

The Quest for *THE* Saxophone Mouthpiece

“There’s an inner musical tree that grows in each and every one of us.” —Dexter Gordon, as the character Dale Turner in the 1986 film *Round Midnight* (Warner Bros.).

This quote is so eternally true for those of us who search for musical gratification beyond imitation of our idols. But in our search, it is often our equipment that hinders our “tree” from flourishing and bearing the personal results that encourage us on to artistic heights yet attained. Your horn(s) of choice are an important factor in this task, but even more crucial in this endeavor is the “golden spike” that fuses human and instrument together in the perpetual dance of artistic expression: the quest for *THE* perfect mouthpiece.

My personal journey began very early, primarily because of three major factors: 1) the equipment of the pros seen on album covers, TV performances and magazines; 2) trying to play along with my musical heroes on my student equipment with varying results at best; 3) advertisements from this very magazine touting the virtues of pro mouthpieces and the featured artist’s equipment list (horns, mouthpiece and reeds) that was provided at the conclusion of the article. All of these factors compelled me to start searching for new mouthpieces to help me get my personal sound concept together.

I assigned my mouthpieces in three distinct categories: 1) concert band/classical; 2) stage band/jazz; 3) extreme blaster/jazz, avant-garde. During the mid-’80s through the early ’90s, my mouthpieces in the those categories for soprano, alto, tenor, baritone/bass saxes were:

- Soprano: Yanagisawa HR #5, Couf/ Runyon #5, Dukoff D8;
- Alto: Berg Larsen HR 85/2, Meyer HR #8, Berg Larsen metal 110/0, Dukoff D8;
- Tenor: Berg Larsen HR 100/2, Berg Larsen metal 95/2, Dukoff D8 and S9;
- Baritone/Bass: Berg Larsen HR 110/1, Berg Larsen metal 120/1, Dukoff D10.

Divine intervention occurred on Labor Day weekend 1988 in the person of Hamiet Bluiett, who was in town to play the Montreux–Detroit Kool Jazz Festival. After expressing grievances about my current bari setup to him, he loaned me his personal Lawton metal 7-star B to compare. Whoa—I couldn’t stop playing this free-blowing piece! It increased my power and extended my altissimo range, yet it gave depth to the core sound of the baritone. I told Bluiett of these virtues I experienced in playing the Lawton, and he gave me the mouthpiece. I was floored and grateful all at the same time.

I asked myself, “Wow, if the Lawton baritone piece can do this, then the soprano, alto, tenor must be just as good, right?” About two years later, Julius Hemphill would make a similar ges-



ture for me with soprano, alto and tenor Lawtons. Count Basie baritonist John Williams sent metal and hard-rubber Lawtons to me, thereby completing my first set of unified mouthpieces—which with a little leveling of the table produced similar results for the rest of my saxophones. Since my Lawton unification of 1990, I’ve dabbled with other mouthpieces by Dave Guardala, Phil Barone, Gary Sugal and the like, and for me nothing will ever touch the power, joy and the totality I feel every time I play my Lawtons. But each one of my heroes would say something like, “You gotta keep your chops strong, because if you don’t play these mouthpieces, they’ll get the better of you!”

Playing my Lawtons has provided me with a template with which saxophonists can objectively search for the proper mouthpieces:

Self-Examination

It’s important to take a good listen and ask yourself if your current equipment might be holding that “inner tree” hostage and stunting its growth. It could be time to make a change. Don’t be afraid to be brutally honest with yourself. You are always your worst critic, but if used constructively, self-examination could turn out to be your salvation.

Horns Tight

I don’t think anything could be more detrimental to a first impression during a mouthpiece trial than a maladjusted horn. It behooves you to make sure your axe is regulated prior to undertaking such a serious task.

Outer Research

If you’re determined to replicate a musical hero’s equipment as a starting point to your own musical happiness, then do the research online or in books as to what their gear of choice is/was. This could narrow down the searching time for you, but never say, “I don’t want to try this, so-

and-so didn’t play on this, etc.” Keep an open mind to different options.

Music Store and/or Private Seller

Find music stores and/or a private seller with a vast selection of mouthpieces and tryout rooms. I recall the Woodwind & Brasswind in New York had great tryout rooms, each with sound systems complete with tuners and a CD playback/record that allowed you to take your comparisons home to listen to at a later time. I find the bigger the selection, the greater your journey will be.

Helping Materials

A player must have a plan to set a comfort zone that’s ideal for comparing pieces on an equal footing. Far too often I see posts online where folks are comparing horns and/or mouthpieces and don’t play the same passages for the listener to make an informed decision. The things that can help provide such a comfort zone include play-along CDs and method books with exercises that provide the player with a constant environment that will enable him to judge all mouthpieces fairly and come to an informed conclusion. If you have a person whose opinion you highly respect, that is certainly a plus. It is also essential to have an abundance of your favorite reeds with you—too often we play a mouthpiece for a while and switch to the next mouthpiece using a waterlogged reed, thus robbing us of the first impression we’re accustomed to getting with a fresh reed on the table.

Time

The most supreme commodity in this endeavor is time. Time set aside to take full advantage of the options available at the store or collector. Time for long tones to be played and scrutinized for intonation, fullness and ease. Time to let the embouchure rest and come back tomorrow or the next allotted time. Time to listen to that “inner tree” to hear if these tools will indeed aid in bringing in the harvest of the song that is you.

I sincerely hope that this has been helpful in what can be a very tedious and sometimes discouraging process. But with continued honesty and diligence, the player’s inner tree will bear for the world to feast. I am truly blessed to have my family, musical teachers and other mentors (past and present) who were honest with their words and charitable with their equipment, and who continue to help fuel the journey.

Peace, love and long tones.

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