



The Saxophone embouchure

Over the years I have been very fortunate to have taken lessons with and attended master classes by some of the world's greatest saxophonists. At some point nearly all these saxophonists have discussed their ideas and views on the sax embouchure. I will say now that none of my ideas here are revolutionary or new and indeed owe a great deal to George Garzone, Jerry Bergonzi and Larry Teal.

The Saxophone embouchure is the position of the facial muscles, teeth, and the shaping of the lips around the mouthpiece.

One of the most common complications I have encountered with players at any level is a tightly pulled-back "smiling" formation of the mouth, with lots of pressure being applied by the lower teeth and jaw. This in effect traps the reed reducing the vibration of the reed which can cause a thin, pinched tone, poor intonation, a repeatedly occurring squeak in the sound created by the pressure of the lower teeth biting into the reed, and problems producing the lower notes (see **Sound Production and Articulation in the lower register**). There are several elements that must be examined in order to ensure that you or your students are forming a good saxophone embouchure: embouchure position on the mouthpiece, formation of the embouchure corners, alignment of the upper and lower teeth, and the amount of pressure exerted by the lower teeth and jaw.

The embouchure must make contact with the mouthpiece at the point at which the reed and mouthpiece rails meet. This contact point can be found by inserting a piece of paper between the reed and mouthpiece. Push the paper downward until it comes to a comfortable stop; mark this position with your thumb (or draw a pencil line), pull the paper out, and form the embouchure at the point marked by your thumb. You will often find, particularly on the bigger Saxes, that too little mouthpiece is going into the mouth. This small change can have dramatic results in terms of sound production.



The corners of the mouth/embouchure should be focused inward,

not pulled back as if you are smiling. With inwardly focused corners, sufficient support is provided to the upper and lower lips so that they will not be too tense, allowing for the reed to vibrate to its maximum. Tightly drawn corners will have an adverse effect on the vibration of the reed, possibly cutting off the sound completely (especially in the higher register), and causing a thin tone with poor intonation.

A further thing to consider is the alignment of the upper and lower jaw. For most of us, the natural position of our jaw is that of a slight overbite. A few people however, have naturally occurring under bites, and it should be noted that people with severe under bites may have trouble forming a proper embouchure. For purposes of playing the saxophone, we should aim to achieve an even bite; that is, the upper and lower teeth should be in complete alignment without an overbite or under bite. This will likely require the lower jaw to push forward just slightly to be in alignment with the upper teeth.

A habit that many saxophonists develop very early in their playing is biting into the lower lip with the lower teeth. Many think that the lower lip acts as a cushion into which your teeth can bite into; again, this results in the reed being unable to vibrate properly, not to mention the pain that can be caused by the teeth actually restricting blood flow to the lip. To get round this you should support the mouthpiece from the top teeth. When placing the mouthpiece in your mouth push the mouthpiece up into your top teeth, and then bring your bottom lip up to rest against the reed, then form the rest of the embouchure by tightening from the corners, do not exert any pressure from the lower jaw, the chin should not be bunched up, but should remain flat in a firm but relaxed position. If this done correctly it will allow the reed to vibrate freely producing a strong well focused tone.

There are some good exercises that can help to strengthen the musculature of the face used in the formation of the embouchure. (These exercises have been taken from *The Art of Saxophone Playing* by Larry Teal, published by Summy-Birchard. This is an excellent book for all students and teachers.)

The first exercise focuses on the corners of the mouth. Whistle; you will notice that the mouth corners move automatically towards the centre. Now smile, moving the corners of your mouth back as far as you can. Alternate between Whistling and smiling, start slowly, but in a regular rhythm, for about 2-3 minutes. Repeat this exercise 3 times a day and you will soon notice the muscles growing stronger.

The second exercise focuses on the chin muscles. Push the lower lip tightly up against the upper lip. Try to keep your lips in line, with no protrusion of the lower lip, but you must press as hard as possible. Hold the lips together for ten seconds. Repeat twenty times.