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MUSICAL MERCHANDISE REVIEW

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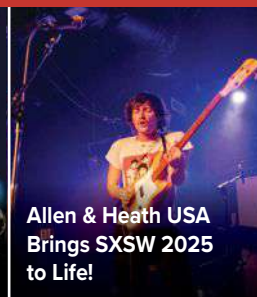


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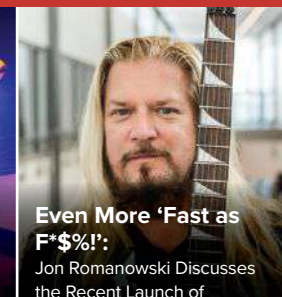
INSIDE



Jody Jazz Celebrates 25 Years:
Founder Jody Espina Reflects on a Quarter-Century



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JODYJAZZ CELEBRATES 25 YEARS

Founder Jody Espina Reflects on a Quarter-Century

by Christian Wissmuller



Jody Espina playing a Runyon Baritone mpc in 1975. That model mpc would be customized in 2000 and became the JodyJazz Classic

Espina on what drove him to start JodyJazz in the first place, and how the values that guided him then continue to lead the company to ever-greater heights.

First off, JodyJazz is reaching a significant milestone this year. Congratulations on the 25th Anniversary!

Jody Espina: Thank you. It's gone by very fast! It doesn't seem that long ago that I was in New York City selling mouthpieces out of my loft downtown.

Let's do a little bit of "then & now" — back in 2000, how many JodyJazz employees were there total? Where were the JodyJazz HQ and production facilities 25 years ago and how large (square footage) were they? Bringing things to the present day, how many employees are there in 2025? Where are the JodyJazz facilities and what size are they?

Well, back in 2000 there was just me. In 1999 I met legendary saxophonist and mouthpiece maker Santy Runyon, playing at his 90th Birthday party. Santy customized a mouthpiece to my specifications which I immediately fell in love with, and it was actually Santy's idea to make it for me and call it the JodyJazz mouthpiece. Word got out about this special mouthpiece, and I soon became overrun with orders for it. Over the next six years I travelled to the Runyan factory in Opelousas, Louisiana, seven or eight times a year and developed the range into a full line of mouthpieces. But I was never completely satisfied and wanted to make my own mouthpieces. I moved the business to Savannah in 2008 and in 2011 we moved to our current location, which we have since expanded twice. Our multi-storied factory and offices now occupy 10,000 sq ft and we now have a staff of 23 employees.

Looking back at the past quarter-century, what are some significant milestone events and product introductions that really stand out to you?

On the product side, the development of DV mouthpieces was a game changer. Metal mouthpieces generally have more power and presence, but the downside is that they always sound too

“I love music and I love playing the saxophone. We do what we do because music is one of the greatest things in life and by doing different outreach programs, we might get to touch young musicians that otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to play our products.”

“It's been an amazing 25 years, and I could not have reached this milestone without the support of all the amazing Artists, our hard-working dealers and my amazing staff and factory crew.”

2025 marks 25 years of crafting some of the world's finest saxophone mouthpieces for JodyJazz. It's also been two and a half decades of industry-leading innovation, partnerships with some of the highest-profile performers alive, significant corporate acquisitions, and community outreach.

MMR recently spoke with founder and president Jody

bright and shrill. So, I had always wanted to find a way to make a metal mouthpiece that didn't have that shrillness but still had that power and projection. Inspired by the book 'The Da Vinci Code' (hence the name 'DV') I applied the Golden Mean proportions found in nature to the design of a mouthpiece. This resulted in several special design features, the most important of which is the patented DV secondary window design. This resulted in a spectacular series of mouthpieces which are still among our best-selling mouthpieces to this day. The DV models have incredible presence and projection but still have a big fat mid-range and bottom end that has never been present before in metal mouthpieces.

Equally significant to me has been the evolution of the business to the type of company it has become today. I have been able to attract some incredible talent to the company. From manufacturing and operations to product design and programming, to sales and marketing, I'd put my team up against anybody's. Plus, every mouthpiece we make is painstakingly finished by hand, so we also have a rigorous apprenticeship program for hand-working. I consider our hand workers to be the very best in the world. As a company we offer full medical, competitive benefits and 401k plan etc. The team we have assembled is the absolute key to our success; I'm so proud of what everyone on our team does day in and day out. I'm not sure exactly how it happened but I know that everyone working with JodyJazz/Chedeville/Rousseau is doing their best to provide the best products and service of any company, not just in our sector.

JodyJazz has made some significant brand acquisitions over the years — Chedeville in 2017, E. Rousseau in 2020. How has the expansion of the product offerings impacted JodyJazz's reach with both the customer base and retailers? (If the response to the above question covers this subject, feel free to ignore)

It was always my plan to expand beyond just mouthpieces for Jazz. There are more clarinet players in the world than sax players and of course the concert band market, especially within school music programs, is significantly larger than jazz band. So, it was obvious to apply my design skills and our manufacturing capabilities to make these kinds of mouthpieces. But with the Brand name "JodyJazz" it was always going to be a challenge to do that. I'm not sure that many classical saxophonists and classical clarinet players would want to play a mouthpiece with "Jazz" written on it, however great the mouthpiece might be!! So, when the Chedeville company became available I jumped at the opportunity. The rich history and heritage of the brand name attracted the immediate interest of the players, and the quality and unique designs have

g a i n e d fans all



over the world. We have many top clarinet players now playing Chedeville mouthpieces and more and more seem to be coming on board every day. An increasing number of retailers globally are now offering Chedeville clarinet mouthpieces alongside the traditionally dominant brands in this category.

The plan originally was to utilize the Chedeville brand name for our classical saxophone range also. But then in 2019 Dr. Rousseau contacted me to let me know that he was planning to sell his company, and he asked me if I would want to acquire it. As one of the most celebrated names in the classical saxophone world, of course I didn't think twice. It was truly humbling and very meaningful to me that of all the people that Dr Rousseau could have sold to, he chose me first because he felt that his legacy and the legacy of his mouthpieces would be safest in my hands. I consider that in itself to be one of the greatest compliments I could ever receive. We completed the acquisition in January 2020 right before the pandemic which wasn't the greatest timing. But the worldwide demand for the mouthpieces has grown rapidly especially in Asia where they are incredibly popular in countries like Japan and Korea. In 2023 we appointed St Louis Music as the exclusive distributor for the Rousseau products in the USA and Canada. We felt that their extensive national reach would be beneficial in re-establishing the brand with school music dealers who work with schools whose band programs are predominantly for concert band. They are a great organization, and domestic sales have been growing steadily.

The brand has been embraced by so many high-profile artists including Kurt Whalum, George Garzone, Tom Scott, Don Braden, Andy Snitzer, Ed Calle and The Count Basie Orchestra Sax Section, among many others. How important have artist endorsements been for the evolution of the brand?

The role of the Artist Endorser has changed in recent times. Back in my day when I was studying at Berklee we'd sit around listening to records and we'd know everything there was to know about each of the players on the record and know exactly what gear they were using. Nowadays people are listening on Spotify etc and they don't even know who is playing on the record. Social media and YouTube are far more important. More and more customers are making their buying decisions based upon videos. But I've always considered our Endorsers to be my expanded R&D team. It's a privilege to have this incredible team of experts to whom I can send prototypes to gain their opinion and feedback. Their feedback is invaluable to me, and it's been like that since day one. Right from the very early days, players like George Garzone and Andy Snitzer were always incredibly generous with their time in offering feedback to me on various designs.

JodyJazz has always had a very active international outreach — I know that I'll see you at every Music China show I attend (unfortunately I was unable to this past year) and you've also travelled to Cuba, Southeast Asia, Brazil, etc. How important is the international market to the brand?

We do over 60% of our business outside of the USA so the international markets are incredibly important to us. I began attending the Frankfurt Musikmesse in Germany very early on and that was incredibly important in building our international business. It was expensive to exhibit there but I was able to forge long-lasting relationships with many overseas customers purely because of our presence there. That show is sorely missed. I do hope it, or some version of it, can come back in the future. We make a major investment in exhibiting at Music China not only because of the importance of the China market but because, now without Musikmesse, many of our larger overseas customers attend the show. The 2019 Music China show was huge! It was incredible, the busiest one ever and we were kept on our toes working with not only our domestic China customers but also so many of our EU and Asian distributors and dealers. Covid unfortunately very much took the wind out of the Music China Show's sails, and we were not able to attend again until last year. It's not like it was, but we'll be back exhibiting again this year. I myself am regularly invited to perform masterclasses and workshops around the world and continue to travel extensively. So far this year, I've already performed in Mexico and in Costa Rica. In



Jody gives a clinic to a classroom in Sarasota, FL in 2003



Jody loved the DVs so much, he liked to play two at a time! (circa: 2007)



Jody Espina with Tom Scott

July, I'll be performing at the Indonesia Saxophone festival and then will be traveling on to Nanjing, China for a Clarinet competition and then will attend the World Saxophone Congress in Harbin, China.

The company has also always been very active in altruistic efforts, both here at home-base and abroad, sponsoring festivals, hosting visits to the company facilities, supporting the Sound Support Foundation Scholarship, helping MI retailers during the Pandemic with the 'Music Store Stimulus' program, etc. Why are these types of initiatives so important to JodyJazz?

I love music and I love playing the saxophone. We do what we do because music is one of the greatest things in life and by doing different outreach programs, we might get to touch young musicians that otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to play our products. I've always felt that a love of music is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children. So, any opportunity to support music education events or organizations, and music scholarship programs is very important to me. JodyJazz is also a major sponsor of the Music Achievement Council which is doing incredibly important work here in the USA. No one is doing more to support the development, recruitment and retention of music educators. Plus, their music education advocacy programs offer essential tools for school music dealers to help ensure that school band programs in their districts continue to receive the support and funding they require. As for the Music stores, they play such a vital role in their communities. Most people don't realize how much the school Music dealers serve and support their entire community but especially the band directors and students. I've met so many people and companies in this industry who are great people and give back selflessly all of the time.

Leading up to both the anniversary year and the NAMM Show in Anaheim, JodyJazz had a couple of significant new releases — the DV HR Series Baritone and the DV JC Jody Custom sax mouthpieces. How has the reception been to these new mouthpieces so far?

We're only just now getting the DV JC JODY CUSTOM Alto mouthpieces out into the market. This whole idea came about because back in the summer of 2024, I was thinking of ideas for a special 25th Anniversary limited edition model. Since the launch of the original back in 2005, I had occasionally made various slight tweaks and changes to my personal DV. When I stopped to think about it, I realized that my personal mouthpiece at this point had really become a different model. After a little more tweaking of my personal DV we came upon a version of the mouthpiece that I just freaked out over. I loved it so much that I decided it was too good to be a limited edition, and I wanted to make it available to everyone. So far everyone who has played it loves it.

Anniversary

The DV HR Alto and Tenor models were the first hard rubber mouthpieces to feature the patented DV design. They have both been incredibly popular and are now some of our best-selling models. So, it was only natural for us to introduce the Baritone model, and we are now working on a Soprano. I feel that the application of the secondary window has an even more dramatic effect on the Baritone. Baritone sax players need a mouthpiece that lets them play a live gig with enough volume and power to be heard, but that doesn't lose richness in the tone. The DV HR Baritone really projects from the bandstand but can also play beautifully and sweetly. Above all it is extremely versatile.

We have had such great success with our new product releases for so many years and I believe that these latest two releases show that we are not slowing down at all.

Are there other recent or upcoming releases you'd like to draw MMR readers' attention to?

Our collaboration with the legendary Hollywood studio musician and famed clarinet mouthpiece maker Jim Kanter has done more to put Chedeville on the map than anything else we've ever done. The first mouthpiece design born from that collaboration; the "Chedeville Kanter Cinema" model has been popular beyond our wildest dreams. This is now one of our very most-popular mouthpieces worldwide, period, and I'm talking about all JodyJazz, Chedeville and Rousseau models. It has been incredibly successful. I am very excited to say that we have just followed that up with the second model in that collaboration named the "Chedeville Kanter Opera" model. Jim believes that this new model will be even more popular than the Cinema model!! So, we are very excited to get that out on the market.

We've also had a fantastic response to the new third generation Rousseau models, what we are calling "Rousseau 3.0". After acquiring Rousseau, it was always our plan to manufacture all the Rousseau mouthpieces ourselves at the JodyJazz factory, but it was not something we could accomplish overnight. So, we had to do it in stages. First, we had to work with the original manufacturer to correct several of the designs that had been allowed to go out of spec over time and to improve the quality overall. These were essentially the 2nd generation models. That then gave us time to transfer the entire Rousseau line to be fully manufactured from start

to finish at the JodyJazz factory. That migration was completed in the summer of 2024. Now with the Rousseau 3.0 models we have full control over the manufacturing process, and not only have we radically improved the consistency of the mouthpieces by enforcing stricter quality controls, but we have also improved several of the mouthpiece designs. The prices have stayed the same, but the quality is infinitely superior. For the Rousseau 3.0 models we like to say that we are offering "Boutique mouthpieces at mass-production prices".

Are there any upcoming 25th Anniversary events or promotions you'd like to preview?

We will be celebrating our 25th Anniversary with a very special concert featuring Kirk Whalum during the Savannah Jazz festival this coming September. We'll also be having lots of events at our factory around the time of the festival including some performances and a retrospective of the history of JodyJazz that I am personally putting together myself. For many years we have proudly supported the annual Savannah Jazz Festival which is organized every year by the Savannah Jazz Association which is a non-profit organization. The highlight of the festival is the two days of outdoor concerts in beautiful Forsyth Park in downtown Savannah. These outdoor concerts are completely free and open to the public and always feature some truly world-class talent. I served on the Board of Directors of Savannah Jazz for several years and in 2023 I was proud to be inducted into the Savannah Jazz Hall of Fame. Colin Schofield, our VP of Sales & Marketing Worldwide, is currently serving as President of the Board. So, we've always had a close association with the Savannah Jazz organization, and it only seemed fitting that we should partner with them to bring Kirk Whalum to Savannah and celebrate our 25th Anniversary in style!!

Closing thoughts?

It's been an amazing 25 years, and I could not have reached this milestone without the support of all the amazing Artists, our hard-working dealers and my amazing staff and factory crew. It has been beyond a dream come true and I can't wait to see what the next 25 years will bring!



Jody Espina at Musikmesse in 2010



Jody Espina with Jim Kanter



George Garzone and Jody Espina at the JodyJazz factory



Jody Espina performing live



Jody with Dr. Rousseau



Group shot: The Jazz Jam



The JodyJazz, Inc. showroom



Jody Espina performing live