



UNLEASHING
THE
DRAGON

Saxophone Technique
The intermediate - advanced manual

By: James Dóxx



*Whenever a dragon's song is heard, all ears are inevitably
turned towards it.*

*Its colorful timbre, and legendary powers sparking blissful
anticipation.*

*It's majestic voice striking deep into our hearts. Rushing; Joy,
Love, Sadness, Inspiration and every other emotion through
our very souls.*

Then flying on quickly, leaving only its memory.

Hearing a dragon sing, can change a life forever.

Singing with the dragon, is the joy of a lifetime!

Tips on how to use this book:

This book can be read from start to finish as a novel, but you can also use it as a kind of encyclopedia.

It works the best if you print out the book and all the extra tools, so you can review and practice things quickly when needed. The best way to use this material is to work it through completely from start to finish using the included calendar, slowly implementing the techniques into a daily practice ritual one by one.

Keep in mind that this course will take at least a 105 days to work through. Most of the exercises will take several weeks, often more to complete. Don't rush things! You can read ahead, but it's better not to do so. Try to fully complete every exercise a 100% before moving on to the next part.

Musical skill takes time to develop. So always expect things to take a while. It's like climbing a mountain. The only way to get to the top, is by just putting one foot in front of the other. There are no magic pills in music! You just have to keep at it, unleashing your full creative potential one step at a time, every day! If you persevere, you will succeed eventually.

This course is very structured, so most of the later exercises only become meaningful or possible once you have really mastered the earlier stuff. If you use the calendar though, you will find that the challenge increases steadily, along with your capacity.

Feel free to add other exercises that you like to your daily practice routine. The more you play stuff you love, the better!



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So you want to really get busy with your technique huh?
I had the same idea a while ago, and let me tell you... A lot can be done!

To start us off on the right foot I first have to make a few things very clear:

You have some experience:

Throughout this course, I will assume that you have some experience on the saxophone, meaning you have been playing for at least several months and that you already have a basic embouchure, breath support, know most of the terminology, etc. You don't have to be any type of "Hero" or "Genius" yet. If you are able to hold a (somewhat) steady tone, play some basic scales and maybe a little blues without too much problems, then you will do fine.

The relativity of technique:

I'm aware that there are a million ways to play the sax and that the individual differences in the shapes, sizes and energy capacity of our bodies necessitate that at some point, each of us must individually perfect our technique to fit our personal body and music style. This book is aimed at giving you all the basic components you need to do develop your own mature saxophone technique. Allowing you to utilize all the possibilities this versatile instrument has to offer. Given of course, that you practice enough! In addition to that, I have to admit up-front that playing an instrument is about being an

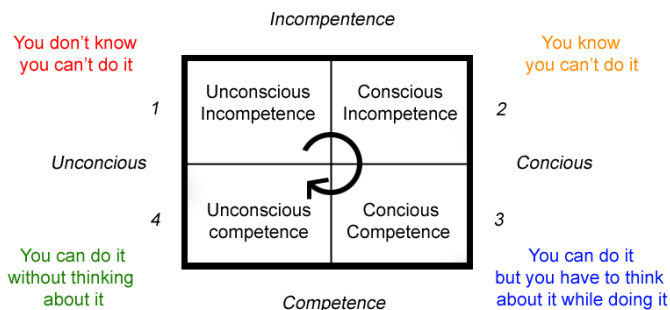
artist and a creator. In that context, technique can have a very different meaning. If you want to achieve a certain sound and you find that you can make it happen by playing a saxophone, mouthpiece upside-down, while riding a unicycle through main street, then you have successfully used “technique” to achieve some artistic goal. However, this course is not about those types of “techniques”. Simply stated: A “**technique**” is just: “**A way things can be done**”. There are a million techniques out there. This course will give you only those saxophone techniques I have found to be the most effective and give you the best results. Often though, they are not the easiest or fastest!

Thirdly, as with my other materials, this book is specifically written to be suited for use without a teacher. However, it’s still a good idea to have a teacher or an experienced player helping you out on a regular basis while you’re working through this course.

If you are a classical player, you can find good info and exercises in this course, but it was really written for the jazz player. I have very little experience in classical playing, and tonality. The technique used for classical is quite different from jazz, so I can’t guarantee any specific results in a classical setting. However, with the guidance of a good classical teacher, you can probably adapt and use most of the exercises.

This book is a course. So although you're free to just browse through it and take from it what you like, it's best to read it from the beginning to the end, and follow the included calendar as you go. This way you ensure that you build the later stuff on a solid foundation. Besides, if you can't complete the earlier exercises, then you probably won't be able to physically or mentally complete the later ones.

Our brains can't practice two things at the same time. Everything the human brain learns has to progress through four stages.



We can do many things at the same time, but we can only THINK about one thing at a time. So if we have to focus on...where to put our tongue, or how to manipulate our throat, then we can't focus on our tonality at the same time. If we try, we're guaranteed to screw one of the two up as soon as we divide our focus.

Because of this, we have to build technique up in layers. Slowly focusing on one aspect of it at a time until it

becomes automatic (unconscious competence), and then adding another layer to it.

Some studies have shown that a new skill can start to become unconscious once it is **repeated correctly** about 27 times or more. Knowing this can help us systemize things a little bit.

Sometimes we are our own worst enemy when we try to do more things at once, usually ending up not getting good results. On a related note, this is also why huge life changes involving many things at once usually don't work out.

It's also one of the reasons why it never works to practice things while we are performing! When we perform, we shouldn't be thinking about anything but the story! If we've practiced a skill long enough, it will just show up for us at some point while we're performing. We'll find that new blues line we practiced on for months, (or a slight variation of it) just popping out at some unexpected moment during a gig. That's the moment when you smile and say to yourself: "I learned something new today"!

A good lesson I learned from Arnold Dooyeweerd, A master bass player from the Amsterdam conservatory:

Never practice while on stage!

Enjoy the ride

Every part of this course should be fun in some way. Whether you are having fun through driving your neighbors crazy, turning things into a game, or by incorporating your favorite songs into your daily exercises is up to you, but make sure **you enjoy the process of practicing as much as you think you will enjoy the results of the practice!** If there is one thing I've learned in life it's that:

The more you know about a subject, the more you realize how much you don't know about that subject.

&

The better you become at something, the more critical you become about that something.

Wanting to be “**better**” or to “**know more**” can really be a bit of a trap! Because if we're not mindful of these two pitfalls, we often end up feeling worse about our own abilities and knowledge.

Learning musical abilities is really very much like trying to kill a dragon. Every time you cut off one head, it grows back two new ones. So always remember to spend most of your time enjoying the things that you are doing right! It's no good to feel unsatisfied with your musical skills for 5 hours a day and spending only half an hour feeling good about your abilities.

Always love your own playing! No matter what it sounds like!

Having a clear goal is half the journey, so we will need a point somewhere on the horizon that we are going to aim for and work towards. Perhaps you already have a very clear goal, or maybe you're just thinking something general like: "I want a better tone". To start, let's get crystal clear on this first:

What exactly goes into saxophone technique??

When we play the saxophone it's quite a total body experience. (notes coming from the tips of our toes etc), but "officially" it's comprised of four main components namely:

- 1: The embouchure
- 2: The breath support
- 3: Posture
- 4: Fingering technique

Throughout this book I will use the word **technique** to refer to the cumulative effect of these four, plus several additional factors.

I like to refer to technique as a whole, because I believe all the parts are so closely interrelated, that the only way to really improve one of them is to improve all of them. To give a simple example: If we want to make our embouchure tighter or looser for some reason, it means

the air will have to flow through a slightly smaller or bigger space. To do this successfully, we **MUST** also adjust the strength and control of our breath support accordingly. Hence: **We can't successfully adjust one without also adjusting the other!**

This course will follow a very holistic approach, looking at technique in a broad sense. To accomplish this, we will alternate between zooming in and optimizing a specific part of our technique, and then taking some time to get the new skill into our automatic functions. We will keep going through that process several times in order to get everything balanced optimally. To avoid confusion, I have constructed the following definition that I will use throughout the course:

Saxophone Technique =

How we use our mind, facial muscles, the shaping of our lips and throat, our ears, tongue, breath support and our posture to play a saxophone.

There is that famous quote from Albert Einstein that mentions how: "If he had an hour to solve a problem, he would have spent 59 minutes redefining the problem and 1 minute solving it.

Looking at/defining "**Saxophone Technique**" in this holistic way enables us to see more clearly what it is and what it involves. Making it far easier to break through the many glass ceilings we will encounter along the way.

Asking the right questions is the most important step of solving any challenge.

Because all the parts of saxophone technique are so dependent on each other. A question like: “**How should I improve my embouchure?**” will always lead to unsatisfying results, because it **ignores the other aspects of technique.**

By asking: “**How can I improve my saxophone technique?**”, we set ourselves up for success from the get-go. It opens up our eyes to all the aspects that will have to come together to achieve the one end result.

The solution to a problem in one area of our technique, usually lies in another area. So if we don't look at technique as a whole, we inevitably get stuck in one area for a while, until we maybe stumble upon the solution in another area.

In retrospect, I was very fortunate in my first year of playing to meet, attend workshops and have private lessons with: Eddie Daniels, Tineke Postma, Branford Marsalis, Arnold Dooyeweerd, Floor Wittink, Wolfgang Martini and many others. Learning from them (amongst other things) about their personal approaches to exercising, musical philosophy, etc.

Combining my experiences with them and my own ideas and experiences in learning to play the saxophone, enabled me to formulate the following goal that ties all areas of saxophone technique together.

A great technique lets us:

- Play comfortably with minimal effort.**
- Play longer without fatigue or other physical problems.**
- Play with great accuracy, controlling our notes and intonation very precisely.**
- Gradually improve the quality of our sound, making us sound more: steady and fluent, effortless and in control, bigger, more colorful, and open.**

As you can probably see right away, achieving these goals will necessitate that we optimize and incorporate all aspects of our saxophone technique.

These are our long term goals. The big star on the horizon that we are going to move towards, but there is a good chance that you also have some additional

personal goals for yourself (...maybe you just want to improve your altissimo notes...). It's great to incorporate these personal goals. We can use them as signposts along the way to that big star on the horizon. So we will start by setting these up with this first exercise:

Take out a blank sheet of paper and consider the two sides of saxophone technique for a few minutes.

1: Your playing comfort and enjoyment

2: The quality of your playing (tone, projection, fingering fluency, etc)

It's best to create goals for yourself that incorporate both of these aspects. So draw a line across the paper to create two columns, put **enjoyment and comfort** above one of them, and **quality** above the other, then take some time (20 minutes or so) and write down everything you would like to achieve in both areas of your technique.

Maybe you have just one specific problem with your attack that you want to get handled, or perhaps you want to be able to play a little longer without back ache, or maybe you have a whole set of specific things that you want to tackle. Whatever the specifics are for you, just keep writing them all down until you're completely out of ideas.

OK Go!

Now that we've made this crystal clear, let's turn these goals into one imaged experience that we can play out in our head...

For example: If your goal is to:

- Go to that session at your local jazz club some day
- Playing your favorite song ...X... there.
- Doing a ripping solo on it that incorporates some nice altissimo action.
- And getting a great big cheer from everybody present,

then imagine that scenario. Imagine what it will be like to be up there playing comfortably. How would it feel standing there doing all those things? Go through them one by one and imagine doing and feeling it.

What kind of new possibilities would playing like that open up for you?

Take ample time to close your eyes and really summon up the feeling of experiencing your personal goal as if you had just achieved it.

Now once you have that feeling firmly in your mind and you can feel it all through your body, I want you to pick up your saxophone and play a nice passionate flurry of some real loud notes. Have as much fun as you can in doing this! Then just smile, feel great, laugh out loud and realize for a moment how much you love playing the saxophone.

Remember this feeling! And whenever you run into problems or feel a little demotivated, just pick up that sax and **blow those loud notes!** Remember what you're doing it all for. Go though that list in your mind and **strengthen your resolve!**

Arjen Schalker, a great saxophone master and teacher, once told me that many players temporarily lose their love for their instrument at some point. They often **over practice!** (i.e. forgetting to have fun). In the process they can lose their passion for playing. He told me: "**Always having something to remind you of your love for playing. It's a necessary habit to cultivate, because it will prevent you from falling into the "over practice" trap.**"

Take the piece of paper with your goals and put it on a wall somewhere, or somewhere else where you will be guaranteed to see it every day. Whenever you see it, remind yourself of what you have set out to do.

Making things concrete!

OK, so now that we have some perspective, the promise of this course is:

If you go through the whole course and do the exercises seriously for at least the 105 days, you will:

- Play more comfortably and with less effort.**
- Play longer without fatigue or other physical problems.**
- Play with much more accuracy, so you can control your notes and intonation much more precisely.**
- Improve the quality of your sound, making you sound more: steady and fluent, effortless and in control, bigger, more colorful, and open.**
- You will gain a deeper understanding of technique that will enable you to pro-actively start solving other challenges you might run into in the future.**
- The combined results will lead to highly increased capacity to improvise and be creative on your instrument, and with others.**

OK let's get to it!

1: Slow is smooth, smooth is fast.

The hallmark of true mastery is:

Doing something incredible well, while making it look very easy.

Take a look at these videos for some examples of saxophone mastery:

<http://www.Unleashingthedragon.com/ST01.htm>

Where does that ease that masters always have, come from?

I like the analogy of taking an exam at school.

You probably remember what it felt like taking an exam if you hadn't studied quite enough right?

You probably felt nervous and you also probably had **no real desire** to take the exam. In addition to that it's very likely you didn't pass the test with a grade that made you feel really good about yourself.

On the other hand: You probably also have the experience of taking an exam after you had studied your ass off, or taking an exam on a topic that you just loved and already knew everything about.

When we take a test this way, we feel great! We feel like: **Bring it on!** Because we know we are going to ace it no matter what.

Science has studied the habits of successful people for many years now. Although we often think, and are told that good results come from...just studying hard!... Science has proved that in most cases (about 90% of them) that isn't the real reason. Instead they found some other factors to be far more important. Look back for a moment at your own life. How did you really do the things you did successfully? If you look back you will probably find one or more of the following factors played a huge role:

- **You were always paying attention, because you were just having good fun while you were working on it.**
- **You did your homework and probably much more.**
- **You didn't try to skip anything because you just wanted to know, and do it all.**
- **You weren't in any hurry to finish because you liked spending time on it.**

As a result you did something that (apparently) highly trained military snipers are taught in order to aim quickly and accurately. They are trained to:

Move slowly, because slow is smooth and smooth is fast!

By moving very slowly, they can hit widespread and often moving targets, very precisely with unbelievable speed...**By moving slowly...**

That's what I call: A true paradox!

I found that this analogy of: "slow is smooth and smooth is fast" holds true for all fields of mastery. It's really like a secret key to all success.

While we are training ourselves and are trying to achieve new goals, it's good to know this principle and use it all the time. **Never be in a hurry! Because** (paradoxically) **it will slow us down and screw up the quality of whatever it is we're doing!**

Go slow! I have met a lot of musicians over the last year, both professionals and amateurs and one thing really stands out. There are pro's out there who have been playing for just 4 or 5 years who have unbelievable skill, but there are also amateur players out there that have been playing for 10 to 15 years or more who really sound like they've only been playing for a few months. When I ask people about their approaches to practicing saxophone techniques, I generally find that the people who get good results are doing things "**slow and smooth**". As a result, they develop their skills much faster and are often much more comfortable in their abilities. So I realize this is a weird sentence but:

Throughout this course: **Go slow! That way, you will get to your goal faster!**

The word **GO** in this is also very important. We really only learn through **doing stuff**. Thinking is very overrated. An hour of doing something is worth far more

than an hour of thinking about doing something. I once heard Sonny Rollins say that **one hour on the stage is the same as 6 months of practice.**

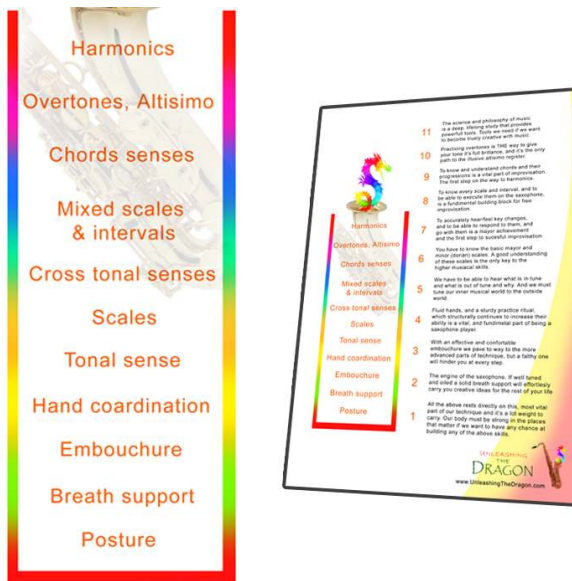
<http://www.Unleashingthedragon.com/STSR.htm>

Now that may not exactly be true in a scientifically provable way. But you get the idea.

2: It's like constructing a Tower

I like to look at building saxophone technique as:

Building a majestic tower with Tetris blocks (yes...the Gameboy hit from the 90's). From my own experiences I have constructed the following model below (also see the in depth version in the Extra's folder):



We can kind of imagine all the different parts of saxophone technique as the different parts of a building, as you can see in the picture above. On the very top it has the overtones and harmonics (I'll discuss these topics later) and the rest of the parts are spread widely throughout the building. To get to and use every skill in the building we will have to build a sturdy structure all the

way to the top, using blocks of many shapes and sizes. We also will have to ensure that the connections (corridors and staircases) between all the skills are easy to navigate. After all, we want to be able to use all these skills in rapid succession, and in many different combinations.

Whenever we use a particular skill, we put pressure on the skills underneath it. So for example: if we try to play a scale but:

- Our tonal senses aren't well attuned,
- Our hand coordination is a bit shabby,
- Our embouchure is OK, but we're not breathing a 100% properly.
- And our posture is awful.

Then our scales are not going to sound good, and we're not going to feel comfortable while playing them. **No matter how much we practice!**

For example, I once met someone at a session who was completely self-taught. He had a decent sound when he played at a high volume and used very fast notes, but his posture looked really bad and he held his horn at a very odd angle. After a few tunes I started noticing that he didn't sit in with any of the ballads. So I asked him. He then gave me this whole story why he doesn't like ballads, but it was very obvious to me that this was just a story he was trying to sell himself. I started paying some

extra attention to his slower stuff and sure enough, I could hear his tone starting to crash as soon as the volume went down. Whenever that happened, the holes in his foundation just instantly became (painfully) apparent. In other words, whenever he put pressure on that part of his foundation. The whole thing just started to crumble.

Personally, I had a similar problem a while ago. Being mostly self-taught, I had only partially learned to breathe correctly. I was breathing through my diaphragm more than through my upper chest, but not quite as much as possible, and my coordination between diaphragm, chest and shoulder breathing was just off! So I unknowingly lacked a good portion of my power in that area. Naturally, my body compensated for this by tightening up my embouchure.

In itself this wasn't a disaster, but slowly I began to find that my high notes were always a little sharp, and lacked the power and color that I had in my other notes. So I tried a marriage of things to "fix my problem". Practicing more on my high notes, doing mouthpiece exercises, long notes, etc. Which (frustratingly) all didn't contribute to better sounding high notes! So I finally had one of my mentors analyze my complete technique. Lucky for me, she quickly found the problems with my breathing.

After that, it took me four weeks of intensive practicing and concentration to break my old habits, and probably about 4 to 5 weeks more for the new breathing and loser embouchure to become natural again. I really had to go

back and patch a hole in my foundation. It took some time, but it worked like magic!

The challenge throughout the course, and really throughout your whole career as a saxophone player, is to build a strong “tower” of skills all the way to the top. This way, it doesn’t matter how much pressure you put on an individual skill. Your foundation will stand solid and you will be able to play with ease and confidence.

Approaching technique this way also makes us more aware of the time and dedication it will take to do this. Everybody can see that we can’t construct a majestic, awe inspiring tower into the clouds in one day. Being realistic in our goals can help us to achieve them faster.

We must walk the path...



It's a daily ritual (and our mind will resist it!)

We have to construct this metaphorical “tower” through our daily practice ritual. I very deliberately use the word “Ritual”. I do this because for me, it incorporates the necessity of regular practice better than the word “routine”. A ritual is **something of great importance**, and that is a good way to view our practice time.

It's best if we practice daily! (or if that's really not feasible, than at least as regularly as possible). As in my other book, I recommend practicing un-interrupted for at least an hour every day. Throughout this course we will be adding new exercises to a daily practice ritual that will yield the best results if you invest at least an hour or more into it daily. If you have less than an hour a day, **don't worry**. The exercises will still help you just as much, but it will take more time to build momentum in your progress. Every day on the calendar stands for a day with one full hour of practice, so if you can only practice for say... 30 minutes a day, than you can cross off a day on the calendar every other day, since that will sort of be equivalent to one full hour of practice.

1 hour a day is equivalent to almost a full workday of practicing every week (7 hours). So every daily practice minute is worth seven minutes by the end of the week. If you play 45 minutes a day, your weekly total quickly drops to just over 5 hours. In one year, the difference between playing an hour a day, or 45 minutes a day, already adds up to more than 90 hours (almost 12 full

workdays of practicing)! So in essence, doing just 15 minutes extra daily will add 12 full working days of practice to your annual total. Just imagine how much better you'd be with that much extra practice.

Also, it's not a good idea to practice very long on Saturday to compensate for lost training time on every other day of the week. That's like postponing studying for an exam for a year, hoping that you can still make it by studying for two full days right before the exam. It doesn't work like that. Our bodies and brains need time to shape and perfect our routines. Only prolonged and structural repetition over a long period of time can do this. It's better to do 15 minutes every day, than 2 hours at the end of every week. Combining them is of course even better!

The key thing to remember is that we will encounter resistance from our body for every change we try to make. **What...???**

Our brains have the nasty habit of always trying to find a way for us to expand as little energy as possible. We do this by naturally choosing the path of least resistance (all animals do this). It's why we always look for reasons not to change. To give a very dramatic example: I once heard a story about a man who (after some traumatic experience) believed he was a corpse (no joke). No doctor could convince him otherwise although many tried. When they let him hear his own heartbeat or tried to convince him otherwise he would simply pretended not to hear. At some point a very bright doctor came up

with a clever idea. He said to the patient: "A corpse doesn't bleed right? Because it has no heartbeat" The patient agreed. Then the doctor said: "So if I puncture your finger with a needle, you won't bleed right...?" Again the patient agreed. Then the doctor said: "So if I prick you and you do bleed, then you can't be a corpse right...?" Again the patient agreed. So the doctor pricked him with a needle and the man bled. The man looked at his bleeding finger and then said: "Hmmm.....I guess corpses can bleed...."

This is a prime example of the stunning mental acrobatics our brains are capable of in order to avoid change. The man from the example, knew that accepting the fact that he was alive, would mean changing a million things about his life. His brain struggled to avoid this at any cost.

The same is true for all of us. Just in slightly less extreme circumstances, but make no mistake about it. Changing the way we play the sax is something our brain will naturally try to resist!

It usually goes like this. The first day we're fired up to do all our exercises. We made time in our agenda the day before, cleaned our sax a little extra and bought some new reeds to speed us on our way. This goes well for a few days.

Then...The sixth day we forget to clean our sax after practice, because we really wanted to see that TV series that we always watch.

The next day we might think...

O well...before I can get started I first have to clean up my mess from yesterday, it's kind of a hot day today...Maybe I'll just take one day off to reward myself for all my hard practicing this week.

Before we notice it, we have already strayed far from our goal of a 100% GOOD practice every day. To give us a head start on things, here are some numbers to help us combat our own brain's defensiveness.

The first three weeks of changing something are usually the hardest. It's the **"starting phase"**. You might sometimes find yourself thinking things like:

- **Hmmm should I be doing this?**
- **These exercises are making me tired.**
- **Maybe I should take it a little slower.**

This is all just our subconscious mind trying to seduce us into going back to our old ways.

By the third and fourth week you will still have to be very vigilant in making yourself go through the motions, but it usually starts to be a little easier by then. You might find yourself thinking things like:

- **This feels good.**
- **I'm really doing this.**

- I'm getting there.

We could call this **the adjustment faze.**

After the fourth and fifth week, we will find that the world is slowly starting to flip around. It's becoming like brushing our teeth. Now we might even start to feel a little guilty when we don't do the new exercise.

Realize up front that it's this kind of tennis match between the two parts of your brain; left brain (change) & right brain (stability) that will go on for a while before you settle into the new you.

For most of us, it takes several tries to get a new habit going. For example: When I started jogging in the morning. I started successfully for about a month and a half and then the summer holiday came. I got sloppy (late night parties, BBQ's, holiday trips,) and soon I had stopped jogging all together. After the summer, I suddenly realized I had quit, so I tried again. This time I succeeded for almost 7 months and then a new job radically changed my time tables. Once again, I slowly stopped jogging. When I realized I had stopped again, I quickly picked up the slack and this time I'm still jogging. I have been doing so for well over a year now.

There is a good chance something similar will happen to you when you try to cultivate this new practice habit on the saxophone. By expecting it to happen you have a more flexible strategy to conquer your old habits. Realize it's OK, and completely natural to fall off a horse a few

times! Just make sure you get back on right away!
Eventually you will be able to stay in the saddle.

Don't over practice! If we have a lot of time and start practicing 6 hours a day all of a sudden, we will probably burn ourselves out. Better to build up the practice habit slowly. Start with just one hour. The first weeks on the calendar contain a little less than an hour of exercises every day, so we can slowly work ourselves up to it, but try to start with a full hour a day if you can. Just fill in the rest of the time by doing your regular exercises. If you want to practice more, than just slowly increase your practice time with half an hour every three to four weeks. Of course, the occasional 2 hours of spontaneous extra practice are great!

Ok, so now we have three super effective and empowering perspectives for approaching saxophone technique.

- **Slow is smooth, & smooth is fast**
- **It's like constructing a tower**
- **It's a daily ritual (and our mind will resist it)**

We are ready to zoom in on the first part of the saxophone technique!

1: Posture and the posture muscles.

The solid bedrock of all our technique is our posture. If our posture isn't optimal, it can make us tire more quickly, it can cause neck and back injuries and it can dramatically influence our sound. I've heard that some teachers can tell how someone is standing, just by listening to them.

Now it's good to mention that there is really no such thing as "perfect posture". Many great players from history had a posture that we might consider "questionable" (if looked at technically). For example: take a look at how John Coltrane stands when he plays his tenor, always leaning over backwards considerably. So much so, that we might wonder how he managed to avoid huge back problems. Since good posture is somewhat relative (different) from person to person, what can we use as **good criteria** for assessing our posture? I came to the following description:

Good saxophone posture:

1: Feels comfortable

2: Makes the airflow from our body into the sax as easy and effortless as possible, conserving our energy and opening up our sound.

3: Reduces harmful strains on our body as much as possible.

4: Gives us optimum control over our instrument.

So what can we DO to create and really maintain such a super posture?

There are many factors, but I'll start with the part that is often completely overlooked when it comes to saxophone posture: **The Back.**

When we play the sax, we are very intensively using our back (spine). A saxophone, depending on the type you play, can weigh up to 3 kilo's or more. That's quite a weight to carry. Especially if you consider that we're usually on stage for at least an hour or so at a time, sometimes much longer (up to three hours for some gigs and practice sessions). So playing a saxophone is really a time game for our back. When we put the sax on, we might barely even feel its weight, but after we've been playing for a while our backs will begin to tire. Because we're usually very focused on playing, we often don't notice this or ignore it out of necessity.

However, as our back tires, our posture does start to change. We tend to be conscious of our posture mostly when we begin to play (while we are adjusting our neck strap and so forth), but we rarely take the time to **really** look at our posture midway through a session, or right after we've played for an hour or more.

If we did this, we would find that our posture has changed quite a bit during the time we were playing.

Some of us will find that:

- Our backs are a little more bent from fatigue.

or

- We have lowered our head or lower jaw a bit to compensate for a slowly loosening neck strap or tired neck.

(Neck straps tend to loosen slowly during gigs. Something that has become strikingly obvious to me lately, is how many times professional players keep adjusting their neck straps during gigs.)

The first exercises we will add to our daily practice time will have everything to do with strengthening this bottom part of our technique. So the first thing to do is:

Consciously take the first 2 to 4 minutes before **and after** you practice to intensively watch and adjust your posture. Really taking all the time you need (**go slow!**) to go into every little detail. Use a mirror to take a good look at your posture and how you hold your saxophone. Adjust everything step by step, until you really feel you have found and can maintain the optimal configuration for yourself.

Here's what to look for:

Our general posture (without the sax)

Make sure that you have your feet standing about the width of your shoulders apart and pointing straight forwards, or very slightly inwards or outwards (depending on your personal preference). You should not have a huge V or inverted V shape because this lowers the amount of support for your back).



Your back should be straight. Some people have problems keeping a straight back. A good way to do it is: **Don't puff out your chest! Instead use your lower back muscles**, the same ones you would use if you tried to arch your back. Now roll your shoulders back and just relax your arms and let them hang loosely beside your body. What's especially important when it comes to our posture is that we straighten our inner air column. If your posture is good, the path from your lungs, through your throat and mouth is quite straightforward. The air comes straight up through our windpipe, bends once, and then departs through our mouth. With a bad posture, the path gets a lot more twists and turns. To check if your posture is good, try the following: Stand up straight and open your mouth as wide as you can. Breathe in deeply. Because of the extremely large mouth opening, you'll find breathing in deeply becomes extremely easy. While

keeping your mouth like this, bend your back as far as possible, and breathe in and out again. You'll experience a noticeable difference, and you'll probably feel the extra pressure you need to apply throughout your upper body. Do the same while sitting down, both sitting up straight, and in a "just hanging back" position. Notice how much easier breathing is when your inner air column is straight. It's really a huge difference.

While you're sitting down, it's basically the same thing. Have your feet on the ground, about the width of your shoulders apart. Straighten your back with your lower back muscles, and make sure you have a good chair that provides good support for your back, especially during longer performances.

The comfort of our posture is obviously dependent on the energy capacity of our muscles. Many people have back problems. I'm no physiotherapist, but I think it has a lot to do with the fact that our backs are on our backside. Because we don't notice them or think about them so much, we can easily forget to keep them in good shape. I once had a fitness instructor who jokingly pointed out to me how all the really buff guys in a gym are always very much bent over forward. She said it's mainly because they spent hours and hours training their belly muscles to become a six-pack, but they often completely ignore their back muscles. The strengthening belly muscles then gradually pull them over forward.

It's easy to see why this happens. It's just not obvious to train our back and neck muscles. It's natural for us to

bend forward, but not natural to bend backwards. We only naturally do this while we are swimming or running.

Regularly exercising our back and shoulder muscles is the most effective way to strengthen our posture and basic playing comfort. I'm no gym instructor, so for the best ways for you to do this, you should consult your local fitness instructor, but for myself I have constructed a simple 5 to 10 minute exercise that I do every day. It keeps my back in good shape with very little effort.

I do 3 sets of very ordinary pushups right when I come out of bed.

10 pushups, I rest for 30 seconds, than another 10 push-ups, than I rest for 30 seconds, than another 10 pushups. It's very simple but very effective.

Then, in the same fashion I do 3 sets of pull-ups on a pull-up bar that I have on the roof of my balcony.

If you add something like this (something that fits your body) to your daily exercises you will find the saxophone quickly becoming lighter and lighter on your back and neck, giving you more air during longer gigs, and more comfort while playing. Increasing your comfort means: MORE concentration for other aspects of your playing!

Personally, I also like to jog for about 20 minutes every morning. Nothing fancy. I have no need to run a marathon or anything like that. 15 to 20 minutes of jogging a day, in combination with a normal day job is more than enough exercise to keep the heart, lungs and

all primary muscles in prime condition. I found that so far, all professional sax players that I've asked do back and cardio exercises of some kind. Part of a good technique is having your basic tool (your body) in prime condition. So if you're not already doing this, find a little space in your daily schedule and put some daily back and stamina exercises in place. It's the first and bottom part of your technique. And its influence is far greater than we might think.

(Posture) Where and how to hold that saxophone?

You were probably thought to position your sax using a strap. Most of us learn it this way. It's a good enough way to get started, but there is a way to optimize it. Something I picked up from saxophone master Joe Lovano: It's better to find out where you'd like to hold your sax without a strap. A strap should facilitate a good position, not dictate one. For some players, the saxophone position ends up being a compromise between what their neck strap allows for and how they would really like to hold their sax. That's not what we want! You don't want your strap to be confining in any way.

Grab your sax with both hands (leave the strap on the table) and try to play a note. Now start trying out different positions to get the angle of the mouthpiece and your saxophone as comfortable as you can. The optimal angle is different from person to person and there is also a slight difference for every saxophone type.

The important thing when it comes to the angle at which the mouthpiece enters your mouth, is that there should be **as little angle as possible**. In other words: The air should be able to flow from your mouth into the sax without having to change direction too much.

Angle too high/Strap too long



If we angle the sax too high our notes will become thin, they will lose power and color and we will have a very hard time controlling our sound in general.

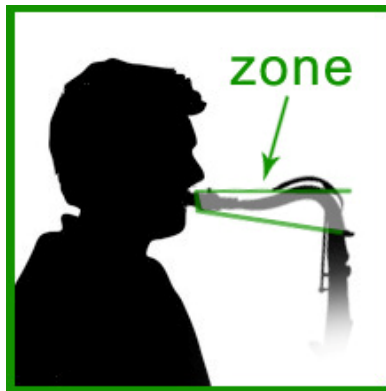
Players who play this way usually leave their strap a bit too long and also tend to lift the sax up a bit with their arms and lower back. This can result in all kinds of physical problems down the road!

Angle too Low/Strap too short



If we angle the sax too low, our low notes won't come out properly and we will have the same problem with controlling our overall sound as in the high position.

The right angle “zone”



The right angle is usually just a tiny bit higher then what we would think. Most of us tend to play just slightly to low. When we hold and blow the saxophone **without** a

neck strap, we tend to instinctively position it just perfectly. It's like jumping in a new bed or chair. Our bodies twist and turn a bit and then naturally find the most comfortable position.

Take your time in positioning your sax without the strap. Test out the different positions by blowing some notes and gauging the effort it takes (how it affects your sound, projection, etc.) You'll probably find that the details matter a lot. Eventually you will discover a “**zone**” where you'll find your sound is the best, the most reliable and where you can blow with the least amount of effort. Once you have found this zone it's time to get your neck strap out.

- Put your strap on (don't hook it to the sax yet)
- Grab your sax again and get it back up to that good position in the zone.
- Hook up your strap and adjust it so it supports your sax at this optimal position.

Now the actual position with the strap might vary a bit from the ideal position because of necessity. The way Lovano put it: “The importance here is to experience the feeling of the saxophone **without** a strap, and then trying to find that same “free” feeling again while playing **with** the strap”.

Depending on your body size, it can vary how easy or challenging it is to have a strap support your sax in the optimal position. The best advice I can give you is: Just

do **whatever it takes** to get your sax in that optimal zone. If you have to switch to a different type of strap, or maybe start using a harness...Do it! The best players I've spoken with, always seem to express a great love for their neck straps, which they usually found at some flea market in a godforsaken town somewhere in Belgium, after searching for many years, or they've had it tailor-made from some exotic soft leather to fit their necks perfectly. The point is: **I really can't stress enough the benefit that you'll have from keeping your sax at the right angle with minimal effort.**

As a daily exercise: Take more time than you usually do to fit your saxophone.

- Put the mouthpiece on the neck and blow only the neck.

-Vary the angle and listen at what angle you have the most power and control.



- Put the neck on the sax and now try that angle again without the neck strap.

- Vary the angle of the sax.

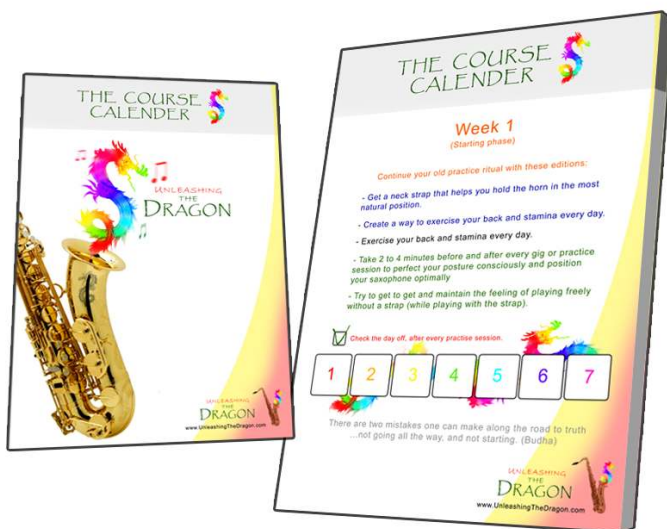
You will probably find that it's the same angle for the whole sax that gives you the best results.

Go slow with this! If we do this every time we practice or play, we will soon start to become very quick and effective at finding the perfect angle. After a while we will start to be able to skip the neck part while still finding the best angle right away. In addition to that, our ears will slowly start to get attuned to the subtle differences between playing “**Just off**” and “**right on**”. It's the same as hearing sharp and flat notes. When we just get started we often simply can't hear the difference between a good note and a slightly sharp one. Over time we learn to differentiate between the two. It's the same thing with this. If we've never spent several weeks paying conscious attention to having the optimum angle, then we simply can't hear the difference. I remember when I first started doing this. The difference seemed already quite substantial to me at the start, but now, when I vary the angle even a little bit I immediately hear the difference.

It's best to do this at the start and finish of your daily practice ritual. Take all the time you need to angle correctly at the start. Check if you're still holding it right at the end. Consciously keep correcting yourself, until it goes completely automatic and you will quickly find yourself playing at the optimum angle all the time.

The calendar:

We now have several exercises we can use to optimize the very bottom, and most foundational part of our technique. You'll find a summary of every week's exercises on the calendar (in affirmation form). Making it easy for you to practice, and keep track of your progress.



The best way to use it, is to print it out and hang it up on a wall where you practice. Cross off a day after every successful practice session.

Let's recap:

Depending on your personal level of skill, feel free to continue your old practice ritual. Just add the following elements to it this first week:

- **Get a neck strap that helps you hold the horn in the most natural position, and very comfortably.**
- **Create a way to exercise your back and stamina every day**
- **Exercise your back and stamina every day.**
- **Take 2 to 4 minutes before and after every gig or practice session to maintain your posture consciously, and position your saxophone optimally.**
- **Try to get and maintain the feeling of playing freely without a strap. (10 minutes)**

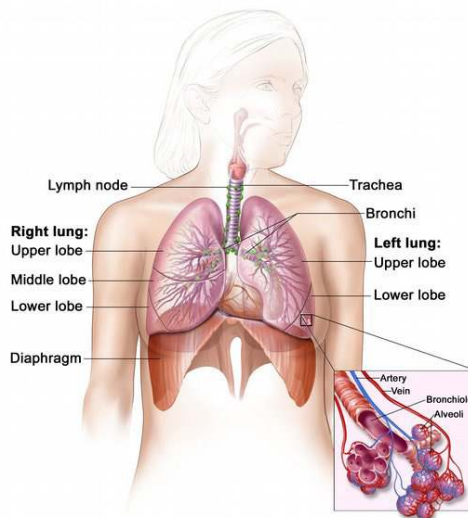
Strengthening our physique and optimizing our posture is a structural thing that slowly starts to yield very large results over the long term.

Once you've done these for the first full week. It's time to read on and add some more ideas and exercises.

3 Breathing

I'm sure you know about breathing through your belly. So did I. When I decided to start working on my own breathing technique, I found that it was a lot more complex than I thought. Breathing correctly is very much **the** key to a steady and open sound. We could say the breath support is the **only thing** that can give our sound its "**true**" power.

The first and rather strange thing, is of course, that there aren't any lungs located in our bellies. In fact our lungs only cover about one third of our upper bodies, as shown in the image below.



So if there isn't any part of our lungs even near our abdomen, why are we all working so hard at extending our bellies while we're playing? I know our bellies go up and down by themselves while we sleep. It does really seem to have something to do with our breathing, but what? I realized I could never optimize my technique in this area without first getting some more understanding. I started reading about it, and soon came across some comments like these:

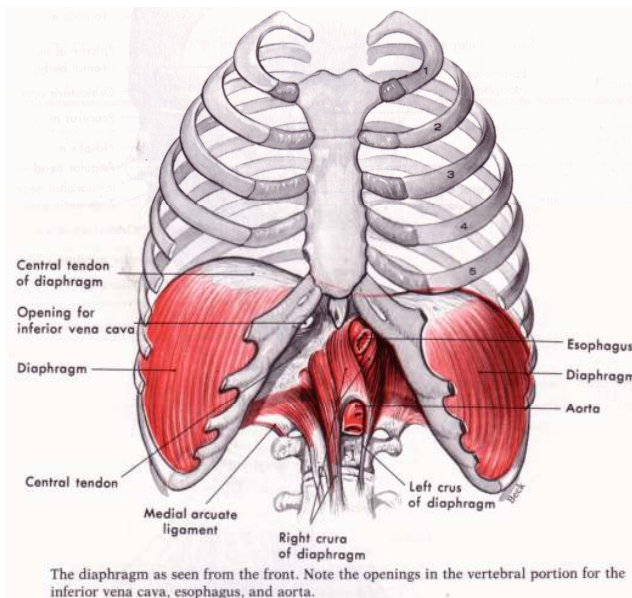
"...There are many misconceptions about diaphragmatic breathing. For example these often used instructions are riddled with myths and half truths.....Now lie on your back, and we'll do diaphragmatic breathing. Breathe into your belly, letting it rise on the inhalation and fall on the exhalation. Don't let your rib cage lift. If your rib cage moves up and down but your abdomen does not, you're not using your diaphragm. Belly breathing is the deepest breathing...."

The more I read, the more I heard about the enormous amounts of miss information about this subject, So I got some real anatomy books and started searching for the truth behind the myths.

It turns out the illusive muscle that is the secret to great saxophone power is really a muscle that: **We can't see, or feel, our even touch directly.** In fact, it's several muscles which we cannot see feel, or touch, that together make up the "diaphragm". These muscles look somewhat like a **parachute.**



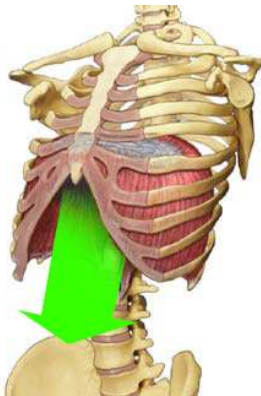
The diaphragm is shaped like a parachute



The diaphragm really is nowhere near the belly. It's located at the inside and underside of our ribcage. It forms the dividing barrier between the upper chest cavity (holding our lungs and heart) and the lower chest cavity (holding our bladders, kidneys, etc). So no matter how much we try or may want to, we can't directly touch or see it! We can only see its effects on the rest of our body. The diaphragm works like this:

Its standard (resting) position is upwards (when our lungs are almost completely empty).

When we activate it, it pulls itself downwards. Creating more space for the lungs, making us inhale.



When we relax the diaphragm muscles again, we breathe out.

This is why breathing out feels so relaxing. We are literally “relaxing” our diaphragm muscle when we exhale.

Apparently the diaphragm is one of humanity's favorite muscles to store stress in. When we get stressed, we tend to unconsciously tense up the diaphragm, keeping a little more air in our lungs than we should. This deprives us of some fresh oxygen, which is bad for our bodies, because they now can't clean out all of the garbage. Doing this often can lead to all kinds of physical (stress related) problems; fatigue, a bad mood, headaches, etc.

Breathing in deeply and exhaling slowly helps to relieve stress very effectively, because it's literally an emptying exercise for the diaphragm, our **“physical stress storage device”**.

When we use our diaphragm muscles to inhale, the contents of our lower chest cavity and belly are being pushed down and outwards. This leads to **the optical illusion** that we are breathing through our bellies, but as we can clearly see now, that's not where the breathing is really going on.

So how do we train a muscle we can't directly touch or see?

With the diaphragm it's all about getting conscious control. The diaphragm muscles are a set of muscles that we CAN control consciously. Most of us are just completely desensitized as to how to control it directly and consciously. In order to start using the full potential of this “Jedi” saxophone muscle, we need to reacquaint ourselves with the diaphragm.

Here are some very effective exercises to help you get in touch with your diaphragm and train these muscles in a focused and effective way.

1: The “upside down” breath

This is the best way to experience and really feel your diaphragm at work. It's very easy:

- Stand up, with your legs slightly apart,
- Put your hands at the side of your ribcage (i.e. in your sides),
- Bend over as far as you can and then breathe in deeply.

When we do this we force our diaphragm to work against gravity (which it normally doesn't have to do). In addition to that, our belly can't move forward in this position, because it's partially up against our upper legs. This makes our belly's expand to the sides, letting us feel the diaphragm much more consciously.

While doing this, slowly rise up while breathing. Try to keep this conscious control of the diaphragm. Panting while bend over can increase the consciousness of the diaphragm even more (but don't do this too long or you will get dizzy).

This is not an exercise you need to do daily, but it's good to do it every once in a while, to increase or maintain your consciousness of the diaphragm.

2: The weighted breath

This exercise is not only very suited for becoming more conscious of your diaphragm, it's also a great way to exercise it.

- Take a weight (I use a single dumbbell of about 2,5 kilo, but you can also use a heavy book or something else that fits on your belly) and put it on your belly.
- Breathe in through your nose and push the weight up as high as you can. Watch out not to use your belly muscles for this. Really do it with your diaphragm.
- Once your belly is up, expand your sides as far as you can. Now keep the weight up for 10 seconds,
- Then let your belly drop and completely empty your lungs through your mouth. Be very conscious to start pushing out from your belly. You should be able to feel the push of your diaphragm (by seeing you belly lower itself first) and then slowly by the inwards pushing of your sides and then the upper ribcage.

3: The exhale - inhale check:

Your lungs should be filling up from the bottom all the way to the top. Another way to practice this is to observe yourself regularly for a while. Stand in front of a mirror without a T-shirt and relax. Don't do anything yet. Just breathe as you normally do and observe what your body does. Then take conscious control and follow the steps below. Breathe in through your nose for this exercise. (it forces the muscles to work harder).

Inhaling:

- 1: Fill the bottom of your lungs first** (observe your belly being pushed out all the way).
- 2: Then expand your lower chest and sides** (You can feel your sides expanding with you hands)
- 3: Feel your upper chest and shoulders rise slightly as the air supply fills your lungs and rises all the way up to your throat.**

Exhaling:

- 1: Feel the upper chest and shoulders relax**
- 2: Notice how your lower chest and sides move inwards as you exhale**
- 3: Pull the stomach and lower rib cage in as much as possible to empty your lungs fully.**

The perfect long note:

Playing long notes is one of the greatest exercises for our tone out there. Now that we have optimized our posture, we can start to really focus on our breathing while playing these long notes, pushing this already great exercise to an even higher level. To do this we will combine long notes with the “**exhale – inhale check**”.

(I also highly recommend getting and using a [Tuning CD](#) for this exercise).

Breathe in consciously and exactly as you do in the **Exhale – inhale check** exercise, but now inhale through your mouth and blow out into your horn. Begin at low volume and play the same note crescendo until you reach full volume and then decrescendo until you're out of breath. Repeat 5 times. Do this for a whole major scale. When you get near the “out-of-breath” point at the end of each long note, you should really be able to feel your belly pushing hard. Don't go completely out of breath! Stop the note at a point where you still have good control.

About our air usage:

Percentage-wise, about 70% of the power of our breath comes from the diaphragm. About 20% comes from your sides and lower rib cage, and the remaining 10% comes from the so called; upper chest/collar-bone breathing. It also varies slightly from person to person.

For the best result, we should strive to combine the power of all three.

This means that saxophone playing really requires us to use as close to a 100% of our lung capacity as possible. In normal daily use we only utilize about 30% of our lung capacity.

When we do things like running or playing tennis, we tend to use about 70-80%. When we play the sax, we should be inhaling as deeply and with as much power as possible. Our goal with all these breathing exercises is to be able to breathe in deeply but also very quickly, and then to breath out an airstream that is very powerful and steady.

Use the above exercises to optimize every detail of your own breathing technique. As with the posture exercises, we must do these slowly, precisely and repeatedly in order to have the benefits of **true increased** breathing power. Dedicate between 15 and 20 minutes of your daily exercise ritual to these exercises. Slowly stack these techniques on your now optimized posture.

It will take about 4 weeks of implementing these breathing exercises daily, before they can start becoming routine. Go very slow in the beginning and then increase the speed and lessen your consciousness gradually. Constantly check how you are doing, until you are sure that true optimal breathing has become an automatic part of your saxophone technique.

Let's Recap:

You can now go through week 2 on the calendar.



- *Exercise your back and stamina every day.*
- *Get a neck strap that helps you hold the horn in the most natural position.*
- *The weighted breath for 5 minutes*
- *Take 2 to 4 minutes before and after every gig or practice session to maintain your posture consciously and position you saxophone optimally.*
- *Try to get to the feeling of playing freely without a strap.*
- *The exhale - inhale check (5 minutes), combined with long notes for 5 – 10 minutes (use a Tuning CD if possible!!)*

4: The Embouchure

Wikipedia says: **The embouchure is the use of facial muscles and the shaping of the lips to the mouthpiece of a wind or brass instrument.**

I will also include the use of the tongue in this chapter.

Now you are probably already very aware that the embouchure is something that's quite precarious. Every little detail matters here, so we are not going to leave a single stone unturned. The embouchure is not just where you make your tone beautiful and nicely articulate it with your tongue. It's also the place that defines your personal sound the most. If the breath support and posture are the muscle of the saxophone engine...the embouchure is its personality. Our mouths are as distinct as a fingerprint, so we all have a unique tone from the start, but there are many ways to improve our sound through perfecting our technique and increasing our knowledge in this particular area.

I like to imagine the embouchure as the cockpit of a jumbo jet. Our mouth and lips are built up from many small muscles and surfaces. Each individual part is a bit like a switch in a cockpit. Each one controls a different part of our sound. Thus, in order for us to control our sound fully, we have to learn where the various switches are and what exact effect they have. The same goes for the tongue.

Let's start with the lips and the teeth.

As you probably know, the upper teeth should be located in the natural biting position opposite our lower teeth. In that way, the lower teeth kind of dictate where the upper teeth should be. For the position of the lower teeth we should take a close look at our mouthpiece to see where the facing starts (the point where the reed separates from the mouthpiece). Our lower teeth should be directly under this point. As I mentioned before, the upper teeth should be in their natural position above the lower teeth. So we should really be biting as we normally do. If you have a small lower jaw, it can help to extend it a little bit (like saying oeheee). This can give you a little more control. Other than that, there should be no extending of jaws or any other action of that sort (unless you're trying to create some kind of sound effect).

The amount of force we apply should be very **very** little! In fact it should be amazingly light! A great many of us start off with applying way too much pressure, often as compensation for a weak breath support!

A good way to think about regulating our lip pressure, is to realize that we are only trying to hold the reed with our lips, rather than the whole mouthpiece.

The amount of pressure we have in our lips should be just enough to hold the air stream in. No more! Any

additional pressure will only muffle the richer dynamic ranges of your tone.

The upper lip should lie comfortably in its natural position, resting on top of the mouthpiece and against our teeth. There should be no pressuring or pinching of this lip. We can check this by asking someone to lift up your upper lip while playing. Or we can do it ourselves by using our right hand to lift up the upper lip while we are playing a long note. We should be able to easily lift the lip. If you feel some pinching, try to become more conscious of how you use your upper lip. Teach yourself to keep your upper lip relaxed. You can do this with long notes. Just keep checking your lip with your right hand until it becomes second nature to keep it relaxed.

The lower lip is also very important, although I have heard surprisingly little about its effective use on forums and in books. Take a look at a video of any pro, and you will quickly notice that they seem to constantly vary the amount of mouthpiece they take in while they are playing. When they play in the low register they tend to take in less mouthpiece, and when they play high they seem to take much more of it into their mouths. Strangely I found that a great many players are actually not even aware of how much they are doing this.

Anyway, here is what's important about it. When a reed vibrates it creates sound. A reed naturally produces a lot of ultra high and very harsh sounding overtones (which you can sometimes hear when you're playing just the mouthpiece). The cushioning effect of the lower lip helps

to reduce these extremes so the fundamental can come out and shine.

By rolling your lower lip forwards or backwards slightly, you help the reed to produce a better fundamental note in the high or low registers. As the standard (middle C) position, our lower lip should hit the reed at the thickest part of your lower lip. You can find out where that is by saying the word Volume. When we say the “V” our upper teeth will hit our lower lip at the place where we should have the lower lip touch the reed.

For the high notes we should slowly roll our lower lip forwards over the reed, so a little more of it is in our mouth. For the lower notes the opposite holds true. For these you can let the lower lip roll back slowly, so less of the reed is in your mouth.



The teeth can stay at the same position, only the lower lip rolls back and forth.

The only way I found to really practice this, is in front of an old fashioned mirror.

- Play a middle C and move up through the C Major scale while slowly letting your lip roll forwards over the reed. You should be at about a quarter of an inch further up the reed by the time you hit the high D. **This is the high position.** Use this for everything above High D.

- Now go downwards through the C Major scale again until you are back at the middle C. Your lower lip should be back in the **starting position** again.

- Now move down towards the low notes. You should hit the **lower lip position** (about a quarter inch down from the starting position) when you hit the low D. Use this position for everything lower than low D.

- Now move back up again, and repeat 3 or 4 times (preferable with different scales).

We will include this exercise in the daily ritual until it's become second nature to do this. It's very good to combine this exercise with other scale exercises.

If you do this you will find that your tone becomes much livelier and balanced throughout the range. Especially when combined with the tonguing techniques from the next chapter.

The tongue:

For me, the tongue was the most instrumental part of my technique. I had taught myself a slightly faulty way of positioning my tongue from the start, and after playing for a while, I ran into several problems that affected my control over intonation and articulation. It was a real glass ceiling for me. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't get through it. It took a while, but I finally traced the problem down to my tonguing. Once I had figured out that my tongue had to be the problem, I went looking for the right positions and quickly found the solution. I still remember very well what happened when I tried it for the first time. It felt like a huge door just opened up for me. All of sudden, through changing just a few little things, every other part of my technique fell into place like clockwork. The effect was especially dramatic in my high ranges. I had always had some problems with the higher notes. A somewhat fussy attack, lacking control and good projection. Now I could finally start these notes beautifully and make them sound pretty from start to finish, at a high and low volume.

The right tongue position is very simple but not always obvious. Especially if you are self-taught there is a good chance that you have the same challenges I had.

U can use the tongue in many ways, but the standard position should be as follows.

Very clearly say the word "EAT" as in eating. Notice the position of your tongue as you pronounce the EA part. Your

tongue will tend to rise up in your mouth and flatten out sideways, pushing slightly against the inner sides of your upper teeth.

This is the best starting position for your tongue (middle C position). Your tongue should be a little up in your mouth. Flattened out, with the sides resting against your upper teeth. Breathe in deeply and breathe out hard while keeping your tongue in this position. You will notice that the narrow corridor this creates forces the air through at great speed, but with very little effort. Now lower your tongue and try to create the same airspeed. You will notice that you have to blow incredibly hard to get the same airspeed.

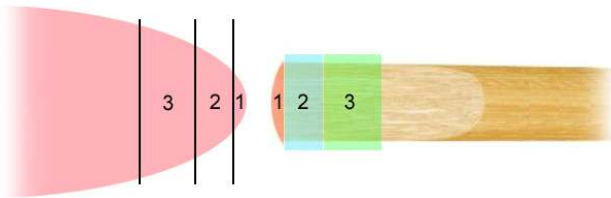
This **Eat** or **EEEE** position is by far (!) the best default position for our tongue! As we go into the higher registers we can slowly push the tongue up a little further to increase the airspeed but this is often not necessary. For the lower register we can slightly lower the tongue into the **ÀÀÀÀ** position as in “**RAW**”).

We should be alternating slowly between the **EEEE** (**EAt**) and **AAAAAA** (**rAW**) tongue positions as we move up and down through the various registers.

If needed, add the proper positioning of the tongue to your daily scale exercises. Because the improvement with this is so easily heard you will often adopt it very quickly. Make sure you don't slowly regress into old ways though.

Tipping the reed

To add variation to the way we articulate our notes. We can use several different techniques for tipping the reed with our tongue. The tongue has roughly three area's that each give a distinct effect when used for tipping the reed. The reed also has 3 basic areas that we can use for tipping it, giving us ample possibilities for creativity.



Very fine and light articulation can be achieved by using the number one areas on both the tongue and the reed. We can also use areas 2 or 3 of the tongue to tip the number 1 reed area. The effect is very relative according to each individual tongue size and structure. It's really a matter of experimenting a lot and getting familiar with all the possibilities. You can combine these areas in any way you want, but in general we can say that. The more of the tongue touches the reed, the harder the articulation. When we use area's 1,2 and 3 of the tongue all together on the 1,2 and 3 areas of the reed, we achieve the hardest form of tonguing (sometimes called: slap tonguing). This produces a very strong articulation, somewhat like shooting a gun.

Let's Recap:

You are now at the start of week 3 on the calendar:

- *Exercise your back and stamina every day.*
- *Take 2 to 4 minutes before and after every gig or practice session to maintain your posture consciously and position your saxophone optimally.*
- *Try to get to the feeling of playing freely without a strap.*
- *The weighted breath for 5 minutes.*
- *Be mindful of relaxing your upper lip. (combine with long notes).*
- *The exhale – inhale check combined with long notes for (3 minutes) (use a Tuning CD if possible!!)*
- *Practice rolling the lower lip in front of a mirror 2 – 10 minutes a day. (combine with long notes and exhale – inhale check).*
- *Practice holding the right tongue positions “AE” and “AW” (combine with long notes)*

Follow the calendar through weeks 3 and 4, and then move on to the next exercises. (Although the subject was disgust, articulation exercises are not included in these weeks yet. Those will come a little later).

5: Fingering the saxophone

Becoming proficient at fingering the saxophone is a vital part of our technique. There are two main aspects to fingering technique:

Speed and **Accuracy**. I will refer to these two combined as: **Fluency**.

We want to cultivate both in balance with each other. To be very fast while also very sloppy, is no good. To be very accurate, but always a little too slow is also no good.

Because these two aspects have to work together it's best to train them together. So we won't be training our speed or our accuracy. It's better to train for the combined aspect of **Fluency**. The use of the tongue and articulation are also directly linked to the fingering. Speedy fingers combined with a slow, or sloppy tongue produce a bad result and vice versa it's the same thing.

The basic blocks that we should have in our foundation are:

- **All major and minor (Dorian) scales.** There are many others which are also very important, but as a first foundation. These two are the most essential. Once you can do these fluently, add the "Natural" and "Harmonic" minor scales.

- **A good familiarity with both the standard, and alternative fingerings of the above scales.**

- Familiarity with different times (regular, swing, etc)

The only way to learn these is to simply practice them every day. We should know both mentally how a scale is built (F major has one flat, the Bb, etc) and we should be fluent in playing them throughout the whole range of the instrument (including the low B, Bb, and high F, F#). So start all scales on the lowest note (either B or Bb) up to the highest note in the scale, then back down to the lowest note and then back to the closest root.

A good way to practice this is to start by doing the C major scale (c d e f g a b c). Once you can play this across the instrument. Start with the C# scale. Find the notes by ear, and don't write anything down. If you forget a scale, just find it by ear again. It will stick in your memory better that way. Practice it throughout the whole range and once you can play it, add the D scale, etc. Do this all the way up to the B.

Practice them in regular and swing time, and experiment with the different forms of tonguing (articulation). Train yourself to articulate cleanly. Your fingers should be in lockstep with your tongue, and vice versa.

This week we will add 10 to 15 minutes of scale exercises to our daily ritual.

They're best practiced very slowly, precisely and with a metronome. When you start to speed up, keep a close eye on your accuracy. If you notice you're losing some

accuracy, STOP! Slow down to the point where you have 100% accuracy and play at this speed until you can crank up the speed without losing accuracy. You want to train yourself to be **fluent** (fast and accurate), not just fast!

In addition to the scales, go out and buy an exercise book with etudes (complex practice lines and tunes) and work through some of these every practice session (week 6). (I recommend [25 Daily exercises for saxophone](#) by H Klosé. It's a great resource for this)

Fingering lines and licks

Some questions I get often are:

- **How should we study blues/jazz lines and licks?**
- **What fingering should we use and why?**

Concerning this I have a few very sturdy principles that I picked up from Eddie Daniels at a workshop. (arguably the fastest clarinet player alive) For a good example of his fluency, watch this video:

<http://www.Unleashingthedragon.com/ST03.htm>

He thought me the following principles:

- **Always play beautiful!** It's very damaging to our technique to rush notes. Many players rush lines, and difficult parts of songs, thinking that the audience doesn't notice anyway. They are right! An audience often won't

notice it when you're rushing things. BUT...They notice it very quickly when you're NOT rushing things!

If you really can play fast, people will love the way you sound.

If you just pretend to play fast, people won't complain, but they often won't praise you either.

In addition to that, you probably just won't feel so good while you're playing, because YOU WILL KNOW you're rushing things. Not feeling great has all kinds of bad influences. We would be putting pressure on a part of our foundation that is weak, and that always affects everything else.

So we should always **play beautiful** within the boundaries of what we CAN play. As we become better at the stuff we can do, we also get better at the stuff we couldn't do. Our technical boundaries slowly progress outwards in this way. Of course, do try to play as **fast as you can** every once in a while. For fun, to see how fast you can go, and experience high speeds. Just don't do it in general or when performing if you can't **really** do it yet.

- There is no wrong way, only different right ways!

How we finger a note really doesn't matter! It only matters in the context of what we are trying to play. So it's very important that we cultivate a familiarity with the standard fingerings, and also with every possible alternative fingering. Every song we play is an

opportunity to find our own best way of playing it. When we do so, we have to take all things into account: Tonality, ease of playing, possible speeds, etc. It's those factors we should look to when we decide for one fingering or another.

If we're practicing blues lines. We should make sure we can play them in all keys. The same applies to fingerings. We should always strive to be able to play the same line using several different fingerings. Once you're sure a certain one is the best for you, go with that!

Once we get enough familiarity with playing things in various ways, we automatically cultivate a knack for finding the easiest way to play things.

I see it often with all my different mentors. They can sometimes look at, or hear a line of music and they instantly know to use a certain fingering, but how they do it, is always just a personal preference.

In addition to this, there are also some things concerning sense of rhythm that are important which we shall get to in later chapters.

- Keep building your musical vocabulary!

Whether we buy some books with blues or jazz lines and study those, or create our own original lines through experimentation. It's good to always be expanding our music vocabulary. Musical lines are very much like words. We need to know some words in order to create interesting stories.

Try to strike a good balance between canned lines from books and your own original lines. If we use too much stuff from books, we will quickly start to sound just like everybody else. It's great to always have a notebook or tape recorder handy, to record any lines you might come up with during work hours or when you don't have your sax with you.

You're now at the start of week 5 on the calendar.

- Exercise your back and stamina every day.*
- Take 2 to 4 minutes before and after every gig or practice session to maintain your posture consciously and position you saxophone optimally.*
- Try to get to the feeling of playing freely without a strap.*
- Be mindful of relaxing your upper lip. (combine with long notes)*
- The weighted breath for 5 – 10 minutes*
- The exhale – inhale check combined with long notes for 3 minutes (use a Tuning CD if possible!!)*
- Practice holding the right tongue positions “AE” and “AW” (combine with long notes)*
- Practice rolling the lower lip in front of a mirror 5 – 10 minutes a day. (combine with long notes and exhale – inhale check).*

- Practice all major, minor (Dorian) scales across the whole instrument, focus on finger fluency! Include regular & swing time, paying attention to clean articulation.

Incorporate and practice alternative fingerings, (not until week 8)

- Etudes for 10 – 15 minutes. (not until week 9)

If you've done all the above exercises for a while (up to the start of week 10) and are starting to use all the techniques mentioned above automatically, then you have created a very strong technical foundation on which we can now effectively start building some more advanced stuff.

You can read on without having completed the exercises in the previous chapters, but realize that none of the following information or exercises will be of much help to you if you don't possess a truly solid foundation to build them on.

5: Sound Awareness

Something that I personally wasn't aware of while I was getting started, is a concept I call :“Sound Awareness”. Let me tell you a little bit more about what I mean by this.

You can probably make up melodies and songs in your head quite easily and they always sound great in your mind right? At least to the degree that in your mind, there is never a false note or moment where you lose the tempo. I believe this is the case for all of us. Our inner voice and imagination, being personal and having no outside frame of reference, is always truly free (as in...**can make no mistakes**). But something strange happens when we look at our inner music from the outside. I first began noticing this when I started taping myself regularly while I was practicing. My house is situated next to a large park and I often go there to practice. I don't take any music with me. I just play anything that comes to my mind.

I taped a few of these practice sessions and found that though there was structure to my playing, my timing and tempo were often all over the place, even though I had not noticed this myself while playing. Being on my own this posed no real problem, but it awoke me to the possibility of training my inner sense of rhythm. It made me conscious of the divide between the inner and outer worlds of music and I realized that:

Being able to play my inner musical conceptions was not just a matter of acquiring the technical skill

of embouchure, breath support, fingering, etc. I also would have to learn to tune my inner musical world to the outer world.

So I started looking at myself somewhat as a translator (that might sound a little woowoo, but bear with me here...). If some particular bit of music I played at a session or workshop wasn't a great success with the listeners, I began looking at these things as mistranslations".



I knew that in my head, the concept as I had intended it, was a beautiful swan of an idea.

So if the audience thought of it more as an ugly rubber duck, **it no longer automatically meant that the concept was necessarily bad! It could also mean I just didn't translate the idea in my head... out into the world properly.**

Having this awareness raises all kinds of new questions and creates new skills for us to explore. It makes us look at our sound and musical ideas in a different light. So the concept of “**Sound Awareness**” refers to:

To what degree we are aware of the difference between our own inner musical world, and our outside musical world, in which our audiences reside.

As I started to realize how large the divide was for me, I took a good hard look and came up with a number of factors that I believe provide good material for bridging this gap.

1: Basic tonality (the first gap)



Basic tonality is the very simple but extremely important first gap that we will have to bridge, in order to effectively translate our inner material to the outside.

Basic tonality = the relationship between our inner and outer scales.

When you sing a basic major scale in your head (do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do / C,D,E,F,G,A,B,C,). It's probably pitch-perfect when you imagine it in your head. Now play it on your instrument and ask yourself. Am I playing it as pitch-perfect on my sax as I'm hearing it in my head?

The answer is probably no. The scale in your head however, is the basis for all your inner music. So if the scales that come out of our horn are a little bit off from the ones we hear in our heads. That means that from the start, EVERY idea we play will be slightly **“mistranslated”** in its tonality. In other words: **there is a real divide between our inner ideas and what we end up hearing from our instrument.**

We want to make that gap disappear, or at least make it as small as possible. So the analogy is: The better our inner scales, are in tune with our outer scales, the better our **basic tonality** is.

A fantastic exercise to improve our basic tonality is something I call: **Playing by numbers**. You probably remember **painting or drawing by numbers** when you were a kid at school. We'd get an image with just some outlines, every area would have a number which corresponded with a color and all we had to do was put in the correct colors and we would get a beautiful picture.

When we have a musical idea in our head, it's a bit like having that basic image with the numbers. We have the perfect outlines in our heads, but to create our "picture" accurately on the outside, we will have to play exactly the right notes, in the exact right tonality on our saxophone. If we happen to do this on a stage then we will even have to do it right on the spot and very quickly. The rub is that it's not easy to pick only the right notes. Unlike with a box of crayons, we can't look at a note first, check if it's the right one and then play it. We have to be able to blindly chose the right ones; quickly, repeatedly and with very little effort.

Playing by numbers is an exercise that's all about training our ability to succeed at this difficult technical feat.

- Take your sax and go somewhere very quiet.

- Play a note or a scale to give your mind a good sense of the key you're starting to imagine in.
- Now imagine a line of 4 notes. Create it in your mind without playing the sax.
- Now try to play this 4 note line, But take all the time you need and make sure every note you hit is the right one.
- If you make a mistake, correct yourself immediately. Don't start hitting other notes or guessing. Just stop, imagine the line again, and then try playing it again without any faults.
- Once you become proficient at 4 note lines, start adding a fifth note and then a sixth, etc. Once you can do 8 note lines, start adding key changes to your imagined lines. These are very hard to imagine, and you will have to become proficient at all the scales in order to do it, but with practice you will succeed eventually.

The key is to **never get sloppy with this!** We can only cultivate the skill of doing this a 100% right, by doing it a 100% right **every time!** The effect of this exercise is that we'll slowly but surely, start to tune our musical skills and imagination to each other. Over time, this enables us to pick-up and replay melodies more easily and we become much more accurate at translating our ideas to the outside world.

It helps to make saxophone playing more like talking. If you imagine saying a simple sentence, you probably feel a 100% sure that you can pronounce it exactly like you

imagined it beforehand. You can probably even do it without having to think about it consciously. We all can! Because we all have about 17.250 hours of using our voice once we reach the age of 12. So we've had a lot of practice. We want to get to a point with the saxophone where we can sing through it just as spontaneously as if we were talking.

2: Rhythm feeling (the second gap)



Rhythm Feeling = the relationship between our inner and outer rhythms and tempo's.

The principle is the same as with basic tonality. At our workshop in Amsterdam, we have a 2 hour frame of time where anyone can take the stage, pick some musicians from the audience and make a band for about 15 minutes. The only catch is: **We're not allowed to say anything to them about what we want to play, the tempo, key, style, etc.** We just have to start and then everybody else in the band will start improvising from what we started. From there, we see if we can get our ideas across to the other musicians.

It often happens, that the rest of the band has to struggle immensely to find out what tempo and rhythmic style the initiator is trying to convey. The starters hear it fine in their heads though. When asked afterwards by the workshop leader (Did you feel you were clear on the tempo you wanted?), they usually answer with a clear

and sonorous yes!! But then the other band members are asked and they often answer with something like:” I had some vague idea what he/she was trying to do with the tempo, but it seemed to jump all over the place, every time I thought I had it, it switched somehow”.

Often the initiators are somewhat stunned or briefly in disbelief when they hear this, because they really heard the whole thing playing flawlessly in their minds. When they explain their original rhythmic ideas for the piece, they are usually great! So the idea is not where things go wrong most of the time.

Once again it's the **gap between our inner idea of the rhythm and what the audience and other band members are hearing.**

How can we train this, besides just playing with other people a lot?

The best way to train our inner sense of rhythm is to practice with a metronome as much as possible. For example: We can combine our scale exercises with a metronome.

- Play a scale and hold each note for a fixed number of beats.
- Play the etudes with a metronome.
- Practice **painting by numbers** with a metronome.
- Practice your tunes with a metronome or backing CD.

If you have little experience with a metronome you will probably find it somewhat tiresome in the beginning, Funny enough, you'll constantly feel that the damn thing is off beat. The reality is of course, that we are forced to see how often we are out of the beat ourselves. It will take quite some time (several weeks) to get used to playing with a metronome, but once you get used to it, your rhythmic sense will improve a lot and you'll notice that your ideas become far more accessible and speak to people more clearly. Listeners and other players will be able to get into and feel your groove better.

3: Color/Mood awareness (the third gap)



Before I go deeper into this factor, I first I have to explain a little bit about the use of the word “color” or “colors” in music. These two words are used with different meanings and this can be very confusing if we don’t set it straight from the beginning.

Some musicians use the word color, colors, or coloring to talk about intonation and articulation. So if a musician says something like: **“that’s a very colorful piece of music”**, or **“That mouthpiece gives you a lot of control over tone colors”**

They are saying: **“That piece of music has a lot of variety/quality in intonation and articulation** (nice clear notes, rougher notes, softly articulated notes, bended notes, etc). And: **“that mouthpiece gives good control over intonation and articulation”**.

The words: Color, colors and coloring are also used to indicate interesting chord progressions and changes,

and the emotional dimensions they can create. So you could hear someone say the same sentence: **“That’s a very colorful piece of music”**, but this time they could mean: **“I love how they use the different harmonic devices** (chord changes, transition notes, chromatics, etc) **to create different emotional dimensions throughout the song.**

OK now that we are aware of these distinctions, let’s get into Color/Mood Awareness.

When we modulate from one key to another something happens. It’s very difficult to describe precisely what happens. I guess it’s one of the great mysteries of music, but somehow, when we go from one key into another, we create a color. I very deliberately say: “we **create** a color” and not : “we **switch** from one color to another”. I say this because in my opinion, our awareness of the “colors” is heightened considerably during the transitions, while playing in one key for a longer time diminishes our awareness of tone colors slowly. For example: If we got a person, with no musical schooling of any kind, to listen to a band. And if we had this band play in one key for a while and then switch over to another key. Then even this untrained person would be perfectly able to perceive that “something” just happened. They may not be able to voice exactly what it was that happened, but when asked they might very well describe it using the words: “...*It’s like the color of the music just changed...*”, or: “...*It’s like the mood of the music just changed...*” Hence... why we use these words

to describe this phenomenon. Even though we could say that these terms fall somewhat short of really describing what happens, it's the best form of description we have at this time.

Although I think it's fine to think of a key as a color (for example F Major might be a yellowish sounding key and C major may sound more indigo to someone, etc), I like to think of modulating as: **mixing colors**, and less as: **going from one color into another**. For example: when we go from F major to C major, we mix yellow and indigo and we get a greenish color for a moment, before we get into the indigo of the C mayor itself. It's a difficult concept, so watch the following movies to get some sense of coloring effects in music.

<http://www.Unleashingthedragon.com/ST02.htm>

Somehow the colors of music are exchangeable with our emotions. Some colors make us feel cheery while others make us feel sad (or funny enough... blue).

Being able to translate our imagined moods and colors through the instrument accurately is crucial, if we want to add a compelling emotional dimension to our music.

So our color or mood awareness = **the relationship between our inner imagination of modulations and tone color, and how they actually sound in the outer world.**

I have to say this is an extremely hard one. It's very difficult for us to mentally switch key's in our head. For

example: Try to mentally conceptualize a melody accurately in F# and then switch to Bb in your mind....

It's hard...!

At free improvisation sessions it often happens that most of the bands unknowingly start to play in whatever key the band before them ended. Human minds turn out to be exceptionally good at subconsciously picking up a key. It's why singers can sing along so easily with a piano player, even if the piano switches keys regularly and the singer doesn't know what will be played in advance.

Our minds seem to be naturally predisposed to get sort of stuck in whatever key we heard last and that's not so strange, considering that key and intonation changes are a vital part of our daily communication. When we speak we use different keys harmony and dissonance to unconsciously express things like: I agree with you, I don't agree with you, this makes me feel happy/sad, this makes me feel exited, etc.

For example: try saying something in a really happy way, and then say the exact same thing in a very sad way. You'll notice that you're voice switches to a different key or way of intonating for the sad version. We actually talk using all kinds of different musical keys and intonation all day long. Quite cool, huh? I couldn't find any hard scientific evidence for this, but I suspect that it is also the reason why talking to a depressed person, can make us feel a little depressed. We unconsciously (and often

unwillingly) start picking up their key and our emotions seem to respond to this somehow.

Having a mental awareness of **musical moods** or **colors** lets us escape from our mental mood prisons. It provides us with the possibility to hear key changes more accurately in our mind and to pre-visualize moods while we are playing. Using this device, we can add a very powerful ingredient to our music i.e. the ability to emotionally touch and captivate our audience and to take them with us on the emotional journey of our choosing.

It's one thing to think...**what note do I want to play next?**

It's another to think....**what emotion/mood do I want to play next?**

So what can we do to create this awareness?

- The first thing to do is to become multi key on everything. When we're practicing a song, we shouldn't just practice the one key we're learning it in, but instead try to play it in as many keys as we have time for (I usually pick 3 or 4 at random for everything I practice). Once we can play a tune in several keys, we can start switching keys mid-way. Try to find interesting ways of modulating by experimenting. If we do this, we will soon start to notice that it's great fun to visit different keys during a tune. By doing this often enough we start to become familiar with the various colors and modulation

devices. It greatly enhances our ability to improvise in interesting ways.

- The second exercise is to start playing by ear as much as we can! Put on the radio or TV and just play/improvise along with everything. It forces us to cultivate the ability to quickly pick up any key by ear.

- The third thing to do is to get to know the scales intellectually. How they are build, and how to construct extended scales (dominant seventh's, altered, half diminished chords etc). The science behind this is called: **Harmonics** and it is a whole school of books by itself so I will not discuss that subject very extensively here. Understanding harmonics is sort of the holy grail of music, and you really just need a great teacher and **lots and lots and lots and lots** of practice, in order to get your harmonic knowledge and experience up to snuff. Many great players like John Coltrane for example, dedicated their lives to (in essence) cultivating a greater understanding of harmonics. If you haven't heard his landmark tune "Giant Steps", go watch it here:

<http://www.Unleashingthedragon.com/ST04.htm>

Listen to the incredible plethora of (possible) moods this song goes trough in rapid succession, the emotional journey it takes us on. Notice how it goes through moods like: sad, happy, something bad just happened to me, something great just happened to me, this is the best day of my life. things just aren't going my way, I'm almost there, I'm feeling elated, running, being mad, seeing

something you find beautiful, etc. There are really a thousand possible moods/feelings in this one tune. Now I'm not saying that that was Coltrane's intention with this song or anything. Just trying to open our eyes to the possibility of using moods/colors as a creative tool, since we all have a personal frame of reference. What one person feels as "being elated" may sound to another as "feeling melancholic, or sad". There are no absolutes, but there are some trends. It's an elusive and difficult concept, but its also a very inspiring and empowering musical device to be creative with.

So "harmonics" is a big study which we won't be able to go into very deeply here.

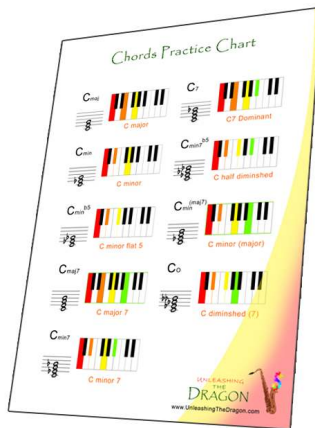
However, there are a few things which are essential to know if you want to play with others, so we'll go in to this a little bit. First: a great metaphor for thinking about extended chords (an important part of harmonics which has great relevance for playing bebop and hard bop and improvising in general). I learned this from a brilliant guitar player named Wolf Martini. He thought me that extended chords can be viewed a bit like pizzas...

A basic major chord (1,3,5) is our basic pizza Margarita. No matter where we go, we know a Margarita always has the same ingredients and always tastes a certain way.

A half diminished C chord is like a pizza Hawaii. It sounds (tastes) slightly different, but it still has some of the same ingredients as the basic C chord.

At some point we have to learn the list of ingredients and how they taste so we know it by heart. That way, whenever we feel an audience craving for a certain taste (mood, color, emotion), we can provide just the right pizza. In the same line of thinking; If the band is playing a Hawaiian tune, you don't start ruining it by throwing in some goat cheese or tuna.

In the extra's map you will find the **Chords Practice Chart**.



This chart shows the most used chords to master. (naturally, there are several others). It shows all the chord structures applied to the C as the root, but the same applies for all keys. It's the structure of these chords we must learn by heart (the ingredients). It's not rocket science, but it takes time to memorize them all. Simply said; every basic chord is made from 1, 3, 5, (7),

and sometimes even (9), but if you're completely new to this knowledge, just stick with the 1,3,5 – (7) for now. The basic major chord is 1,3,5. That's the basic pizza Margarita. Then you get the minor. That's the same 1,3,5, but the third is always flattened in the minor chords. So its ingredients become: 1, **b3**, 5. For the Cmin-b5 it becomes: 1, **b3**, **b5** and so forth. That's what we need to memorize. Once we know the components of each chord, we can apply them to any key. This is the reason why you have to know all the scales by heart. If you don't know the scales, you can't apply these formulas, but if you do, then just learning these 9 formulas by heart will enable you to instantly recognize almost any chord out there, and you'll be able to play over them much more easily.

Try them on a piano. If you don't have one, use an online piano like this one:

[\(http://www.unleashingthedragon.com/VPiano.htm\)](http://www.unleashingthedragon.com/VPiano.htm)

You'll find that each chord type has its own character. They all instantly create different moods and atmospheres.

So how does this apply to jazz or playing in a band? If you look at any piece of music in (for example) a Real Book. You'll usually see a chord symbol above every bar. Usually a tune will go through several different chords (keys) over time. We call this the harmonic progression of the tune.

To play, and especially to solo in tune, we have to make sure that whatever we play follows or fits this harmonic progression. “Follows” meaning: we play in the same chord (key), and “Fits” meaning: we perhaps play other chords or keys, but in a way that works well with the chords of the harmonic progression of the tune we’re playing.

This is what **bebop** made very popular. It’s playing and improvising freely while following the harmonic progression. It also added a specific way of phrasing and a more syncopated rhythmic approach.

Watch the video of “Giant Steps” again. And this time. Look at the chord symbols above the bars.

<http://www.Unleashingthedragon.com/ST04.htm>

Having this image and knowledge should help you get started with harmonics. It’s a good frame of reference to approach harmonics when you’re getting started with these aspects of technique.

Let's Recap:

You now have all the material you need to get up to week 10 of the course: The concepts from the previous chapters are still summarized on the calendar, but I won't restate them all here. Since by now, you probably know the earlier ones by heart.

- Practice all major, minor (Dorian) scales across the whole instrument + etudes for 10 – 15 minutes.

Focus on finger fluency! (if possible use a metronome, and Tuning CD)

- Practice “playing by numbers” 10 – 15 minutes (if possible use a metronome)

- Practice switching keys while playing by numbers, or playing tunes (not until week 12).

- Play by ear whenever you can. Play along with the radio or TV as often and long as possible!

- Learn the scales intellectually (start reading books on harmony)

Really take ample time to get started with these concepts. These concepts really take practice and deep focus to cultivate.

6: Material Perfection

Ok, If you've taken your time with the exercises so far and persevered. Your foundational technique will have become very solid by now and your capacity for exploring will start to increase rapidly. Now that our foundation is really starting to come together, it's time to get serious about our equipment.

Why at this moment? Well, in order to properly evaluate different equipment we need to have a good basic skill set and some experience. The difference between an incredible saxophone and a very lousy one is really not that apparent to the untrained eye or ear. We first have to develop our basic skills to a point where we can really hear the benefits of one piece of equipment against another. This takes some time (usually at least a year or so).

I think this moment is a crucial one for optimizing our equipment. You see, our mouthpiece, reeds and sax are very much like a lover. We have to get to know them. The longer we stay with them the deeper the relationship starts to become and the more possibilities open up for us over time. If we keep switching materials all the time, we never form a deep relationship with them.

Like with a lover, there is a path that we have to walk with our equipment. We meet each other, we go for a drink and a chat, go see a movie, do silly things and have fun for a while, we meet each other's friends, parents, go on a vacation together, etc.

What we want with our equipment is very much like a happy relationship. It's something we can build on. It gives us comfort, inspiration and supports us in our endeavors. It's really two people becoming one and as you probably know, that kind of relationship doesn't happen overnight.

So first we have to take some time to learn the basic skills. Think of it this way:

if you were a great saxophone, would you want some halfwit idiot to play you?

Probably not!! You would rather want somebody to play you to your full potential right?

Once we have the skills to start looking for that illusive partner in crime. We can go hunting for the right stuff. We want to pick equipment that we can commit to for a long time. It's not that we can't or shouldn't ever switch after this, but for our learning process we really want to stay with one, well chosen set of equipment. At least for a few years, before we start exploring different things again.

To start we will have to get serious about the type of sound we want.

- Create time to listen to at least a dozen or more great saxophone players. Look here for a list with suggestions: <http://www.Unleashingthedragon.com/players.htm> Explore each one for a while and write down the qualities that you like about their sound. Use these as

components to try and form a very concrete auditory image in your mind, of what you want yourself to sound like. Then go out to every shop, market, or pawn shop you know. Visit every place that sells: saxophones, mouthpieces or reeds and just try everything!

Remember: **You can learn to play any mouthpiece, reed, or sax!** The important thing here is that you want to choose equipment that will bring you closer to the sound you want. Also, you really want to pick a combination that you will feel good about for at least some years to come.

Once you've made a choice, stick with it! There will be that new ...“whatever”... that always seems to come out two days after you bought some new stuff. Pay it no mind! You've got good stuff! Stick with it!

A good Saxophone:

There is some truth to the slightly dogmatic idea that the old Selmer's are the best out there. Back when all instruments were still handmade with love. The Selmer Company cranked out some amazingly good horns. It's hard to say exactly why, but old Selmer horns do have something very deep in their sound. If you can get one of these, I highly recommend you do so (if you like the sound of the horn).

On the other hand, there are good new saxophones being made today. The best criteria for judging them are your own ears. Just make sure to bring another player along when you go shopping, so you can hear the horn

being played from a distance (often a very different experience from what we hear while playing).

A fitting mouthpiece

1: Materials: Saxophone Mouthpieces are usually metal or hard rubber, but they're also made from wood, various plastics, porcelain and other materials. What makes one material better suited for one occasion can also make it completely wrong for another. When I first started hunting for my mouthpiece, I found I really didn't know enough about how mouthpieces work exactly. What the functions of all the different parts are and how they would affect my sound. So I went out into the world and asked a great many people a lot of questions. I found several things that are important to know when you are making a choice.

Any material can be and is being used in every music style.

When I started off I had the notion that there were rather clear rules.

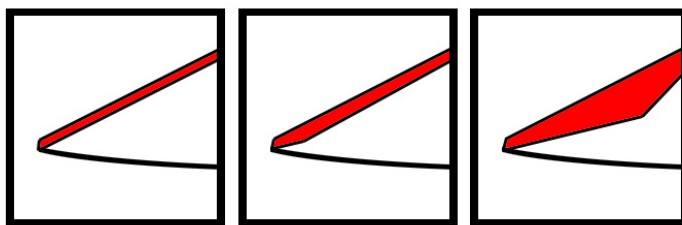
Jazz players play metal mouthpieces.

Classical players play special classical pieces.

This is not true. You should never let anyone fool you into thinking that there is music that you can't play with this or that mouthpiece, or saxophone, or reed. The only truism I found in this fable, is that some big band leaders indeed demand that you use a hard rubber piece. They

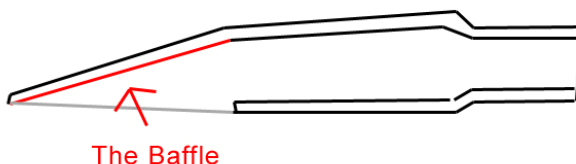
do this so everybody blends in nicely. Other than that we never have to worry that we need to play a certain material in order to play a certain music style. There are some fashion trends though. In general, metal mouthpieces are predominantly used by jazz and rock players, as well as by players who accompany house DJ's and such. Every material has its own characteristics, but through many tests and experiments science has found that the size and design of the mouthpiece are responsible for most of its sound characteristics. When choosing a mouthpiece it's best to let the design and size guide you, and consider materials only after that. There are a million things to learn about the design features of mouthpieces, but here is what you must know in order to make a good choice:

The Baffle:



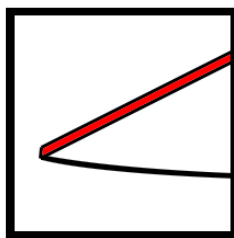
Much of the character of the sound comes from the baffle. It's the first place the sound hits as it starts its journey through the saxophone and therefore it's the most influential. It's really **THE place** where your sound gets made. We might call the baffle "**the shape of the**

inside roof of the mouthpiece” The baffle ends where the “chamber” of the mouthpiece begins.



There are four basic types of baffles. It’s good to know the different characteristics so we can predict what their influence might be on our sound.

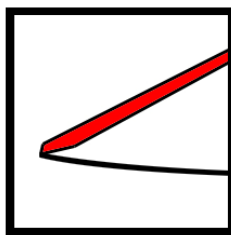
Straight Baffles



They do what they are named for, flowing evenly from the tip into the chamber. Mouthpieces with this baffle type deliver a clear consistent sound in all registers. However, they can sound a little dull or hollow sometimes. The first saxophone mouthpieces made by Adolphe himself were straight baffled pieces. These days they’re a good choice for soprano saxophones, because they tend to sound thin in the upper register.

They're also very suited for players with a naturally strong embouchure. Players that blow hard, tend to play a little sharp. Straight mouthpieces tend to counter this natural tendency somewhat.

Roll-Over Baffles



These Baffles have a slight curving right at the tip of the mouthpiece, which then straightens out quickly and continues much like a straight baffle. The curve at the start brightens up the sound, giving it an edgy quality and making it sound “Bigger”. At the same time these baffles retain much of the open and consistent qualities of the straight baffle.

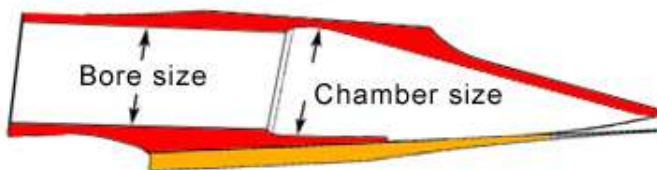
In some cases it can be hard to see the difference between a straight baffle and a roll-over baffle with the naked eye. The curve can be very small and subtle, so use your ears when in doubt. If it's bright and edgy, then it's a roll-over. The classic Otto Link jazz pieces are a good example of a roll over baffle.

Step Baffles



A step baffle is easily recognized by the sharp angle, usually located about halfway on the baffle. These baffles start very high and then drastically drop before merging into the chamber. The effect of this “step” is a very bright sound and the biggest projection of all mouthpiece types. Making it the perfect mouthpiece for most styles of rock, pop and R&B, because they let you cut through the rest of the band when needed. Step baffles tend to give a nice even sound across the range, although they do have a tendency to be a little sharp in the high register and the low notes might sound a little less fat and round. Step baffles are usually easy to play and have a great attack, which is why they allow for very large tip openings (increasing the projection even more). I play one of these baffles myself (a Lebayle Jazz metal (8*)).

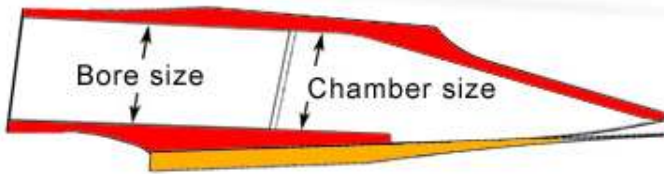
Chamber sizes:



The size of the chamber of the mouthpiece also has a significant effect on the sound we produce. There are four basic size types.

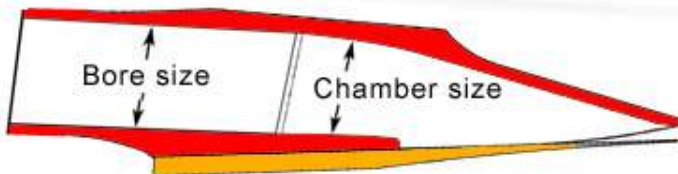
1: Large: The chamber is significantly larger than the bore. (Like in the picture above)

This makes the transition from the narrow tip rail into the large chamber smooth, and allows the air stream to spread producing a fat and warm sound. Large chamber mouthpieces lend themselves to a big fat bottom, and give a more open and spread sound in general. This is a very common choice among classic jazz musicians on the tenor saxophone and among classical players throughout the whole saxophone family.



2: Medium: The chamber is about the same size as the bore

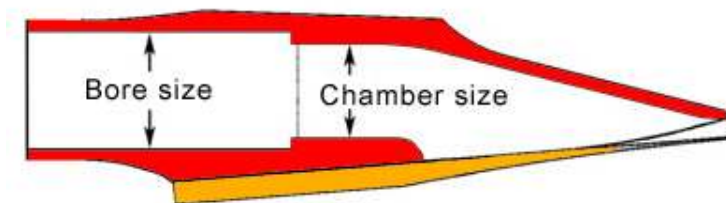
Most alto players prefer this chamber size. This chamber produces a full sound that is also centered with 'core' to it. They do not have the fat bottom end that large chamber mouthpieces have, but are still open and full sounding.



3: Small: the chamber is a little smaller than the bore

Small chamber mouthpieces have a so-called 'squeeze' in the interior shape of the chamber, making the chamber slightly smaller than the bore. These mpc's have a quick, very focused response. Think of putting your thumb over the end of a garden hose; the more you cover the hole, the quicker the water comes out. A small chamber mouthpiece is like having your thumb further over the end of the hose. The airstream moves very

quickly through a small chamber mouthpiece. Often these chambers are used with a high baffle to create a super-focused and bright sound.



4: Super small: the chamber is a lot smaller than the bore.

While looking in the bore through the open end of an extra-small chamber mouthpiece, you will see a pronounced circle in the chamber. This is due to the chamber being so much smaller than the bore. Super-small chambers are used for even more focus and power in the sound, as the air-stream moves extremely quickly.

Usually an extra-small chamber mouthpiece has a very high baffle and is used for rock-n-roll or R&B music. Soprano saxophone mouthpieces are the exceptions to this rule. With soprano mouthpieces extra-small chambers are almost always used. Because the opening of the neck on a soprano saxophone is so small relative to the bore of the mouthpiece, the extra-small chamber is simply narrowing the airstream to smoothly enter the neck of the saxophone. Plus, the sound of the soprano is formed more in the throat than in the mouthpiece.

Reeds

Reeds matter! Although the differences between brands are small, they are real! A good reed is a pleasure to play, while a faulty one can be a real disaster. I attended an actual reed workshop with a one of the top reed manufacturers and learned several things that are good to know.

1: The thickness of reeds that is stamped on the box (2.5...3.0...3,5...etc) is by approximation. Reed manufacturers don't make reeds with a certain resistance; they select them from the supply that nature gives them. So if you get a box of 2,5 strength reeds, it actually means that the producer put reeds in there that fall between the sizes 2,3 and 2,7 resulting in the fact that most of them will be either too thick or too thin.

A trick I learned from Branford Marsalis is to always buy your reeds too thick. So if you play a 2,5 strength reed, buy a box of 3.0. and then file them down to the right thickness. This way you can get far more out of a box of reeds, although it does take some extra time to file them down carefully.

A second trick is to leave them in the open for a while in a somewhat moist environment. The clearness of a reed's sound depends on the moisture level in the reed. Reeds often "dehydrate" while in their factory box. So when they come out, they will need some time to rehydrate before they sound good. This is why trying all reeds from a new box right away is usually a Greek

tragedy. At such a moment, most of the reeds will be bad simply because they are all dried out.

Picking a brand is very personal. The only real criterion is: How you like its sound! As with the rest of your setup, it's best to pick one type of reed and stick with it for a long time before we start checking out other brands or sizes again.

Some reeds are being marketed as “classical” or “jazz”. Although there is some truth to these segments. (classical players usually prefer a very clear sound while jazz players often like a more rugged sound), there is no rule that says that we can't play good jazz on a “classical” reed. Reeds don't have feelings! So a classical reed won't mind if we play jazz with it and vice versa. Don't let any of the marketing fool you. Just try a bunch of reeds and go with whatever type or brand gives you the sound you want.

Use the above info to assess your current material, and optimize your setup, or set up a plan to get better materials if you feel you need them.

7: Mouthpiece Magic

Now that we have found a good sax, mouthpiece and reed, and have our basic technique in order it's time to start really exploring our mouthpiece a bit more. The mouthpiece coupled with our embouchure is responsible for the biggest part of our sound. The horn really only amplifies and facilitates the lower pitches. So the mouthpiece is an instrument all by itself, learning to play it perfectly will add unbelievable depth and control to our sound.

Mouthpiece pitch

If we pull the saxophone apart from the mouthpiece while we're playing, we would hear that we are actually playing the same tunes on just the mouthpiece. However, there is a good chance it's not quite in tune on the mouthpiece. It's odd, but playing in tune on the mouthpiece has an enormous effect on our overall sound. The only problem is: We can't hear if we are playing in tune on the mouthpiece while it's on the horn. So we have to do something called: **Fixing, or tuning our mouthpiece pitch.**

It means we train ourselves to produce a steady, focused pitch through our mouthpiece. Depending on the saxophone we use, it's a:

Baritone sax: D Tenor sax: G Alto sax: A

Soprano sax: C (these are all "concert" pitches)

So the first step is to go see what pitch you are producing right now.

- **Take your tuner out**

- **close your eyes and play a long note on your mouthpiece (only).**

- **While you are holding a steady pitch, open your eyes and take a look at your tuner to see what pitch you are currently producing.**

- **Now adjust it to the appropriate pitch for your sax type.**

- **Close your eyes again and play a scale on your mouthpiece.**

- **Now try and produce that basic pitch again.**

- **Make sure to use your throat and larynx to tune the pitch. Not lip tension!**

- **The trick is to blow this fixed pitch on the mouthpiece all the time, but we have to learn to do it without being able to hear it.**

Practice this for 5 minutes before every practice session and hold the mental image in your head of producing this steady note on your mouthpiece.

Improving our mouthpiece pitch solves pretty much all remaining intonation problems. Once we combine this with proper breath support, posture, tongue positioning

and embouchure we will see the true potential of the saxophone starting to shine through.

Mouthpiece tunes and scales

In addition to the fixing of our pitch, it's a great exercise to play simple tunes (Twinkle twinkle little star, etc) and scales on just the mouthpiece. It's good to do this in combination with exercising our lower lip rolling. This increases our control of both the throat and our embouchure.

Mouthpiece long notes

Playing long notes in combination with the **inhale - exhale exercise** on just the mouthpiece, is a great way to increase your control. Once we have good control over the mouthpieces volume and can eliminate squeaks and harsh overtones, we will find that our sound has also transformed significantly when we play with the horn.

It's good to devote 10 to 15 minutes of our practice ritual to mouthpiece exercises for at least several weeks. If we do this, we will see a very substantial increase in our control and in the quality of our tone. I recommend doing these exercises **indefinitely**. If you stop doing these, you will find that the increased quality of your sound dwindles again quickly.

8: Overtone Practice

Overtone practice is one of the “holy” exercises of the saxophone. Once you start doing these exercises, you’re sort of in the club, because every other saxophone player out there knows your neighbors hate you too...

But what is overtone practice and why is it so good for your control and sound?

The saxophone produces it's variety of notes through the lengthening and shortening of the horn by using the pads we control with our fingers.

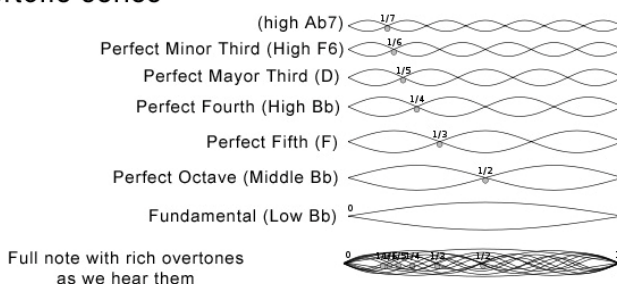
The shorter the tube the higher the note.

This means that we only use an extremely short part of the saxophone when we play the high notes. For example; to play a high F# we have essentially all the tone holes open. So the total length of the saxophone we are using when doing this is only about 15 or 20 cm. The smaller the part of the horn we **use/is vibrating**, the less “**partials**”, and “**rich overtones**” the saxophone produces.

What **partials** and **overtones** are exactly is a very long book of its own, but what we need to understand about them is that every note is comprised of something called: **the fundamental** and **the overtones** (or **partials**).

Their names already allude to their relation. The fundamental is what we might call the basic, or bear, or naked note. It's the part of the frequency that is most recognizable to our human ears as "the note". It's whichever note we are trying to play. The partials, or overtones are other parts of this same note, but these resonate simultaneously in higher (or lower) sound frequency's.

Overtone series



So on the one hand you have the naked note, and on the other hand: its pants, sweater, shoes, etc.

Or..

On the one hand you have the head of the family, and on the other the partner, the sons, the daughter, a dog and some chickens.

So a "note" is not a singular thing. We tend to like notes more if they are well dressed, or accompanied by as many of their beautiful sounding counterparts as possible.

A note can have as many as 8 or 9 overtones/partials (that our human ears can hear).

So on the one hand we know that: **The more of the horn we use, the more friends we send along with the fundamental.** On the other hand: **The design of the saxophone forces us to use less of the horn as we play the higher notes.**

Hence... **overtone practice**

Or...

How to play higher notes without sending any of them into the world naked, or without their friends and family.

The objective of overtone practice is to play the higher notes with as much rich overtones/partials as possible.

I hope you're still following me here. It took me a while to get my head around this. Don't worry if you have to re-read this chapter a few times before you get it all.

How does overtone practice work?

Essentially we take the low fingering of a note (using the full horn), for example the **low B** and then we try to play its first overtone the **middle B (still using the low B fingering)**. We achieve this by adjusting our throat and mouth cavity. The slight narrowing of the air corridor makes the air flow faster and this creates faster

vibrations in the reed, and thus we produce a higher tone.

We are now playing a higher note **while still using the full horn**. This way we can hear what the note would sound like when it's accompanied by all its brothers and sisters.

Once we've played the overtone, we switch to the normal fingering of the higher note. We then try to match the sound of the regular note to the overtone we just played, thereby increasing the number of overtones of the regularly played note.

Now you might be wandering... James... How can this be? You just explained how we can't get the brothers and sisters out when we're not using the whole horn, and now you're saying that we can?

Yes and No! You see, playing the sax turns out to really be a case of mind over matter. And if you know what you need to hear, then somehow the human body is able to get us very close, but we need to know exactly what to create, in order to do it. However, it is true that we can never get the regular fingering of a note to sound as perfect and rich as it does when it's played as an overtone, but we can come a long way. Also, many players use the overtones themselves on stage.

Once we get good control of our overtones we get a bonus for all our hard effort. We can start using the higher overtones (altissimo register), a series of very

high notes that can't be reached with the normal fingerings, extending the range of the saxophone upwards from 3, to almost 5 full octaves.

Here are some highly effective ways to practice overtones:

1: Tone matching

As I already explained in the previous chapter, a great exercise is to match the tone of the normal fingerings to their overtone. U can create every note on the sax with just the low tone fingerings (low D through low Bb). Use the **overtone practice chart** with this exercise.

The exercise consists of playing an overtone using the low note fingerings, and then switching to the regular fingering for that note. Over time you must master your throat, larynx and embouchure, in order to match the sound of the regular fingered note to the sound of the overtone.

It's an exercise that requires a true Zen mentality to complete. Especially the higher (altissimo) overtones (as many as 8 or 9 can be achieved) are ludicrously difficult to produce, But even though you may only reach these notes after years of practice, the benefits of the exercise will quickly become apparent in your every day playing.

A much richer sound and much better control.

2: staying relaxed while playing (high) long notes

We tend to tense up enormously when we play (or even sing) high notes. Eye brows, and chest rising, etc. A prerequisite for successfully playing the higher overtones is that we stay relaxed. Our embouchure and throat should remain relaxed and open. When playing higher overtones we should make the throat and larynx a little more narrow, but it shouldn't feel "tensed-up". It's like singing a high "iiiiiiiiii" sound. In contrast to an EA or AW sound.

A good exercise for training this is to play long notes in the very high register (high C to high F#) while focusing on keeping our embouchure and throat relaxed, and the notes sounding beautiful.

- Play them crescendo and decrescendo
- While playing a high B(5), lose the octave key and keep the note sounding beautiful, Then slowly, by the use of your throat (NOT YOUR LIPS), let the note sink an octave lower. Then without the use of the octave key, push it up an octave again using only your throat. Keep practicing this with the C5, B5, and A5 until you have very conscious control of your throat.

3: Playing overtones and altissimo over all low note fingerings. Use the **overtone practice chart** with this exercise.

Play the overtones as high as you can for all the low note fingerings: **Low Bb, B, C and Db**. Dedicate 10 minutes of your daily practice ritual to this. Like the tone matching exercise, this is a Zen mentality exercise. We have to stay very relaxed and focused. Go slow, don't tongue the notes, use an air attack and try to play the overtones crescendo and decrescendo. Be very sure not to use extra lip tension as a way to get the overtones out. That might work for the first 1 or 2, but it will prevent us from getting any higher. The achievement should come from increased control over our larynx and throat only.

After several days of practice you will already begin to notice the effects of these exercises on your overall sound. This is great but don't let it fool you into thinking you're done. It takes months or years to perfect your tone through the practice of overtones.

The altissimo register is very hard to play, especially in the beginning. It can take a really long time before you're even able to play just the first of them. Try to get there, but don't make it more important than it is. Charlie Parker almost never used altissimo notes. Their great for adding flavor and to show you have some serious skill, but the sax already has all the notes you need to be a great player!

Use the included altissimo chart to get you started on the alto and tenor altissimo fingerings. Keep in mind though, that playing altissimo is a trick of the body. It could be that another fingering works better for you. The listed fingerings are a good starting position, but you will have to experiment for yourself. You do this by first getting to a point where you can get the notes out. Then, while playing the note, you switch to different fingerings, adding a finger, or subtracting one at a time, until you find the way that works the best for you.

4: One extra tip:

Something a great many saxophone players mention when talking about overtones, is how important it is to imagine every note correctly before you play it. Pre-visualizing, or maybe I should say: **Pre-“hear” alising** each note before we play it is very important. This is why the “playing by numbers” exercise also helps tremendously with developing our tone, and being successful at playing the altissimo. We really need to tune our imagination and our physical skill to each other.

So always keep your mind in the game. If you’re having difficulties, it could also mean you’re just not imagining your notes clearly enough beforehand. It’s a real factor in your music.

Let's Recap:

- *Take a few minutes to fix your mouthpiece pitch before practicing (not until week 13)*
- *Practice all major, minor (Dorian)scales across the whole instrument + etudes for 15 – 20 minutes. Focus on finger fluency! (if possible use a metronome)*
- *Practice “painting by numbers” 10 – 15 minutes (if possible use a metronome).*
- *Practice switching keys while playing by numbers, playing etudes or playing tunes. (not until week 13)*
- *Play by ear whenever you can. Play along with the radio or TV as often and long as possible!*
- *Learn the scales intellectually (start reading books on harmony)*
- *Get your material (sax, mouthpiece, reeds) up to your level*
- *Practice mouth piece pitch exercises (scales, simple tunes) 10 minutes (not until week 12)*
- *Practice mouthpiece long notes 5 minutes (not until week 12)*
- *Practice overtone matching (not until week 13)*

- Practice High long notes (focus on relaxing throat and controlling the larynx.) (not until week 13)

- Practice altissimo notes over the low note fingerings. (Also see altissimo fingering chart in the extra's map) (not until week 14)

9: Playing with other people

Quite frankly there is no more fun way to practice than playing with other people, but it's also very good to further enhance our musical skills. Everything is very condensed when on a stage. If you make a mistake or discover something new while playing on stage I guarantee you'll never forget it.

There is a big difference between playing alone at home and playing with people, preferably in front of an audience. I guess we could compare it a little bit to studying to become a surgeon. Studying how the human body works from books is all fun and games, but it's still quite far removed from actually standing over an operating table.

The only thing that can get us ready for that sort of thing, is just doing it over and over again. The same principle applies to performing. No matter how well we can play in our own living rooms, once we step onto a stage in front of an audience, everything is different.

If you want to get onto a local stage at some point and you're not quite sure how to do it, Here are some things you can do to make it happen one step at a time:

1: Start with a music night:

Find your local jazz or music club (or that pub that has a guy with guitar there once a week) and make a commitment to go there once a week. Once you're there;

go and talk to all the musicians, ask them what other places there are in the region that have live music. This will likely put you on a bit of journey, especially if you live in a bigger city. Take this one fixed night a week to visit the places you hear about. Listen to the music and learn from it. Get to know the local music scene and people.

2: Try to get into a band

Most cities have music workshops of some kind or open sessions. Once you find these and get into contact with other local musicians, ask around for people who are looking to practice with others, want to form a band or who need a saxophonist.

There are great play-along CD's out there. Aebersold-type play along records are a great way to start bridging the gap between the living room and an actual stage. They can help us to get used to playing with others, the pacing of a band, having to structure our solo's, following the harmonic patterns, etc.

4: Play at sessions

Open sessions are a great place to further hone your skills. A good way to get yourself prepared to sit in at a session is to visit it often and get to know the people who play there. Soon they'll start asking you when you're going to bring your saxophone along.

Get a book with some standards (preferably with a play along CD) and practice one or two classic standards like for example: "Footprints", or "Summertime". You can

pretty much be sure that the other players will all know these.

Make sure you can play the chorus by heart and that you feel fairly comfortable improvising for a few bars. Don't worry if you can't improvise for the length of a full chorus yet. Most music is a fixed number of bars. Just ask the session leader to signal you for a solo, and tell him you probably won't be able to do a full solo. Just ask him/her to be ready to pick the solo up as soon as you run out of ideas. If it's your first time, they'll be happy to help.

Keep doing that every week! Try to stick with the same two or three songs for a while. Play them at home with the CD and on the bandstand, until you can do a decent solo on each of them. Once you can do that, try adding one new song to your library every week.

You'll find that playing with others brings all your skills together and solidifies your technique. Once you do this for a while you'll start getting confident in your own abilities. Slowly you might start to visit other venues until you feel you can play just about anywhere without problems.

Surviving on a stage can be a hard thing to do. It's a jungle out there, so here's:...

The stage(session) survival guide:

1: If you play a false note....It could mean everybody else was out of tune: Music is very relative. If you play a false note, and act as if you played a false note (stumble, look up, look insecure, etc) it will definitely come off as a false note to the audience.

However: If you play a false note, and play it like you own it/know exactly what you're doing, people will:

1: Often not notice at all:

2:: Think you're a musical genius, and are trying to take the song in interesting new directions.

2: If you can't find the key, or the right notes, just play the melody correctly.

Think of any melody.

Now play it on your sax. Intentionally use completely the wrong notes, but play the melody correctly with these false notes.

You'll notice, you can still perfectly make out the melody. Our brains recognize melodies by their pattern, not by their key, or by how "in-tune" they are being played.

This is a very handy trick to know. If you find yourself on a stage with at least some other brass or woodwind players and you can't find the notes or the right key, play the melody along with them using completely the wrong

notes. In fact... make sure you don't accidentally play a good note here and there. Make sure their all way out of tune.

What will happen is: The false notes you play will create all kinds of cool sounding harmonies with the rest of the brass and woodwinds, since you're following the melody. It will sound fine. In fact, it will often sound very cool! Improvisers also often use this technique to spice things up a bit.

So it can both save your life, and make you sound like a genius.

You can also do this in improvisation situations. If you don't know the melody, just keep a close eye on the fingers of one of your brass or woodwind colleagues, and play a note whenever they play one.

Learn your roles: Everybody has a role on the stage and this role varies throughout each song. In one tune the base might be very apparent, in another the piano or sax might be more at the forefront.

Be aware of what you role is in every tune you're playing. During your solo you can do whatever you want, but during the rest of the song, you should play your role to a tea, supporting other people's solo's and creativity.

The most important element of every musical performance is what we call: "The story"

Your role should support and augment this story, making it more interesting, and keeping the audience engaged. Also: Never play something just because you're on a stage with an instrument in your hands. Every note you create should somehow increase the whole. If you feel like you don't have anything interesting to say, keep shut and go have a drink at the bar!

The story:

Each song is a story, every solo is sort of a mini story within this larger story. It's kind of your personal take on it.

Ornette Coleman said it best when he proclaimed: The intro and the chorus are the territory.... The rest... is the adventure...

It's a great paradigm for what you're doing as a band when you're performing on a stage. Now a big part of every player's personal journey is to discover your own way of telling a good story. So I'm not going to spoil it by going into this very deeply. I'll just give you 3 things that are the most essential to know:

Use some elements of repetition. It's great if you can tell your story in a way that gives the audience a chance to get ahead of you.

Meaning: By using a certain repetitive element in your solo, people will come to expect a certain something about that element. If you can get them to really expect a

certain thing to come, you can create a great sense of longing and anticipation in your audience.

For example a long super high note. Your audience feel it coming. They can hear you're building up to it, but every time it feels like your almost there, you go for a little loop into another direction. It's like you're teasing them, sweeping up their emotions and heightening their involvement. When it finally comes, it makes the climax all the more enjoyable.

Break the pattern. It's very important to really break from every previously played line. We'll be naturally tempted to use phrases that are equal in length, speed, separation and structure. We have to be conscious to keep varying these in interesting ways. Our phrases should fit together nicely and feel as a coherent whole, but we should avoid obvious repetition, except if we're using it to create anticipation as mentioned above.

Think of it like this: If you hear someone telling a story in a language you don't understand, you can still clearly make out that they are telling a story. Music is the same. Your audience should be able to tell your telling an amazing story, even if they don't have a clue to what exactly it is you're telling them about.

Two great little words we can always keep in mind to help us achieve this are: **Simple**, and **Space**. Meaning: Keep it simple, and use lot's of space (pauses) in your solo's.

Use the range of the instrument: Making good use of our range is very key to making our solo's work or not. I got a great metaphor for this when I had the pleasure of being a jury member at a national belly dancing contest. One of the criteria we had to judge was "use of stage space".

It meant: Did the dancer use the "range" of the stage to make the performance more interesting? Performances that used a lot of stage space, moving from the back to the front several times etc, were indeed much more lively and interesting than the more static ones.

this principle can also be applied to the range of the saxophone. We want our solo's to travel between the higher and lower registers in interesting ways. Staying in one area for while, then moving on to another, and back again, and so forth. This adds a feeling of depth and richness to our music.

On the one hand, we don't want our music to become so iritic that it feels like it's jumping all over the place, but we do want it to feel open, like it could go anywhere.

Watch these videos again with your new eyes and see what structures you can now make out.

www.Unleashingthedragon.com/ST01.htm

10 Bringing it all together

Over the last months we have added a lot of stuff to your saxophone practice . As you perfect your routines through daily repetition and adaptation, you will begin to come to a point where you can start with developing a personal touch to your sound.

I think it was either Charlie Parker or Miles Davis who said: First you have to learn it all, then you have to forget it all again.

So now that we've learned it all, it's time to forget it all again. It's actually a very important part of every learning process to step away from the material for a while. To stop thinking about your technique all together and just play.

I don't mean that you can stop practicing; I just mean it's important to stop thinking about the techniques. Go through the exercises like you normally would, but put the focus of your learning elsewhere for a few months.

Start learning about Jazz history, or raising chickens, or how to cook an amazing lasagna, But leave learning more about saxophone technique out of your mind for a while. This way your mind has time to process things and singe all the new information and routines into your automatic (subconscious) systems.

If you have done all the exercises and have taken your time throughout the course, your technique is very solid now.

The last and most important part is to learn to **trust your own abilities from now on!**

You know everything you need to know about saxophone technique! All that stands between you and great ability and sound now, is how much you practice. So go out there and play your ass off!

May the sound be with you!

James Dóxx

I hope this course helped you improve your playing. Do me a favor, let me know your thoughts on the course.

I will try to update and improve it regularly and off course I will try to answer any questions you might have.

You can send your feedback/comments/questions to:

James@hellosaxophone.com

Special thanks to:

Floor Wittink:



The great lessons, the many long, and inspiring conversations we've had about the saxophone and it's music continue to be a great source of inspiration.

Wolf Martini:



You're a great player and teacher. I hope we do a lot more workshops together in the future.

Tineke Postma:



In addition to just being a great saxophonista ;). You really helped to get my playing, understanding of harmony and improvisation up to a whole new level. Your seriousness and dedication to your craft I'm sure will be the stuff of legends some day.

Susanne Alt:



Thanks so much for all your detailed comments and feedback during the writing of this book. It's great to have someone like you watch my back. I love your music and I hope you'll continue to make lot's more of it!

Arnold Dooyeweerd:



Having access to your great musical knowledge and skill has probably contributed more to my musical development than I even realize. Thank you for your honest and constructive critique. The many opportunity's you gave me to take the stage and your great advise and training.

Emiel Wienholts:



Man, you're probably the most dedicated creative musician I know. And that's saying something. You're songs are great. Really the stuff of future standards, I'm

thrilled to work and play with you in the future. Thanks for all your help with the course.

Branford Marsalis:



It was both inspiring and enlightening to learn from you. Perhaps no coincidence.. “..Mo Better Blues being one of my all-time favorites...” But without any exaggeration. I learned a lot from our meeting last year in Amsterdam. Improvisation isn’t about repeating pre-practiced phrases or brackets, it’s all about the story, the moment, the real spontaneous adventure, which is also the intended spirit of this book. Thanks for the inspiration.

Micheal Karn:



Thank you so much! Your in-depth feedback and advice were key in putting the icing on the cake (so to speak). You know jazz in a way that can I only hope to know it one day. I felt very honored and blessed to have a real NY jazz man helping me out. Also, your fresh approaches on the Tenor have become an inspiration that I'm sure will help lead my own music in interesting directions in the future.

Steve Neff:



It was great to have a fellow teacher on board. Kind of being on the same path, just from different angles. It was amazing to hear your take on things. Let's keep on pushing saxophone education in new directions!

About the author:



James Dóxx was born on the 23th of April 1983 in the small town of: Capelle aan den IJssel (The Netherlands). He's currently based in Amsterdam and hopes to enjoy the saxophone and contribute to its music and culture for many more years to come.