a small scene in the sense that you had a lot of famous blues guys who lived there, but there was never many places to play in Los Angeles. I grew up there, and one of the reasons I moved to the Bay Area was because there was more opportunity here. I just wanted to go where I knew I could play blues and where there would be a scene for it."

In Hummel's case, the potent lure of the blues — and blues harp, specifically — struck him fairly early in life. "When I was 14 or 15, I picked up the harp. Once I picked it up, that's all I really wanted to do. It was just something I was totally consumed by."