

## 6. Body Parts

*“How loose can you get?”*

“I thought you were going to start with your teeth off of the mouthpiece.”

“I did.”

“I know you thought you did.”

Okay, here we go again. My perception and his are different. One would think that I could tell with some assurance that my teeth were not touching the mouthpiece before I started to play the phrase of the day. But it gets worse.

“I think you don’t know how to open your mouth,” he said, sounding concerned as he stared at my mouth, frowning.

As I reacted to this surprising and seemingly ridiculous statement, Phil approached and moved the mouthpiece out of the way and placed his thumb under my front incisors.

“When you take a breath, relax and do this.” He suddenly pushed upwards, snapping my head back an inch or so. “Now your throat is open and your jaw can relax.”

This startling action certainly gave me a different feeling, causing me to duplicate what he had done so I could get a better handle on what I had just experienced. Sure enough, when I took a breath and jerked upward on my front teeth with my jaw relaxed, I felt more “open” internally. When I felt for tension in my embouchure, I

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could feel how this was different from just opening my mouth by lowering my jaw. This particular motion made me feel as though I was relaxing my face as I opened my mouth, which in turn made the muscles in my jaw actually feel as though they were relaxing instead of just moving to a different position.

By stopping me when he saw I didn't start with my teeth off of the mouthpiece, Phil was essentially pointing out that I had lost the ability to properly time the sequence of fingers first, air second, mouth last. By understanding the motion of opening and closing my mouth as I took a breath, I could then more accurately control exactly when my teeth would touch the mouthpiece. The hard interface between teeth and mouthpiece is also a better reference than the less definite lip/reed connection.

At first I thought it seemed odd and slightly obsessive to focus on something that didn't usually merit much attention, but it soon became apparent how important the procedure for starting a note was in maximizing an optimum sound and the musicality in my playing. He had stated many times, "It's all about the sound," so anything that could possibly interfere with optimal sound production was worth examining in order to understand the dynamics in play.

Analyzing the way in which I addressed the mouthpiece was essentially about allowing the reed to make the best sound possible. Another part of that process is finding the best lip location on the mouthpiece/reed combination where the tone contains the maximum number of desirable harmonics. By experimenting with the tone by moving the lip/embouchure contact position from the tip of the

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mouthpiece millimeter by millimeter away from the tip, the tonal character, volume of tone and total sound volume will change. Particular changes are dependent on the reed strength, reed cut, slope of the baffle, angle of the facing, chamber size, etc., so every combination of reed-mouthpiece will have a different sweet spot. Phil's technique for finding this spot on the saxophone was to take the mouthpiece and neck off of the instrument and blow steadily at each new position, listening for a full, free tone, while avoiding a wild sound. Each time a new position is tried, the proper approach to blowing must be performed

I was immediately told to stop "puffing," and instead blow a steady stream of air so the tone could be properly evaluated. Also added was the admonishment to not start the sound by tonguing, which led to a new subset of considerations.

The basic goal, he said, is to make as much music as possible with what you are given. Tonguing is an action that's supposed to signify the definite beginning of a sound, or an action that interrupts the sound. At this point in my training, he declared that tonguing was to be eliminated wherever possible until I learned how to tongue more correctly. So to minimize the "tonguing variable" in determining the optimum position for my embouchure by blowing on the neck/mouthpiece only, I was told to only blow with no tonguing.

As I tried again, he pointed out how much tension was in the muscles around my mouth.

"Well, I have to make an embouchure to blow the air through the mouthpiece."

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“Not now you don’t. We’re trying to find how to get enough air through the mouthpiece so the reed will vibrate, but with the least amount of interference with the reed’s vibrations. Feel air escaping around your mouth as you blow and then just enough lip pressure to seal the leak. Absolute minimum pressure on the reed! How loose can you get?”

I tried again, but he yelled, “Looser!” I got so loose that I got a raucous goose honk. “Now we’re getting somewhere!” he exclaimed. “Now just add tiny amounts of embouchure pressure. Remember – minimums.”

At this point, he took the mouthpiece/neck from me and told me to open my mouth. He then placed the mouthpiece onto my lower lip, pressed down a little and rolled my lip across my lower teeth as he moved it in and out of my mouth. “Feel the thickest part? That’s where your lip should always be. Don’t mess with it!” He also cautioned me to make sure I was evenly supporting the reed across its width and that the mouthpiece was going straight into my mouth. Any angle other than perpendicular would cause an uneven response from the reed because it would not be damped evenly by the lip.

Now that I understood I was working for minimum interference with the reed and I had the correct placement and alignment, I quickly found which positions worked and which didn’t and ended up in a slightly different place on the mouthpiece. When I put the saxophone back together and went back to the same position and embouchure feel I had just worked out, I also found myself making a significantly different and better sound.