

MY 2 CENTS ON MOUTHPIECES

WOODWINDS

My name is Alex and I'm a mouthpiece abuser. I have four or five mouthpieces that I've been playing continually back and forth and I'm thinking of buying more. I understand I have a problem but I think it's under control. I know I'll be okay if I can just get an old Otto Link that's been blessed by Mike Brecker's friend's Dry Cleaner. But I just can't stay off eBay long enough to get clean."

Okay, okay I'm kidding, but sometimes you really have to wonder what's going on. I talked to an ex-student yesterday that sold an old Otto Link for \$900 US! And you know that when you check eBay (and I do) you can see old mouthpieces going for \$400 US all the time. Some of them are absolute junk—I know because I've got some of them. Does anyone really remember who Dick Stabile was? He was a great player but his sound is not really very appropriate for a modern band. What I wonder is who would buy a Dick Stabile sax mouthpiece today? I know someone who bought a box of used mouthpieces (15 of them) for \$20 Cdn a piece and sold them on eBay for over \$100 US a piece! A nice profit no doubt, but is someone really playing these or do they just have too much money. Perhaps they are collectors and assume that mouthpieces will be worth a lot of money some day. I don't know who will buy them however, because none of the musicians I know will ever be able to afford them.

When I get a student that wants to tell me that the mouthpiece they just bought cost a lot of money and therefore has to be good, I usually give them my embouchure talk and try to really hear if it's them or the mouthpiece. Often (not always) it's a lack of support and basic fundamentals so I thought I might review these things.

I like to think that the sound of my horn is my voice. If I could sing then the sound I get from the horn would be me singing (or hollering which is closer to the truth). I even took a number of singing lessons just to understand the vocal mask and the process of placing or voicing the note. I try to put warm air in the horn and bring the sound to life. These days I'm trying to keep my embouchure as loose and relaxed as I can. I figure the tighter the embouchure the less

the reed can vibrate. I do put my bottom lip over my bottom teeth, not much, enough to say "V". I know some people teach an embouchure without any bottom lip but my experience with my students is that they need the support or the pitch goes a little crazy. I try to keep the muscles around my lips as loose as I can without puffing my cheeks. If my cheeks are pulling one way and my lips are pulling another I think my embouchure gets tired a lot more quickly.

One particular problem I noticed with students is starting the note in the throat or what I call the cough reflex. Rather than placing the air behind the tongue some students make a coughing sound and expel air like a cough. This gives you no control over the airflow or sound. I suggest they put the air right behind the tongue and control the air a little better using the diaphragm muscles.

When I look for a mouthpiece I like to play it first. I know this is a radical concept but I like to know what it sounds like before I buy it. I've played mouthpieces with thick rails that play well, and I've played mouthpieces with thin rails that play well. I've played mouthpieces that look like doorstops that play well and I've played mouthpieces that look perfect to me and play terribly. I have spent some time with Jerry Bergonzi who plays a new Otto Link right off the shelf and sounds great. Yet he says other people who have tried it think it's a dud, so I always like to try it first and if I can't do that here in Canada then I travel to where I can. I've tried ordering mouthpieces over the Net and having them shipped to me but if I try a few (and I do) the custom payments are kind of heavy and take a while to get back.

There are lots of Web sites to find out information on mouthpieces. I like a site called www.mouthpieceheaven.com and there's a news group on Yahoo called "mouthpiecework" that gives me enough information to be dangerous.

Reedman, Alex Dean has been a mainstay of the Canadian music scene for many years. He has played and recorded with: Gil Evans, Kenny Wheeler, Mel Tormé, Aretha Franklin, Natalie Cole, Harry Connick Jr., Ray Charles, Pat LaBarbera, Phil Nimmons, and the Toronto Symphony. Alex is a member of Rob McConnell's "Tenet," holds the tenor saxophone chair with McConnell's "Grammy award winning" BOSS Brass, and has recorded their last 10 albums with Concord Records. He is also a member of the group D.E.W. East, who have released several recordings. He has appeared on numerous Juno and Grammy award-winning albums with the BOSS Brass. Alex is the Canadian Artist Representative for Boosey & Hawkes, promoting Kielwerth Saxophones and Rico Reeds. Alex is a widely respected clinician/adjudicator in Canada and the United States. He is a faculty member of the University of Toronto and Humber College Music Departments in Toronto, Canada, teaching saxophone and advanced jazz improvisation. And last but not least, he can be reached online at www.alexdean.ca.



by Alex Dean

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