

CONVERSATIONS WITH SANTY

THE FIRST MEETING BETWEEN A STUDENT AND SANTY

Student: How should I put the mouthpiece on the gooseneck?

Santy: The instrument does not come direct from the factory with the mouthpiece on the "goose neck" in the proper place. On a new instrument, the neck is always dry. Because of this dryness, you cannot get the mouthpiece on the "goose neck" far enough. Because the mouthpiece is not far enough in, the instrument will play out of tune with itself, and the tone is dull if the mouthpiece is not far enough on the neck. Don't spoil your ear before you get started. Get someone to sand the cork down for you and oil the cork so that the gooseneck slips on easily. Later on, I'll tell you how to tune up by placing the mouthpiece right on the gooseneck, but first you will probably need help in getting the cork sanded and oiled.

Student: How should I place the saxophone in my mouth?

Santy: The proper term for that is embouchure (M-Boo-Sure) formation. With your mouth slightly open and relaxed, press the lower lip gently against the lower teeth with the index finger. This is the amount of lip that should be rolled over the lower teeth, forming a cushion for the reed to vibrate against. Then, wrap the lips around the reed and mouthpiece by forming an "O" syllable. This will keep the stream of air from escaping when blowing. The chewing muscles on either side of the lower jaw are the means of exerting the proper amount of pressure against the reed when playing.

Student: Well, how much pressure on the reed is the right amount?

Santy: The reed and the mouthpiece are the vocal chords of the saxophone. Most naturally, what you do to the reed and mouth piece is reflected into the instrument.

As a new learner when playing the instrument, you do not have the slightest inkling of the amount of pressure to use. You could develop horrendous habits, that, in many cases, may take you several years to correct. This can be avoided by following my advice.

Let me tell you a story. In my early studies, I was advised by my orchestra, band, and private instructors to exert more pressure against the reed. They would say, "Pinch more." or "Bite harder." The question that always bothered me and always went unanswered was, "how much should I pinch, how much pressure should I add, and how hard should I bite?" None of these fine teachers who tutored me had a definite answer to this mysterious question.

The following suggestions are tried, tested, and proven from years of experience as a professional musician and woodwind teacher. I am confident that you will find them helpful.

Just as the motor of your car must have gasoline to keep it functioning, a saxophone must have steady stream of air. The motor may have six or eight cylinders, special type spark plugs, and scores of other gadgets, but without the all-important gasoline, it is all worthless. With a saxophone, the steady stream of air is likewise all-important. The reed, the mouthpiece, the embouchure, and the design of the instrument all play their part in better performance, but always keep in mind that without that steady stream of air, they don't mean a thing.

The vibration of the reed, set up by the steady stream of air, produces the tone in a saxophone or a clarinet. So, the best and most accurate way to determine proper embouchure is by blowing the mouthpiece alone and producing the following note. This is done with the mouthpiece off the instrument. I know this may seem odd, but give it a try.

The correct note to be produced on the alto sax mouthpiece and reed is "A" 880 vibrations per second. If you have a keyboard handy, "A" is the second "A" above the middle "C". Strike it on the keyboard, then try to produce that note on just the mouthpiece. If the pitch is too high, drop the lower jaw slightly. If the pitch is too low, tighten the lower jaw slightly until you match the note on the keyboard.

When you do finally produce 880 vibrations per second on just the mouthpiece and reed, you may discover that you are not really blowing a steady stream of air against the mouthpiece and reed. This is an excellent way to check your all-important steady stream of air.

I also experimented later on other instruments. I found out they all require different notes. The right note to play varies with each instrument's mouthpiece: the tenor sax is G concert; the baritone sax is E flat; the soprano sax is D flat; (and) the soprano clarinet is B concert.

When you do get the right note on the mouthpiece, repeat it over and over making sure to remember how it feels to you. This repetition will produce a good tone all over the saxophone.

Now put the mouthpiece well on the sax neck. Grease the cork on the gooseneck, and attach the mouthpiece. Adjust the neckstrap so that the mouthpiece fits in your mouth comfortably and correctly.

Hold the mouthpiece in your hand just like when you blew the mouthpiece alone. Have someone who knows how to finger the instrument stand behind you, put their arms around you and place their fingers on the instrument in the playing position. Now blow the mouthpiece while he fingers the instrument. Surprise!!! Surprise!!! A nice sound will be produced, even before you know where to put your fingers on the horn.

Take the mouthpiece off and produce 880 again for several times. Have someone show you how to finger the "A" without the octave key. Blow it just like you did the mouthpiece alone. It should sound great if you have followed the above directions.

THE SECOND MEETING BETWEEN A STUDENT AND SANTY

Santy: Do you practice on the mouthpiece everyday?

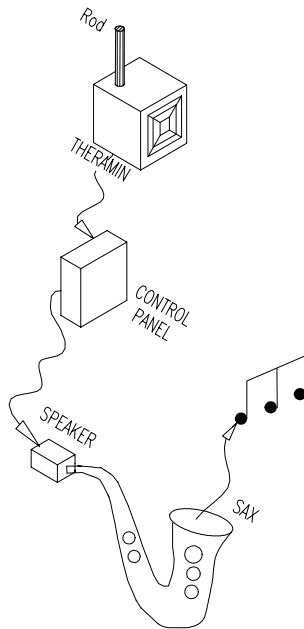
Student: Not everyday, but I've been practicing.

Santy: Do you check the oil in your car? You have to check it every day until you make such a habit of it. ... I still check it. Believe me? I check man, man. I check it. I know where it is. Why? It's not... It's not human to retain anything, unless you use it all the time. ... Is it true or not? It's not human to retain it unless you use it. You are not past the stage where you can go along without checking it. Nobody is.

Like this guy, two years ago, he came down here [not even] close to playing the low notes. He couldn't even get the low notes on the saxophone. Well in one lesson I had him blow on the mouthpiece. And in one lesson he was playing on low notes. And he got so that he could play pretty good. And then he didn't blow the mouthpiece. And then he didn't come down here until four months. And when he came down here I had to start him all over again. And so he still couldn't get the low notes again. [He says] "I don't know what's wrong. I can't get the low notes". And I say, "I know what's wrong; [you] didn't blow on that mouthpiece."

That's the result of not blowing on the mouthpiece every day. No kidding. It's very important. I think the only comprehensive way that anybody ever did to figure out how the saxophone worked is that. I don't know of anybody that went to the trouble to figure out how the instrument worked. Let me show you.

This is a theramin. See the picture. It happened to be the only electronic instrument at that time [in the 1930's]. And this young college prof had one and like I told you, he said, he complemented me on my saxophone playing, but not very favorably. He said that



you are not getting the right sound. Come over to my lab. I'll see if I can help you. And he asked me if I had a mouthpiece that I didn't care about. [We] cut this part of it off and just used the shank and [then we] built a little box with a speaker in it. And this thing had a control [rod to raise and lower the notes]. ...The closer ... [your hand] got to this rod, the higher the pitch. I saw one [recently] and it really made a comedy of it on television and I was very surprised that there was one still in existence. And this guy was doing like this and making a real wild vibrato out of it. And the sound it made, it sounded like a musical saw. You ever hear a musical saw? [It] sounded like a musical saw.

Anyway he built this speaker and attached it to the saxophone. And turned this thing on and it proved beyond a question of a doubt that you don't have to have air go into that saxophone. The band directors say fill it up. Blow it full of air. I have heard that a thousand times. Well it's not a vacuum. It's already full of air. The object is to set the column of air in motion that's already in the instrument. So when we set this thing on 880 vibrations a second you could play the upper register and lower register [with a] nice sound all over the horn and nobody blowing it. The only human element was me fingering ... When you got it below 880 [vibrations/second], the lower register played in tune, but the octave key wouldn't work. ... You get it above 880 [vibrations/second], the upper register played fine and you released the octave key and it stayed in [tune] in the upper register. Only when it would work in both registers [is] when you got it on 880 [vibrations/second] ... right on that note.

Student: And that control panel pictured, what happens there is, that you are setting it at 880 ?

Santy: Yes.

Student: You are bypassing that little rod ... you are playing just one tone; is it a low register A?

Santy: Yes, you're right. Now then what happens is that when you put a finger down to play a G instantly and automatically the vibrations in the saxophone adjust themselves to the vibrations of the reed.

Now it played all right clear up to high D, but E flat was a little flat. I figured this out and it works. The faster the reed vibrates, the swifter the stream of air has to be to make the reed vibrate faster to bring the pitch up. Okay, so how do you do that? You do that with an E syllable. It's the same principle as taking the garden hose without any nozzle and putting your thumb over it. It squirts out. You are

confining the water to a smaller space so it shoots out faster. So you confine the air to a smaller space by thinking an E syllable which raises the tongue and makes a smaller cavity as it approaches the reed which brings the pitch up without biting like you did on the high E flat, see. That squeezes the tone and spoils the tone, but you don't have to do that. But you have to understand that you don't have to do that and you have to practice not doing it and you have to practice playing those notes with an E syllable instead of pinching.

Well, the most famous story is that Harry Carney story when he couldn't hit the high F on the baritone. ... [Imagine one of] the greatest player in the world couldn't play high F and all I did was have him blow the mouthpiece. Now he was world famous. If its good enough for him, why is it not good enough for Joe Blow over here. ...

Student: Who did that guy play with?

Santy: Duke Ellington. Duke Ellington is famous. If you want to hear a fine baritone, try to get a tape of Duke Ellington with [the song,] Misty, on it. And Harry Carney plays at the end of it. He plays a cadenza all by himself and then the band comes in and plays a couple of cords. You think he's through and he plays another extended cadenza [with] ... marvelous phrasing, marvelous notes ... and then you think he's through and they play another couple of cords and he does another cadenza. It's a marvelous ... recording. World famous...

Now if I want to adjust the quality, then I suppress part of the vibrations with the reed - by putting the mouthpiece in my mouth crooked - which suppresses part of the reed and adjust the quality. But I'm still blowing. My jaw is still in the right place. I'm not pinching more. A lot of saxophone players loosen for the low notes. That's why they don't get them. But you see there is no problem playing G down to C [and] F down to B flat or anything like that.

Student: Well is your mouthpiece designed for that technique?

Santy: Of course it is. That's what it is designed for.

Student: Are other mouthpieces not designed for that?

Santy: I'm not saying that other mouthpieces don't work that way because they do. ... There was also a fellow ... who came to me for saxophone lessons. And he played so bad, that I took ... the horn away from him for two weeks and had him blow just the mouthpiece. I wouldn't let him [blow on the horn]. I took the horn away from him. And he was so far off that I made him play without the

horn on the mouthpiece for two weeks. And later on, he was the official tester for [a mouthpiece manufacturing] company. With fourteen testers working under him. Now was that bad or not. This mouthpiece [that I'm holding] is a hard rubber mouthpiece and it is worked by hand. I don't believe in hand work. Because the hand is not as accurate as a computerized machine. So we had a computerized plastic press. And we programmed that plastic press to hold a cycle for a certain length of time and when the mouthpiece falls out we put it in a barrel of cold water so that it set up right a way. We take every precaution to make them all the same.

[Most horn manufacturers] send this [gooseneck] out with the cork so thick that you couldn't possibly [get it on]. There is no way that you could get the mouthpiece [on], even if you could put grease on the cork, you couldn't get it on. That's the horn right there. That's why I had the sand paper ... so you can get the mouthpiece on to where it belongs. Well, there is no way you can get that on there.

Student: Well how do you know where it belongs?

Santy: You blow that mouthpiece and you put it on the horn and you tune the horn with a strobe [electronic] tuner or you hit a note on the piano.

Student: Is it always at that set point?

Santy: It should be unless [the piano's out of tune]. You see, now that they have electronic key boards, I don't have to [tune up with the piano]. When I go out and play a job, I don't have to tune it up to the key board. The keyboard is on A, 440. And I just put my horn on A 440 before I leave and I go and pick the horn and blow. Why tune it up because it is in tune. But how do I determine where the mouthpiece goes on the cork? If I pinch too tight [with my lip] like Harry Carney, it throws the whole saxophone ... sharp and then you have to pull the mouthpiece out. When you pull the mouthpiece out too far, it throw the horn out of tune. ... It throws the high notes flat with the low notes. Now what do you have to do?

Student: You pinch?

Santy: You pinch to get the high notes in tune. And the rest of the horn is out of tune. ... So you have to screw around with your lip to tune every note. What good is that? No, so by this process you can put ... the mouthpiece on the horn so that the high notes are not flat so that you don't have to pinch them up. So you can play; so you can play all over the horn.

Student: How do you play altissimo notes?

That's done with the throat. Now, I'm adding a little bit of pressure for those notes. But I have a different throat formation for everyone of those notes. How do I do that? By trial and error. You have to do that. So I can play those high notes. Because I know how and because I have the mouthpiece on there at the right place. But I had to sand the heck out of it to put it in the right place.

Student: Now the way you are playing not only improves the notes you are playing, but it also improves the tone?

Santy: Why certainly. So you are not pinching the life out of the instrument. ... I told you about, Bob Redwine. He was playing third alto with Jack Teagarden's band. I knew him in Tacoma Washington. [We] played in Tacoma Washington, and I knew him there. ... All of a sudden, he is in Chicago .. [and] he knows I'm playing the Chicago Theater and he comes around and he says "Santy, ... I always like the way you play, ... I got fired". He says "Third alto; Can you help me?". That's when I gave him the mouthpiece exercise. And told him what to do and he came back in another week and I gave him another lesson. A third time. And pretty soon the lead alto man comes "What did you do to Bob Redwine?" I said, "Why?". He pushed me off the lead chair!



Santy plays the piccolo.



Runyon
PRODUCTS INC.

Distribute this publication in its original digital PDF format without charge.
All other rights reserved.
All model and accessory names are trademarks.
Many features are patented.
Specifications subject to change in our quest for excellence.
Copyright - Runyon Products Inc.
1998 - 2000

