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The Measure Of Perfection

JodyJazz is thrilling the sax community with innovative designs, obsession with flawless production, and a passionately non-commodity approach to making mouthpieces.

Basking in the glow of product reviewers' praise and player testimonials that border on idolatry, JodyJazz is arguably the most up-and-coming name in woodwind accessories. Headquartered in New York City, JodyJazz offers a broad line of distinctive, American-made mouthpieces for sax and clarinet—"a mouthpiece for every player."

Before all this hubbub started around 2000, JodyJazz founder/President Jody Espina, never went looking for acclaim as a manufacturer. In fact, he was making a good living playing clubs and the occasional Broadway musical, directing a jazz program at a prestigious music school, serving as an adjunct professor at another college, and teaching 20 to 30 private lessons per week. But fate turned a simple gesture of respect into a life-changing invitation to the music products industry.

While attending the 2000 IAJE convention in New Orleans, Espina introduced himself to legendary saxophonist Santy Runyon, who had run the successful mouthpiece manufacturing company Runyon Products since 1939 and whose students had included Charlie Parker, Sonny Stitt, Paul Desmond, Lee Konitz, and Espina's own teacher, Junie Ferrell. Espina wrote a story about the exhilarating experience and sent it to Runyon, who responded by inviting him to his 93rd birthday celebration in Louisiana.

After playing one of Runyon's mouthpieces, Espina asked him to make a few modifications to give it a more free-blowing feel and stronger low and midrange frequencies. Runyon reworked the mouthpiece exactly as he'd requested and dubbed it the "JodyJazz" model. "He did it partly just because he liked me," Espina says. "He got the name 'Santy' because he was known for giving things to people, but he also realized that my teaching career would give him access to a lot of new customers."

Runyon afforded Espina an invaluable education by allowing him to work directly with

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The JodyJazz Team—Jason Press, quality control manager; Meilana Gillard, shipping; Jody Espina, founder and president; Daniela Radu, operations manager; and Samantha Grabler, sales.

his factory employees to develop the JodyJazz mouthpiece. Even though he was investing a good deal of time in the slow, painstaking design process, he still wasn't thinking of it as a business. "I just thought I would just sell these to my students, and that would be the end of it." But word about the JodyJazz mouthpieces quickly spread, initially among his students and on the SaxOnTheWeb forum, and the orders came pouring in.

With the benefit of six decades of experience, Runyon recognized the line's potential to complement his products; his company has a long tradition of selling professional mouthpieces, but over the past decade or so the brand became more identified with student models packed with other manufacturers' horns. Two of JodyJazz's five mouthpieces incorporate Runyon's patented Spoiler, a removable baffle that reduces the air chamber size, increasing volume and projection, but

otherwise their design specs are noticeably different. More importantly, Espina play-tests every one. "There's a lot of fine handwork in a mouthpiece," he points out. "Even the smallest deviations can make a significant difference in the way the horn sounds and plays. Mass manufacturers don't take the time to make those micro-adjustments."

The time required to work on his products eventually compelled Espina to take a sabbatical from his music school teaching, especially after Runyon gave him permission and use of his facilities to develop a line of metal mouthpieces. It was at this point in 2001 that Espina realized he "had a real business" and "had to get more serious about it." He renamed the original mouthpieces the Classic series (to which he later added a clarinet model designed specifically for jazz players), and designed an aptly "serious" website to promote his wares.

At times JodyJazz's rapid growth caused a degree of friction between

Espina and his mentor, particularly when he officially launched his company with himself as president. But Runyon saw that JodyJazz products were bringing substantial sales with better margins than his other lines. Also, he had a genuine affection for Espina. "Ultimately, he was very cool," says Espina, who is proud to have been one of the pallbearers at Runyon's funeral in April 2003.

Espina's goal in producing a metal mouthpiece was a "straight-ahead" jazz sound that was darker than that of the Runyon models. He worked closely with Runyon factory workers, especially master technicians Leroy Guilbeau and Blaine Moran, to incorporate his favored thin tip and rails and a distinctive baffle shape. Together they also developed ways to improve the precision and consistency of production process. Skilled craftsmen use CNC technology to machine the mouthpiece's basic shape from a solid bar of

the finest virgin brass, then face it with a non-CNC machine, then finish the facing with fine hand tools before the buffing and gold-plating processes. The JodyJazz ESP tenor model debuted in 2002, followed soon by models for alto, bari, and soprano.

To achieve his goal of offering “a mouthpiece for every player,” Espina knew he must create a line of hard rubber mouthpiece typically preferred by more traditional jazz players seeking a warmer sound. (Classic models are made from a proprietary high-tech polycarbonate/synthetic rubber mix that is significantly more expensive than the plastic materials used in other clarinet and saxophone mouthpieces.) Coincidentally, Bari Inc. founder Wolf Taninbaum was looking for a buyer for his mouthpiece factory in Fort Lauderdale, but for several reasons Espina resisted that temptation. “I knew that I couldn’t focus on JodyJazz and run that company as well,” he recalls. “Also, even though I’m a Florida native, most of my playing is based here in New York. More importantly, as I’m trying to establish JodyJazz as a great jazz mouthpiece, New York is where many of the great jazz players are. In the end, I developed a relationship with Wolf like the one I had with Santy, where I worked with him to produce some of my designs.”

After studying the world’s favorite

hard rubber mouthpieces, Espina developed his own ideal specs including an almost totally round interior for warmth, and a wide tip, which spreads the mouth for a broad, open sound. He then oversaw fabrication of the metal cams that serve as the template for each mouthpiece’s facing curve, and worked with the Bari factory staff to design custom depth gauges and other tooling. The design process took a year, and the HR series was introduced in 2003.

Like the JodyJazz Classic and HR series, the ESPs had garnered great reviews and many buyers, but Espina was still haunted by an unrealized ideal, a Holy Grail of mouthpieces. “For a long time I was envisioning a mouthpiece that is powerful, for those situations when you don’t have a monitor, you’re playing with amplified instruments, you’re not miked, or the drummer’s going crazy... But I wanted volume, projection, and brightness without sacrificing any of the rich low end. Also, I wanted it to be able to also produce a pretty sound at a *low* volume.” In other words, he wanted to have his cake—and pie and cookies and soufflé—and eat them too. He achieved the impossible in 2004 with the debut of the DV mouthpiece series.

Espina created the DV after reading *The Da Vinci Code* inspired him to explore applying the so-called “Divine Proportion” derived from the Fibonacci

number series 1.618 to the mouthpiece’s dimensional relationships. Often denoted with the Greek letter *phi*, this “golden ratio” mathematical constant expresses the relationship that the sum of two quantities is to the larger quantity as the larger is to the smaller. Espina was intrigued that the Divine Proportion occurs in Stradivarius violins, acoustically superior cathedrals, and throughout the natural world. His first DV prototypes were so convincing, he applied for a patent for use of the proportions on woodwind mouthpieces.

Further validating his belief in the concept, Espina later found that his ESP model, designed before he’d heard of the golden ratio, already conformed to the proportions in some areas. Using 3D CAD drawing and producing many prototypes, he spent a year designing the DV to precisely conform to the ratio in all of its proportions—the width and length of the window, the width of the side rails, the width of the shank, the length of the bore, the depth of the chamber, the point where the facing begins, etc. He was initially concerned about applying the *phi* ratio to the length of the window. “Making the window too large risks destabilizing the reed,” he explains, “but it ended up being perfect; it allowed me to recapture more of the low frequencies. The DV has power, it has a big, fat, husky, Dexter Gordon sound, and it’s incredi-

Perfection Doesn’t Come Easy



THE QUALITY OF JODYJAZZ mouthpieces comes from extensive handwork, continuous measurement, and care. All mouthpieces are hand-filed to ensure that chamber dimensions are exact and that the feel and sound are perfect. **(center)** Gap gauges are used to confirm that the facing curve begins at exactly the same point on both rails. **(right)** A special gauge is used to confirm the dimensions of the tip opening.

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bly free-blowing.” He recently added the DVNY sub-series, which possesses the darker tonal quality he associates with New York jazzers.

To produce the DV, Espina chose Blaine Moran, a former-Runyon machinist who set up his own shop in the Louisiana bayou. “Business-wise I needed to spread out in case anything happened to the Runyon factory,” Espina explains. Moran uses two large CNC machines, a lathe and a facing mill, to ensure exact base measurements, but Espina intentionally stopped short of programming a machine to create the baffle and the tip rail. “I want the human element in our products,” he says. “Also, doing it this way allows me to customize mouthpieces for players. People like the idea of caring handwork going into their mouthpiece.”

Where some other metal mouthpieces have a “patch” on top, the DV has a unique decorative *phi* symbol (Φ). To avoid affecting the feel, a technician machines brass from the top, paints the cavity black, engraves the symbol, pours a clear material over it, then sands it down to make it perfectly smooth. The symbol is also engraved into both sides of the mouthpiece before it’s buffed, gold-plated, and polished.

Such skilled, labor-intensive work—along with the meticulous attention to the precision of the baffle shape, facing, etc.—doesn’t come cheap. Available for soprano, alto, and tenor saxes, the DV sells for \$500. (Espina made all his respective list and MAP prices equal to avoid having customers “try out a

mouthpiece at a mom-and-pop store and then go buy it online.”) “The DV model sort of changed the fortunes of the company,” he says, “because even at a premium price it’s selling very well. Customers accept it because so many people who try it immediately say, ‘This is the best mouthpiece I’ve ever played.’ The Classic and hard rubber models are priced close to the most popular quality brands (the HR alto model sells for \$107), but a little higher to cover the additional attention and quality control. As for the DV and [\$350] ESP, there will always be room in the market for quality products. Deliver the quality and set your price accordingly. If you build it, they will come.”

Espina admits that even beyond Santy Runyon’s generous mentoring, fate has been kind to him. “JodyJazz started as a lark,” he admits, “but the success of my first mouthpiece showed me the possibilities, and I really started to get passionate about it. I had no business background, and I’d never taken any business courses. Any business skills came later, mostly through talking to people on planes—the ‘University of America Airlines’—and reading some books. There are probably big holes in my business knowledge, but sales have just kept climbing. We’ve added 50 to 70 dealers each year in North America, Europe, and Asia, and after our revenue doubled four years in a row we grew 50% last year and this year we’re on track to grow another 60% to 65%. We’ll probably do \$1 million in revenue this year, which isn’t bad for a

small, young company.”

Dealers have supported JodyJazz partly in response to its level-playing-field pricing and low buy-in. They also appreciate Espina for helping to drive consumer interest with a bi-monthly newsletter that highlights new products and developments as well as a highly informative website. One of the site’s most valuable features, the “six questions” section, probes prospective customers playing experience, tonal preferences, etc. to help Espina recommend the right mouthpiece.

But the biggest key to JodyJazz’s growth is undoubtedly Jody Espina’s obsession with quality and personal, hands-on involvement with every mouthpiece he sells. Even though he works very closely with the three factories to ensure his products’ consistent precision, he still ends up making some kind of adjustment on 20% to 30% them. For example, he conscientiously removes minute machine grooves on the facing because a perfectly smooth facing allows the reed to vibrate more evenly and with less resistance. He also ensures that each tip is perfectly symmetrical, and he uses ultra-precise gap gauges to confirm that the facing curve begins at *exactly* the same point on both rails. “I understand why mass production manufacturers don’t want to spend this much time and energy on quality control,” he concludes. “It’s hard, but it can be done if you check every single mouthpiece, make perfection the mark, and don’t let anything less than perfect go out the door.”



A mouthpiece for every player

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