

Newport Daily News

Have harmonica, will travel

James J. Gillis - The Newport Daily News

Posted: Tuesday, March 15, 2011 12:00 am

NEWPORT, R.I. Peter Martin retired from the software industry a decade ago and has been ridiculously busy ever since. He works part time, serving as a Democratic **state representative** from Newport, now in his second term.

It's a great thing, he said. I enjoy it, and it It's kind of rejuvenated me. Martin, 69, also has plenty of hobbies to fill his time, including playing the dozen or so harmonicas he owns. It's a passion he developed more than 20 years ago.

Local musician **Bill Killian** was holding a party, and a condition attached to the invitation included bringing a musical instrument. Martin owned a piano but was unable to wedge it into Killian's place. So he brought along a harmonica even though he had never played one.

When others started playing, Martin softly joined in, borrowing from his piano knowledge.

Not long afterward, he began working off and on in Chicago and discovered a place called **Joanne's Piano Bar**, where he fell in with some Windy City musicians.

Even though I was only there a few times a month, I became a regular Martin said. I was kind of timid to play at first, but they kind of urged me to keep at it. Back in Newport, Martin sat in at the **Blue Pelican Jazz Club**.

A native Newporter, he moved to San Francisco right after the Blue Pelican closed in 1991 and found himself at home in various music clubs.

He even studied harmonica and piano at a local school. I've played wherever I've gone since then, he said. I've played in **Chicago** and **San Francisco** and on Bourbon Street in **New Orleans**.

The musicians in those cities are so open and welcoming. Martin returned home after retiring from his career as a computer nerd in 2000.

He's since played harmonica at **Billy Goode's** on Marlborough Street and the **Ancient Order of Hibernians Hall** on Wellington Avenue, and has sat in with a Rhode Island band called **Garda**.

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Martin is more musician than fan, though he admires Belgian jazz harmonica player Toots Thielemans, whom he has met. I've worked at it and I've improved a lot since that night at Bill Killian's house, Martin said.

Though a lot of people don't even know I play. But when I go out, I often carry a harmonica or keep a few in the car. Martin is also an amateur photographer, turning his Newport-based pictures into greeting cards.

He learned to become a brakeman and eventually an engineer on the **Old Colony & Newport Railway**, whose tracks pass by his Willow Street home.

But harmonica is the hobby he has stuck with for more than two decades.

If I hadn't gone to that party, I might never have pursued it, Martin said.