

## Selecting a Jazz Saxophone Mouthpiece

By Tracy Heavner

**W**hen striving to produce a good saxophone tone, one of the most crucial pieces of equipment is the mouthpiece. There are many brands of saxophone mouthpieces being manufactured using a variety of materials, encompassing a wide price range, and designed for performers at all levels of development. Beginning saxophonists usually play the stock mouthpieces sold

with their student model saxophones. These synthetic mouthpieces are inexpensive, mass-produced, and primarily designed to produce the basic sound. As a saxophonist progresses, the stock mouthpiece is usually replaced by one made of ebonite, also known as hard rubber. These mouthpieces, which are somewhat more expensive, are made of a better material and with more craftsman-

ship, allowing the performer to attain a better tone. They also come in a variety of tip openings, facings and chamber sizes providing saxophonists with more opportunities to find a mouthpiece that better suits their particular playing style. Many professional saxophonists perform on hand-finished, hard rubber mouthpieces that allow for maximum expression and individuality.

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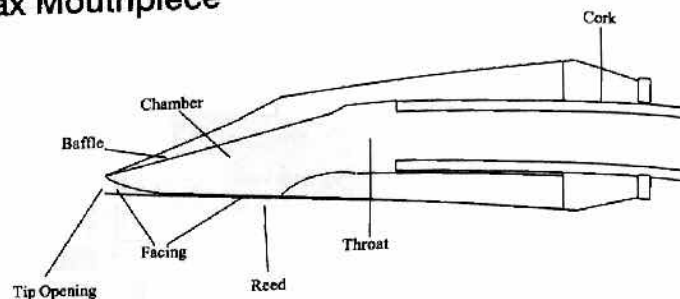
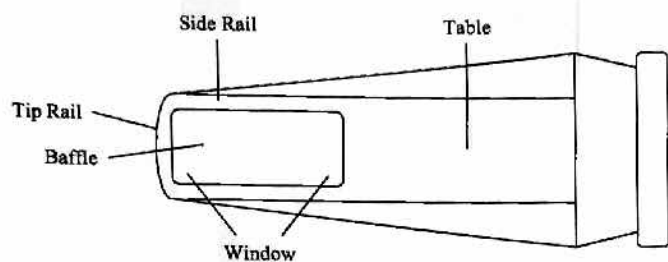
### Tip Openings, Facings, and Chamber Sizes

When selecting a mouthpiece, the tip opening, facing, and chamber size should carefully be considered. The tip opening is the distance between the tip of the reed and the tip of the mouthpiece. Mouthpieces with small tip openings are easier to control, have a more stable pitch, but require a harder reed. As the tip opening increases in size, control becomes more difficult, the pitch is more flexible and a softer reed must be used.

The mouthpiece facing is the distance between the tip of the mouthpiece and the point where the reed and the mouthpiece separate. The longer the facing, the more mouthpiece the saxophonist will need to take into the mouth in order to line up the lower teeth with the position where the reed and mouthpiece separate. Due to this fact, a medium facing usually works best for most performers.

The mouthpiece chamber is the internal cavity inside the mouthpiece and its design has a direct effect on tone and response. The chamber can be small, medium, or large in size and have a variety of shapes from round to rectangular. A small, rectangular chamber will produce a brighter tone with more power. As the chamber size increases and becomes more round in shape, the tone will become darker and less powerful.

## Schematic of a Sax Mouthpiece



### Jazz Saxophone Tone

Unlike classical saxophone tone, the tonal concept for contemporary jazz and commercial music can vary widely among performers. This may be a result of each saxophonist trying to develop a personal, identifiable sound that will set him or her apart from other performers. However in general, jazz saxophonists have a more powerful, brighter tone that contains more edge than tones typically favored by classical performers.

Jazz saxophonists usually begin developing their sound by first emulating their favorite artist in both tone and playing style, many times purchasing the exact mouthpiece of the performer they like. However as they progress, they tend to develop their own personal sound, which may be very similar to the tone they started with or it could be entirely different. As this evolution takes place, the saxophonist may change mouthpieces several times trying to find the one that best matches their tonal concept at that moment in time. Eventually, most jazz saxophonists find a mouthpiece they are satisfied with and direct their focus on other aspects of performance.

### The Development of Jazz Saxophone Mouthpieces

Jazz mouthpieces were first designed to meet the needs of saxophonists performing in jazz big bands of the 1930s. When performing big band music, saxophonists needed a mouthpiece that would provide more volume, projection, and edge, allowing them to match the sound produced by the brass section. Mouthpieces designed up to this time had a large round chamber that produced a softer, darker sound typically desired by classical saxophonists. During the 1930s, mouthpiece manufacturers started experimenting with the size and shape of the mouthpiece chamber, tip opening, facing, and materials mouthpieces were made from. By designing the mouthpiece chamber with a more narrow and rectangular shape, increasing the tip opening and sometimes using metal as the construction material, mouthpieces grew more powerful with more projection and edge.

### Selecting a Jazz Saxophone Mouthpiece

When selecting a jazz saxophone mouthpiece, the performer must first narrow down the choices since it is difficult to play every brand of mouthpiece made. This can be done by researching various mouthpieces using the Internet, researching mouthpiece brands and models played by prominent saxophonists, getting recommendations from saxophone teachers, and finally test playing mouthpieces at larger music stores that have them in stock.

If the local store does not have the requested mouthpieces in stock, some online stores may ship several mouthpieces at once for individuals to try. Although this is not the most convenient way to select a mouthpiece, serious saxophonists should test play many

mouthpieces before deciding on the specific one to purchase. When ordering mouthpieces online, some stores have a return policy that will allow the performer to keep the mouthpieces for up to 30 days. This is very helpful since the saxophonist can practice and perform on the mouthpieces in a variety of situations and venues such as rehearsals, sectionals, ensemble, and solo performances.

By playing the mouthpieces for several weeks, most of the time the saxophonist can be sure that the mouthpiece selected is the best one. If possible, each mouthpiece should be recorded while being test played. It is often easier to determine which one sounds best using a recording since this allows saxophonists to focus their full attention on each example rather than trying to play and listen at the same time.

When test playing any mouthpiece, saxophonists should protect it from marks or scratches caused by the teeth or ligature. If a mouthpiece is damaged in any way when it is test played, saxophonists may have to buy the mouthpiece even though they may not want to. To assure that the mouthpiece is not damaged when being test played, a mouthpiece cushion or tape should be placed on the mouthpiece beak to protect it from teeth marks.

To protect the body of the mouthpiece, a leather or fabric ligature in the Rovner style should be used so the mouthpiece will not be scratched when the ligature is placed on it. By following this advice, many mouthpieces may be test played without damage. If a satisfactory mouthpiece is found at a local store but the price is higher than buying the same mouthpiece online, the store manager should be asked if the online price can be matched. Many times the local store will sell the mouthpiece for the discounted online price.

### Jazz Saxophone Mouthpieces

There are a wide variety of jazz saxophone mouthpieces being manufactured using materials such as hard rubber, stainless steel, and other types of metal alloy. While this is important because saxophonists usually have a preference for the feel of either hard rubber or metal, it should be noted that the design of the mouthpiece is the most important factor in sound production, not the material from which the mouthpiece is made.

When examining jazz mouthpieces, saxophonists will notice that their tip openings are larger than classical mouthpieces and require the use of a softer reed. Their chambers are also designed to produce more volume, power, and edge, with many mouthpiece brands offering models with a choice of small, which is the brightest, medium and large chambers. Some mouthpiece brands, such as Runyon, provide a removable spoiler, which is a baffle with small metal reeds that can be attached inside the mouthpiece, allowing the performer the ability to add even more edge and volume to their sound.

Some popular jazz hard rubber mouthpieces brands include Beechler, Freddie Gregory, Jody Jazz, Claude Lakey, Meyer, Otto Link, Selmer Soloist, and Vandoren. Popular metal mouthpieces include Beechler Bellite, Berg Larsen, Bobby Dukko, Dave Guardala, Otto Link, Peter Ponsol, and Runyon. Many prominent smooth jazz alto saxophonists have gravitated toward metal mouthpieces, especially the Beechler Bellite 7 model.

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For some saxophonists, vintage mouthpieces are highly desirable because they produce a tone quality from an era gone by. These mouthpieces, which are no longer manufactured, play quite differently from new ones, even those with the same brand and model name. They are also hard to find and have a much higher price tag. However, if a vintage mouthpiece allows a saxophonist to attain the ideal tone, the time spent searching for one and the higher price are worth the extra effort.

### Custom Mouthpieces

Although there is a wide variety of mouthpieces currently being manufactured, some saxophonists may still not be able to find

one that perfectly suits their needs. In this case, a custom mouthpiece may be the answer. A custom mouthpiece is one that is created especially for a specific performer based on their needs, desires, and playing specifications. Sometimes a custom mouthpiece is newly created from a saxophone mouthpiece blank, while other times, an already existing mouthpiece is customized to meet a saxophonist's performance specifications.

### Customizing a Saxophone Mouthpiece

There are numerous craftsmen who specialize in making mouthpieces for saxophonists based on their playing style, reed selection, instrument selection, and a variety of other personal factors. After determining which craftsman will be used through an Internet search or based on recommendations, the saxophonist must contact this person to discuss the project. This can be done over the phone but, if possible, a personal visit to the shop often works best. At this time, the saxophonist should disclose what the current problems are with the existing mouthpiece. In addition to this information, the saxophonist should also let the craftsman know what other equipment is currently being used, including the reed brand and strength, ligature, and saxophone. Using this information, the mouthpiece maker can determine if customizing an existing mouthpiece will solve the performer's problems or if creating a new one is the best solution.

If a new mouthpiece is warranted, one will be made using a mouthpiece blank, or *shell* as they are sometimes called, that ad-



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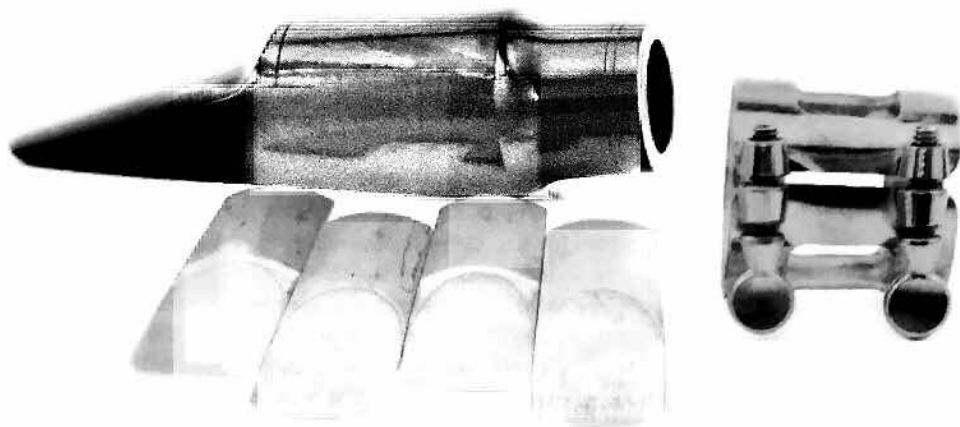
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dresses the concerns of the performer. When making the new mouthpiece, the craftsman will design the chamber in conjunction with the facing to create a mouthpiece with optimal sound and response. This process is known as *voicing* the mouthpiece. After the mouthpiece is completed, it will be test played by the maker to ensure that it is playing correctly. However, if for some reason the owner upon playing is not happy with the results, some craftsmen will make additional modifications if requested.

If customizing an existing mouthpiece

is the best remedy, the craftsman will first check the mouthpiece table to make sure it is flat. Second, the facing and window of the mouthpiece will be checked to make sure all measurements on each side of the window are accurate. Next the width of the side and tip rails will be measured. If any measurements are off, the craftsman will make the necessary adjustments. A fourth step is to check the contour of the inside of the mouthpiece and re-voice it if necessary. Finally, a light polish and cleaning of the mouthpiece will be completed before the job is finished.

Choosing to have a new custom mouthpiece made or to have an existing one altered can be an expensive undertaking, depending upon the material the mouthpiece is made from, who the craftsman is, and how long it takes to complete the job. However, if a saxophonist cannot find a suitable mouthpiece already being manufactured, a customized one is well worth the expense.

### Summary

There are many choices available when selecting a jazz saxophone mouthpiece, which can be both a good and bad thing. With so many mouthpieces to choose from, saxophonists can feel confident that they will find one that meets their needs. However, it may take much time and effort to test play numerous models until that perfect mouthpiece is found. Some saxophonists are fortunate to find a suitable mouthpiece right away, while others search for a long time. In addition, as performers develop, they sometimes outgrow the mouthpiece they selected and the search starts over again. It is highly suggested that saxophonists take the necessary time to find a suitable jazz mouthpiece since tone quality is a very important aspect of performance. However, once a good mouthpiece is discovered, saxophonists should try to stick with it, allowing practice time and effort to be focused on other important performance skills.




Dr. Tracy Lee Heavner is a professor of saxophone, music education, and director of jazz studies at the University of South Alabama in Mobile.

He is an accomplished author, music educator and distinguished performance artist for Cannonball, Yamaha, Beechler, and D'Addario music corporations. He is also a recording artist for LiveHorns and has performed throughout the United States and at international venues around the world. His latest book, *Saxophone Secrets: 60 Performance Strategies for the Advanced Saxophonist*, has received rave reviews and is published by the Rowan & Littlefield Publishing Group.

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