

Choosing the Perfect Saxophone Mouthpiece

by Pete Petersen

First off, let me say that this might put me at odds with an entire sector of the saxophone community. You know, there's a school of thought that in order to have the perfect sound, one must find that elusive holy grail of gear, the perfect mouthpiece. To which I say, these are the same people who believe that the cart should go before the horse. You don't need a new mouthpiece to improve your sound, you need to improve your sound first and then find a new mouthpiece that makes that improved sound easier to get while feeling relaxed and natural. The last thing you want to do is expect the mouthpiece to dictate what kind of sound you get; therein lies the road to madness, for you will never truly be satisfied with your sound if you let the mouthpiece dictate to you what it wants you to sound like instead of the other way around.

That being said, it's important to start with a decent, even-blowing mouthpiece that gives you some fundamental control over your sound, including pitch and dynamics. If you're still playing on a student-model piece or the one that came with the horn, go out TODAY and buy a Selmer C* or something equally medium-faced of good quality. This will be your basis for comparison and will take you far enough to be able to develop your sound to the point where you'll be able to go on to something more personal later on.

SO: assuming you're far enough along in your journey that you've already got a decent setup and are looking for something better, you've already spent enough time on your horn to be able to blow up and down through the full range of the instrument, in tune and at varying degrees of dynamic expression, and you're ready to step up to a more specialized mouthpiece: This article will help. This article will not help if you're still working out technical issues on your horn. But if you're feeling like a new mouthpiece is what you need to break through to the next level, read on:

I had a friend tell me once, "Hey, I just noticed you're playing on a new mouthpiece." I had been playing the new piece for a couple of months by this time, it was a rather drastic switch from a newer metal Link 7* to an older hard rubber Link 5*, and he and I had done several gigs together since the switch, so it was surprising that he hadn't noticed before.

I told him, "Yeah, that metal piece was making me work too hard to get the sound I wanted."

"Well, the most amazing thing," my friend replied, "is that you still sound like you. I wouldn't have been able to tell the difference if I hadn't looked up and seen you playing a rubber mouthpiece instead of that metal one."

He hadn't noticed any difference in my sound, but to me, the difference in what I was having to do to my face to get that sound was night and day. On the metal piece I had to stick my jaw out, contort my face into all manner of weird shapes, and generally work twice as hard to get the same sound that I could get from the rubber piece with virtually no effort at all. To my friend listening to me, there was no difference whatsoever in how it sounded. I still sounded like me, no matter what. But I was having to work a lot less to get the same sound, thanks to a mouthpiece that was a better fit for my mouth.

Here's the thing: Every human being has a slightly different shape to his/her oral cavity, in other words the shape of the inside of his/her mouth. We're all built slightly differently in there. The oral cavity is part of the apparatus that focuses and directs the air through the mouthpiece and into the horn, therefore it is just as important to tone production as the mouthpiece is -- with one crucial difference: the shape of the inside of your mouth can be changed, through tongue placement, facial muscle control, and jaw elongation, while the mouthpiece is just a stationary piece of rubber or metal. Therefore, the thing that has the most control over your sound is your *mouth*, not your *mouthpiece*.

The fact is, almost any good quality mouthpiece can be used to make almost any kind of tone on a saxophone, it's just a matter of how much control you're able to exert to twist and contort your facial muscles into a position that will work with the mouthpiece you've got to achieve that desired sound. It's possible to play a dark, warm subtone on a Dukoff 10, but you might dislocate your jaw and send your tongue into convulsions while doing it.

Repeat it, memorize it, write it down: **THE IDEAL MOUTHPIECE IS THE ONE THAT MAKES IT POSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE YOUR DESIRED SOUND WITH THE LEAST AMOUNT OF EFFORT.**

Of course, this presumes you have a desired sound. If you're still searching for your desired sound, I suggest you find it before you go looking for mouthpieces - otherwise you'll be going through a new mouthpiece every 2 weeks and never be satisfied. Each one will be "better, but not quite what you're looking for," or "almost there" but never will a new mouthpiece solve all of your problems until you know what those problems are.

So before you spend a large amount of money on a mouthpiece, go spend a large amount of time in the practice room by yourself with your current mouthpiece, getting to know its insides and outs, learning its limitations and its

strengths, and discovering how to develop your own voice on the instrument. Bring a tuner into the practice room with you, and spend some time getting inside exactly what physical motions you need to put your chops through in order to make each and every note ring true. Do this at a variety of dynamic ranges, checking your pitch against the tuner as you go along. Push the envelope; be as loud as you can, then as soft as you can, play as high as you can, then as low as you can. Use your ears, spend a lot of time listening to yourself and picking up subtle nuances in your own sound, while being aware of what your face is doing to create those nuances.

Now comes the fun part: with your current mouthpiece, try contorting your face into a variety of different positions to alter the tonal quality of the sound. Find out just exactly what you need to do to give yourself a bright, edgy tone, checking pitch against the tuner while you do so. Exaggerate your features to well beyond what anyone would consider normal, pushing the sound as close to the edge as you can go without cracking. Then go the other way: stick your jaw out and try to go for as dark, warm tone as you can muster without turning to solid air. Don't be afraid to experiment: you're doing this to find the limitations and strengths of the mouthpiece, as well as to listen to your own sound and decide what you want to sound like. Make the mouthpiece sound like you, not the other way around.

A good book to read at this point would be Dave Liebman's [Developing a Personal Saxophone Sound](#), which has all sorts of insight into making your sound into a unique voice. Read it, know it, do the exercises in it, live with it for a while...

Once you've developed your personal saxophone sound, ask yourself these questions: Are you satisfied with the range of expression your current mouthpiece gives you? Are you able to make it as bright and edgy as you want, or as dark and warm as you want? Can you play as loud as you want or as softly as you want with minimal change in embouchure? How hard is the mouthpiece making you work, to achieve YOUR sound? The answers to these questions should determine whether you need a new mouthpiece, and if so, what kind to start looking for.

Now your task is to go into a music store who has a good selection of mouthpieces, and waste about an hour of the salesperson's time. You're not going to buy anything this day; you're just going to spend time playing a bunch of different mouthpieces. If you're really meticulous, you can draw a chart: write down the brand name, model, and facing size of each piece you try, then put it through your routine: Loud, Soft, Bright, Warm, Low, High, etc. Rate each mouthpiece by how it performs in each area, how difficult or easy it is to move between extremes. You want, above all else, a mouthpiece that gives you a decent amount of control over your sound.

If you don't want to be that meticulous, just make it a point to remember how each piece feels when you put it through its paces. Regardless, you're just on a scouting mission this day anyway. You're going to find out what different mouthpieces are capable of, which ones feel nice in your mouth, which ones give you the easiest time controlling the tone, etc. And you're going to narrow it down to your two or three favorites.

Now, go back to your current mouthpiece. Play "your" sound as expressed through your current mouthpiece. In turn, go through your three potential new mouthpiece candidates and play "your" sound through each of them. Ideally, you should be able to get "your" sound easily on one of the new mouthpieces, and as you narrow it down you should choose mouthpieces that allow you to feel as relaxed and natural as possible while playing your personally chosen tone. This should give you an idea of what kind of mouthpiece you're looking for; chances are the three you've selected are going to be very similar, and by the time you're done you're probably going to have a favorite among the three you've selected. Don't Buy It Yet!!!

Go home and sleep on it. Then spend a day or so playing scales, long tones, exercises, etc on your current setup. After play testing all those other mouthpieces, you should have an acute awareness of exactly what your current mouthpiece's limitations are. Make a mental note of these limitations, and additionally make a note of everything your face is doing to overcome them when producing your preferred sound. When you've got all this, you're ready to go back to the music store.

This time, start right away with one of the new pieces. Immediately try to get "your" sound, keeping in mind all of the facial muscles, jaw position, tongue placement you've been doing up to now to get your sound on your current setup. Remember that the ideal mouthpiece should allow you to relax and feel natural while you're making your best quality tone. If one of these mouthpieces does that, go ahead and buy it. If not, it's okay to keep looking.

Sometimes the only way to get the perfect mouthpiece is to have one custom made. These typically cost about twice as much as a store-bought piece, and they take several weeks to complete, but it's well worth it because what you get is a mouthpiece that is specifically crafted to fit the shape of your own unique facial structure and oral cavity. A good mouthpiece technician (usually sax players themselves) will be able to craft a piece to your specifications based on your needs. They'll start with a "blank" generic mouthpiece, or with a piece that's almost-but-not-quite "it" for you, and they'll listen to you play, and they'll measure the facing and decide that if they shave a little off here and there, open this up, shape the baffle thusly, it will give you the ease-of-playing you're looking for. Be

prepared to tell them exactly what your needs are, and don't be afraid to keep bringing it back to them until it's perfect - you're paying good money for their efforts, and they need to know if it's not exactly right so they can work on it until it is. They'll have you play-test it often during the process, during which time you'll have opportunities to tell them whether the piece is making you work too hard to hit that altissimo G, or whether the low notes are harder for you to hit, or you're having an easier time or a harder time sounding like what you want to sound like, etc. And remember that although a custom-worked mouthpiece is going to be the ultimate "your" sound, it's also going to be a one-of-a-kind that's difficult or even impossible to replace if it gets lost, stolen, bent, or broken. Always have a backup!

Finally, you should NEVER buy a mouthpiece just because someone else recommended it. If Michael Brecker plays on a Guardala, so what. That's no guarantee you're going to sound just like him if you play the same piece. If John Coltrane played on an Otto Link, so what. Those guys all had uniquely different shapes to the inside of their mouths, and they also spent a ton of time in the practice room developing their own sound, independently regardless of the mouthpiece they were playing -- so should you.

In other words, choosing the "perfect" saxophone mouthpiece is as much about training your chops and ears to develop your personal sound as it is the hardware involved. Use your ears, use your chops, and develop your sound... THEN AND ONLY THEN should you upgrade your mouthpiece to facilitate that sound.