



The Saxophone

From squawks to the big stages

Charlie Parker acrylic painting by Leanne Nelson

By Terry Hanck

The saxophone as we know it today was invented in the mid-1800s in Belgium by Adolphe Sax amid a lot of controversy with classical music lovers. In the United States, the horn tradition with jazz and blues took hold in New Orleans and then moved up the rivers to Memphis, St. Louis, Kansas City and Chicago, and spread into Texas and beyond.

I didn't pick up the horn until I was 21. For two years, I just squawked and grunted and scared my friends, while attempting to play avant-garde or free jazz, before I had learned anything about music. So I went back to the music I loved when I was growing up. That was when rock 'n' roll first hit with white audiences.

Most of it was coming out of New Orleans from a studio run by Cosimo Matassa on labels like Specialty, Imperial and Atlantic. A lot of it was all the same band. Most of the solos were on saxophone by Lee Allen or Herb Hardesty. It was all R&B then. The term "rock 'n' roll" came later. I really liked Ray Charles when I got out of high school, and David "Fathead" Newman

was his tenor sax player on most of the recordings. I got to see both Ray Charles and B.B. King live in 1963 at the Regal Theater in Chicago, and that turned me on to the guitar in the blues. It blew me away and sent chills down my spine.

After I spent those two years trying to play avant-garde jazz without knowing anything, I came back down to earth and got together with some people who were into the blues, and I just taught myself.

There are many types of saxophones: soprano, alto, C melody, tenor, baritone, bass and contrabass, which is so big you almost have to use a stepladder to play it. Mouthpieces are varied and as important to the sound as the reed and the horn. The reed is the constant bane of the horn player. All the technology of the horn – all the little springs and pads, all of that – is brought to its knees by a piece of wood. It's made from cane and grows in the same climate as grapes for wine: warm days and cool nights. That's why originally reeds came from France.

I have two 1967 Selmer Mark VI saxophones, which were made in France from 1954 - 1973. The alloy metals used at the time were good, but the horns are pretty delicate and in need of constant repair. A good horn repair person is hard to find, which makes it hard when you are on the road. I've had to do a lot of on-the-job repairs with rubber bands. The one I am having completely rebuilt cost



Maceo Parker was the longtime saxophone player for James Brown
Photo courtesy FleaMarketFunk.com



The saxophone entered the European music scene amid much controversy
Photo by Kurt. E Johnson



Fans dig the saxophone sounds created by Terry Hanck
Photo by Tim Parsons



Blues fans can enjoy Deanna Bogart playing sax at summer festivals Photo by Kim Reed

me a lot of money, so if there is someone out there looking for a Selmer Mark VI, give me a call.

I tried taking some lessons when I first started and was lucky enough to be taken in by a great Chicago horn player named Joe Daily. He asked me to play something, so I started honking and squawking, thinking he would say it was brilliant. That's when he told me to stop. He said, "I'll show you how to read [music] until you can read a Charlie Parker solo. Then you are on your own." But I never got that far. I didn't have the discipline.

When I got out to California in the late '60s, I was still just learning. Most of the cats that played music I liked at the time were Latinos. There was a horn player from Santa Ana named Tony Elisalda. He was the first one who really taught me harmonies to back up blues and soul. A lot of soul music is played in unison. Check out the Memphis Horns – Wayne Jackson on trumpet and the late Andrew Love on tenor sax – they had the best soul sound ever.

In my early playing days, I was very shy, so the hardest part was facing the crowd between songs. After I joined Elvin Bishop during his heyday from 1977-87, I gained a lot of confidence. I went from playing in a club with three people who didn't care, to all of a sudden doing the same thing at the Oakland Coliseum for a Day on the Green with 55,000 screaming people who loved it.

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Blues man Keith Crossen has been playing saxophone since he was 11 years old Photo by @Marilyn Stringer

When I lived in Berkeley, I was in a rooming house upstairs from the great "Wild" Willie Moore, who had played with Jimmy McCracklin. One time when my only horn was in the repair shop, I had a gig and he loaned me one of his horns. When I got to the gig, it wouldn't play at all. The pads were dried up. Later when I gave it back, I told him his horn didn't play. He said, "Didn't you soak it in the bathtub?" I said, "No, I didn't think to put your horn in the bathtub."

Another time, I was living down in Monterey and had a gig at Larry Blake's in Berkeley. I was excited because there was a rumor that the head of Alligator Records, Bruce Iglauer, might attend the show. I drove up and opened the sliding door of my van and my horn wasn't there. I just shut the door and said, "That didn't happen." I opened the door again and it still wasn't there. I went in the club and called up every horn player I knew in the Bay Area and everyone was working, nobody had a horn. I

ended up playing a kazoo. It turned out Bruce Iglauer really was in the audience and there I was – playing the kazoo and jumping around like an idiot. I'll never forget that night.

I want to mention some of the great R&B stylists: King Curtis from the '50s and '60s rock 'n' roll and soul; Junior Walker is in a category of his own, which I would call soul-sax; the honkers from the early '50s – Big Jay McNeely, Joe Houston, Red Prysock and others; and funk with Maceo Parker. All the old jazz players were great bluesmen. They could all get down and really play the blues...Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, Coleman Hawkins, the father of the tenor sax, Illinois Jacquet, to mention a few. This is just the tip of the iceberg. There are hundreds more sax players who were, and still are, important and influential.

"No, I didn't think to put your horn in the bathtub."

Over the years I've been able to work with people like Etta James, Bonnie Raitt, Allen Toussaint, Lee Dorsey, Tracy Nelson, Jimmy McCracklin and Sunnyland Slim, and jammed with more people that I can remember. The horn has taken me to some of the far corners of the globe, but I still can't play a Charlie Parker solo.



Terry Hanck is a seven-time Blues Music Awards nominee, including a 2015 nomination for Best Instrumentalist, Horn, which he won in 2012. He also was the 2012 Living Blues Critics Choice winner for Best Horn. His band includes Butch Cousins on drums, Johnny Soubrand on guitar and Tim Wagar on bass. His website is www.terryhanck.net

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