

# **Saxophone Workshop**

## **by Peter Ponzol**

### **Chapter 6**

#### **The Saxophone**

During my workshops, there are always many questions about saxophones, and if the old ones were better.

Let's face it - with all of the modern technology available, including computer controlled machines, etc., it only makes sense that it should be possible to make a better saxophone today than 40 or 50 years ago. The instruments made today have better intonation and mechanisms that are easier to play. Then why are so many players willing to pay more for an older instrument than for a new one? I think that it's partly myth, legend and habit. Musicians are very reactionary when it comes to something they have played for many years. It's not easy to get used to something different no matter how little the difference is.

This might explain why so many older players and teachers hold on to the older horns, but what about younger players wanting these vintage saxophones? I think that most of it lies in the fact that their teachers probably play one, and that they see so many photos of the great players playing one. Of course, many of these photos are very often from the same period as the instruments themselves, or if more recent photos, are photos of the older players who grew up with these vintage models.

Remember, these horns were not always "vintage". I remember my teachers telling me that when the Mark VI replaced the Balanced Action models, they hated the new models and the price for the older models increased. Players from this generation will still tell you that the Balanced Action was the best. For example most of the photos of Trane playing a Balanced Action are from the time before the VI was released. Later photos show Trane playing a VI.

During the early days of the Mark VI there were many other choices for saxophonists, particularly jazz players. Most of my teachers played Conn. We tend to forget that Selmer was only one of many makers of saxophones. The American names that come to mind are; Conn, Buescher, Martin, Olds, King and many stencil brands made by these companies. Some of the French companies besides Selmer were; Leblanc, SML, Donlet, Buffet and several others whose names escape me at the moment. These saxophones were unique, they looked and sounded different from each other. With the Mark VI, Selmer defined what a modern saxophone looks like, and since then it is impossible for any maker to design a saxophone that does not resemble a Selmer.

Prior to the Mark VI, each maker's saxophones looked really different from each other and I feel that there was more room for innovation because of this. Today, not one maker will take a chance to go in a different direction.

I feel this has created the unfortunate situation of having every saxophone look like a Selmer copy.

Many of these older saxophone companies were small family businesses that were started by musicians who actually played the instrument that they made. Many of these small companies have disappeared and instrument making has gone the way of most big business. However, this does not mean that the horns being made today are not good - in many ways they are better. It's just that they are all pretty much the same. The differences between them are not as great as they were 40 years ago. I'm certain that if someone were to come out with a brand new saxophone that looked and sounded different, no matter how good, everyone would say that it's great, but...

I wish that someone would prove me wrong, because I think it would be wonderful to have more choices. I, for example, have some ideas that have never been used that would make for a unique new model saxophone. As of this writing, I have not found a company willing to take the chance.

Also, there is the entrance of China into the instrument market. I remember when we laughed at Japanese instruments, yet today, they are making some of the finest saxophones in the world. Next came Taiwanese instruments, some of which are very good. With the advent of CNC (Computer Numeric Control) machines, a saxophone can be made anywhere. Since all saxophones today look like Selmer's, it's very difficult for players, particularly students, to tell the difference. Every time I look on eBay, I see some name I've never heard before, with strange finishes and designations, like "new 2007 model". Give me a break, this is not the automobile market.

The Asian market is very difficult to look through. Most of the names are not factories but traders who buy finished instruments and have their name put on them. Some small factories buy finished parts and simply assemble the instruments. So, how do you know what you are buying? The best way is to rely on a trusted name that you know. There aren't many left. Names that come to mind are Selmer Paris, (Selmer USA is the distributor of Selmer Paris saxophones in the U.S., and they also make their own line of saxophones), Keilwerth, Borgani, Rampone, Yanagisawa and Yamaha. Even some of these have their student models made in the Far East. There are some excellent saxophones from the Far East, but so far, with little innovation. Perhaps one of these companies will be interested to develop something new and unique.

It's very sad when I think about the U.S. saxophone market. All those great names from the past are gone. As of this writing, there is not one saxophone made in the U.S. I would really like to see that change, but to a younger market that really doesn't remember these saxophones, it really doesn't matter. It's just a case of nostalgia for those of us who remember a different time.