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Jody Espina
Kenneth Coon

Jody Espina

Interview By Thomas Erdmann

What a novel concept, a music manufacturer, designer, and marketer who is actually a master musician. In this, the era of large corporations and even larger corporation greed, Jody Espina, the Founder, President, and Designer of one the world's best mouthpieces for saxophones and clarinets, JodyJazz, is himself a monster musician of the highest order. Starting on the clarinet in the seventh grade, Espina added the saxophone to his list of instruments the following year. Practicing 4 or more hours a day in high school, and taking lessons with and being mentored by Junie Ferrell in Tampa, FL, Espina was quickly playing gigs three nights a week in Tampa, FL. After two years of classical clarinet studies at the University of South Florida, Espina transferred to the Berklee College of Music having won a Phil Woods Performance Scholarship. Saxophone lessons with artists: primarily Joe Viola, as well as others like Joe Allard, George Garzone, and Dave Liebman, to list a few, helped Espina develop abilities to such a high extent National Public Radio aired his senior recital.

Then it was on to a fantastic career as a performing music with gigs including, but not limited to touring with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, being a regular substitute in the pit Orchestras of Broadway, a featured soloist on three Mirimax film soundtracks and a documentary about Holland, *Sex, Drugs and Democracy*, as well performance work TV's *Guiding Light*, *The Reading Rainbow*, and television shows in Japan and Spain. He has recorded with Brilliant Coroners, Feed The Meter, Illuminatti, Splatt, and The Walter Thompson Orchestra. Among the many great artists who have called upon Espina's talents for live performances are Don Alias, Eddie Arnold, Louis Bellson, Milton Berle, Dave Douglas, Mark Feldman, Vic Juris, Patty Page, Charlie Persip, Lew Soloff, Mel Torme', and Rachel Z. A composer as well, in 2001, Espina received a Meet the Composers grant for his composition, *The Universal Symphony*.

Among the positions Espina has held include being Director of the Jazz Department at the prestigious Hoff Barthelson Music School in Scarsdale, New York, where he taught Jazz Theory, Improvisation, ensembles and private lessons. He was also adjunct professor of Saxophone and Clarinet at Concordia College in Bronxville, NY, and in Barcelona, Spain he was Professor of Saxophone, Clarinet, Flute, and the Director of the Big Band at the Aula de Musica i Moderna Jazz. While in Barcelona Espina also taught at Taller de Musics and at The Lutier School of Fine Arts.

As if this isn't enough he is also a conductor and workshop provider in the musical sign language system called Sound Painting, and has worked in the Grammys In The Schools Program. Leaving college teaching to run his company full time, Espina not only designs the mouthpieces, his website has earned the highest rating from Alexa.com, and has also started a publishing division including educational materials such as the DVD release, *The Music Of George Garzone and The Triadic Chromatic Approach*. When not on the road giving mouthpiece, saxophone, clarinet and jazz clinics and masterclasses, Espina can be heard every Friday and Saturday night at the Rancho Alegre restaurant in Savannah, Georgia, on tour with the trio Tricycle.

What was the impetus that led you to start making your own mouthpieces?

It was meeting Santy Runyon and having him customize one of his mouthpieces for me. I saw how his work transformed that mouthpiece to make it really great for me. I told him I loved what he had done, and he said, "Well, we can make this mouthpiece for you and call it JodyJazz." That's how it started. I wasn't thinking about making and selling mouthpieces, and I didn't know that refacing a mouthpiece could have such a dramatic effect, but when you dial a mouthpiece in to what you really like, it's great. I thought I would just sell these mouthpieces to some of my students, but people on the internet heard about them and wanted to buy them.

I then started traveling to Louisiana, where Santy was based, seven times a year to work in his factory and learn from him and his crew. I really got into working on and designing my own mouthpieces. It's been a cool thing as a player to get these mouthpieces that are really perfect for me and others. Before doing this I had only played about four or five mouthpieces throughout my career, and I was a middle of the road mouthpiece guy in terms of my tip openings and mouthpiece choices. They were not too weird or on the fringes. When I pick a mouthpiece for me it seems to appeal to the majority of players, and that's lucky for me.

A lot of great saxophonists will talk about how they had their mouthpiece refaced, or the curve refaced into short, medium, and long refacings. Can you explain, for the readers, what it means to have a mouthpiece refaced and what are the advantages of each of those three refacings, the short, medium and long?

Refacing refers to the curve, as well as the tip rail and a whole bag of tricks that could go on. The reed has to travel during its vibration and close down completely, then pop back up. No matter whether the refacing is short, long or medium, you want it to work seamlessly throughout the registers. Sometimes a mouthpiece will die out in a certain register, all of a sudden the sound will not be as equal and as vibrant, and that's usually a problem of the curve. Number one the curve has to work well throughout the whole range. I've never heard anybody talk about this, but we know what a curve does. A long curve, and what

Santy gave me was a longer curve than what he had on his mouthpiece, will open up the bottom and make the mouthpiece more free blowing. A medium curve would attempt to strike a balance between a long and short curve, and a short curve would actually take some of that bottom away but it would accent the highs and make the altissimo register very easy.

The lengths refer to where the curve begins. You have a flat table and your side rails, and then at a certain point the mouthpiece starts to curve away from that flat plain and where it begins, in relation to the tip of the mouthpiece, is the length of the facing curve. A shorter length begins closer to the tip and less of the reed will be vibrating open and shut.

What a lot of people don't think about when it comes to the curve and the reason one person will like a mouthpiece and another person won't is sometimes it's about how much of the mouthpiece a person takes in their mouth. If you have a long facing and you don't take in much mouthpiece it probably won't work for you. Nobody thinks about that, and that's one of the reasons we have a lot of different models and types, because there are that many different types of players. Things a mouthpiece refacing could include, and probably does, are two things that to me either make a mouthpiece play great or not. The curve is one, and the baffle is another. Some people refer to the baffle as the whole floor of the chamber, all of the area under the open part where the window is.

The baffle is directly behind the tip rail?

That's right, and that's what I say, it's only about a ¼ of an inch long and is the whole area under the tip rail, but a lot of people call the whole area that continues down into the bore the baffle. To me that's not the baffle, that's the floor of the chamber. The baffle, the area right under the tip rail, has to be right. If there is too much material up by that tip rail it gets in the way, and if you take too much out it will deaden the mouthpiece, but if you don't take enough material out of the corners, and here we're talking very small amounts by hand, it won't open up.

Whether you like the sound of the mouthpiece or not, if you get the curve and baffle right the mouthpiece will do it's best to play at its optimum even if it's not the right sound you're looking for. Having the ability to do this CNC work (Computer Numerical Control machines, primarily lathe and mill), when we're prototyping, and having the ability to change things minutely, we can see what's really working. We can work with the curve forever, and sometimes we do, but when we get that curve right, bam, the mouthpiece plays fantastic. You can really see this with the CNC because when you're doing things by hand you're not really sure if you did something more or less than what you wanted to do. Having said that, every mouthpiece we have involves hand work on the baffle and tip rail because we can actually do that better than the machine.

Some saxophonists say the baffle is important in creating the buzz of a mouthpiece. What does buzz mean in this case?

I don't know if I would agree with this statement. To me buzz is almost a function of the reed. The softer the reed the more buzz you'll have in the mouthpiece, if you want less buzz you go with a harder reed and then the sound dries out and gets a little more airy. I can make any mouthpiece buzz if I use a soft enough reed, but I don't agree the baffle is responsible for that buzz.

You do the CNC work, and I know you use 3D imaging in your mouthpiece manufacturing. How has this helped you in your design of mouthpieces?

It is actually very complex to use this software to create the solid model, this is not plug and play stuff going on, it's always an ongoing process of learning how to manipulate the elements of the solid model because if you don't do it right when you change one thing everything else goes wacky. What we want is the solid model to communicate with a Machine Path Tool program, a CAM program (Computer Aided Manufacturing program), and this all has to work with our CAD program (Computer Aided Design program). What this has all done, ultimately, is help us do a lot of different shapes and manipulations. For example, when we made our GIANT mouthpiece, I wanted it to come from our hard rubber mouthpiece. What I did was scan my favorite of all time JodyJazz hard rubber mouthpiece. Then I started tweaking from there. I wanted to share the shape, the outside, and some of the characteristics of it, but I also knew what I wanted to change about it for it to be the new GIANT model. All of this 3D and computer aided stuff was a great way to start that project.

When I was young, in the 70s, if you wanted to play jazz just about everybody was saying you had to play a metal mouthpiece. Times have changed, and now hard rubber mouthpieces, as well as mouthpieces made from other materials, are commonly found played by great jazz

Jody Espina's Instrumental Setup

Soprano Sax

Selmer Mark VI with a JodyJazz DV 7* mouthpiece, a JodyJazz Ring Ligature, or JodyJazz HR* 6* mouthpiece with a Rico H Ligature.

Alto Sax

Selmer Mark VI or Brasspire (Japan) with a JodyJazz DV 8 mouthpiece and a JodyJazz Ring Ligature.

Tenor Sax

Conn 10M with a JodyJazz Giant 9* mouthpiece, Garzone Signature Model mouthpiece and Rico H Ligature or JodyJazz DV CHI 7* mouthpiece with a JodyJazz Ring Ligature.

Baritone Sax

JodyJazz DV Baritone 8 mouthpiece with a JodyJazz Ring Ligature.

Clarinet

Selmer 10G with a JodyJazz Jody Espina Model #6 mouthpiece with a Rico H Ligature.

Flute

Powell with a Gold Lip Plate.

saxophonists. Your company makes mouthpieces in four materials, hard rubber, polycarbonate, aluminum and 24kt gold-plated brass.

And we also use a silver-plated brass as well. You know back in the 1970s almost all of the guys who were playing jazz were also playing a lot of other gigs with loud bands, like rock, R&B, jazz fusion, etc. By the 70s we all had to play with guitar players.

It's so different now. You see a lot of jazz saxophonists advertising that they play hard-rubber mouthpieces.

Metal was never that popular on alto because alto is a brighter sounding horn, but our DV Alto mouthpiece is our most popular metal mouthpiece. The reason most alto players never liked metal was because metal mouthpieces are awfully bright, almost put your nails on the chalkboard kind of bright. For tenor and baritone saxophones metal is another story. Metal mouthpieces never got much traction on the higher instruments. Our DV has a secondary window that gives it more body and warms up the sound, and people are always surprised that they love a metal mouthpiece on alto.

You also make a metal DV mouthpiece for the soprano.

Yes, and people love that one because it blows so freely. Most soprano mouthpieces have a resistance that is different than any other saxophone. You're pushing against something that you're not used to pushing against on any other saxophone. The DV is the only mouthpiece I know of that when you blow it, it feels like everyone of your other mouthpieces. It blows freely. When I made the DV series, every time I went to a higher horn, I started making them for the tenor first, I would back off on the brightness to some degree, and I backed off more on the soprano so it would feel right from one horn to the other. I can pick up a DV on any instrument and they all feel right; I feel correct playing them on any horn. With older style mouthpieces in the past there was usually just one that would be popular, but I've worked so hard when I was designing the DV alto by making sure I would go back and forth between the alto and tenor over and over and over in order work on them to try to get them to feel like they are truly all of one family. We have many of our endorsers play DVs on every one of their horns, including alto and soprano.

How did you come up with the DV mouthpiece?

After I had been making mouthpieces for about four or five years, I started to think how I needed a mouthpiece that was powerful like the Dukoff's and Guardala's. The people who play a certain type of live gigs need power and brightness or you'll just be swallowed up and be miserable. Those mouthpieces tend to be very bright and not have much bottom or mid. I was trying to figure out how to bring that to a mouthpiece.

The way you make the mouthpiece powerful is to make the chamber small and the mouthpiece becomes brighter and louder, but at the same time you lose the bottom. I couldn't figure out how to make a mouthpiece that was full,

had bottom, and had power. In reading *The Di Vinci Code*, the novel, the author talks about the golden mean proportions and how they were found in the Stradivarius Violin and all throughout nature. That proportion is in the human body, the dolphin, the nautilus shell, everywhere. I started to think about using that proportion in the mouthpiece I was trying to create. Once I did, it all came together.

Looking at one of these mouthpieces with that proportion you can see where I came up the concept of the longer window on the DV, and all of the proportions of the mouthpiece are on this golden mean proportion. Basically you divide the length of something by 1.618 and you keep doing it. If you want to design a house or anything you will find the result will both look and feel right if you use this proportion. That's what led to the DV, and it is an amazing mouthpiece with all of its proportions and its super thin side rails. That was, I think, my most unique contribution to the mouthpiece world, the DV series.

Jody Espina's Selected Discography

With Bernadette Brown
A Love Life (Bbossa Entertainment, 2000)

With Feed The Meter
It's About Time (Water Street Music, 2005)
Violation (Water Street Music, 2000)

With Joe Gallant and Illuminati
Shadowhead (Accurate, 2001)
Terrapin (Which, 1999)
Music Of The Grateful Dead And Beyond, Vol. 2 (Relix, 1998)
Music Of The Grateful Dead And Beyond (Relix, 1997)

With Just Cause
Standards (Orchard, 2005)

With Harry Miller
Open House (Optimism, 1985)

With Ralph Sturm
Shawangunk (Water Street Music, 2005)

With Walter Thompson
PEXO: A Soundpainting Symphony (9Winds, 2003)

With Tricycle
Tricycle (Water Street Music)

With Various
Son Of Rogues Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs & Chanteys (Anti, 2013)

And you're talking about the whole series, the DV CHI and the DV NY, as well as the DV itself.

Yes. The CHI stands for Chicago. The NY came about because friends of mine in Boston and New York said they loved the DV but it was too bright for them, so I made it dark for them and called it the DV NY, and some people loved the series but one was too bright and the other was too dark for them. So I created the Chicago that has a huskiness I equate with Chicago tenor players.

We have some interesting models. The DV series, for example, is a true series, but right now I'm using four distinct different facing curves. The DV has one facing curve, the GIANT has its own unique facing curve that was influenced a lot by George Garzone, the JET is a new facing curve and is my only short facing curve. The JET it's really cool how it works and because of that curve and other things about it I am playing higher now than I ever have; notes in the Lenny Pickett register.

The HR, hard rubber, has a traditional facing curve. We have these different approaches with these different materials. It's not just like we have one series. We have four or five different approaches that we use in our mouthpieces. We say, "A mouthpiece for every player," because I can generally satisfy everyone with all of the different facing curves and tip openings.

We've been working for 15 years, and I'm out there traveling now more than ever. We also expanded our factory here in Savannah and are now up to 12 employees. We generally run two shifts, and have built a showroom here in Savannah that I'd love for people to come visit. The showroom has a glass showcase with all of our mouthpieces, as well as a pool table, a little bar, a stage where we can do performances, stage lights, and a projector with a movie screen. It's a cool little place. The factory tour is also really interesting. We'd love for people think of Savannah as a destination to try out mouthpieces.

All of your mouthpieces come in a wide variety of tip openings. How do the different tip openings affect the sound?

Traditionally, in molded technology, you're working from one blank which means that when you face it in a small 5, and then in a 10, you have a different chamber height as well as other differences. What we can do with our technology is tweak the chamber of the floor so that I can make the sound the same on all of the different tip openings. Traditionally you'll go a little darker the more open the tip opening because manufacturers were working from the same blank.

How the sound changes from a small tip to a big tip, in a perfect world if the chamber is right, is that you'll get more harmonics in that tone because you're reed is vibrating further; it has further to go. What you're getting is somewhat of a fuller sound. One of our endorsers, George Garzone, is a real proponent of the 10* and gets all of his students on this size tip opening. They get great sounds, but that's his philosophy. There are plenty of people who have great sounds on small and medium tip openings.

My thing is that I've seen someone try a hard rubber mouthpiece, trying five different tip openings, and find one that really works. We used to have a loft in New York City and people would be playing in my whisper room sound booth, so I couldn't even really hear them. I'd be on the phone in my office with a number of walls between us. I'd come out and say, "What's that one?", because I could hear the resonance of one of those mouthpieces through all the walls. In other words, one of those tip openings popped for that musician. That's what tip openings are about; which one pops for you. I used to think it was a question of how you

blow and how developed you are as a player, but now I think it's the chamber ratio between the chamber in your mouth and the chamber in that mouthpiece with that tip opening. When those proportions align all of a sudden there is a resonance and the mouthpiece makes your sound resonate more than the others.

The tip opening is a big question because it goes hand in hand with the reed strength. The number one message I'd like to get out to players is that the reed is so integral to your sound and each mouthpiece probably takes a different reed. Almost everything is about reed strength, and getting your reeds right is getting the right strength. I face this every day because our DVs play so freely that somebody with a 2½ reed will find that reed to be too soft for the DV. I have to try to get the saxophonist to go to a 3½ when playing our DV. They look at me like I'm nuts, but we've made a lot of sales that were going to be returns once we got them on a different reed.

Is there any kind of a check sheet that says, if you use this kind of a mouthpiece you want this kind of a reed?

Reeds are such a personal thing that two people can be playing the same mouthpiece but with completely different reed strengths get the sound they want. I can't put a sheet together, all I can do is point in relative fashion that a certain mouthpiece generally requires a harder or softer reed. It all depends where the performer wants their sound to be and how buzzy they want their sound to have. Also, some players don't want resistance and so the reed is quite soft while others want resistance and use harder reeds. Resistance can be in the mouthpiece but it can also be done by the reed.

Resistance is a personal thing.

Yes, it's all about what gear you want to drive your 10-speed bike in, if you could only pick one.

While each of the areas of a saxophone mouthpiece are crucial, it is perhaps the throat where many saxophonists feel confused with regard to what they should be looking for. Throats can be round, or half-round, or square, or some combination. What is your advice regarding mouthpiece throats?

I think the only way we could do that was to have someone write a doctoral thesis on this where they x-ray people, or they 3D image people, giving them all the same saxophone and the same tip opening mouthpiece. What the throat is, is when you look through the mouthpiece from the shank side into the bore. That is the shape. I call it the shape of the chamber, but you're right, that's the throat, and it can be square, horseshoe, round, oval, so many different things.

I don't know the answer to your question. Some people just pop on one throat design and not on others. The throat shapes the sound in different ways, but I can't predict it. Some people will say, "I'm a round chamber player and I won't try that square chamber." Then I say, "What do you have to gain by being closed-minded, nothing, only things to win by being open-minded." I can't look at a player who wants to sound like someone and that someone plays a square chamber and give them a square chamber and have it be the sound they want. It is really all about what works with you to get you the sound you want. If someone did this study I described we'd sit and watch, via x-rays, how all of the elements, including the players tongue position, come into play. Additionally, a person's own throat is one of the places where the sound is either won or lost; if they constrict their own throat they have no sound.

One of the things you talked about in an interview was how frustrated you were as a saxophonist with all of the inconsistencies in saxophone mouthpiece manufacturing. Your company was the Winner of the music retailing magazine Music Inc. Product Excellence Award and the Winner of the Technology Association of Georgia Excalibur Award. *How has your company overcome the problem of mouthpiece inconsistencies?*

By being insane. It is so hard, manufacturing is hard. Now I see why there are inconsistencies. The question is, will a manufacturer be willing to not sell a whole tray, 50 to 100 mouthpieces that came off the line? I play test most mouthpieces, but I have Danielle Walker here in the office who is a great player and performs six nights a week in the Savannah Theatre, and she tests the rest.

I recently came back from a clinic and masterclass out of town and she said, "These JET tenor mouthpieces are not right." I went back and played them myself, and she was right, something got off. So they were all scrap. Theoretically they played quite well, they were just too bright sounding. A lot of people would just send those out to be sold. In this case others will say, "Well some people like bright, some people like dark, some like resistance, some like free, we just let the

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Masterclasses And Lessons

Masterclass con Jody Espina (Jody Jazz) Parte 1 (February 28, 2015)

Masterclass con Jody Espina (Jody Jazz) Parte 2 (February 28, 2015)

Masterclass con Jody Espina (Jody Jazz) Parte 3 (February 28, 2015)

Jody Espina Lesson On Playing In Hot And Cold Temperatures (February 2013)

How To Put Your Reed On: Lesson from Jody Espina (February 2013)

Jody Espina: Master Class In Tokyo (February 2013)

Saxophone Helium Test
…Make sure to watch the video all the way through and see what happens when you apply helium to an Alto Saxophone! (November 2013)

Jody Playing Sax & Demonstrating Mouthpieces

Jody Espina Performs At Savannah Jazz Fest (September 2014)

Jody Espina / Marquinho Sax - Isn't She Lovely (September 2014)

Mike Smith, Jody Espina & Howard Paul perform "Now's the Time" at the 2014 Winter NAMM show

Austin With Jody Espina of Jody Jazz at NAMM 2014

James Carter, Arno Haas, Jody Espina Jam at NAMM 2014

Jody Espina Introduces The JodyJazz GIANT Mouthpeice at MusikMesse 2014

Jody Espina Introduces the JodyJazz JET Mouthpeice at MusikMesse 2014

JodyJazz HR* Bari mpc introduced by Jody Espina @ MusikMesse 2014

Members of the UNF Jazz Band Sax Section and Jody Espina Play Impressions At FEMA (February 2013)

Jody Espina in Nagoya, Japan (February 2013)

Just Friends (October 2013)

Jody's Blues @ 2012 Savannah Jazz Festival

Andrew Linham and Jody Espina at the NAMM Show 2012 Jazz Lounge Stage

JodyJazz & Steve Goodson: NAMM 2011

Jody Espina performing with his Jody Jazz DV NY at a Sax.co.uk masterclass in London (November 2010)

mouthpieces go out there and we let the consumer choose." That is, to me, a major cop out.

Yes, people do like different things, but if they play their teacher's mouthpiece I want them to go out and get one of those exact mouthpieces, not a different version of that mouthpiece. So we overcome inconsistencies by not only state of the art technology, but also I have five people working for me who are filing tips right now, and they are excellent at their job. The tips have to be very thin for me and perfectly symmetrical and that baffle has to be done right. I'm really proud of this crew. We don't accept anything else than a perfectly consistently made mouthpiece in each of our six models. Even though we have state of the art technology, none of that would matter without play tests, and always playing the benchmark model first before we play test the new one. We hold each mouthpiece to the benchmark model. I'll be honest, this part of the job drives me nuts, and it's really hard no matter the technology one uses.

So someone in your company play tests every single mouthpiece to make sure it is the same as the benchmark model before you send it out to a consumer?

Yes.

You have the absolute top of the line, the best jazz saxophonists, as endorsers and users of your products. They include Frank Catalano, Jeff Coffin, Ornette Coleman, George Garzone, Blue Lou Marini, Tom Scott, Andy Snitzer, and the list goes on and on and on. When performers come to you, what do you find to be the most common problem they have with mouthpieces, and how do you overcome that concern?

The great players, surprisingly, reflect the general player in that their concerns run the gamut. Some have been playing the same mouthpiece for 30 years and never thought about it, and when they come to, let's say a high performance mouthpiece, their eyes flash and they say, "Wow, what have I been doing for the last 30 years? I should have been playing one of these." That often happens.

Other times they come from a place where they had a mouthpiece refaced for them, they've had it for 30 years, and they can't ever think of parting with it. That's tricky because I don't presume to tell them we'll knock that mouthpiece off the shelf, but sometimes we do. Sometimes they have a mouthpiece that is too reed-picky. Sometimes

they try our DV and they find an extra shot of what I call Dexter Gordon in their sound, a big sound that comes into their tone that is a little extra than what they had before. Sometimes they find a mouthpiece that will shake some new things out of their horn, and what I mean by this is that they will find themselves playing new musical ideas and new musical concepts all because the new mouthpiece opens up something in them.

When a mouthpiece clicks for you, new stuff will come out of the horn. It's hard for me to generalize about these famous players, but it is really fun and satisfying to hear a great player, who usually already has a great mouthpiece, but find they like my mouthpiece more than what they were playing. I'm not aggressive chasing endorsers, because I want it to be genuine when an artist endorses a mouthpiece. A lot of people think we pay endorsers. That might happen in the drum world with a really famous percussionist, but I don't think there are many saxophonists who are getting paid to be an endorser. This is a misconception many people have, and we certainly don't pay our endorsers. We don't want to claim anybody who's not playing our stuff. If we hear they're playing something other than us, then we just talk to them and take the endorsement down. We want it to be genuine.

In the end, what is the best way for a consumer to evaluate a mouthpiece? Are there certain exercises, scales, or notes in specific patterns you recommend a player play in order to best ascertain if a mouthpiece is for them and the style of music they play?

I never get too specific with this. What I do recommend, when we put out a try of six or more mouthpieces, is that it's always better to try more than less. If you have two or three or four or five, don't spend 40 minutes trying the first mouthpiece. This happens so often. My instructions are to play each one of them for only a minute, but I do give them the one I think will work best for them first based on what they've told me and what I hear. They usually like it so much they never want to get off it. I tell them to go through each of them for a minute each and narrow the selection down to the best two or three. They should not waste their time. Once they have it narrowed down, then they should be more specific with each mouthpiece. I don't tell them what to play because each performer is so different. They can usually tell, just don't play for 40 minutes on the first mouthpiece you try.

Was there something about mouthpiece manufacturing that surprised you when you first started to make your own mouthpieces?

How little things make such a big difference. That difference, from yes this mouthpiece is a good one, to no it's not, from me, is not something everybody can feel. Sometimes I'll compare a mouthpiece with the benchmark and I'll feel something different, so I'll give it to someone else and they won't feel a difference between the new mouthpiece and the benchmark. I have friends who I know feel, when playing a mouthpiece, exactly the same way I feel.

Then I have those employees who I have to train so they can learn to feel what I feel when play testing mouthpieces. I want them to know what I'm looking for, because some people might be looking for different things, but if you're working for me as a play tester then you have to know where I draw the line. The main surprise was how little things can make a big difference and how difficult it is to always maintain perfection in manufacturing.

When it comes to matching a mouthpiece to a neck and/or a saxophone, is there anything special consumers should be aware of as they mix and match different equipment parts?

It's like what comes first, the chicken or the egg. Some people like to buy the horn first and then match a mouthpiece to it. That's good advice because a mouthpiece will play different with every horn, but on the other hand maybe you should pick the mouthpiece you like first and then go looking for a horn to match to it. I think the mouthpiece makes more difference in the sound and feel than the horn does.

If you really love a certain mouthpiece then you can find a horn that really pops with it. You're right to mention the neck because it makes more difference, after the mouthpiece, than the horn. If you find a neck you like try it on different horns, if it fits. Necks are super important, and it's also really important, when trying horns, to try many as many of that model as possible. If you find one you like, you'll probably also have found the neck you like. I've been in factories and tested this out, and that was where I found out about how important the neck is.

Your company website is full of a ton of great information and educational materials. What led you to provide, free of charge on your website, virtual lessons, as well as free online saxophone and clarinet performance lessons? What led you to want to provide this free service to the saxophone community?

The teacher in me, who taught all my life, was part of the reason. Also, when I got into this I was both playing and teaching fulltime, in addition to starting a business and working literally 18 hours a day, every day. I started to search what the other mouthpiece companies were doing online, on their websites, and basically I saw they were all asleep. The internet was still new in 2000, but giving content was part of my web formula. On the business side this makes sense, but it's really part of the educator in me.

With regard to your publishing, one of the latest things you've been doing is releasing a series of CD play-alongs with George Garzone and Kenny Werner. What makes your play-alongs different from those released by either Hal Leonard or Jamey Aebersold?

One thing is that we record them as a record. In the Aebersolds they put the drums on the left and the bass on the right so the drummer or bass player can turn off the drums or bass and play along. The result is that the final sound does not sound as good as a great recording. So first we try to make a great recording. We use the same studio for each of the discs, Systems 2 in Brooklyn, New York. They get a great live sound that is beautiful, they have a nine foot Steinway that used to be in Carnegie Hall, and we always play live all together. We don't skimp on the recording process.

Player-wise on the *Trading With The Greats* series we take the artist and have them play with their normal working group. So what the player at home is doing is playing in the

actual band of that artist, George Garzone or Kenny Werner. You're playing with the artist and his rhythm section, then the artist plays a chorus, then you play a chorus, you'll trade fours with the artist, everything.

On disc two you get those same tracks but without the artist so you have just a wonderful and great play along. Since the artist was playing originally you get a lot of great animation from the rhythm section on the play alongs. The result is not a flat sounding disc. What I recommend for students when doing their college auditions or whatever, and having to send in a CD or audio file, is to use that second CD, drop it into GarageBand and then record themselves over it.

The people, the professors, who are judging the auditions, are not hip to these recordings of ours yet, so when they hear the Aebersolds they'll recognize it, but when the kid turns in a file based on how I just described doing it, the judges will think the kid made a record. The result will sound really good. Auditions are super competitive now. There are great players all over the place. I forget what percentage Berklee and other colleges accept, but it's not too high. You have to make a great audio file. You can be at home and buy a microphone for under $200 that sounds quite good. Drop it into your computer and play all day long. The result will be a great recording.

Anyone who doubts just what a monster you are as a player need only go to the YouTube videos to hear you play to dispel any reservations. You continue to have to a long a successful performance career. Is there something you can point to as having helped you maintain this career?

I have a steady gig in Savannah on Friday and Saturday nights at a Cuban restaurant. That really helps me because I'm so busy I don't really practice anymore. It's difficult to stay on top of your instrument if you're not keeping up a practice or performance schedule. When I go out on the road I also play. I'd love to be practicing more and focusing on that, but I love what I do and I feel like I'm the luckiest guy on the earth. Last week I played a concert in Michigan with a great rhythm section, and it was such a blast to play with a great rhythm section. Playing feels different for me now than when I was dependent on being a professional musician. Now playing is relaxation, and since I don't focus on it the whole thing is just about joy. I don't obsess about my competition or anything. I'm just in a different place and playing is all icing on the cake now.

You do a ton of clinics and masterclasses throughout the world every year. In fact, you're just about always on the road, and the clinics you give are not just on mouthpieces, but many of them are saxophone performance and jazz clinics and masterclasses. When you're giving a masterclass, is there an overriding concept you like to emphasize?

The main thing I start with, and spend at least half the time on, is sound. Sound is everything. I try to get people to think about how they are developing their sound, and how the practice session should be devoted to sound. I'll give about six or seven different ideas about sound. Then I might spend time on improvisation. This past week I was giving two clinics a day, one was on saxophone playing and the other was on improvisation. But really it all comes down to sound, which includes breathing and air usage. You can go to the website and see, under Resources, some of the ideas I concentrate on in clinics and masterclasses.

When it comes to learning to improvise, almost all great soloists say transcribing solos is important when one is developing their abilities. Do you, as a teacher, recommend your students transcribe solos and if so, do you feel they should write them down or just learn them by ear and play them that way?

I wrote an article for *Downbeat* called *Paraphrasing The Greats*. Transcribing is great and I recommend it, and I recommend writing it down so you can come back to it later in case you forget the solo. The problem with transcribing is that you do forget them and that you're only learning what the artist played. You might not truly be expanding your vocabulary. This article can be found on our company website under Resources.

What you're doing is taking a lick and playing it exactly like the player originally did it. I encourage students to take that lick a player did and perform it exactly like the player did. This includes articulation, vibrato, timing, everything. Then play it over and over. As you do this, slowly change it and put the lick into your own words; paraphrase it. I show some examples in the article.

When I talked to Michael Brecker and would go to his house, he would have John Coltrane records lining the floor and the walls. He always practiced. He was always checking things out, but he told me he never wrote things down. He would grab parts of solos and work on them. That was

his method. Some people write the whole solo down. The problem is we only have a limited amount of time. I've loved the whole solos I've transcribed, and there is a proudness you develop when you complete a solo and can then play it. That is a real accomplishment. If, however, you only have a limited amount of time, you should just pick the fruit, pick the licks you love. You will pick different fruit, different licks than others, and you'll have your own mix.

For those high school students who are thinking of going into music as a performance career, what advice do you have?

Only do it if you can't imagine yourself doing anything else. I would never tell someone to not do it, but if you're on the fence it's tricky. I started playing the saxophone at the age of 12. At 14 I quit baseball, soccer, tennis, all of the sports I was doing because I already knew I wanted to be a musician and I knew I had to practice if I was going to be good enough. So I say, whatever you're practicing, practice more and devote yourself to it.

If you're going to be a player you better be the best player you can possibly be. It's very easy to be pessimistic about being a performing musician, just look at the reality of the number of actual gigs that are out there that will provide you with a living. That would discourage most people, but there are those who do make a living as a performing musician.

There are different things you can do, like teach lessons, but if you have to play, play. A lot of people discouraged me from pursuing music as a career, a lot of people, but I didn't listen. I have one more piece of advice. I didn't learn this until I was older, but it's really important. Attitude. For people in any walk of life this is important, but as a musician you have to have a great attitude. If I'm on a gig with you, and I do all kinds of gigs, like corporate gigs or whatever, but if a kid has a bad attitude and is complaining about the cheese dip or anything, I'm not going to call that guy for anything. There are plenty of musicians who are uplifting, are in a good mood, and I want to be surrounded by positive people. The attitude you bring to anything you do, you may not think it's being noticed but it's always being noticed and you probably won't know who's doing the noticing. Attitude is number one. §