

# An Approach to Playing Lead Alto in a Big Band

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# Discussion Topics

- Understanding the roles of the lead alto player in the big band / saxophone section
- Sound and mouthpiece/reed setup
- How to lead the saxophone section/band
- Developing your skill-set and sound

# The Roles of the Lead Alto Player

- Responsible for “singing” the part you play
- Be the “voice” of the saxophone section
- Be expressive; make the most of the melody
  - Dynamics, articulations, and inflections
- Blend and match sound with the other lead players (trumpet/trombone)
- Be a leader, not a soloist. Save your presence for solo sections and sax solis.
- Conducting the sax section and/or the band
  - Dynamics, starts, cut-offs, conducting with your horn or free hand

# Sound and Mouthpiece Setup

- Your sound will always be unique because IT'S YOURS!
- Sound gives the sax section its identity
- Have a mouthpiece that feels comfortable and responds
- Use the proper strength reed to get an even and consistent sound

# Mouthpieces...

- TRY A LOT OF THEM!
- The higher the number (facing), the brighter the sound (usually), and vice versa.
- Every person's mouth is different. Try a variety of mouthpieces with a variety of reed strengths
  - My alto setup is: New York Meyer 5M (opened), with a Vandoren ZZ #3
- Ask experienced players about their setup

# Mouthpieces...

- A good mouthpiece will allow you to execute anything you need to without sacrificing your sound. Ask yourself these questions when trying mouthpieces:
  - Is the pitch easy to control? (You don't want too easy...)
  - Will it let me be expressive? (vibrato, dynamics, attacks)
  - Do I get the characteristic sound I hear in my head? (Record yourself playing the mouthpiece and compare with others)
  - Is the sound consistent throughout the range?

# How to Lead the Saxophone Section

- Know how you will play your part:
  - In your own way
  - In a solid way
  - In a way that sounds good
  - In a way that is easy to follow
  - In the most consistent way possible

# How to Lead the Saxophone Section

- Ways to be expressive and lead the section
  - Add dynamics to long tones
  - Emphasize all dynamics and articulations; pay attention to detail
  - Slightly raise or lower your horn when doing a crescendo or decrescendo
  - Use inflections (TASTEFULLY): vibrato, lip slurs, bends
  - Be CONSISTENT!



# How to Lead the Saxophone Section

- Ways to be expressive and lead the section
  - Breathe a beat before entrances
  - Use a little motion with your breath
    - This gives the best chance for the whole section to play together
  - Use your body and horn to assist with cut-offs

# Lead Alto Roles in the Big Band

- Lead and be the voice of the saxophone section
- Follow and match the lead trumpet player in the band
- When in unison with the lead trombone, blend into and follow the lead trombone
- Save your sax “presence” for sax lines or sax solis

# Lead Alto Roles in the Big Band

- Blend or disappear into the brass when playing with the brass section (saxes are the color of the band)
- Exaggerate dynamics in a tasteful and appropriate way
- Listen to the ride cymbal and the bass for feel and good time
- Avoid over-playing. It's all about balance and consistency!

# How to Lead the Band

- If there is no conductor, it may fall to you as the lead alto player to direct the band.
  - Learn to conduct simple 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 time signatures
  - Learn to use a free hand or your horn to bring the band in, cut the band off at the end of a tune, or give dynamic direction
  - Know your music well enough so that when you have to direct the band, you can go back to playing your part with ease

# Developing Skills and Sound

- Read music EVERY DAY! You must have strong reading skills!
- LISTEN! The best lead alto players listen and learn from the masters. (A short list will be provided at the end)
- Play in as many bands as possible to gain a knowledge of the repertoire
- Learn how to play in as many styles as you can
- Develop confidence by studying and learning as much as you can - The more confident you are, the more effective and consistent you will be as a player!

# Developing Skills and Sound

- Learn your doubles!
  - Clarinet
  - Flute
  - Soprano sax
  - Oboe/piccolo optional

# Developing Skills and Sound

- Practice sound and tonal exercises: Long tones, ballads, matching pitch with a tuner, intervals with a tuner
- Learn melodies: Great American Songbook (standards), jazz standards, pop melodies, etc.
- Listen to players you like and research their influences.

# Selected Listening - Lead Alto Players and their Bands

- Johnny Hodges - Duke Ellington Band
- Marshall Royal - Count Basie Band
- Don Redman/Benny Carter - Fletcher Henderson Band
- Woody Herman - Woody Herman Band
- Phil Woods - Quincy Jones, Dizzy Gillespie, Clark Terry
- Lennie Niehaus - Stan Kenton Orchestra
- Jerome Richardson, Dick Oatts - Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Band
- Sherman Irby - Jazz at Lincoln Center Band