

The Music Trades

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VOCAL EFFECTS

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JODYJAZZ TAKES IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Pro mouthpiece maker invests in Savannah shop, reinforcing all-U.S. manufacturing



The JodyJazz team at their newly upgraded shop in Savannah, GA: (l-r) John Patton, Christie Lawrence, Jody Espina, Mike LaBombard, Lonnie Coulter, Taylor Karchawer, and Jeremy Johnson.

WITH VARIATIONS MEASURED in thousandths-of-an-inch, a high-end saxophone mouthpiece demands exacting work by both hand and machine. Long production cycles meant that until recently, customers waited up to five or six months for some models from mouthpiece specialist JodyJazz. Over the past few months, however, JodyJazz has made a series of moves to bring production into line with demand, and then some. Through investments in technology and manpower, the mouthpiece maker has gained in both precision and speed while bringing the entire production process in-house in Savannah, Georgia. "The strategy is to control our own destiny," says JodyJazz founder Jody Espina. "This will help us catch up on the products we already have, while getting some totally new pieces onto the runway. It's tremendous."

By purchasing its building in Savannah this year, JodyJazz was able to secure a Small Business Administration (SBA) loan that was used to pay for the upgrades to its shop. The centerpiece of the purchase is a five-axis CNC machine selected to take the mouthpiece maker's machine work to a new level of precision. By allowing the mouthpiece to rotate on multiple angles as it's shaped by the drill bit, the machine allows for greater accuracy and more nuanced design than was possible with earlier equipment. "It lets you create complex surfaces, like beautiful rounded edges that would be very difficult to do with a lower-tech machine," says Espina. "Not only is it a higher-tech process, but we'll be able to run it at faster speeds when we need to."

Further technical improvements have streamlined JodyJazz's prototyping

process. Using a 3D scanning process and entering those scans as editable designs in SolidWorks software, the company is building a library of mouthpiece schematics that it will draw on when creating new products. The whole process has been anchored in Savannah, said Espina, who once had to take time away from the factory to work on prototypes at a machine shop in Louisiana. "We're doing new stuff all the time now," he says. "In our first week with the new machinery, we made a mouthpiece that I played at a gig the other day, way ahead of schedule."

An accomplished pro saxophone player and educator, Espina has performed live with the likes of Mel Tormé, Patty Page, and The Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, among other notables. Until 2005, he was also director of the Jazz Department at the prestigious Hoff Barthelson Music School in Scarsdale, New York. In 1999, Espina began working with the famed saxophonist and mouthpiece maker Santy Runyon on a custom mouthpiece for his own use, eventually collaborating with Runyon on the first mass-produced "JodyJazz" mouthpiece. Over the next few years Espina began prototyping his own clarinet and saxophone mouthpieces in both hard rubber and metal. Espina's experience as a player—and a wide range of other influences—have led to a diverse line of professional-grade and high level step-up mouthpieces.

For example, Espina got the idea for his metal DV—short for Da Vinci—mouthpieces after reading about the concept of the "Golden Ratio" in Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*. This theory of ideal proportions, applied in art and architecture for centuries, was used to determine the measurements for the DV Series mouthpieces, now among JodyJazz's top sellers. "The interesting thing is that most alto sax players don't want to play a metal mouthpiece—but they're blown away by this one," says Espina. "In the DV Series, we give power to a mouthpiece without making it shrill. It's like a Ferrari that rides as smooth as a Rolls Royce."

With their precise machine-work and skilled hand-finishing, the DV mouthpieces make a prime example of why JodyJazz has invested in both machinery and personnel. As part of this year's expansion, two members were added to

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the JodyJazz team: a machinist programmer and an industrial design specialist, both graduates of the Savannah College of Art and Design. "They're already proving to be savvy contributors to our team," says Espina. "What I've always tried to do here is to talk through our decisions with everyone on our crew. Everything is up for grabs for people to chime in and contribute ideas."

Like other small goods and accessories, the mouthpiece category has taken only a glancing blow from the economic downturn. As Espina reports, JodyJazz sales dipped just modestly during the depths of the recession before rebounding for a 27% sales gain for the most recent year. Over the past two years, the company has even added a new dimension, working with JodyJazz artists including George Garzone and Kenny Werner to produce its own jazz play-along series, *Tradin' With The Greats*. As Espina sums up, "Sales are smokin'."

Due to the nature of the work—the high standards, the precision, and the need for continual hands-on tweaking—a pro-grade mouthpiece shop is also one business that's hard to outsource or duplicate overseas. "We wanted to build a reputation from the top down, letting our high end define us," says Espina. "We have to be super-vigilant, gauging every piece and play-testing every piece. And there's no way we could do that if our workshop was in China. So for me it has been a no-brainer to keep our production here in the USA."

www.jodyjazz.com



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