

# Reed 'Em And Weep



by Alex Dean

I had a student over the other day that is in the process of changing from one mouthpiece to another. During the discussion we got onto the topic of reeds and how people prepare them. This is something that changes depending on what seems to work for you at the time. I have a couple of things that work for me so I thought I would pass them along.

To paraphrase an old guitar joke, "I think I spend 90 per cent of my time looking for a good reed and 10 per cent of my time playing on bad reeds." I've spoken to older musicians about "the state of cane," and they always say it used to be much better. I don't know if this is nostalgia talking or the truth. However, there seem to be a lot more people playing reed instruments now, and I'm sure that has to effect the cane supply somehow.

One aspect that I hadn't thought of is how well the reed seals on the mouthpiece. Apparently the material that mouthpieces are made of (metal or rubber) is relatively soft and over time can change. As the reed vibrates it can alter and warp the lay of the mouthpiece. If you are having a lot of trouble with reeds, it could be because the mouthpiece is warped and the reed isn't sealing evenly. In that case the only thing to do is to get it refaced. There are a couple of guys that will do that and it's not that expensive, but it does take time.

All right ... down to business. What I do with a box of reeds takes a little time

but it seems to help me. First, I soak all the reeds in a cup of water for 5 or 10 minutes then I lay them on a piece of glass (I had this made up at a window place - 4" x 4"), and I leave them to dry for a day or two. I do this three times using water, then I do it a fourth time using saliva (I try to use my own), and play through all the reeds for about five minutes. As a reed gets soaked its fibres expand and shrink as it dries out. That's why a reed that feels great when you first play it starts to feel soft the more

you play. By soaking it so many times I'm trying to minimize the amount it changes. Each time you soak it the reed changes a little less. I leave the reeds to dry out one more day and the next time I play them I start to separate the reeds into those that play, ones that are too hard, and ones that are too soft. At this point I put the reeds that play (sometimes only one) into a reed keeper and start to play it. The others I mark with an H for hard and an S for too soft and I put them away until I need to find a new reed.

This seems like a lot of trouble but it helps me organize my reeds. I know what to expect from them. I haven't found a way to make a reed that's unplayable work, but this at least balances them out for me.

I have tried other things in the past, including trying to bake them in the oven to help age them, but all I did was burn them. I have some friends that soak them right out of the box in a little jar with a lid so you can carry it around and never let them dry out. You have to put a little drop of Listerine in the water so they don't get mouldy. I've also heard about taking them out of the box and doing figure eights on a flat surface 50 times clock-wise and 50 times counter clock-wise to try to seal the reed so it won't change too much. I think that whatever works for you is great. Sometimes when the cane just won't settle for me I'll do anything rather than throw them out.

When I adjust the reeds I just try to balance them. I use a reed knife to take the cane off. Some players like to use a very fine sand paper or a reed file. You use the sand

paper on the front of the reed and a reed file on the back. I take a look at the reed in a strong light to see how even the heart of the cane is. I shave the side of the reed that is a little darker trying not to take off too much. I've ruined a lot off reeds by taking too much off, so I try to leave the reed a little hard and it usually breaks in. When I'm finished with the reed I give it a couple of scrapes on the side, right where the bark is cut. I started to do this a number of years ago and it seems to make the reed vibrate a little more.

Most of the playing I do is in jazz or commercial music so I like the reed to buzz a bit. If I was playing different music I would be careful not to scrape the sides too much (this may make the sound too bright). I have a friend who likes to drill a round hole about half an inch wide and an eighth of an inch into the heart of the reed. He says it really frees up the sound. It didn't work for me. For about a minute, there was a theory that if you put tiny slits in the reed it would vibrate more freely. Unfortunately it just made me squeak a lot.

These days there are a lot of different makes of reeds out there. The easiest thing for me is to try to find a brand of reeds I can live with and try not to do too much cutting. I've found through experience that any wood you take off a reed is really hard to put back on later!

*Reedman Alex Dean has been described as "one of Canada's foremost Jazz Saxophonists," has been a mainstay of the Canadian music scene for many years. He has played with Gil Evans, Kenny Wheeler, Dave Liebman, Ernie Watts, Mel Torme, Ray Charles, Pat Labarbera, Nick Brignola, and the Toronto Symphony. Alex is a member of Rob McConnell's 'Tenet'. He also holds the tenor saxophone chair with Rob McConnell's "Grammy award winning" BOSS Brass. His numerous recordings include Grammy and Juno award winners and he is the handleader of the explosive Tenor Madness, Alex Dean Quintet, and "power trio", DEW East. Alex is the Canadian Artist Representative and clinician for Boosey & Hawkes, promoting Keilworth Saxophones and Rico Reeds. He is also the Artistic Director of the highly regarded Kincardine Summer Jazz Program on Lake Huron, ON. Alex is a member of the Jazz Faculty at the University of Toronto and Humber College. He is a widely respected clinician/ adjudicator in Canada and the US.*

WOODWINDS

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