

# BULLETPROOF SAXOPHONE PLAYING

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO MASTERING THE SAXOPHONE



GUARANTEED TO TAKE YOUR  
PLAYING TO THE NEXT LEVEL!

BY DORON ORENSTEIN IN COLLABORATION WITH



RICK  
MARGITZA



WALT  
WEISKOPF



DR. DAVID  
DEMSEY



BILL  
PLAKE



SAM  
SADIGURSKY



TIM  
WILLCOX



Brought to you by:

BEST. SAXOPHONE. WEBSITE. EVER.

BESTSAXOPHONewebsiteever.com

## Legal Mumbo Jumbo

This e-book and accompanying audio mp3s are © copyrighted by Doron Orenstein. No part of this may be changed in any format, sold, or used in any way other than what is outlined within this e-book and audio mp3s under any circumstances. This PDF file is not to be duplicated under any circumstances.

This e-book may be printed out on paper one (1) time. Printouts of this e-book are not to be photo copied or sold.

The author disclaims any warranties (express or implied), merchantability,

---

or fitness for any particular purpose. The author and publisher shall in no event be held liable to any party for any direct, indirect, punitive, special, incidental or other consequential damages arising directly or indirectly from any use of this material, which is provided “as is”, and without warranties.

# Special Thanks

To Rick Margitza, Walt Weiskopf, Dr, David Demsey, Bill Plake, Sam Sadigursky, Tim Willcox, Ricky Sweum, Tim Price, Bob Sheppard, Zach Sollitto, DJ Kevin Quinn, Michael Feher, Nemoy Malcolm, William Slettedahl, Charles McNeal, Mel Martin, Leo Dale, Timothy Roberts, Joe Allard, David Liebman, and the gazillions of other brilliant musicians who have taught and inspired me.

*Extra* special thanks to my one and only love, my exquisite wife, Agatha Orenstein.

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	5
Chapter 1 – An Overview of Saxophone Tone Production .....	9
Chapter 2 – Breathing .....	11
Chapter 3 – Embouchure.....	16
Chapter 4 – Inside the Mouth.....	20
Chapter 5 – Altissimo .....	30
Chapter 6 – Technique .....	34

---

Chapter 7 – Articulation.....	41
Chapter 8 – Intonation.....	48
Chapter 9 – Equipment .....	53
Chapter 10 – Finding Your Own Voice on the Saxophone .....	61
Summing it All Up.....	67
Bulletproof Saxophone Playing Interviewees .....	68

# Introduction

Thank you, and congratulations on purchasing your copy of the barrier-busting instructional program, Bulletproof Saxophone Playing!

Sure, there's a lot to go through here, but don't worry, we're going to make

this as fun and easy as possible. I've got some of the saxophone world's greatest minds showing you their secrets and taking a whole bunch of bumps out of the road.

So whether you're reading this book with the horn in your hand, or listening to an info-crammed interview while jogging on the treadmill, the goal here is for you to seriously *crank up the awesome* in your playing in a short period of time and have a great time doing it.

Yes, we all know that there are no shortcuts to becoming the next Kenny Garrett or Eugene Rousseau. The truth

---

is, many of the concepts we're going to be talking about here are likely to take you a good number of years to master. Anyone who tells you any different is either completely out to lunch or trying to sell you something.

But you know what? In many areas of our playing, it *is* possible to skip over hours, days, weeks, and dare I say, *years* of banging your head against the wall wondering why you're seemingly spinning your wheels and making sluggish progress at best.

## Disclaimer

I wanted to mention that certain parts of this e-book were adapted from my website, BestSaxophoneWebsiteEver.com. Of course, you'd have to sift through hundreds of articles to find the adapted bits, but yes, it's true, some of this you could technically get for free. That said, the vast majority of content here has never appeared on my site.

At the end of the day, my goal here is to take **the very best information** out there, regardless of where it comes from, and organize it into a cohesive, comprehensive, easy-to-access, and logically organized program designed to help you take your saxophone

---

playing as far as you want to take it. So that's it, just wanted to get that out of the way. ☺

# The Challenge

If you're reading this, you probably want one or more of the following things to happen:

- . **To get a lot better on the sax in a relatively short period of time.**  
Who says you can't make big strides rapidly?
- . **To get un-stuck from your current level of playing.** You've found yourself practicing the same boring and uninspiring things for years and not making very noticeable improvements. That frustration, boredom, and lack of inspiration are

insidiously finding their way into all aspects of your musical life. It's time to have fun and make some beautiful music!

- **To prepare for an upcoming musical event.** Whether it's a concert, a gig, an audition, a recording, a jam session, or really, any situation where other people will be listening to you play, you want to knock their socks off.
- **To finally get your hands on the secrets passed between only the greatest players.** You've already heard a lot of the common wisdom

pertaining to the art of saxophone playing, but now you’re looking for, you know, “the good stuff” that not everyone knows or talks about.

## How this Program Will Help

In a nutshell, Bulletproof Saxophone Playing is a simple, practical, effective, and entertaining guide to becoming the best saxophonist you can possibly be. To that end, we’re going to cover essentials such as tone production, technique, articulation, intonation, and equipment, as well as other areas you need to address if you really want to start making some major strides on the instrument.

This course is about taking your playing to a whole new level - regardless of what level you're currently playing at. Whether you're an early beginner looking to develop the right habits from the get go, or a seasoned pro looking to continue to make major improvements, Bulletproof Saxophone Playing will help you weed out the weak spots in your playing and replace them with the habits necessary to make your saxophone playing impervious to shortcomings, such as a weak tone, sloppy technique, poor intonation, and other musical transgressions.

This book and audio set represents a collaborative effort based on a series of highly-focused masterclass-style interviews conducted with a collection of the following six world-class saxophonists and educators (see the bios at the end of the book for more information on these amazing folks):

- . **Rick Margitza:** One of modern jazz's leading saxophonists, Blue Note recording artist, and former member of Miles Davis's band
- . **Walt Weiskopf:** World- renowned prolific jazz artist, saxophonist with Steely Dan, and author of multiple educational books

([www.WaltWeiskopf.com](http://www.WaltWeiskopf.com))

- **Dr. David Demsey:** Director of Jazz Studies at William Paterson, esteemed classical and jazz saxophonist, one of the United States' leading music educators
- **Bill Plake:** Professional saxophonist and Alexander Technique on faculty of the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in Los Angeles, guest lecturer and adjunct at California Institute of the Arts and Pomona College  
([www.AlexanderTechniqueFoothills](http://www.AlexanderTechniqueFoothills))

.com & [www.BillPlakeMusic.org](http://www.BillPlakeMusic.org))

- **Sam Sadigursky:** Critically-acclaimed recording artist, sideman, and woodwind player for various Broadway shows  
([www.SamSadigursky.com](http://www.SamSadigursky.com))
- **Tim Willcox:** With multiple albums under his belt, one of the West Coast's finest saxophone players and teachers ([www.TimWillcox.net](http://www.TimWillcox.net) and [www.NinjazzRecords.com](http://www.NinjazzRecords.com))

Out of those interviews and based on my own experience playing the saxophone for nearly 25 years comes a single body of saxophone knowledge

---

that you’re not likely to encounter in any other single book, audio program, or DVD.

As we move through this course, my brilliant interviewees and I are going to be throwing all sort of game-changing tips, techniques, and insights at you. As you move through Bulletproof Saxophone Playing (which I’ll refer to as *BSP* from here moving forward), you’ll find that some of our interviewees don’t agree one hundred percent on certain aspects of playing. If they did, that would imply that there is only one way to play the saxophone, and that would reduce playing the

saxophone to a mindless set of instructions.

Sure, we all need to know the fundamentals of playing the instrument. And by all means, drink in each and every word written and spoken here. But also bear in mind that as a musician and as an artist, through trial, error, and open-mindedness, we need to come to a place from which emerges the best possible outcome for our own musical development - regardless of whatever any book or teacher tells us.

At the end of the day, if you **put into practice** the advice given in this book, you'll find yourself improving in leaps

---

and bounds faster than you might have imagined. And if you don't put these things into practice— well, it's like they say: "*If nothing changes, nothing changes.*"

## What this Program is Not

BSP is not a “how to play the saxophone” course. This program assumes that you already know at least the very basic fundamentals of how to blow through the horn and make a sound, as well as how to finger all of the notes. There are also some great exercises included here, so if you have at least some experience reading music,

then that's going to help you get a ton more out of the program.

Although my interviewees are primarily jazz saxophonists, this is not a “how to play jazz” or improvisation program. There are a whole truckload of amazing books and videos on those topics, so I’ll leave that stuff to the small army of great jazz educators out there.

## All in All

By the time you’re done reading this book, listening to the interviews, and ***taking steady and continued action*** on the lessons contained here, you’re going to see huge improvements in all areas of

your playing. Listeners as well as your fellow musicians will not be able to ignore your transformation. You'll experience new heights of musical skill, and most importantly, unexpected levels of freedom and joy in doing one of the most powerful things a human being can do – make beautiful music on the saxophone.

# Chapter 1 – An Overview of Saxophone Tone Production

When asked about the importance of tone quality, Walt Weiskopf points out that saxophone players can benefit from an added “warm-up” period, much the way brass players warm up before playing. Brass players must work on their sound and tone production just to function on the instrument! The temptation saxophone players must overcome is the impulse to simply slap on a reed and start playing when they could help themselves to a large degree

by embracing a daily warm-up routine (such as the routine on page 2 of the included exercise book – but more on those exercises later).

And when it comes to beauty of sound, **the sonic possibilities for saxophonists are staggering.** On alto you've got someone like Paul Desmond with a dark and piping sound, while on that exact same instrument you've got the bright and laser-like tone of David Sanborn.

Armed with the massive palette of tonal colors that the saxophone offers, it's up to us to craft our sound into an

unmistakable expression of who are. But before we get to all of that fancy pie-in-the-sky talk, we have to know what constitutes a good sound.

As is the case with any creative endeavor, everyone has his or her own conception of what a good saxophone sound is. But there are some basic qualities we should all strive for, regardless of our own personal tonal conception.

Some of these qualities are:

- . **An audibly wide spectrum of overtones are present** (if you're not sure what overtones are, not to worry, we'll go over that in just a little bit). It's the audible presence of these overtones that makes your tone "big" or "fat."
- . **The ability to project itself over other loud sounds.** This doesn't necessarily mean a loud sound, but simply one that cuts though barriers such as other loud sounds - and unfortunately, right through the

walls of your neighbor's apartment.

- . **Evenness throughout the range of the horn.** In other words, the tonal characteristics stay the same regardless of what part of the horn's range you're playing in. For example, many players find their sound getting a whole lot smaller as they move up towards the palm key notes due to the pinching down of their embouchure. But with practice, we learn to manage our embouchure, inner mouth, and throat so that those higher notes still sound big and fat.

- . **Control.** A saxophonist with a controlled sound can hold out a note for a long stretch of time, and through various levels of volume without the pitch or air support fluctuating. This is what long tones are especially good for.
- . **The ability to convey emotion.** We all know the stereotype - the hotshot with fingers moving faster than the speed of light - and no soul. But at the end of the day, it's not the thirty-second note bebop licks that are going to keep people coming back for more. It's the ability of your sound to affect the way people

*feel* that will get them every time.

- . **Originality.** In order to be a truly great saxophonist, there's no getting away from the fact that we must, must, must develop a sound that's instantly recognizable. When John Coltrane comes through the stereo speakers, within the first three seconds we know that it's him. We want to be recognized after only three seconds as well.

# Chapter 2 - Breathing

Being that we're talking about a wind-powered instrument here, it's important that we learn how to move that wind properly from the very beginning of its journey through the horn.

The principles of effective breathing are really the same, regardless of whether you're playing the saxophone, sitting on the sofa watching television, or shoveling snow.

What should be a natural and effortless process often becomes a pitfall, as proper breathing can either make or

---

break us when we're in the business of killer saxophone playing.

*Bill Plake shares some rare wisdom throughout the rest of this chapter.*

## Unnecessary Tension

There are several things to look out for, particularly for saxophones and wind instruments. The main thing that happens to interfere with the breath is that on the inhalation, the neck begins to tense, the head usually stiffens up on the neck, and there's very often a noisy, gasping breath that comes in.

As soon as we tense up and do that, what happens is we limit the movement of the diaphragm. The diaphragm has to be able to move upward, and downward. It does not move in and out as many people think. The diaphragm contracts on the inhalation and releases on the exhalation. So one way that I can interfere with my diaphragm when I breathe in is by tightening my neck or any part of my torso, tightening my shoulders, tightening my rib cage, tightening my pelvis, and gasping. Again, the gasping is something that very often causes us to make that kind of tightening in the body, so we

definitely want to avoid that loud, gasping kind of breath.

## The Diaphragm

On the exhalation, we want to avoid trying to push too hard from the abs. We think we're supporting the breath, we sometimes say that's “diaphragmatic breathing” and that we're pushing from the diaphragm. But it's impossible to push from the diaphragm on an exhalation because the diaphragm only does two things: it contracts on the inhalation, and releases on the exhalation. It's a muscle moving towards release.

So we're not talking about supporting by pushing from the diaphragm. The support we're getting is from the actual tension in the body as it pushes itself in opposition to the diaphragm.

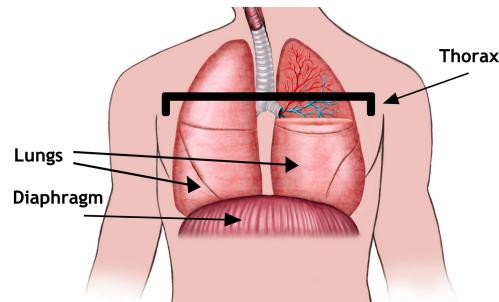
## The Proper Use of Tension

Now when I said the word tension, I don't mean it in a bad way. We need a certain amount of tension.

When the exhalation is working very well, the spine is lengthening, and that means the head is continuing to release up off the spine. At that point, we really need to get some velocity in the air and support it so it's distributed throughout the entire torso, not just down there in the gut.

## Moving the Air Through the Body

Breathing is a matter of coordination, not strength, so the better my breath is, the more coordinated it is. And for that coordination to happen, we need the thorax (that is the part of the body inside the rib cage) to expand. That's what causes the breath. The thorax expands like a bellow for a fireplace and the air rushes in when the thorax expands. So our lungs don't get any bigger due to the fact that they're filling with air. Our lungs are filling with air because our thorax is getting bigger.



Just like a bellows in a fireplace, as we expand, we create a vacuum, and that vacuum is what draws the air in.

Some saxophonists and other wind instrumentalists are trying to fill themselves with air, and if I try to fill myself with air what I will tend to do is tighten my neck, breathe loudly, tighten my chest, and I won't even allow my chest to move. I'm going to try and push that air down into my tummy.

First of all, there are no lungs down near your stomach; the air never goes down into your tummy. The lungs start just behind the collarbones, the lungs are located mostly in the back, and for

the most part, they're not even in the front of our torso. They end somewhere close to the bottom of the ribcage. So I don't want to put the air down there. When we see the tummy come up like that, mostly what it means is that I have stiffened my ribcage, I've stiffened my shoulders, I've stiffened my neck, and I've got about 60% of the amount of breath that I could have, had I allowed my ribs to move.

It's the movement of the ribcage that allows for the diaphragm to descend, thus allowing the entire thorax to expand. The ribs need to move, the diaphragm needs to move, that makes

the internal area of the thorax larger, which cause a vacuum, which draws the air. So the goal is to not to interfere with that.

## Common Misconceptions About Breathing

We hear so much about “breathing from the diaphragm,” but most people have no idea what the diaphragm is, what it does. We hear things like ‘I want to build up my lungs. I want to make my lungs stronger.’ You can’t make your lungs stronger because the lungs are not a muscle.

You can change the muscles that pull on the lungs, you can change the muscles in the ribcage, and you can change the muscles in the diaphragm, but you can’t build the lungs up.

However, most saxophonists think that improving their breathing is a matter of increasing strength.

As I mentioned, breathing well is a matter of coordination, and that coordination is natural. When we came into this world, we learned to breathe, and we learned to breathe in a very natural way. We learned to breathe in accordance to the movement of the diaphragm and the movement of the ribcage. So when we're playing the saxophone, we want to preserve that coordination.

The only difference is that when we're playing the saxophone there's an

---

intention to the breath. That is, we really want a lot of air to coming in, so it's a question of what we do to bring that air in.

## **Habits that will help your breathing**

- **When inhaling, think about "smelling" the air.**

This allows the nostrils to gently flare, thus opening the nasal passages and quickening the inhalation without excess strain.

- **On the inhalation, let your mouth release into an "ah" shaped**

## **syllable as the air comes in.**

Again, this lets the air passages stay free so that the air comes in quickly and easily.

- **Let the movement of your inhalation take place three dimensionally throughout your entire torso.**

It is especially important to let the movement of the inhalation come into your back (near the bottom of your rib cage).

## Here are some things to avoid when breathing:

- **Inhaling noisily, or gasping in the breath.**

It's actually okay to breathe from the mouth as you play your instrument, as long as it's not noisy and forced; though it isn't really necessary if your neck, jaw, and nasal passages are releasing instead of tensing. This means letting the neck and shoulders stay free and easy.

- **Pushing too hard from the abs, or pushing only from the abs.**  
You will push from your abs as you

create the necessary air speed to produce a saxophone sound. In fact, it's rather impossible not to. The problems begin when the saxophonist directly tries to push from the abs to produce the sound in an effort to create "support." When this happens many things go wrong. First, by overusing the abs, you don't allow for the full range of descent and ascent of the diaphragm muscle. Second, you limit the rest of the muscles in the torso to effectively produce the necessary tension to support the sound. When a baby is crying, she is not simply "pushing the air from her abs." If you were to put your hands on her body you

would feel a gentle tension in her entire torso, not a rock hard gut.

- **Avoid going too far with the exhalation (pushing to the point of completely "emptying" the lungs).** When this happens it significantly interferes with the coordination of the next incoming inhalation. Of course there are times when you have to do this because the music calls for it. But avoid it as much as you can.

In an ideal breathing situation, it shouldn't feel like a whole bunch of work (especially if that work is in

only one or two parts of the body). Believe it or not, a baby can cry all day and night, supporting the breath beautifully, and virtually never become exhausted from creating this support.

## **What Breathing the Right Way Looks Like**

If you watch the people who breathe beautifully, what you'll notice is what they don't do. You won't see them tighten their heads down on their spine and throwing their heads back. You won't see them tighten across their shoulders, you won't see them holding across their chest trying to force their

stomachs out. What you will see is you see the whole torso expanding in all dimensions.

It's a three dimensional movement - as we breathe in, our torso gets longer, it gets wider, and it gets thicker from front to back. The whole torso, not just the tummy, everything; let the entire torso move.

One person who had extraordinarily good breathing was Michael Brecker. If you watch videos of him playing, you'll notice that when he takes that in breath you don't see him bearing down on himself, you don't see him losing his stature. You see him maintaining his stature and the same thing when the air is coming out, you don't see him launching down into his gut to push the air out. You see him maintaining his stature.

Another saxophonist with masterful breathing was Charlie Parker. In fact, watch Charlie Parker in general if you want to see someone who leaves

himself alone when playing the saxophone.

## Take Action

### Proper Breathing

Here's one way to practice the ideas we're discussing:

- Holding your horn as you normally would while playing, stand with your back facing a wall (maybe anywhere from 4 inches to 8 inches away, depending on your anatomy).

- Let yourself release back into the wall from your ankles (not from your hips or waist). Make sure you are letting the wall support your back.
- Use the above mentioned inhalation strategies as you play your instrument. Pay attention to directing the movement of the inhalation into where your back connects to the wall.
- If you feel yourself pulling your back away from the wall on the inhalation, that means you are stiffening your neck and pulling

your shoulders up, thus limiting the movement of the diaphragm.

- If you feel your back pulling away from the wall too much on the exhalation (it will come back some, to that point at which you started) it means you're pushing too hard from your abs and not letting the support of the breath take place in the rest of the torso (especially the lower back).
- On the exhalation, think about your spine as lengthening (which it actually does), with your head gently releasing upward (not pulling downward as so many players do!)

as you exhale. Think upward from your heels.

# Chapter 3 - Embouchure

There are several different schools of thought when it comes to embouchure. Legendary teachers such as Larry Teal, Fredrick Hemke, and Joe Allard all had their own philosophies on what a saxophone embouchure should be.

Speaking generally, it seems that jazz saxophonists gravitate toward the embouchure that Joe Allard taught, while classical saxophonists are more inclined to use Teal's approach. Now, I make no bones that due to the particular lineup of experts contributing to this

program, the embouchure we're examining here comes mostly from the Joe Allard school of tone production. However, we'll be discussing principles of embouchure that will be invaluable to any saxophone player, regardless of which embouchure they use.

## The Jaw and Lips

### How Much Mouthpiece to Take In

Here's what Walt Weiskopf has to say on the subject:

“I do think about the amount of mouthpiece to take in. For me the rule of thumb is roughly a third. All this is

very subjective, depending largely on the particular playing situation or genre (jazz, rock, classical, “Broadway,” etc). If I was playing, let’s just say, a Broadway show on the alto or tenor saxophone, I probably wouldn’t take in as much mouthpiece as I might in a more commercial situation, or a situation in which I was playing the 3rd or 4th chorus of rhythm changes, for instance. I’d probably get a little bit looser and just naturally take in a tiny bit more of the mouthpiece. It’s not a hard and fast rule. But, as is a rule of thumb, if you want more control and less brash quality to the sound, then try backing off the mouthpiece just a little.

The more mouthpiece that you take in, the harder it is to control.”

Another situation in which you’ll need to think about changing the amount of mouthpiece in your mouth is when attempting to play the lowest notes on the horn, such as low F down to the low Bb with a softer and darker tone (also known as a subtone). In those instances, you may find yourself naturally moving some of the mouthpiece out of your mouth.

## Take Action

### How Much Mouthpiece to Take In

To figure out how much mouthpiece to take in, find the point at which the reed separates from the mouthpiece. Put the mouthpiece in your mouth up until that point. It's that simple.

To make it even simpler to find this spot:

- Insert a piece of paper in between the reed and the mouthpiece.
- Place your finger at the exact point

where the paper can no longer be pushed in.

- Keeping your finger in place, remove the paper and take the mouthpiece in so that your mouth covers the mouthpiece up until where your lips run into your finger. And there you have it; a great starting point for the position of the mouthpiece in your mouth.

## **Forming an Embouchure without Unnecessary Tension**

Bill Plake suggests that to avoid tensing up, first you've got to think about what

your head is doing. You've got to let your head come up off your spine, not pull down onto your spine. When we pull our head down while playing, the jaw has a tendency to lock up - a highly undesirable side effect!

To give ourselves the awareness we need to maintain the best embouchure possible, we have to think of the constant things and the things that aren't so constant. What should be constant is the pressure of the jaw and the lips on the reed. Of course, the pressure from the jaw and the lips may vary a little bit as needed, but the fact that our jaw isn't locked up as a result

of our pulling our head up is definitely going to give that flexibility we need for those times when adjustments do need to be made.

## The Upper Lip and Teeth

Generally speaking, there should be very little pressure coming from the upper part of your mouth other than the natural weight of your upper teeth and lip.

Of course, you're going to have to exert some pressure from the upper teeth in order to hold the mouthpiece in place, but beyond that, it's important that you resist the temptation to clamp down.

The upper lip can basically sit flat on top of your mouthpiece, letting its natural weight keep it down.

## The Lower Lip and Teeth

Again, what we're looking for is the minimum amount of pressure necessary to hold the mouthpiece in place. The goal here is for maximum reed vibration.

There are people who will tell you that the Allard approach means playing with your bottom lip out. While I find that playing with the lip out works best for *me*, I don't think it's so much a question of putting the bottom lip out, as much as situating your lower lip in such a manner that the reed is able to vibrate as much as possible while still holding the mouthpiece in place.

Says Rick Margitza, “The main thing is definitely flesh on the reed with the bottom lip. If you rub your bottom lip over your teeth and play, then roll your lip out and let the flesh buzz on the reed, you hear a big difference.”

When we roll the bottom lip all the way in over our teeth, we’re creating a fairly hard surface for the reed to sit on, so the reed ends up vibrating quite a bit less than it would vibrate if it were placed upon a softer surface such as the fleshy part of the lower lip.

The lip-in over-the-teeth method is very popular among classical saxophone players, and is probably the more commonly taught saxophone embouchure. So if you're going to go with this embouchure, keep in mind that your sound is likely to come out darker, and possibly a bit smaller than it would with the Allard approach (classical sax players, please don't shoot!).

As for me, I noticed that when I switched to a bottom-lip-out embouchure, there was an *instant* and noticeable shift in my sound. Although the sound was a bit harder to control at first, I got used to it and can't ever see myself going back to playing with my

bottom lip tucked in over the bottom teeth.

## The Corners of the Mouth

Another staple of the Allard approach was the relaxation in the corners of the mouth. While the natural tendency while playing is to pull the corners up to form a circular seal around the mouthpiece, the *trick is to leave the corners of the mouth and the bottom lip down flat.*

## Keeping it Simple

Saxophone behemoth Jerry Bergonzi recommends an approach he calls “The No Embouchure Embouchure.” What this means is that when playing, our lips are situated the same way that they’re situated when we’re speaking, or really, the same way that they’re situated any time that we’re *away* from the horn. To practice this approach, simply get in front of a mirror, notice the way your lips look as you simply stand there, and then try and maintain that same naturalness as you place the horn in your mouth.

## Position of the Mouth from Note to Note

As mentioned earlier, the outer embouchure - that is the jaw and the lips - should move as little as possible when going between notes. Of course, the tendency is for the jaw to drop on the lower notes and pinch up on the higher notes.

However, when moving around the horn, the part of the embouchure that actually needs to change is the embouchure *inside* your mouth. So you're not only using the shape of your oral cavity to hit the right notes, but as

you refine your skill in this area, you'll even be using the inside of your mouth and your throat to control your intonation.

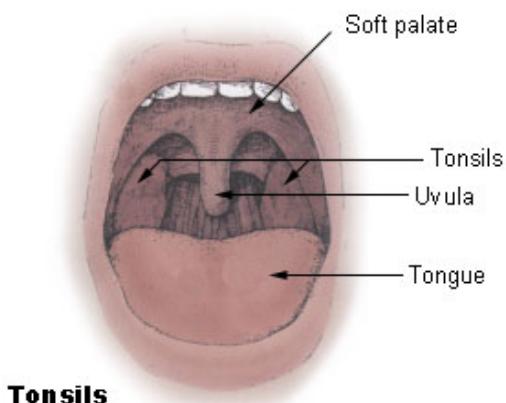
# Chapter 4 – Inside the Mouth

The “inner embouchure” is Joe Allard’s term for describing the position of the various muscles in the oral cavity.

Basically, the shape of your inner mouth is determined by whatever the tongue and soft palate are doing together in any given moment.

And for those of you who don’t know what the soft palette is, the mighty Wikipedia will tell you:

*”The soft palate is the soft tissue constituting the back of the roof of the mouth. The soft palate is distinguished from the hard palate at the front of the mouth in that it does not contain bone.”*



From the U.S. National Cancer Institute

The common consensus on the position of the tongue seems to be that it should be vertically positioned in the center of the mouth – not too high, and not too

low. Some teachers even suggest that the position of the tongue can also affect your pitch, with a tongue positioned too high resulting in sharpness, and a tongue too low producing flatness.

One thing is for certain though - *your mouth should not feel contorted in any way*. You want your playing to happen as naturally and effortlessly as possible. When first putting into practice the principles in this book, you're probably going to feel pretty awkward. But at a certain point, that awkwardness will give way to a natural ability to control your sound so that it's in tune,

powerful, and even-sounding throughout the entire range of the instrument.

When practicing, we need to set aside some time to ask ourselves, “Hey, what is the inside of my mouth doing?” Truth is, the shape of the inner mouth is changing all the time. For example, when you speak, you can bet that the shape in your mouth – in other words, the position of the tongue and the soft palate, is subtly shifting with each syllable you pronounce. Well, it’s the same thing when moving from note to note on the sax. Of course, it’s impossible to keep track of every single movement inside the mouth while in a real-life playing situation. But it is good to be aware of the position of the tongue and soft palate so as to develop

muscle memory, which through practice, guides you automatically to the biggest possible sound.

## The Myth of the “Open Throat”

One way to use the shape inside our mouth to our advantage is to choose the right syllable sound. To explain, a lot of us are taught to play with “an open throat” and the way we’re taught to achieve this open throat is by thinking of the syllable “AH” and letting our oral cavity respond accordingly. I mean, why else would the doctor tell us to “Open up and say AHHH” so that he could take a look deep down into the dark recesses of our throat?

Truth is, there's no such thing as an “open throat” because there's no such thing as a *closed* throat. The throat does not open or close. It's simply a part of the route the air stream passes through on its way to the saxophone. So although we can't open the throat any more than it's already naturally open, we can remove as many obstructions as possible

So while saying “AH” may give your doctor the best view, it's definitely not the right syllable for getting as much air through the throat as possible.

When you make the “AH” sound, you’ll notice that your tongue stretches forward, obstructing the air coming from the throat. On the other hand, when you think of the “EE” sound, you’re moving the tongue up and out of the way of the airflow.

Here’s another way to look at it. You know how when you’re gargling water, you produce a bubbling “AHHH” sound? Well, can you imagine what would happen if you gargled while making an “EEE” sound? Why, of course, you’d surely choke. See, when you’re trying to block off the flow of water from the mouth to the throat, you need to put your tongue in an “AHH”

position. And that's great for staving off water, but when you play saxophone with your tongue in the "AHH" position, you're staving off the all-important flow of *air*.

The other benefit of moving the tongue up and out of the way is that it focuses the air moving into the mouthpiece the same way that putting your thumb over the end of a garden hose results in a much more powerful and fast-moving stream of water. So in this case, the tongue is serving the same purpose as the thumb, giving you a much robust stream of air.

Don't believe me? Well, our man Joe Allard actually has a little exercise you can do to see the difference. Try this:

1. Put your hand out about a foot in front of your face.
2. Let out an exhalation while thinking of the “AH” sound
3. Now, let out another exhalation while thinking of the “EE” sound.

Notice how much more air hits your hand when you’re thinking “EE?” It’s just that extra boost of air that’s going to make your sound project more

powerfully than that deceptively ineffective “AH” sound.

But “wait!” some of you particularly observant folks might say. “*Doesn’t the ‘EE’ sound make you tighten your jaw?*” To which Bill Plake answers, “it might for some players, but it really doesn’t have to.” The key here is to gain independence between the jaw and the tongue.

“To some of you, figuring out whether or not you have that independence can be somewhat confusing.

“If so, all you need to do is get in front of a mirror and whisper ‘la-la-la.’ If you see your jaw bouncing up and down, it means that you don’t yet have that independence. If you find your jaw tightening up when making the ‘EE’ sound - work on this exercise as much as possible. Then take this same skill into your playing. While tonguing notes, see if your jaw is moving down with each tongue attack. With a bit of practice, you’ll soon be able to take advantage of that powerful “EE” sound without causing unnecessary tension.”

## Changing the Position of the Throat

Unlike the position of our jaw and lips, and just like the position of our tongue and soft palate, the position of the throat should constantly be in flux as we're playing our horn. However, as strange as the concept of moving your throat may sound to some of you, it's really quite simple.

If you sing a note, any note while keeping your hand on the front of your throat, and then sing up an octave from that note, you'll be able to feel a very obvious upwards movement in your throat. It's no different when you're playing. For example, if you are playing your middle C and then you pop up an

octave to your high C, the movement in your throat should be no different than what it would be if you were singing those exact same notes. As you develop your ear, you'll be able to hear each note before you play it, causing your vocal cords to intuitively snap into the correct position.

# Practicing on the Mouthpiece Alone

One great way to put into practice all of the ideas discussed so far is to remove the brass part of the saxophone from the equation altogether. This way we're not relying on the instrument's keys to get us from note to note, but rather from the activity of our own external, as well as internal, embouchure. So what we're doing here is simply playing on the mouthpiece with the reed attached onto it and nothing else.

I won't lie to you. Playing on the mouthpiece alone makes a seriously

---

obnoxious sound, so you'll want to find a place to practice this away from the ears of neighbors – not to mention ducks in heat. (Do ducks even go into heat?)

At any rate, in my experience, proper mouthpiece-only practice involves a lot of air and volume to do it right, so find a place that you can blow a mighty wind through the mouthpiece without invoking an eviction notice.

The first thing to practice would be to simply hold out a single note as steadily as you possibly can. From there, you can practice simple things such as octave jumps, scales, scales in thirds,

simple melodies, improvising, and eventually work up to playing anything you'd normally play on your saxophone.

Here are a few things you can do to boost your mouthpiece chops:

- Moving those muscles in the vocal cords is the most important part of mouthpiece practice. Practice singing a major scale without the mouthpiece, and notice the changes in your throat that occur with each note. Now make these same changes in the throat while actually blowing into the mouthpiece. The movement in the throat is what we're going to be using to move from note to note.
- Go for absolutely no movement of the lower jaw while moving between

notes.

- As I mentioned before, you’re going to need a good amount of air to get this working right, so be sure to support the air with the action of your entire upper torso, as mentioned in the chapter on breathing.
- Make sure you have the right amount of mouthpiece in your mouth. As mentioned earlier in the book, a good general rule is to put your thumb where the reed separates from the table of the mouthpiece, and put the mouthpiece into your

mouth up to the position of the thumb. As you go down in pitch, you may want to slide the mouthpiece out of your mouth just a tiny bit. On the way up, move the mouthpiece back into your mouth, again, very slightly.

- Make sure to *hear* the notes before you play them. Your ear will guide the rest of your body towards the right notes.

Many will find this quite not-easy, so it's important to not get discouraged. You probably won't be playing Glazunov or Giant Steps or possibly even a proper major scale right off the

bat. Basic long tones will get you off to a fine start, and you can gradually build from there.

Also, since you're not relying on the saxophone's keys to change notes, you're going to end up having to rely on your ear working in concert with your vocal cords – which is a great thing. On top of all of that, it's important to learn how to control your pitch without having to rely on the lower jaw; so practicing this way pretty much guarantees that control over your intonation is going to improve.

Cool thing is that you can take a mouthpiece and reed just about anywhere you go – which is a nice alternative to lugging the horn around anytime you’re away from home and want to get a little practice in.

## Take Action

### Mouthpiece Practice

Playing on the mouthpiece and the reed alone, please see the exercises on page 1, courtesy of Leo Dale ([www.LeoDale.com](http://www.LeoDale.com)).

## Overtones

Many sax players new to the instrument may have heard the term “overtones” thrown about without really knowing what the term means and why they should know anything about it. You may have also heard the terms “upper

partials” or “harmonics,” and those terms mean pretty much the same thing as “overtones.”

The fact is, knowledge of overtones as well as the practice of overtone exercises on your horn is simply a must if you’re planning on becoming a great saxophone player.

## What in the World Are These Overtone Thingies?

To quote from Wikipedia:

*“An overtone is any frequency higher than the fundamental frequency of a sound.”*

In other words, if you're playing a low Bb, there are actually other notes quietly sounding at the same time as that low Bb. And while these other pitches are sounding relatively quietly in comparison to that low Bb, they affect the sound of the saxophone massively.

To illustrate what I'm talking about, try this as a simple exercise:

- Play a middle Bb on your horn.

- Next, position your fingers to play a low Bb.
- Keeping your embouchure the same as it would be for that middle Bb, play that middle Bb BUT keep your fingers in position to play the low Bb while moving your vocal cords into the same position that they'd be in if you were *singing* that middle Bb. What you should be hearing is still that middle Bb, but with a bigger, louder, harsher, and more abrasive tone quality. This is basically the same sound you'd get if you attempted to play the low Bb but missed the note due to not enough diaphragm support.

The point of the exercise is to demonstrate that the middle Bb is the first overtone of that low Bb. Other terminology for the sound of a middle Bb played with the low Bb fingering is the “*First Partial*” or “*First Harmonic*. ”

Below is the entire series of overtones (aka “partials” or “harmonics”) that we can play while fingering that low Bb. Of course, toward the end of the series you get to notes that are not possible for 99.9%, if not 100% of all saxophone players to play.

Saxophone Overtones

The image shows a musical staff in G major (4/4 time). It starts with a low B-flat note. Following this are several higher notes: F-sharp, E, D, C-sharp, B-flat, A, G, F-sharp, E, D, C-sharp, and another B-flat. An '8va' (octave up) marking is positioned above the staff.

Again, when you play that low Bb, you're simultaneously hearing the entire series of notes shown above, but they're actually more *felt* than heard, since the majority of the sound you hear is from the fundamental, or bottom note in the series - whichever note that might be.

You're probably wondering, “*What do these overtones have to do with me?*”

Well, to start with, not all sounds have an equal number of audible overtones. The effect of having many audible

overtones in a sax player's sound is a big, rich, and penetrating tone.

What we call the *timbre* or “color” of the tone is determined by which overtones are emphasized. If your tone emphasizes more of the higher overtones, then you’re going to sound bright, and if it’s the lower tones being emphasized, you’ll sound darker.

For example, at the extreme end of the overtone spectrum, once again we’ll use the example of fusion saxophonist David Sanborn. Since the music he plays involves cutting through some seriously loud instruments such as

drums and electric guitar, his sound blasts you with the higher partials. The result is a loud and piercing sound that can penetrate the other loud sounds in a band with electric instruments.

On the other extreme side of the spectrum you have the tone of jazz altoist, Lee Konitz. Due to the emphasis of the lower overtones in his sound, Lee's tone is “dark” and “piping” in nature - perfect for melding into mellower sounds such as piano, acoustic bass, and subtle jazz drumming.

So it's really a question of personal preference combined with the ability to

---

tastefully and creatively fit your sound into whichever musical situation you find yourself in.

Now if you've already gone through the “Practicing on the Mouthpiece Alone” section in the last chapter, you'll find that the tips you learned apply in a big way to the practice of overtones. Just like we did while practicing on the mouthpiece, you're still keeping the lower jaw right where it is while changing notes using your vocal cords.

The principle here is that if we can control our sound without relying on the saxophone's keys to get us from

note to note, you can imagine how much more in control we'll be once we regain the benefit of having the horn with its normal fingerings at our disposal.

Now, I wish I could outline a set of instructions for how to move your throat to get a bright sound, or how to move your throat to go darker, or medium bright, etc. But the point is, by learning to work with the vocal cords to get the various partials to speak, you're *also* developing those same muscles that will facilitate the invisible process of making the sound coming out of your horn match the sound in your head.

**Partially reiterating from earlier in the book, here are a few basic guidelines that should put you on the path to nailing those overtones and building a killer sound:**

- Moving the muscles in the vocal cords is the most important part of overtone practice. Practice singing a major scale without the horn, and notice the changes in your throat that occur with each note. Now make these same changes in the throat while actually blowing into the sax. The movement in the throat is what you're going to be using to move

from note to note.

- Go for absolutely no movement of the lower jaw while moving between notes.
- Experiment with making very subtle changes to the position of your tongue and soft palate (see Chapter 4 if you don't know precisely what the soft palate is). In his book *Developing a Personal Saxophone Sound*, David Liebman suggests that moving the back of the tongue could help with pitch control. You may also find the consonant sound, “K” helpful as a means of moving between the upper and lower

partials.

- As I mentioned before, you’re going to need a good amount of air to get this working right, so be sure to support the air with the action of your entire upper torso, as mentioned in the chapter on breathing.
- Make sure to *hear* the notes before you play them. Your ear will guide the rest of your body toward the right notes.

## Keeping the Overtones in Tune (The Key to Getting a Huge Sound)

---

With all of these overtones piling one on top of the other all the way up the extended range of the saxophone, we need to make sure that the individual pitches in our overtones are in tune with each other.

In fact, it's possible that we can play into a digital tuner and be shown that we're playing in tune while still sounding subtly *out* of tune. This is because the upper partials in our sound are out of tune with the fundamentals (the "fundamentals" being the notes you're actually fingering and triggering the overtones from).

## Take Action

### Getting the Overtones in Tune

To get a clear picture of whether or not your overtones are in tune with each other, Dr. David Demsey recommends that you find a large and highly

resonant room such as a classroom with no carpeting, or ideally, a room that an 80-voice choir or concert band would rehearse in. For many of us, a recital hall or even a classroom is not going to be an option for us, but if you have a particularly resonant living room, or really, any relatively large room without much carpet or sound insulation, that will be fine.

If you have a saxophone teacher or friend who is attuned to this concept, have them stand in the room with you as you play long tones and have them point out when your overtones are in tune and when they're not. If you are going to be doing this alone, listen as

closely as possible to the upper partials of your sound. When they're in tune with each other, you'll feel a distinct ringing sensation in your head. It's much like the concept of hitting a baseball in the perfect spot on the bat, causing the ball to fly an astonishing distance into the air. When your overtones are in tune, your sound will become effortlessly powerful. Being heard will no longer be about playing as loud as possible. In fact, you will probably be heard quite clearly playing expressively at a medium level of volume.

This is due to the fact that your

overtones are resonating powerfully off of one another, turning your tone into a virtual “giant truck of sound” plowing beautifully through anything standing in its way.

## **Overtones as a Means to Finding your Own Unique Sound**

So you may be wondering, “*What’s the point to all of these awful-sounding overtone exercises?*”

First off, the more audible overtones you have in your sound, the bigger your sound is and the more you’ll be able to project. Practicing with the mouthpiece

alone as well as practicing your overtones will also give you increased accuracy in terms of pitch as you learn to rely on the same muscles you'd use to sing in tune as opposed to the use of the lower lip. In fact, if you want to play consistently out of tune, then relying solely on the lower lip for pitch adjustment is a great way to go! The overtones are also your ticket into the altissimo register, which we'll be discussing in the next chapter.

However, it could be argued that perhaps the most compelling reason for these types of exercises is that in the process of practicing them, you are

---

isolating the individual partials that make up a note, and it's the balance of these partials that determine your tone's color.

So that's really all I can tell you about it. Just go out there and practice this stuff and you'll soon be effortlessly, accurately, and beautifully blowing the doors off the place – even when you play softly.

## Take Action

### Overtone Exercises

- For a simple overtone warm-up, see page 2 of the included Bulletproof

## Saxophone exercise book (courtesy of Walt Weiskopf)

- For a more comprehensive overtone workout, see page 3 of the exercise book. (Adapted from Joe Allard's overtones exercises by Dr. David Demsey)

All this talk about overtones takes us to the chapter of the book that so many of you have been waiting for...

# Chapter 5 - Altissimo

The days when limiting the upper register of the horn to the high F above the staff are long gone. Saxophonists are making extensive use of the altissimo register regardless of whether they're playing jazz, classical, pop, or just about any other style of music. The ability to play in the altissimo register has become a requirement for those looking to make a living playing the instrument.

As mentioned earlier in the book, for the brand new saxophone player picking up the horn for the first time, getting a sound out of the instrument is

---

much easier than just about any other wind instrument. Even in your first few days on the horn, you can finger a middle C, blow through the mouthpiece, and a middle C will come bellowing its way out of the instrument.

The trouble comes when we get to the extreme ranges of the instrument, be it low E down to low Bb, and high D and above. And once we're shooting for notes above the horn's "natural" uppermost note, the aforementioned high F above the staff, then it's going to take a lot more than proper fingering to get those notes to come out properly.

These notes above that high F require that we position our inner mouth and throat in such a way that those notes can speak.

So how do we develop the ability to control the muscles necessary to hit these high notes? Well, that's what the overtones are for, my friend! Like the altissimo notes, there's no way in the world that those overtones are going to come out by putting our fingers in the right place – especially considering the fact that the high harmonics of each note on the horn share many of the same fingerings.

In reality, altissimo notes are nothing more than the uppermost partials of lower fundamental notes. For example - want to hit the high Bb two octaves above the staff? One way to get there is to practice hitting that note by fingering the bottom Bb and working your way up the overtone series until you hit that note. In doing so, your inner mouth and throat will have to respond in such a manner that the very high Bb will come out. Now, there is a specific fingering for the Bb two octaves above the staff, so in many, if not most cases, you'll be using that fingering instead of going for the overtone. However, the same control of the inner and outer

embouchure is required regardless of how you finger the altissimo notes.

The beauty of practicing moving between notes using the overtones is that it develops the control of the muscles that we're normally unconscious of, but are crucial to use being able to (ideally) play in the altissimo register with the same ease and control as we do with the notes that live within the “normal” range of the saxophone.

So the moral of the story is – practice your overtones, and keep working your way up the overtone series until you

make it way up there to the tippy-top of the altissimo range.

## **Tips for Kicking Your Altissimo Chops into High Gear**

- 1. Make sure you develop your tone in the range below altissimo first.**

Altissimo requires a great deal of control over the instrument. While mastering the instrument is a never-ending process, simply arriving at the point of being able to eek out an altissimo note is quite a bit more difficult than playing a single note within the saxophone's normal

range. If you haven't got a solid grasp on the basic skills necessary to get a good tone on the notes *below* altissimo, forget about it - it ain't gonna happen.

**2. Make sure that you're using the optimal mouthpiece and reed combination.**

Unfortunately there is no one-size-fits-all setup that guarantees the best results for hitting those high, high notes, so this is one of those things you might need to experiment with, especially if you find yourself struggling to make even the smallest amount of progress. You really want to make sure that your setup can

handle a powerful air stream without the reed closing down. An overly soft reed, or a mouthpiece with an overly small facing can constrict the airflow in a way that can seriously hamper your efforts. Likewise, a mouthpiece with a very open facing and a hard reed can force you to blow your brains out to the point where the notes don't have the support they need to come out of your horn.

### **3. Make sure that your saxophone is not leaking.**

When it comes to the subtle art of playing in the altissimo register,

every little bit of air makes a difference. So if air is escaping via leaky pads, it could cause you added frustration as the notes aren't coming out. Or worse yet, you could end up establishing bad playing habits to compensate for that leaky horn.

#### **4. Make sure you *hear* your altissimo notes before you play them.**

As mentioned previously, altissimo notes require very subtle control of the embouchure, shape of the inner mouth, tongue, and throat. Add to that the fact that each altissimo note has several different fingerings, and

you'll see that there is no set-it-and-forget-it fingering that'll get you to those high notes. The correct manipulation of those hard-to-control muscles must be guided by your ear, so blindly fingering and blowing is not an option here. You need to hear the note so that you can position your throat in the same way you'd position it if you were singing that note.

## **5. Experiment with different fingerings to discover what works best for you.**

As some of you may know, there are indeed quite a few possible

fingerings for each altissimo note. This is probably one of the most challenging aspects of playing way up high. Wouldn't it be easy if all we had to do was memorize the fingering for each note and away we go? Variables such as your equipment setup and your own physical makeup make it so that we have to get creative.

In the included exercise book, you'll find a great altissimo fingering chart that you can refer to. Go through each fingering, preferably with a

tuner, and see which one plays the most naturally and precisely for you.

## **6. Avoid biting down excessively.**

Although the natural tendency when playing in the upper register of the saxophone is to bite down and squeeze the notes out, this is really the opposite of what you should be doing. Just like with your overtones, getting the altissimo notes requires that the “heavy lifting” is not done by your bottom jaw, but rather, by the tongue, throat, and inner mouth. Again, the practicing of overtones will get these muscles working for

you in the right away.

## 7. Support those altissimo notes with a solid stream of air.

Really, this tip applies to any note on the saxophone, but in the case of altissimo it really isn't optional. Make sure that you're supporting your sound using your entire torso as explained in Chapter 2 (the chapter on breathing).

Increasing the speed of the air is important as well. Speeding up the air is similar to speeding up the stream of water out of a hose. Ever step on a hose without completely blocking the water from coming out?

If so, you noticed that the water that does come out travels a lot further and faster. On the sax, if you “squeeze” the air with your tongue high into your soft palette, the air will move faster and cause the reed to pop into altissimo mode.

## **8. Experiment with making different vocal sounds while practicing altissimo notes.**

Earlier in the book we went over the fact that generally speaking, the “EE” vowel sound is a good one to keep in mind while blowing through the horn. However, the inner mouth does need to shift itself in order to

accommodate different notes and make adjustments in pitch.

That being the case, it's recommended that you try some other vowel sound to see how those work for you. Some have reported success from the "EEWW" vowel sound, while others have benefited from imagining making the sound of a cat hissing. I've found that putting my tongue in the "K" position has also helped me snap into the note I was going for, so experiment and see what works best for you.

## 9. **Gradually add new altissimo notes to your practice routine.**

---

If you try to memorize a bunch of altissimo fingerings at one sitting and then attempt to zip through your scales all the way to the tippy-top of the instrument's extended range, then you're probably going to end up frustrated. Instead, practice incorporating one new altissimo note at a time, perhaps every week, or every two weeks, or even longer depending on how much time you are able to practice each week.

For example, for week one, practice playing your scales and arpeggios

going all the way to the altissimo F# (above palm key F). One or two weeks later, incorporate the altissimo G along with the F#. And keep going up chromatically. Continue adding notes on a regular basis, and before you know it, you'll be squealing up there with the best of them!

## 10. Grab one of the great books on the topic of altissimo.

Excellent practice books always make for a great shortcut in musical improvement as we're pushed into playing things completely out of our self-defined comfort zones. Here are

three classics you may want to check out for yourself:

- *Top Tones for Saxophone* – Sigurd Rascher, published by Carl Fischer
- *Saxophone High Tones: A Systematic Approach to the Extension of the Range of All the Saxophones: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Baritone* - Eugene Rousseau, published by MMB Music
- *Ted Nash's Studies in High Harmonics* - Hal Leonard Corporation

## Take Action

### Expanding Your Altissimo

Apply tip number nine from the list above, and gradually add new altissimo notes to your practice routine. Go to page 6 in the included exercise book for an altissimo fingering chart.

# Chapter 6 - Technique

When it comes to playing a musical instrument, there's nothing more impressive to the average listener – and often to the seasoned musician, than a flurry of cleanly executed, lightening-fast succession of notes (also known as “shredding”).

Masters such as Johnny Griffin, Michael Brecker, Cannonball Adderley, and Sonny Stitt had a way of getting around the horn at breakneck speeds that added truckloads of energy and excitement to their live performances and recordings.

So how does one go about developing this super-human level of proficiency on the horn? Well, we're about to go over some stuff that'll get you moving around the horn like a Japanese bullet train moving at full speed.

Now, right off the bat, you should know that technique doesn't necessarily only mean the ability to play fast. According to Rick Margitza, "Technique is being able to control the instrument. I know that means of lot of things, that's kind of a general statement but to me, it means controlling the instrument instead of having the instrument control you."

Rick continues, “A lot of people think about technique just in terms of just being able to play fast. Technique, to me, means playing in tune, being able to breathe properly, being able to play scales and passages evenly, and being able to play dynamics from very loud to very soft. So it’s like I said, a general control of the instrument and what that entails.”

In reality, everything we’re covering in this book is really an aspect of saxophone technique. However, in this particular chapter, we’re going to be focusing on the part of technique that

most of you want to master – that is, we’re going to explore the development of the ability to move around the horn at very high speeds.

## Where Technique *Really* Begins

When it comes to moving quickly around the horn, it’s natural to assume that it’s all about the strength and agility of the fingers that gets you playing at blazing speeds. However, according to Bill Plake, technique begins quite a bit before the fingers actually make contact with the keys.

Bill tells us, “This is probably going to sound stupid and obvious here but I’m

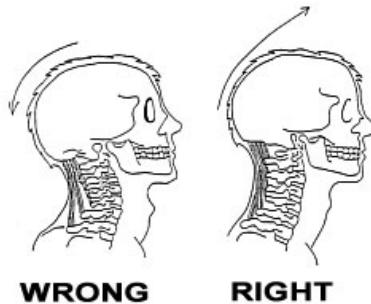
---

going to say it anyways. Our hands are connected to our arms, our arms are connected to our back, and our back is connected to our spine, which is conditioned by how our head is balanced on the spine – not too far forward and not too far back.”

In order to properly balance the head on the spine, let your neck be free so that your head can release upward. Because the head is heavier (it has more mass) in the front, as your head releases upward, you might notice it also comes very slightly forward, gently extending your neck ever so slightly. When this happens it might feel as if your eyes,

face and chin are moving downward very slightly as well. The key is to not try to put the head into place by holding or stiffening, but rather, let the head release into its natural balance.

If your head is tilted unevenly on top of the spine, that means there is stiffness in our neck and shoulders. Stiffness in the shoulders stiffens the arms, which in turn stiffen the hands, which in turn stiffen the fingers. So what we're talking about here is a chain reaction that extends from the head to the fingers.



## Forget About Your Fingers

---

*Image provided courtesy of Anvil Magazine: <http://www.AnvilMag.com>*

Contrary to what one might think, focusing on your fingers while playing is quite likely to trip them up and add unwanted slop to your playing.

It's kind of like driving a car down the freeway. If you focus on the fact that you're moving at 70 miles per hour and then feel yourself flying down the road at the mercy of your hands on the steering wheel, you're likely to lose that sense of oneness with the automobile. And it's that subconscious feeling of connection to the vehicle that keeps you from wrapping your ride around a light post.

Well, same thing goes with the fingers. Many of us are taught to play with our fingers close to the keys. And of course, keeping those fingers as close to the horn as possible is certainly a good habit to get into. But if you're running through your scales with your mind focused on the feeling of the keys under your fingers as you try to keep them stuck to the pearls, you're probably going to trip yourself up. If forcing yourself to play with your fingers extra close to the keys is causing you to over-concentrate on your hands and fingers, then it's not worth the few milliseconds you're saving by having your fingers travel a few centimeters less. There are

some great players out there who play with their fingers flying way up above the keys. However, if you can cut out the tension that starts all the way up at the head, there's a good chance that the resulting relaxation will lead to your fingers naturally hugging the keys, just like we see watching videos of Charlie Parker and Michael Brecker.

You may very well find that your technique seems to improve drastically when you focus on something other than your fingers. Keeping the brain away from the digits invariably results in the notes coming out more evenly

and your playing feeling that much more effortless.

To give some examples of good places to send your brain other than the fingers:

- Imagine playing whatever you're playing center stage to a packed house at Carnegie Hall. Or maybe you're serenading the love of your life from under a tree beneath his or her bedroom (without being interrupted by neighbors telling you to put the horn somewhere rather uncomfortable). Move around expressively a bit and incorporate varying dynamics if that helps you. If you're playing an Ab major scale, make it the most beautiful Ab major

scale that the world has ever heard. The point is, focus on creating something beautiful and you'll find your fingers surprising you with newfound nimbleness.

- Pay close attention to your tone quality. Are you getting the sound you really want to achieve? Think about the “color” of your tone. If you want to sound bright like Phil Woods, listen for and create brightness in your sound. No matter who or what you want to sound like, put your sound at the forefront of your brain while zipping through those tricky passages, and your

fingers will not fail you.

- Focus on relaxation. See how at ease you can be while playing. Become aware of tension in your body – especially in the shoulders, the arms, and the hands, since it's the muscles in those parts of the body that can really cause you to clench up and restrict your fingers to a clumsy turtle's pace.
- Focus on the clanking of the keys as they come down on the toneholes. This tip is going to be controversial, but it's very likely to be helpful for many of you. Granted, even if you

play 100% cleanly, the sound of the keys coming down might not happen in perfect unison with movement of the fingers. But listening to the clinks and clanks with the expectation that you'll be hearing those clanks in perfect rhythm really does something to clean your playing up. Now this does seem awfully close to focusing on the fingers, but it's really listening to the saxophone as a percussion instrument. This is also something that you can focus on while practicing silently, like when you're staying in a hotel or somewhere where loud and cutting sounds are not appreciated.

In summary, focusing on the fingers introduces a bunch of tension in the hands. Additionally, you're creating an unnecessary layer of thinking between the time that the brain tells you to play the note and the time that the note actually comes out.

Moral of the story: *keep tension out of the picture and the fingers will take care of themselves.*

## Isolating the Trouble Spots

When it comes to sloppy playing, the culprit is always the awkward

---

transitions between two notes. Within the span of a single scale, we may have several of these awkward transitions.

Take for example the F# major scale. You can see that there are many more difficult note-to-note transitions than, say, G major. In F#, you've got some finger-busting movements such as F# to G#, and then A# to side B (although it's not technically considered "proper" technique, you can use the bis key here, but it's still going to be a tricky transition to master either way). And how about moving between C# and D#? You've got a whole bunch of keys moving up and down at the same time. Try trilling between those two notes

and you're definitely going to be giving those digits a run for their money.

Ever heard the cliché “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link?” Well, same goes for your scales, arpeggios, and really anything you may find yourself playing. For example, find the most difficult transition in any given scale (in other words, your scale’s weakest link), and know that the fastest speed at which you can *cleanly* get through those two notes is the fastest speed at which you can play that scale. So the faster you can get through those difficult movements between the two notes, the faster you’re going to be able

to get through that scale in a manner that sounds crisp and clear.

So how do we work towards mastery of the most challenging intervals on our instrument? Do we sit there for hours on end playing A# to B?

Sure, you could do that, and it would probably help your technique. But chances are that after ten minutes or so, you would grow tired of doing something as mundane as rocking back and forth between two notes, and your mind would wander off making your practice time nearly worthless.

Why not mix it up a bit? Well then change the rhythm up to “keep your fingers guessing” and force them to get that succession of notes feeling solid.

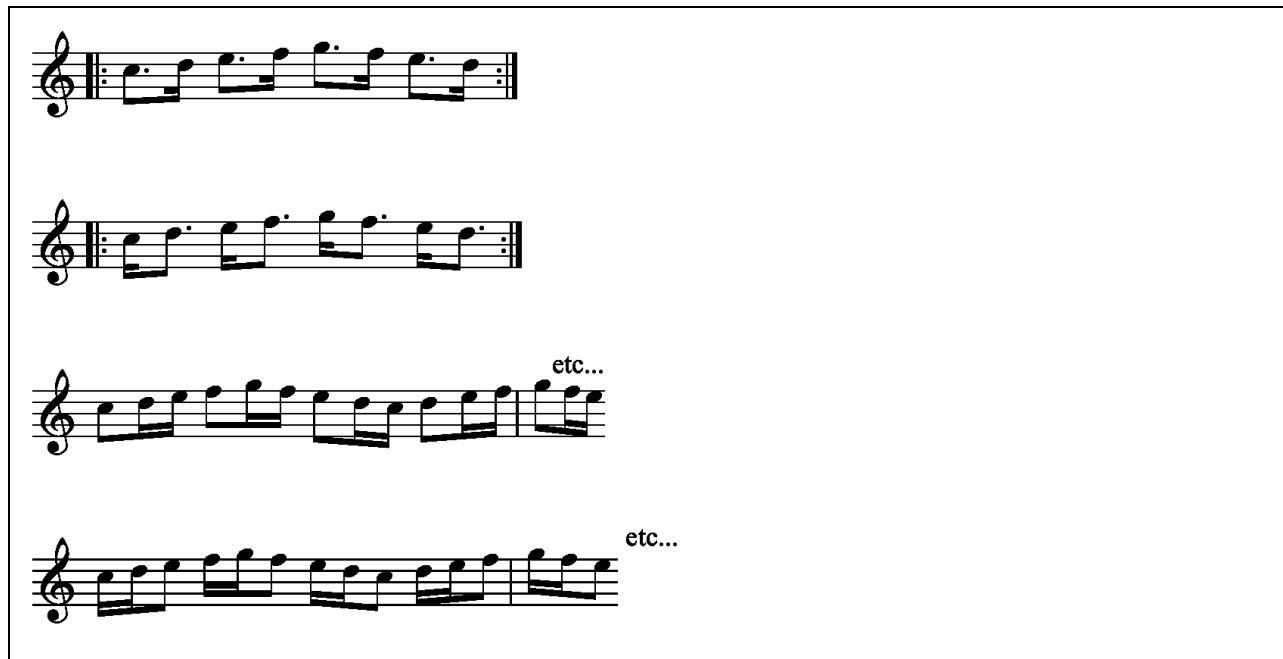
For example, Instead of playing that A# to B over and over again like an annoying alarm clock, think about ways that you can incorporate those two notes into rhythmic variations. Perhaps you can incorporate that troublesome interval in a small section of a scale, varying the rhythm as shown below.

## Take Action

### Rhythmic Variations

Below are four sample rhythmic variations on the first five notes of a C major scale. These are just starting points, so feel free to use any alternate rhythmic pattern you like.

You may also want to try developing your rhythmic conception and accuracy by playing the variations below with the metronome sounding on beats 2 and 4 only.



## How Fast Can You Hear?

Since it's a general rule that you have to hear something before you can play it, it's highly recommended that your ear becomes an intensely detail-oriented listening machine. You must be able to pick out inconsistencies in rhythmic placement of each note. You must

develop sensitivity to how clean each note is executed; in other words, you need to be able to hear what happens *between* the individual notes.

However, Rick Margitz offers an interesting twist on the theory of being able to hear fast. Says Rick, “I kind of feel that the more technique we have, the more we are able to hear. So it’s kind of the inverse. At first I spent a lot of time listening and playing along with records so I think my initial level of technique was determined by what I listened to, maybe not what I was hearing in terms of my own ideas. I was listening to players like Charlie Parker, Michael Brecker, and I was trying to

play along with their records and my technical goal was to be able to execute things that they were playing. So I guess my technique was determined by what I was trying to emulate; and then the more technique and more control you have and gain over the horn, then I think what happens is you start being able to hear other things that are hopefully part of your conception.”

So from Rick’s experience, we can deduce that the development of technique can be a cyclical process. To break down the development of Rick’s formidable level of technique:

1. In addition to steady regiment of classical saxophone practice, he listened to recordings with fast saxophone playing.
2. He emulated the level of technique heard on the recordings by learning what the saxophonists on those records were playing, and then playing along.
3. As a result of being able to play along with great saxophonists on record, he was able to get around the horn quicker.
4. As a result of being able to get around the horn quicker, he was able

to hear quicker.

5. As a result of being able to hear faster, he was able to continue to increase his ability to play at high speeds.

Really, from the very beginning, Rick was *listening* to sax players with incredible technique. So the moral of Rick's story:

*No matter how you slice it, you need to develop fast listening in order to achieve fast playing.*

## Take Action

### Playing Along with Fast Moving Passages

Take a fast-moving passage, 2-4 bars in length, from a recorded transcribed solo or written piece of music and play along with the recording of that passage. Work towards making your version of the passage just as clean and effortless sounding as what's on the recording.

## Classical Repertoire

I have yet to come across a saxophonist with excellent technique who has not

spent a good amount of time working with classical repertoire.

If you’re primarily a classical player, then you can consider yourself fortunate to have been musically stretched by the rigors inherent in this particular area of music. If you’re a jazz player, it’s very easy to fall into a pattern of “letting the fingers do the walking” after a relatively short time spent learning the standard jazz vocabulary. However, classical music can force us to navigate melodic content that feels completely unnatural to us from a technical standpoint, and keeps us on our toes.

Obviously, playing classical music authentically is a complete art in and of itself. There is a different aesthetic in terms of tone production and usually a different reed and mouthpiece setup than what you would see in a jazz setting. Classical saxophonists must also work towards becoming master interpreters of written repertoire and play with much different phrasing than a jazz musician does.

Those of you who are primarily jazz musicians would be wise to build up as much skill in the classical saxophone arena as practically possible as it will exponentially expand your abilities as

well as your overall conception of music.

Whether you're looking to become a great classical saxophonist or not, it is highly advisable that you, at the very least, practice playing through classical repertoire, and ideally study classical music with a private teacher.

## Take Action

### Recommended Repertoire

Below is a list of some of the greatest classical saxophone literature, period. Just about every great saxophonist has explored much, if not all of this music

at one time or another. Familiarize yourself with as much of the material below as possible.

- Universal Method for Saxophone, by Paul Deville
- 25 Daily Exercises for Saxophone, by H. Klose
- 48 Famous Studies for Saxophone V.1, by W. Ferling
- Aria for Alto Saxophone and Piano, by Eugène Bozza
- Concertino da Camera, by Jacques-Francois Ibert
- Sonata Opus 19 for Eb Alto Saxophone, by Paul Creston
- Concerto for Alto Saxophone and

Piano, by Paul Creston

- Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Piano, Op.109, by Alexander Glazunov
- 25 Caprices (and an Atonal Sonata) for Solo Saxophone, by Sigfrid Karg-Elert

# Chapter 7 – Articulation

## Articulation Overview

Articulation is obviously a crucial skill for just about *any* musician.

For our purposes, perhaps the definition which best describes articulation is that which Google offers upon searching for the word:

*“The formation of clear and distinct sounds in speech”*

Of course, in our case, we substitute the word “speech” for “saxophone playing.”

But when it does come to speech, articulation is what differentiates our speaking voice from that of a robot.

In the case of music, if every note in a phrase is played with the same attack as all of the other notes and is in no way emphasized or de-emphasized, then what you end up with is “robot music.” (think early 1980’s video games)

So our goal in articulation is to express melody and rhythm in a way that best

suits whatever it is we’re playing. For example, in improvised jazz, we must vary the articulation in order for the music to swing – usually by emphasizing the off-beats. Similarly, in any sort of written music, we must use articulation to give the melody shape and texture.

As just about all of you know, for wind instrumentalists, the word “tonguing” means basically the same thing as articulation. In the case of us saxophone players, it is important that we become aware of how our tongue makes contact with the reed.

## Guidelines for Proper Articulation

Taking our cues from some of saxophone history's greatest teachers, here are some of the most crucial points to keep in mind with regards to articulation:

- A good way to approach making contact between the tongue and the reed is to touch *not* the very tip, but instead touch with the tip of your tongue the point *just past* the tip of the reed. You can also go back to about half an inch to an inch back on your tongue if that's more intuitive

for you.

- Move the tongue up towards the reed and down away from the reed. Articulating by moving the tongue back and forth should be avoided. One way to tell if you're tonguing correctly is by looking in the mirror and noticing if your throat is moving at all. If your tongue is shooting forward, then you'll notice your throat moving quite obviously. Since what we're going for here is no movement in the throat, or really, anywhere other than the tongue, we can see how the forward and backwards movement of the tongue

can be problematic.

- To make sure that you’re articulating independently of the lower jaw, you can use the exercise mentioned earlier in the book where you get in front of a mirror and whisper “la-la-la” while making sure that your jaw or throat doesn’t move in the process.

As mentioned earlier, start your notes with air first, and then attack the reed lightly. Otherwise you may end up with a constricted, smaller sound. Keep the stream of air steady.

## The Role of Air Flow

However, it's not only the tongue that plays into the equation. We also have to think about the flow of air that's causing the reed to vibrate. In a recent interview I conducted, saxophone recording artist and educator Ricky Sweum reminds us of the challenge that many of us face as we experience a slight, but noticeable delay between the time that we start putting air through the horn, and the time that the sound actually becomes audible. This problem is especially evident when playing the lower notes on the horn. Having a horn that is leaking or out of adjustment makes this problem even

worse.

Ricky explains that there are two different ways to start a note:

1. While the tongue is on the reed and holding it down from vibrating, the airstream begins to move. As soon as the tongue is lifted from the reed, the sound starts.
2. Simply blowing air through the horn with no tongue involved at all

Likewise, there are two ways of ending a note:

1. The air is already moving and the tongue touches the reed to make the

## sound stop

2. The air simply stops with no tongue involved at all

Of course, all of this may sound obvious to many of you, but the point here is to become intimately familiar with the physical sensations of *both* ways of starting a note as well as *both* ways of ending a note. With this awareness, you develop a sensitivity to the responsiveness of the horn to your attack, and you can then work towards making the horn speak exactly when you wish to start a note. Likewise, a sensitivity to the *ending* of your notes

starts to become engrained in your consciousness.

It is this heightened perception of the beginnings and endings of notes adds yet another dimension to the expressiveness as well as the accuracy of your articulation and phrasing.

## Take Action

### Practicing Articulation with Long Tones

When practicing long tones, try the following:

1. With a metronome set at a slow tempo (60 bpm or so), start a note using only your breath and no tongue at all, fade in from complete silence and gradually increase your volume over the course of two measures into full fortissimo.
  
2. Once you've reached fortissimo at the end of two bars, begin to

decrescendo, fading out into complete silence over the course of the next two bars, stopping the breath without the tongue.

Practice this on three different notes, one in each register. So that would mean one note in the lower register, one in the middle register, and one in the upper register. To give just one example, you could start on low B, then skip up to a middle C, and finish up on a high D above the staff.

Next, try this same exercise again across all three registers of the horn, but this time beginning and ending each

note *with* the tongue. Make sure to attack the reed ever-so-slightly, being conscious of how the note starts and finishes.

To take things to *yet another level*:

1. Set your metronome to 80 bpm
2. Play a quarter note, beginning the note with just the breath, and then resting for a quarter note. Repeat this for two bars, moving up in volume with each note just like we did in the last exercise, and then decreasing the volume of each individual note back down over the next two bars. Again,

you are practicing a total of three pitches in this exercise – one in each register.

Now repeat this same exercise, but this time, actually *tongue* each quarter note.

**BONUS:** Breathe through the nose when you take your breaths, keeping the mouthpiece in your mouth and your embouchure intact. Depriving your embouchure of the opportunity to rest throughout this exercise will build up your chops - *big time*.

*(As a sidenote, to learn more about Ricky Sweum, visit his website:*

*http://www.rickysweum.com)*

## Syllables to Use While Tonguing

The way we articulate a note varies quite a bit depending on what sort of sound we're going for. For example, a short staccato note is going to require a different type of attack than a quarter note at legato.

The way an attack sounds is determined by the vocal sound you're thinking of as you play it.

Although there are many basic syllable sounds we can think of while tonguing, here are three of the most common ones you're likely to be using:

- “DA” for legato quarter notes and longer
- “DIT” for staccato notes
- “DO” for rapid-moving legato notes

## Take Action

### Articulation Variation

To practice the fundamentals of proper tonguing, take a look at Mel Martin’s articulation exercise on page 8 of the included exercise book.

# Useful Tonguing Techniques

There are a ton of different techniques out there getting different effects with your articulation, but I'm going to cover two of the most useful and practical ones.

## Double-Tonguing

Ever tried tonguing sixteenth notes at 120 beats per minute? Well, if you have, and if you've succeeded, chances are you used the double-tonguing technique. You can hear double tonguing very prominently in the work of 1920's unsung saxophone hero Rudy Wiedoeft. You can also hear it in the

saxophone part on the theme from the Benny Hill Show (aka “Yakety Sax” by Boots Randolph). Wayne Shorter and Johnny Griffin are among the many jazz players who rely on this effect.

In short, double-tonguing is a way to alternate the position of the tongue so that you’re taking advantage of each movement of the tongue to articulate a note. Whereas normal tonguing involves both an attack and a release for a single note, double tonguing involves replacing the release of the tongue with a “ka” sound, from which you can fling right back into a “da” sound.

The vocal sound we’re going for here is “da-ka.” So four sixteenth notes would be articulated as “da-ka da-ka.”

## Take Action

### Double Tonguing

Timothy Roberts ([www.Timothy-Roberts.com](http://www.Timothy-Roberts.com)), Associate Professor of Saxophone at Shenandoah Conservatory recommends the following practice routine for double-tonguing:

1. First, make sure that you are able to single tongue in 8<sup>th</sup> notes at 144 beats per minute. If not, then practice along with a metronome until you can hit that tempo.
  
2. Practice the “Ka” sound, 8<sup>th</sup> notes at 120 beats per minute.

3. Then slow down metronome and practice alternating the “Ta” and the “Ka” making sure to play the notes evenly.
4. Over time, continue to work towards moving the tempo up as much as possible

From there, you can practice incorporating double-tonguing into your scales, arpeggios, written exercises, jazz solos, and just about anything else.

## Half-Tonguing and Ghosting

If you play jazz or funk saxophone, half-tonguing is not optional - it's a must. To give a list of all of the saxophonists who use this technique would be pointless since the list basically includes everyone.

You may also have heard of half-tonguing as “ghosting” notes. For saxophonists, ghosted notes are notes that are muted, but not completely cut off by the tongue. Ghosting is what allows jazz saxophonists to swing, since there’s that complex yet organic rhythmic interplay of emphasized and de-emphasized notes.

As you might expect, half tonguing involves tonguing the side of the reed as opposed to tonguing in the center as one normally would. This way, you're cutting off the sound from one side of the reed while the other half of the reed continues to vibrate.

In order to achieve this effect, think of the syllables “li-dle” (like the word “little” with a “d” instead of two “t”s) - the “li” syllable being the ghosted note. So in the context of a jazz solo, you might hear the soloist articulating the down beat normally, for example, using the “da” syllable just to get the phrase started, and then moving into the “dle” sound for the emphasized off-beat

eighth note, and then the “li” sound for the de-emphasized and ghosted on-beat.

You can also use this technique to great effect in funk music. Taking a single note and playing it in a funky percussive rhythm and alternating between normally tongued and half-tongued notes is a great way to really get the crowd going. Lenny Pickett and Maceo Parker make great use of this effect, but really, just about any funk saxophone solo you’ll ever hear uses it.

With effects like these, there’s only so much you can explain in words. For more instruction on how to half-tongue,

---

you can watch a video demonstration I did on the subject of half tonguing and ghosting notes here:

<http://www.bestsaxophonewebsitenever.com/an-introduction-to-jazz-articulation-on-the-saxophone>

## **Improving Your Technique by Incorporating Articulation**

It's one thing to fly through scales and exercises slurring each and every note. It's quite another to fly through the music while clearly and tastefully articulating. Although you may initially want to practice your scales and arpeggios slurred, try tonguing each note, or every downbeat, or every off

beat. Basically mix up the articulation so that your fingers are forced to line up with your tongue.

Incorporating articulation into your exercises makes them quite a bit harder, but gaining control of your articulation is going to get you playing those fast passages much more accurately while preparing you for real-life musical situations where you can't simply slur all of the notes.

## **Articulation as the Basis for a Truly Original Sound**

If you want to forge a sound that's one hundred-percent you, then you need to start thinking about your articulation. Even though we may find ourselves playing written music with all of the articulation markings explicitly indicated for us, the way we use our tongue in combination with our airflow, is going to give us a sound that's all our own. If you're a jazz saxophonist, there is no limit to how you can use articulation to express yourself.

Jerry Bergonzi gives the example of when a friend calls you on the phone and within two words you know exactly who it is. Why is that? It's because of the way your friend articulates the

words that they're speaking. And it's no different when we're talking about playing the saxophone.

Whether you're Lester Young or Marcel Mule or Joe Lovano – the way you articulate is what's going to set you apart from any other saxophonist.

## Chapter 8 – Intonation

Although it's a subtle art to master, proper intonation is anything but subtle when it comes to the ears of even the most unseasoned listener. Ever watch one of those televised talent shows like we have in America such as *American*

*Idol* or *X-Factor*? A singer might not have the prettiest tone quality, but if they sing perfectly in tune, it will at the very least sound interesting and definitely listenable. However, if you take a singer with gorgeous tone quality but poor intonation, the intonation deficiencies will be blaringly obvious and cause both the judges and the audience to instantly cringe.

As saxophone players, we're up against the same challenge. No matter how beautifully we interpret music or improvise or effortlessly zip through the entire range of the instrument – all of that good stuff is rendered useless when

combined with the curse of poor intonation.

And if you're planning on playing saxophone in any sort of ensemble, you really need to have a strong sense of intonation.

## **Giving Yourself the Tools to Stay in Tune**

Remember a few chapters back where we got into the practice of playing on the mouthpiece alone, adjusting our throat and inner mouth in the same way that we would if we were singing?

Well, it's the same thing here, but on a

much more subtle level. In fact, if you're a beginning player and the thought of making subtle changes in your pitch using only your throat and the inside of your mouth makes your head spin, not to worry. This is fairly advanced stuff we're talking about, but it's definitely something to work towards.

The reality of the situation is that most of us will have to move our jaw *a little bit* to find the pitch. But the goal is to rely on the inner embouchure to make adjustments as needed.

## Take Action

### The Extreme Pitch Flexibility Workout

1. Hold down a high G and play it as you normally would. (When starting to play this exercise, I suggest starting in the middle of the instrument's range, since the very low notes will be much more difficult and should perhaps be tackled only after you have a firm grasp of doing this in the middle and upper registers).
  
2. Now finger a G# BUT don't let

the pitch of the note move from G. Use the position of the tongue and the throat to hold the pitch in place. DO NOT move your lower jaw, since pinching or dropping the jaw will defeat the purpose here. We're going for the same muscle movements that we use in our practice of overtones.

3. Now finger an A, but again, don't let the pitch of the note move from G.
  
4. Continue this up until you're fingering a perfect fourth above the G, which would be C, all the while holding out the pitch of that middle

G.

5. Once you've made it up to the C, finger and play a high F# (the F# at the top of the staff) and continue fingering notes up by half steps while keeping the pitch of the F# intact.
6. Continue the pattern downwards as far as you can go.

## It's All in the Ears

Yep, the ears. That's pretty much it. No matter how much you practice your long tones and overtones, if you can't

*hear* where the center of the pitch is, you're most certainly not going to be able to consistently *play* at the center of the pitch.

## Take Action

### Give Your Ears a Workout with *The Tuning CD*

Pick up a copy of *The Tuning CD*, which is basically nothing more than a recorded series of drones. There are drones on all 12 notes, about 4 minutes each. This CD can really help you start to hear your pitch in relation to something that's very solid. You will most likely find that playing along with a recording dedicated to delineating pitch such as this one is a much more holistic way to practice intonation than just playing into a tuner and looking for

the position of the tuning light.

To use the CD to improve the accuracy of your pitch, you can:

- Hold out long tones in unison with the drone
- Play scales in the key of the drone (major, minor, etc)
- Practice arpeggios in the key of the drone
- Practice improvising in the key of the drone, or even outside the key for more advanced ear training

Even if you're not playing in exact unison with the drones, intonation inconsistencies will make themselves

quite clear.

Click here to get your own copy of *The Tuning CD*

## The Effect of Temperature on Your Pitch

As many of you may know, cold air makes you go flat, warm air makes you go sharp. Since you probably practice at a reasonably comfortable room temperature, when you play in a particularly cold room, you're almost certainly going to have to push your mouthpiece in a bit more than usual to make up for the fact that your pitch is

going to be lower than it normally is in the room-temperature setting. And as for the warm room – it's the opposite. Pull that mouthpiece out a bit and adjust from there.

**Sam Sadigursky shares some very interesting points on the topic of intonation in a real-life musical situation:**

“A good player should have a lot of flexibility in terms of pitch. I'm actually not a believer in the group getting together and tuning to a single note. First, I know my instruments well enough to know where I should be on them when I play. Beyond that I think a

good player has a lot of flexibility to move around and match whatever is around them. I have a pretty good sense of the pitch within the first few notes the ensemble plays. I constantly adjust for the temperature of the room, and to whatever I'm hearing around me. That single tuning note can provide a starting point for players, but it's only that. Playing with good intonation involves much more rigor and attention.”

“A band can tune up, but that’s not really doing that much for them because conditions are constantly changing. As you change - and you’re constantly going to be adjusting, you might be

adjusting to some instruments that have really gone flat in a certain register. It's a constant thing that you have to be attentive to. And to some extent, you're only going to be playing as in tune as the people you're playing with, so you're really dependent on them to do the same thing and for them to be constantly adjusting. It's a collective thing."

When asked about whether or not he practices with a tuner, Sam answers:

"I do occasionally. I don't do that with saxophone as much at this point but with instruments that are maybe secondary instruments for me I will

work with a tuner; but I'm not that big a believer in it because again, there's no group that you'll ever play with that will play with perfect intonation, it just doesn't happen. It's much more a matter of listening and developing that ability to adjust."

"That also has to deal with how strong your ears are and whether you really know, for example, what a minor sixth should sound like so that you're hearing it accurately. Even if you're playing by yourself, you're going to need to be able to hear whether or not it's off."

“And back to the idea of being able to move around pitch; it’s much easier to move pitch down than it is up. If you’re below the pitch you’re definitely going to want to adjust the mouthpiece and move it further in because any time you’re below the pitch it means you’re going to be kind of biting or something to get the pitch up, and we want to avoid doing that at any cost. There’s no reason to ever be below the pitch.”

“Our ears, I think, tend to accept sharpness a lot more than they accept something below the pitch. A lot of saxophonists will push the mouthpiece all the way in because they’re able to be very loose there and put a lot of air

---

through the horn, thinking that they are bringing the pitch down sufficiently by playing with that loose embouchure and covering up any flat parts of the horn by pushing so far in. Generally, this causes a lot of intonation problems, particularly in areas of the horn which tend to be on the high side of the pitch. Although this loosening of the jaw might be one path to what someone hears as a big sound, it creates a lot of problems. Things start to get uneven pretty fast, and constantly playing above the pitch will drive the players around you pretty crazy.”

## Take Action

### Play Duets with Another Musician

If you really want to prepare yourself for the real world, get together with another musician to play and just experience what it is to adjust to another person while making music. If you're able to record what you're playing with that person, that can be really valuable as well. Just get together with a friend and just play through any of the saxophone literature listed in Chapter 6 (Technique) and see where you stand with your intonation.

# Chapter 9 – Equipment

It's not just sax players who are tempted by the lure of shiny new gear. Some drummers are obsessed with finding that perfect ride cymbal. Guitarists are known to lust over a classic Fender Stratocaster. Trumpet players have wild dreams about getting their hands on a custom Monette.

We saxophonists are no different. Between the three major pieces of our equipment equation – that is, the reed, mouthpiece, and saxophone – there is a lot of room for fixation on gear.

The right gear can help us to be all that we can be as musicians, allowing us to sound our best with the least amount of effort possible. The wrong equipment can make our musical lives an uphill battle.

In this chapter, we're going to be dealing with equipment as it concerns your saxophone playing. I've decided to avoid going into how to choose a new saxophone, mouthpiece, or reed since those topics warrant a separate book in and of themselves and would be too much of a tangent for this particular course of study. Instead, we're going to focus on the philosophy behind the

effect of equipment on our ability to play at our maximum capacity.

## **There's No Getting Away from You**

Some time ago, I set up a “Reed Reviews” section on my website, and to kick it off, I decided to review seven models of reeds and record myself playing on each to allow folks to hear the difference between the various reeds. While the difference between the reeds was not unnoticeable, it was also not extreme. I found that I pretty much sound like me regardless of which reed I’m playing on.

Sure, some reads sound brighter, or fuzzier, or fatter than others, but it's my opinion that nobody's going to hear me play on one reed and then no longer recognize my sound once I change to another reed. And the same goes for saxophones and even mouthpieces.

Now, when switching between mouthpieces made of different material there can be some pretty pronounced differences. For example, if you normally play a hard rubber mouthpiece and then switch to a metal mouthpiece, the difference in tonal color can be pretty pronounced. But I would venture to guess that you'll still sound more or less like *you*.

---

## The Real Reason We Shop for New Equipment

So if we sound pretty much like ourselves no matter what we play on, then why the weeks, months, and years upon years of searching for new reeds, ligatures, mouthpieces, and saxophones?

Of course, it's the way that the new product *feels* as we're playing it that makes it either a winner or a loser for us.

No matter whether or not the audience is going to notice the difference

between you on a Meyer and you on a Theo Wanne, one of those mouthpieces is going to make you feel like you're playing better than when you play the other. At the end of the day, the best choice for you is going to be the piece of equipment that makes it the most easy and natural for you to sound your best.

Truth is, you could make yourself sound great on any mouthpiece, but when it comes to those mouthpieces that are not ideally suited for you, you are going to have to do things like contort your embouchure and oral cavity to attain the best sound that you are capable of. What we're looking for

is something that we just blow into and voila – effortless awesomeness!

The right equipment will make you feel like John Coltrane wailing over a ballad or Eugene Rousseau floating atop an orchestra, or really, anything or anyone you’re trying to sound like (and hopefully the goal is to sound like *you!*).

So by all means, take the time to find the right equipment and find what makes it as effortless as possible to play your best. Then forget about the gear shopping and focus on your own musicianship.



## **Before You Purchase Any New Equipment**

There is certainly a time and place for gear shopping – especially when you find your playing is stuck in a bit of a rut despite your hard work in the practice room. However, before you go out and start blowing through your (or your parents') hard-earned cash, I suggest you try the following:

- 1. Remember that there's a lot more that goes into achieving the sound you're looking for than your actual tone quality.**

For example, if you're trying to sound like Joe Henderson, are you using Joe Henderson's style of articulation and phrasing? If not, you may actually be matching his tone quality, but still sound nothing like him since the way you play everything is completely different. Well, same goes if you're trying to sound like your ideal self on the horn.

Find a recording of a phrase as played by your favorite player, and practice playing it back over and over using the same articulation, dynamics, and time feel. Record yourself playing that phrase, and

compare it to the recording of your saxophone hero. You'll be surprised at how you can actually sound when you really put your full intention behind sounding like a completely different player. (more on this in Chapter 10)

## **2. Check for physical tension while you're playing.**

Great musicianship, or really, greatness in any field requires that we work effortlessly to achieve our ideal. So while you play, scan your body for tension or unnatural contortion in your neck, back,

shoulders, arms, hands, and really anywhere else. Once your body starts feeling fairly relaxed and in its natural state, you should start sounding and feeling noticeably better.

But if after taking a few weeks to really focus on making playing as natural and intuitive as possible you're still not sounding the way you'd like to, or even sounding worse, it might be that the equipment that you're using is forcing you to twist your facial and other muscles into all kinds of weird shapes in order to sound good. And if the only way for you to sound

good is to go all stiff and uncomfortable, then perhaps you need to switch to some gear that will make you sound better once you free yourself up and do away with the unnatural approach.

### **3. Make sure that your current horn isn't in need of repair.**

Leaky pads and maladjusted keys could easily put a damper on your ability to get around the horn. In fact, improperly adjusted key height could affect your pitch or even make your horn sound stuffy.

# Finding the Right Mouthpiece and Reed Combination

Walt Weiskopf shares his insights on the topic of arriving at the best possible marriage of reed and mouthpiece:

“If you’re having difficulty practicing your overtones, the first place to start, equipment-wise, is the mouthpiece; especially if the reed is too hard and the mouthpiece has a facing more open than a 5 or a 6. If you’re playing a 7 or more and if your reed is a 4, you may need to reevaluate your setup. It’s very difficult to be flexible enough to do what you want to do on the saxophone if your equipment is causing an

excessive amount of resistance. A reed that's too hard and/or a mouthpiece that is too open, and therefore harder to control, is a bad combination! Either one of these elements may be the reason the instrument is just too hard to play.”

“I know it’s common for tenor players to play mouthpieces more open than what I would play, but people do it. With regards to the practicing of overtones, you’ll know that it’s possible that your setup is too demanding and is in need of reevaluation if:

1. You feel you are not progressing noticeably (within a week or two).

2. It just seems too difficult, too stressful on your embouchure.
3. Your lower lip is getting sore

“You’ve got to have a setup that’s reasonable. A moderate opening is best. It’s got to have some resistance but not too much. If a mouthpiece is too free-blown it’s not going to be helpful either. The reed should have some resistance but it shouldn’t be too stiff either because then you’re forced to ‘bite’ too much with your embouchure, which does not make for a pleasing sound.”

## Getting Used to a New Mouthpiece

---

Walt continues to share his experience:

“If a saxophone player, over a period of time, acknowledges the mouthpiece they are playing is too open, the next logical step is to try a mouthpiece with a more moderate opening. If you’re used to playing a mouthpiece that you have now decided is too open for you, you may have to give yourself a period of time to adjust.”

“During this period of recalibration you may feel as though the mouthpiece can’t handle the amount of air you are blowing into it! Try to keep in mind saxophone playing is very physical. It

---

behooves you to use your air in the most efficient way you can. It may take a few weeks but you've got to take it on faith that if you're playing an 8 and you're having a hard time sustaining a reasonable phrase, it's a sign your mouthpiece might be too open.”

“At some point during this process, maybe a week or two, maybe more or less, you'll blow into your horn and it'll feel great. The more efficient you can be with your air, the more relaxed you're going to feel and the better you can perform.”

## Having Your Mouthpiece Worked On

“One way to update your setup without spending a ton of money on new gear is to have your mouthpiece refaced or customized. Changes to your mouthpiece should only be carried out by an experienced and reputable mouthpiece refacing and customization specialist, since any changes made to your mouthpiece are likely to be permanent.

There is an enormous amount of information that we could go over on the topic of mouthpiece manipulation,

---

so I am going to keep us on track by just going over the basic concepts so those who are not familiar with them can investigate further in the event that making changes to a mouthpiece seems like an avenue they'd like to explore.”

## Mouthpiece Refacing

Mouthpiece refacing is more of a maintenance procedure. For those of you who are new to the term, the facing is the part of the mouthpiece where the reed separates from the mouthpiece. The reason it's suggested that you have your mouthpiece refaced every few years is that over time, the facing of the mouthpiece begins to wear because of

the reed banging against the mouthpiece thousands and thousands of times each time you play. This wearing down can cause unevenness in the physical connection between the reed and the mouthpiece, negatively impacting your sound. Needless to say, the refacing process can be a scary process for those who love their mouthpieces, but it is a very good thing to look into if you want to keep your beloved mouthpiece playing at its best.

## Mouthpiece Customization

It's also possible to have your mouthpiece customized beyond a

simple refacing. Customizing a mouthpiece can mean making changes to any part of the mouthpiece, either inside or outside. The reason for going through this procedure is so the mouthpiece can more easily guide you towards that sound you're looking for. If you're looking to make significant changes to the quality of your sound, then it's best if you have a backup mouthpiece worked on so that if it doesn't come out the way you wanted it to (which is a very real possibility), then at least you're no worse off than when you started (other than the fact that your backup is shot).

## Saxophone Reeds

---

Ask any saxophone player about their least favorite aspect of playing the instrument, and nine out of ten times they'll tell you the same thing...

## What Strength of Reed Should I Use?

As Walt already pointed out, the general rule is if you are playing a mouthpiece with a large facing, make sure you balance it out with a softer reed. Likewise, if you are playing a mouthpiece with a smaller facing, make sure you balance it out with a harder reed.

If you're blowing your brains out (especially on those low notes) or unable to move between partials when practicing your overtones, then it's quite possible that you're probably playing on reeds that are too hard.

On the other hand, if you're squeaking and unable to play at loud volumes without the instrument feeling like it's hindering the full amount of airflow coming into the mouthpiece, then it's likely that you're playing on a reed that's too soft.

Since all reed manufacturers have different standards of strength and all mouthpiece manufacturers have particularly different standards of facing sizes, unfortunately there is no way to accurately recommend specific reed strength and mouthpiece facing combinations. So it's really a matter of trying out different reeds from different

manufacturers to see what works best with your setup.

## Take Action

### Finding the Best Brand of Reeds *for You*

Many sax players often find one reed that they enjoy playing out of an expensive box of ten. If this is the story of your life, then go over to your local music store and purchase 3-4 individual reeds from as diverse (different brands and models) a bunch as you can afford. Go through the reeds and find the best one from each model. Then record yourself playing the best reed from

each. Give it a day, and then listen back to the recording to see which reed you like best.

## An Alternative Method to Storing Your Reeds

Although most of us simply put out reeds in some sort of container such as a simple Rico Reed Gard, or perhaps a more complex case such as the Rico Multi-Instrument Reed Vitalizer Case.

However, esteemed saxophonist and educator Ricky Sweum suggests a method of storing reeds which will be very unusual to most of you, and

probably not recommended by many saxophone authorities, but bare with me here.

The benefit of this method is that your reeds should last exponentially longer and play more consistently over the course of months – and possibly *years* that they are in service.

## Take Action

### Storing Your Reeds in Listerine

1. Since, for most of you, this is going to be an experiment using a new technique, pick a few reeds that play well, but aren't necessarily your best reeds. In other words, find reeds that you would not be too terribly sad to lose should this experiment fail for you.
  
2. Soak these reeds in a container filled with a solution of 50% Listerine and 50% water. Leave the reeds in this solution for 1-2 weeks so that they can become completely

waterlogged.

3. After the 1-2 week period of soaking, you can store your reeds in a waterproof case such as those sold by Witz Sports (see the exact model that Ricky uses here:

<http://www.witzsportcases.com/electronics-cases/smart-phone-locker.html>). Inside the waterproof case, the reeds should be stored in a simple reed case such as the Vito Pocket Reed Guard. The reed guard should be submerged as deeply as possible in the Listerine and water solution.

## Why This Works

After cane is harvested, it is dried out. In the process of drying out, the fibers in the cane contract. Then, when you get the reed home and wet it, the fibers expand again. Then we store the reeds and they dry off again. Ricky suggests that it is the repeated contraction and expansion of these fibers that causes reeds to deteriorate, often times very quickly.

## Proven Results

Since he started storing his reeds this way five years ago, he has had several reeds that have actually lasted the entire

five years. Granted, those reeds are definitely on the softer end of the spectrum, but they are still very playable in situations where a low level of volume is desired.

In a nutshell, this method extends the life of your reeds to the point of them having the lifespan of a synthetic reed, but with the authentic sound of cane.

The reeds also stay consistent over long periods of time so that you don't have to worry about showing up at a gig and all of a sudden your best reed has gone very soft or died on you altogether. The extremely extended lifespan of the reed allows you to become intimately

familiar with how your reeds play, much in the same way that we become accustomed to a mouthpiece.

What's more is that Ricky has shared this technique with all of his students over the years, as well as just about every professional saxophonist he's come across on a gig. Of all of the people who have tried storing their reeds this way, only one saxophonist decided that this method was not for him.

# Saxophone Equipment Summary

Keep in mind, there will always be a better horn, or a better mouthpiece, or even a better reed for you somewhere out there. But once you have equipment that plays in tune, holds adjustment, and allows you to freely express yourself, then it's important not to let the quest for the perfect saxophone setup to become an excuse for why you can't reach your full potential as a saxophonist.

# Chapter 10 – Finding Your Own Voice on the Saxophone

If you take into consideration the sum total of everything we've gone over up until this point, you'll see that we've laid the foundation for not only gaining virtuosic control of the instrument, but also for developing a sound, a style, a voice that's all your own.

There are many factors that go into creating your own *saxophonic universe* (yep, I just made that up.) Among these factors are tonal color, articulation,

phrasing, time feel, improvisational vocabulary and the list goes on.

Even though the ideas we'll be covering here could apply to just about any instrument, originality is a particularly crucial aspect of playing the sax, since the possibilities of saxophone sound and style are among the most plentiful and diverse of all the acoustic instruments.

What we're going to be focusing on here is how to use the lessons in this book to develop that unique and vibrant voice that we've been striving for.

## Letting it Happen Automatically

The route to originality is quite a controversial topic. There are some who say that coming up with your own sound is something we don't need to consciously strive towards.

Here's what Walt Weiskopf – a highly original saxophonist himself, has to say on the topic:

“The big challenge, and the realization that every aspiring saxophonist has to have, is that you need substance in your playing. You've got to be able to back up your sound. You're can't bridge a

gap in knowledge and material with an inflection or a scoop. I also like to say ‘substance trumps style’. Style will take care of itself.”

“Particularly when practicing, I would be very sparse in applying inflection. This is only my opinion and there will be those who disagree, even people at a high level, but it’s just my personal opinion - there is no reason to practice bending, scooping, or inflecting. If you can already do it there’s no reason to practice it. What you need to practice is language and substance.”

“What I would suggest is to try and approach this matter-of-factly; put the

---

horn up to your face, make sure the reed works, make sure the mouthpiece works, and blow into the horn. The substance is what you should concentrate on. Don't worry about developing a personal saxophone sound. The most efficient way to develop your own sound is to get better so you have good notes to play. This is the reality about playing the saxophone (or any other instrument). A person's sound on their instrument is defined, in many ways, away from the horn. Every person is an individual with their own unique qualities which are usually evident when they play. You can

usually tell a lot about a person when you hear them play.”

“There is no reason to spend part of your practice day working on a personal saxophone sound. Work on the basics of tone production and get as pleasing a sound as you can. But if you find yourself scooping, and bending and inflecting, you are wasting your valuable practice time! Everybody inflects in performance; it’s natural and part of being human. I just don’t believe it’s necessary to practice inflection. I would suggest the opposite; minimize your inflection when practicing. I try and ask myself this question periodically – am I inflecting because I

have decided to do so at this particular moment; or, am I inflecting because it's a force of habit? I would prefer to make the decision consciously than to add a grace note, a bend, scoop or other inflection because it's simply a habit.”

## Developing Your Own Sound on Purpose

Then there are those, including Dave Binney (one of the most innovative saxophonists in jazz at the moment) who suggest that uniqueness doesn't happen by accident. There are those who feel that originality is something that you must proactively pursue as a

means of avoiding the temptations of the status quo.

Here are some suggestions for those of you who'd like to at least experiment with intentionally pursuing a path towards uniqueness.

## **Finding Your Unique Greatness through Mimicry**

The cliché still rings true: “There’s nothing new under the sun.”

No matter how original, imaginative, and eclectic a saxophonist sounds on their instrument, ask and just about any of them will tell you that they were

inspired by a long list of saxophone players who came before them.

One way of finding your own voice is to expand your current concept of what you could possibly sound like by mimicking those whose playing you admire. If you can learn how to mold yourself into a completely different saxophone player, you'll be better equipped to take those skills into creating a completely different saxophone player the world hasn't yet heard.

Of course, none of us wants to be that saxophone clone. You usually hear it

---

with disciples of giants such as Michael Brecker, Charlie Parker, and David Sanborn. But the point is to practice sounding like others *as a means to sounding like yourself.*

For example, let's say that you want to incorporate more of Dexter Gordon's sound in your playing. Sure, you could figure out which mouthpiece he played on and what reed he used. But that's probably not going to get you too far, since there are so many more variables that heavily influence the way we sound, it's pretty unlikely that matching Dexter's equipment alone is going to get you sounding just like him.

You could try to match his tonal color by keeping in mind the sonic color and brightness of his tone, front-and-center in your mind. Thanks to the skills you've gained by practicing your overtones, you can keep Dexter's sound at the forefront of your mind and witness your inner embouchure automatically adapt to create a tone quality similar to his.

You could also experiment with the amount of mouthpiece you take in. And all of that will help quite a bit, but there's a big part of the equation that we still need to take into account if we

really want to be able to mimic another great player's sound.

*Learn to match that player's phrasing, and you've made a huge stride in the right direction.*

## What is Phrasing?

Certain people have an extremely distinctive way of speaking. Take Joe Pesci, Snoop Dogg, or Fran Drescher. It only takes a few words out of their mouth to identify these unmistakable voices.

Let's say you wanted to do a Joe Pesci impression. You wouldn't get very far

by simply imitating the tonal color of his voice while speaking the way you normally do. For starters, you'd have to take into account the way he pronounces certain words, the way certain words are accented more than others, how he elongates the pronunciation of certain words and cuts off others.

Now apply this principle to emulating another saxophone player's sound. You'd have to match aspects of their playing such as:

- articulation

- how long or short certain notes are played
- the amount of accent certain notes receive
- time feel
- speed of vibrato
- style of bending notes
- the amount of air you're putting into the notes

And the list goes on and on...

## Take Action

### Mimicking Your Idols

Now that you know what to listen for, find a favorite recorded snippet from the player you're looking to emulate and learn a short phrase from the recording, maybe four to eight bars. Then play it along with the recording. Then play it by yourself and see, how closely you're matching the tone quality and phrasing.

A super cool practice which Dr. David Demsey recommends is to use multi-tracking technology so that you can have yourself coming out of one

channel and your album snippet coming out of the other. That way you can cut back and forth between the two versions for a super-clear snapshot of how close you're getting to the target sound.

And now that we've gone over how to sound like someone else, here's a list of things you can do to sound more like that spectacular saxophone player with your last name who you never knew existed:

## Take Action

### Developing an Original Sound

#### 1. Overtones, overtones, overtones

I know we've already had this drilled into us a whole bunch of times, but it bears repeating that in order to match the sound of the horn to the sound you're going for, you'll need to have control over the same muscles that you learn to control while practicing your overtones. If you can control the balance of the individual overtones, you'll gain the ability to carve out the tonal color you're hearing in your mind. Of

course, I don't imagine that anyone practices thinking, "I'm going to make the 3<sup>rd</sup> partial the loudest so I can sound just a little bit brighter." But subconsciously, the body now has the tools to sculpt a highly personal and original tone quality.

## 2. Sing!

When you sing a piece of written music or a solo, your singing voice will expose to you what your internal and authentic concept of music really is. This is especially true for melodic interpretation. If your voice is as awful as mine is, you can hide your less-than-stellar

vocal stylings in the safe seclusion of your car or the shower. Over time, the way you sing will find its way into, and out of, your horn.

### **3. Write your own music.**

When creating a brand new and unique setting for your saxophone, you have the opportunity to push yourself into a musical corner that nobody's ever been in before, and from that, it's quite likely that a truly original sound could emerge.

Similarly, you could also practice writing out your own solos. Now

isn't it funny how we can sing, in our minds, or even scat out loud some of the most brilliant solos the world has ever known? But when we're caught up in the immediacy of trying to get our ideas out in real time, it's easy for originality to fall by the wayside as we fall back on tried-and-true musical ideas and patterns. By taking the time to clearly identify and express those brilliant inner solos, we forge a bridge between what we're hearing and what we're playing.

#### **4. Keep a Journal.**

A written record of your musical

journey can help keep you on track with musical ideas and concepts that appeal to you and how to expand on those things. You could make it a journal written in plain English (or whatever your native language is), you could make it a sheet music journal, or perhaps a combination of both.

## **5. Listen to music that you're uncomfortable with.**

You're only going to get so far by settling into a comfort zone. If you really want to push your concept of

music far beyond where it currently is, you need to learn to see the best music that you don't intuitively enjoy. Our preconceptions of what music should sound like are what keep us from arriving at a powerfully personal voice. In gaining the ability to enjoy that 12-tone Schoenberg piece or that Steve Lacy solo saxophone album or even that Britney Spears song that makes you want to put a fork in your eye, you're building up the capacity to incorporate ideas that would have never come to you otherwise. Generally speaking, the more receptive your musical radar is, the more compelling you'll be as a

creative artist.

## **6. Take any gig you can get, no matter what it is.**

Sure, there are exceptions to this. If you're being financially taken advantage of, abused, or put in a situation with seriously negative energy, then of course you'll want to avoid those gigs. You may also have a very specific vision for what you want to do musically and don't want it diluted by the experience of playing bar mitzvahs in Connecticut. And that's fine too - just be prepared to work a day job while you build

your music career on the side.

But unless you've already paid your dues and can afford to turn down work, then you should make it your business to put yourself in as many musical situations as you can find. The experience of playing music you would otherwise never play, and the joy of playing with musicians who you would otherwise never work with, serve as lessons that no amount of schooling will ever give you.

Who knows if the vocal inflections of the singer in the Greek band you're playing with will work their way into your melodic

interpretation. And who knew that playing with that amazing drummer in that top 40 band would improve your time feel as much as it did?

# Summing it All Up

At this point, you should have a clear picture of what's involved in taking your saxophone playing to the next level, and beyond. If you've put the principles in this book into action, your playing will become *radically* improved.

My goal is that your improvement happens faster than you anticipated, but no matter what pace your improvement happens, the key is that growth is taking place. Remember, music is a marathon and not a sprint.

We've gone over the aspects of saxophone mastery necessary to become the great player who lives, perhaps secretly, within all of us. By taking a close look at breathing, embouchure, overtones, altissimo, technique, articulation, intonation, equipment, and the development of your own voice on the instrument, you've given yourself a comprehensive saxophone education that will put you square on the path to a newfound musical freedom as you make the instrument no longer your captor – but instead a dear friend who will bring joy to you as well as to others for years to come.

## Doron Orenstein

Best. Saxophone. Website. Ever.

*PS. I'd love to get your honest feedback – and hopefully some success stories! So if you want to get in touch, please head over to <http://bestsaxophonewebsiteever.com/contact>.*

# Bulletproof Saxophone Playing Interviewees

## Rick Margitza



Born into a musical family on October 24, 1961 in Detroit Michigan, Rick Margitza started playing music at an early age. His paternal grandfather was a Hungarian Gypsy violinist who started Margitza's musical education by teaching him to play the violin at the age of four. Margitza's father, a violist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra continued his musical education by

enrolling him in the piano studio of Mischa Kotler. Shortly after, Margitza heard a recording by Charlie Parker. His maternal grandfather, a jazz bassist with the Glen Miller band, also played cello on the famed Charlie Parker with strings recording. After hearing Parker on this recording, Margitza switched to the saxophone.

Since then he has studied classical saxophone with Donald Sinta at the university of Michigan, and jazz with Sonny Stitt, Gerry Niewood, Michael Brecker, and David Liebman. He studied at Wayne State University in Detroit, the Berklee School of Music in Boston, the University of Miami, and

---

graduated with a bachelors of music from the Loyola University in New Orleans.

After living in New Orleans, Margitzá moved to New York in 1989. He has performed and/or recorded with McCoy Tyner, Bobby Hutcherson, Tony Williams, Eddie Gomez, Chick Corea, Maria Schneider, Dave Douglas and Miles Davis. He has led his own band and performed in clubs, concert halls and festivals around the world. His 10 albums as a leader document the evolution of his playing as well as his growth as a composer. Margitzá has also composed music for orchestra

including two symphonies and a saxophone concerto.

He currently lives in Paris and his most recent recording Bohemia, on the French label Nocurne, is his most personal to date. Recorded after moving to Paris in 2003, this project is completely different in style and content from any of his other recordings. The instrumentation ranges from violins, tablas and sitars, to harmonicas, voices and ethnic guitars. Margitza explores his Gypsy roots by tracing the origin of the Romany people from India across Eastern Europe. The music is programmatic in nature with each instrument and theme being a

character in the story.

# Walt Weiskopf



Saxophonist, composer and author Walt Weiskopf began his New York career performing with the Buddy Rich Big Band in 1981 at the age of 21. Since then, he has made an impressive mark as both a leader and sideman with 12 critically-acclaimed CDs and countless sideman credits, including performing and recording with Frank Sinatra, Steely Dan, Donald Fagen and Steve Smith's Jazz Legacy. A dynamic player with enormous technical prowess, Walt is equally well-regarded as a composer and his CDs contain predominantly original work. His five books on

advanced topics in improvisation are among the most respected in the field. He lives in New Jersey and is an Associate Professor at the Eastman School of Music.

Whether for quartet, nonet, or any configuration in between, Walt's compositions and arrangements have attracted fans and critical notice. Simplicity, (Criss Cross Jazz-1993), Walt's first CD as a leader, met with immediate success. It was number one on Eurojazz radio for four straight weeks and caused Mel Martin of Saxophone Journal to write: "Walt Weiskopf's prime influence as a player

appears to be John Coltrane, but he is no slavish imitator. He ... gets to musical matters in a powerful and positive way, asserting a definite viewpoint.... He displays much technical accomplishment, yet makes it sound basic and accessible."

Walt's subsequent recordings, from A World Away in 1994 (Criss Cross Jazz) to the most recent Day In Night Out (Criss Cross Jazz - 2008), have also caused a critical stir. In the September 1997 issue of JazzTimes Bill Milkowski counted Walt among his "five most underrated players"; by 2000, Milkowski found that Walt had fulfilled his early promise, and is "...a

major talent...a monster tenor saxophonist as well as a prolific composer and accomplished arranger."

Walt's Song for My Mother (Criss Cross Jazz-1994) was awarded four stars in Downbeat. Bret Primack of Jazz Central Station listed Song for My Mother as one of the ten best jazz albums of 1997 and Crusader Magazine chose this recording as its number one Jazz Pick of the Year.

**For more information on Walt go to [www.WaltWeiskopf.com](http://www.WaltWeiskopf.com).**

# Dr. David Demsey



David Demsey has been Professor of Music and Coordinator of Jazz Studies at William Paterson University since 1992, having formerly been a member of the music faculty, then Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Maine at Augusta for twelve years. A Boston area native with a bachelors degree in music education from the University of Maine, he earned a Doctorate in Performance at the Eastman School of Music and a Master of Music in Saxophone from the Juilliard School, becoming the only saxophonist to hold graduate degrees

from these two schools.

Demsey is equally active as a classical and a jazz performer. He has performed over the past six years with the Metropolitan Opera, in productions of Turandot, Lulu, and Nixon in China with John Adams conducting. He performed frequently with the New York Philharmonic since 1995, including their 2000 Millennium European Tour and 1997 Latin American Tour, under the direction of Andr Previn, Zubin Mehta, Leonard Slatkin, Bobby McFerrin, Yuri Temirkanov and Kurt Masur. He was featured on tour with the Kirov

Orchestra of St. Petersburg, Russia conducted by Valery Gergiev, and with the Metropolitan Opera led by James Levine. A member of the American Saxophone Quartet for eight years and two Grammy-nominated recordings, and a member of the New Hudson Saxophone Quartet, he has premiered numerous solo and chamber works for saxophone as well as newly discovered songs by Alec Wilder. His Golden Crest solo album Demsey Plays Wilder is a collection of Wilders jazz and chamber music, and his Centaur compact disc, Saxophone Music of Dexter Morrill contains his performances of music for improviser and interactive digital music systems. He performed six original jazz

tunes on his instructional CD NeoBop, released with Jazz Player Magazine. He has appeared with such diverse jazz artists as trumpeter Clark Terry, pianists Mulgrew Miller, James Williams and Jim McNeely, bassists Milt Hinton, Rufus Reid, Ray Drummond and Steve LaSpina, and drummers Alan Dawson, Bill Goodwin, John Riley, Rich DeRosa, Horacee Arnold and Steve Smith. He was a featured National Anthem performer at the 2005 National Baseball Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony, at the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame Game in 2003 and 2005, and regularly for the NBA New Jersey Nets and numerous minor

league baseball teams.

Demsey is a busy educator and author. Winner of the New Jersey Jazz Educator of the Year and William Paterson Alumni Association Faculty Service Awards, he is a Selmer Saxophone Clinician, and has been a guest performer, lecturer or conductor at over 90 universities, public schools, festivals and music institutes, including recent residencies in Nanjing and Hangzhou, China, and in Ramallah, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. His Improvisation and Concepts of Virtuosity is the final essay in the Oxford Companion to Jazz, and his book John Coltrane Plays Giant Steps

---

(Hal Leonard) is widely known. He is editor of the annotated second edition of Alec Wilders autobiographical book Letters I Never Mailed (U. of Rochester Press), and he co-authored the Greenwood Press book Alec Wilder: A Bio-Bibliography. He has been a Contributing Editor for Saxophone Journal since 1988, and was a regular columnist for Jazz Player magazine for eight years. His articles have appeared in such publications as Down Beat, American Music, Instrumentalist, Annual Review of Jazz Studies and Jazz Educators Journal, and he wrote liner notes for five Verve Records compact discs. He is Curator of the

newly established William Paterson University Living Jazz Archives, containing the archives of Clark Terry, Thad Jones and James Williams.

# Bill Plake



Los Angeles native Bill Plake is a professional saxophonist, composer, certified Alexander Technique teacher, and music educator.

He's been playing music professionally for over 35 years. As a musician, his work is primarily in the world of modern jazz and other, conceptually unique forms of improvisation. As a performer he's comfortable in anything from traditional (early) jazz, straight ahead jazz (standards, bop, etc.), afro-latin music, post bop, "free"

improvisation, and other avant-garde contemporary improvised music settings (such as chamber music).

Bill has performed and recorded with many noteworthy contemporary improvising musicians from the West Coast of the U.S. including Michael Vlatkovich, Vinny Golia, Charlie Haden, Nels and Alex Cline, Steuart Liebig, James Newton, (the late) John Carter, Larry Koonse, Matt Otto, Eric Barber, Rob Blakeslee, Harry Scorzo, Chris Garcia, Billy Mintz, William Roper and Kim Richmond.

He is also a noted jazz composer, and has had one of his recorded

---

compositions, Mingus In Watercolor, submitted for Grammy consideration by Nine Winds Records. Bill has played all over the U.S., Canada and Europe, and has been highly favorably reviewed in such publications as Down Beat, Jazz Times, The New York Times, Cadence and the Los Angeles Times.

Bill is an Alexander Technique teacher, certified by the American Society for the Alexander Technique. His specialty is in helping musicians to learn to play pain-free, with greater ease, coordination, confidence and expression. He is also certified as a fitness trainer through the National

## Academy of Sports Medicine.

Bill also teaches music privately, offering lessons in saxophone pedagogy, jazz improvisation to all instrumentalists, and as a music practice coach and consultant.

Besides maintaining a private teaching practice, Bill is also on the faculty of the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, teaching the Alexander Technique to actors, singers and dancers. He also teaches the Alexander Technique as an adjunct to the music department at California Institute of the Arts, and as a guest lecturer at Pomona College.

## For more information on Bill:

**[www.AlexanderTechniqueFoothills.com](http://www.AlexanderTechniqueFoothills.com)**

This is Bill Plake's Alexander Technique Website. The Alexander Technique is a highly effective method that teaches you to reduce unnecessary effort and tension as you carry out any activity (especially helpful for musicians). You can find plenty of information about the work itself, as well as information on his professional services related to the work.

**[www.BillPlakeMusic.org](http://www.BillPlakeMusic.org)**

This is Bill Plake's blog about playing and practicing music, including articles about the Alexander Technique principles in relation to making music (pain-free, natural and efficient playing), as well as musings on creativity, jazz improvisation (including downloadable etudes), and artistic integrity. There is also a page listing his professional services.

# Sam Sadigursky



Saxophonist, multi-reedist and composer

Sam Sadigursky is one of the most versatile musicians of his generation, equally

comfortable in a variety of stylistic and improvisational landscapes.

His critically-lauded first recording, *The Words Project*, hailed as "an impressive debut" by the New York Times, was given a four star review by Time Out New York, who also named it one of the Top Ten Albums of 2007.

Noted music critic Steve Smith

called it "that rare anomaly: a jazz-and-poetry record that sounds utterly natural and convincing." And his 2008 follow-up, Words Project II, released on New Amsterdam Records "may even surpass the first one" as reviewed by jazzchicago.net. Words Project III, a collection of 18 chamber miniatures released in 2010 garnered similar acclaim from All About Jazz, who wrote "Jazz and poetry never really became a movement. Over the past 90 years or so, the hybrid form has had a few peak periods and some embarrassing lows. On the strength of Sam Sadigursky's

work, we may be at one of the peaks." His unique sound and sense of lyricism has been noted by Cadence Magazine for its "subtlety and restraint, combined with power and purpose."

Sadigursky was born and raised in Los Angeles, California, the first-generation son of classical musicians from the Soviet Union. He started taking piano lessons from his mother at an early age and later studied with famed saxophone teacher Vince Trombetta, who also taught legendary saxophonist Michael

Brecker. While still in high school, performed with jazz legends Brad Mehldau, Milt Hinton and Ray Brown and was the recipient of a grant from the National Foundation for Advancement of the Arts (NFAA). It was also alongside Brown that Sadigursky had his first recording session at age nineteen. During this time, he also toured Japan as a representative of the Monterey Jazz Festival and was awarded the John Coltrane Young Artist Award by the Coltrane Foundation.

As a sought-after sideman, Sam has performed with, among others,

---

the Mingus Orchestra, ECM recording artist Anat Fort, Grammy-nominated Darcy James Argue's Secret Society, and Gabriel Kahane. He appears on numerous recordings for labels such as Fresh Sound/New Talent, Playscape Recordings, Chonta Records, and World Culture Music and is featured on saxophone and flute on the score to the film *Seeing Other People*. He has played at the Kennedy Center and the Newport Jazz Festival as well as New York venues such as Brooklyn Academy of Music, Carnegie Hall, Joe's Pub, and

## Lincoln Center.

Thoroughly steeped and seasoned in jazz styles and tradition but equally comfortable in world music, Sadigursky has a keen interest in Latin music. He's played saxophone, clarinet and flute with folkloric and jazz-based Colombian, Brazilian choro, Argentinian and Cuban ensembles, performing and recording with artists such as Lucia Pulido, Edmar Castaneda, Marvin Diz, Folklore Urbano, and La Cumbiamba e Neye.

As a composer whose works show

---

a deep knowledge and fascination with classical harmony and instrumentation, he has been commissioned by vocal groups, film directors, and has collaborated with modern dance choreographers in live performance of their works. He is a three-time winner of the ASCAP Young Jazz Composer Award and more recently recipient of a prestigious Chamber Music America/French American Cultural Exchange Grant involving an ongoing collaboration with French pianist/composer Laurent Coq in Paris, which will also

include a CD of their work which will be released by Sunnyside Records in 2012. Sam has also published two books of original clarinet etudes, which combine traditional and contemporary styles and have been widely reviewed in the clarinet world.

Sam speaks and writes eloquently about music and has been featured in interviews on David Garland's "Ear to Ear" program on WNYC (2008) and Minnesota Public Radio's "The Jazz Connection" (2008). Of Sadigursky's passion for vocal compositions based on poetry, he comments "The use of

words in music can provide a much needed entry point for listeners and an interesting challenge for composers. Despite the limitations of working with a text, numerous possibilities that stretch the composer's imagination are created. The marriage of the two can captivate listeners and provide them with a unique experience, especially when this meeting doesn't overshadow the truest and deepest components of jazz: creativity, interaction and spontaneity.”

**For more information on Sam,**

**go to [www.SamSadigursky.com](http://www.SamSadigursky.com).**

## Tim Willcox

Portland saxophonist Tim Willcox was born in Eugene, OR. Taking up saxophone at the age of eleven, Tim quickly fell in love with jazz music. He was exposed to great jazz recordings by two very inspirational teachers, Carl Woideck and Joe Ingram.

Throughout high school, Willcox earned several national honors, winning A Downbeat Magazine award as well as being named a Presidential Scholar of the Arts in 1993. This honor was bestowed upon Tim at the White House by president Bill Clinton. Willcox



was also the recipient of the Stan Getz / Clifford Brown fellowship, presented by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Moving to New Jersey in 1994 to attend internationally acclaimed William Paterson University, Willcox got the chance to study with jazz greats Kenny Burrell, Harold Mabern, Vic Juris, Rufus Reid, Steve Wilson, John Riley, as well as taking lessons outside of school from Rick Margitza, Lee Konitz, and the NY Phil's David

Demsey. After graduating in 1998, Willcox moved to New York City where he played with Marc Copland, Jeff Hirschfield, Vic Juris, Reid Anderson, Ben Monder, Matt Pennman, Scott Mclemore, John Herbert, Michael Kanan, and many other acclaimed musicians.

Since moving to Portland in 2002, Willcox has performed with David Friesen, Randy Porter, Alan Jones, Bobby Torres, George Mitchell, Gary Hobbs, Gary Versace, John Gross, PDXV, and Victor Noriega. Tim has recorded with Gino

Vannelli, Randy Porter, Art Hirihara, Ingrid Jensen, Peter Erskine, Larry Grenadier, Marcus Reynolds + Farnell Newton, Bill Athens, Darek Oles, Chris Mosley, David Friesen, and a slew of others. He recently released his first album on Ninjazz Records entitled, "Superjazzers : Vol. 1" ([www.NinjazzRecords.com](http://www.NinjazzRecords.com)).

**For more information on Tim,  
go to [www.TimWillcox.net](http://www.TimWillcox.net).**