Teaching the Saxophone Embouchure

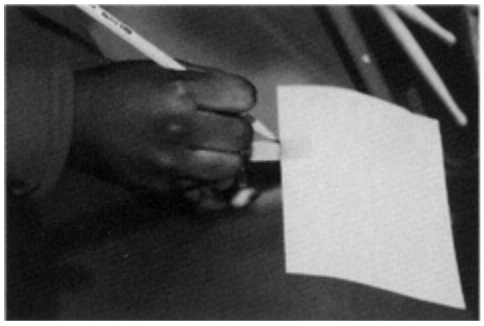
No doubt you have heard those old saxophone jokes, like "What's the difference between the sound of a saxophone and a lawn mower engine? Answer: You can tune the lawn mower." Pretty bad, eh!

There must be a reason, however, for all those jokes about the poor tone quality and poor intonation of saxophone playing. In the Spring 2000 issue of *Kjos Band News*, I wrote an article entitled "A + E = T." In other words, A (Air) + E (Embouchure) = T (Tone). But why have saxophones, in particular, taken the brunt of all those jokes regarding poor tone quality and poor intonation? I believe it is because many saxophone players are not playing with saxophone embouchures. Specifically, I believe that many saxophone players are playing with clarinet embouchures. This can be easily determined by discovering which pitch they are playing with their mouthpiece only. The pitch that is played on the mouthpiece of single reed instruments *will* determine the tone quality.

Assist students in forming and developing their embouchure by having each be responsible for providing a small mirror that can be placed on the music stand. This will allow students to see that their embouchure is being formed properly.

Ensure a good formation of the saxophone embouchure by having each saxophone student do the following:

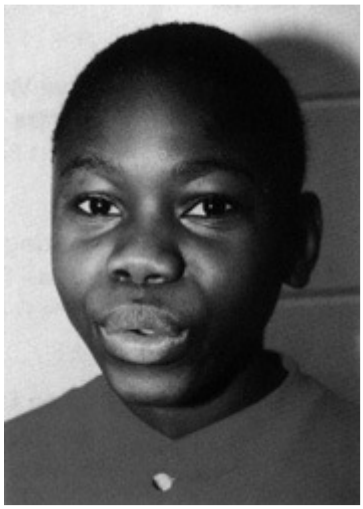
1. Slip a piece of paper between the reed and the mouthpiece and slide the paper down, away from the tip, until it stops.



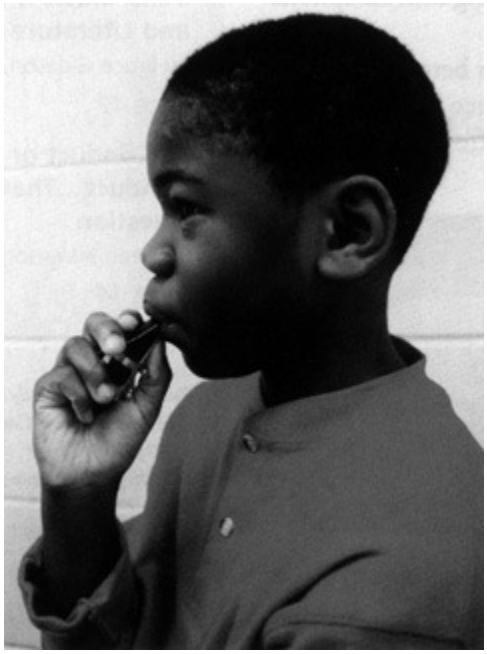
2. With a pencil, draw a light line on the reed connecting the two sides of the paper. This line will indicate where the lower lip should he placed. Remove the paper.
3. Hold the mouthpiece with one hand and place the tip of the thumb just under the line that was drawn on the reed.



4. Shape the mouth as if saying “whee-too.” Hold the mouth in the “whee” position while saying “too.”



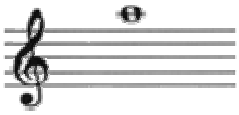
5. Cover the bottom teeth with a small amount of the lower lip.
6. Place the mouthpiece in the mouth so that the lower lip touches the thumb that was placed just below the line that was drawn on the reed. The thumb should serve as a “stop” allowing just the right amount of mouthpiece in the mouth. Too much mouthpiece in the mouth will cause a harsh, raucous tone. Too little mouthpiece in the mouth will cause a constricted or strident tone.



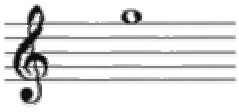
7. Rest the top teeth directly on the mouthpiece. Close the mouth in a drawstring fashion with equal support on all sides of the reed. The chin should be flat and pointed. Using the mirror, check to see that the embouchure is formed properly.
8. Take a deep breath of air (filling the back of the throat) and play a long, steady tone.

If the embouchure is formed properly, the following concert pitches should sound:

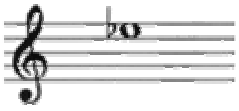
Alto Saxophone



Tenor Saxophone



Baritone Saxophone



Many young saxophonists play with a higher pitch resulting in a strident tone. To lower the pitch, have the student relax the embouchure as if saying “O.” To raise the pitch have the student pull the corners of their mouth as if saying “oo.”

To ensure a well-established saxophone embouchure, have the student play long tones daily.
By following these simple steps, students will learn to form a good saxophone embouchure that will be important to the development of a beautiful saxophone tone. It may even put an end to those terrible saxophone jokes.

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