

Volume 27, Number 1

Sept/Oct 2002

USA \$11.95
CAN \$17.00
Made in USA

Saxophone

JOURNAL

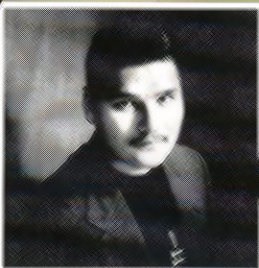


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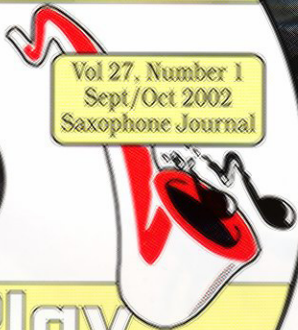
Mike Tracy

Wayne Tice

Saxophone Journal



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How To Play Pop, R&B, Smooth Jazz

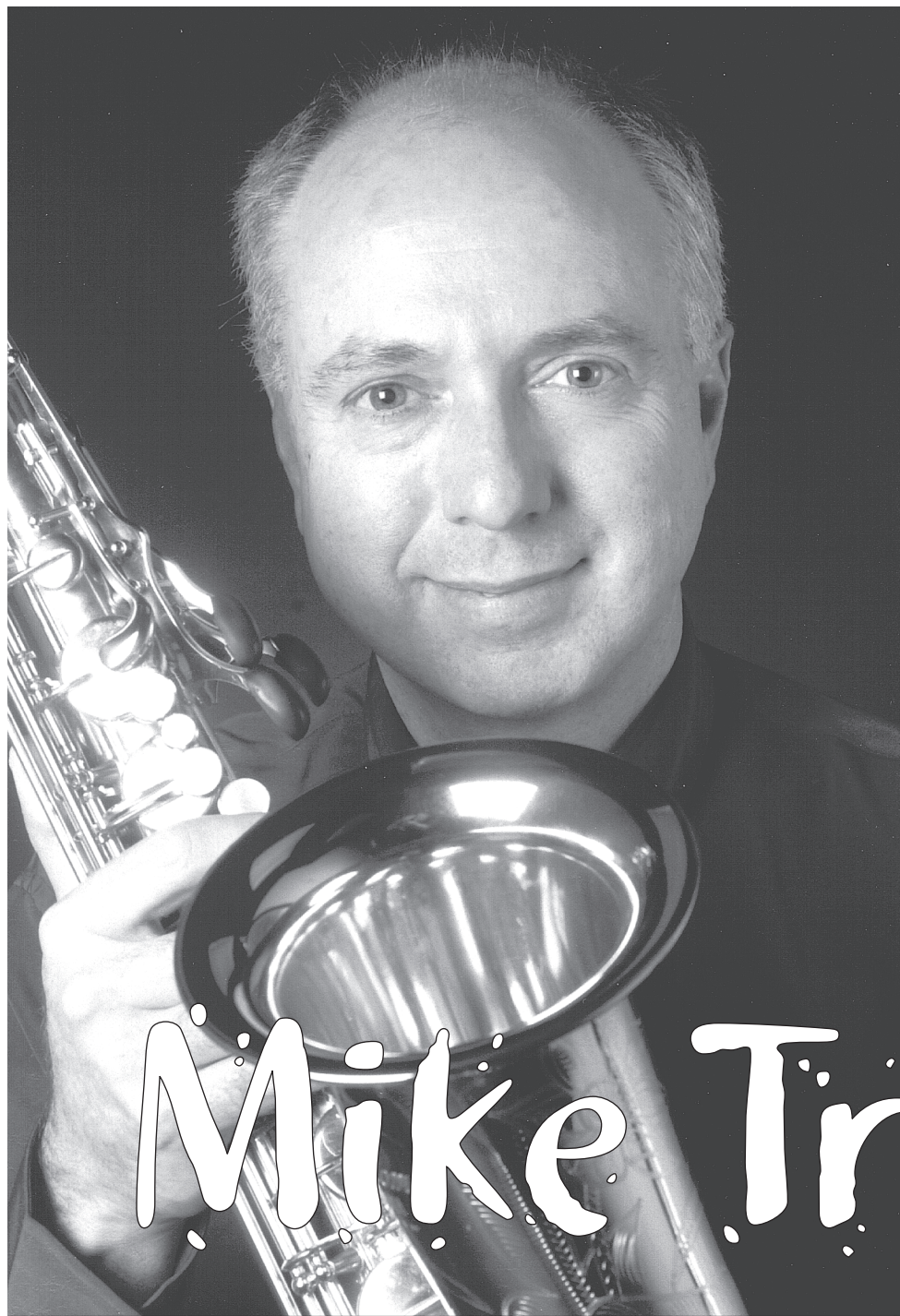
Masterclass/Play-along CD

By Eric J. Morones



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By Rick Matingly

Mike Tracy

Those who have known Mike Tracy since he was the first student to major in saxophone at the University of Louisville School of Music in the early 1970s feel a sense of poetic justice in the fact that Tracy now heads the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program and teaches saxophone at his former alma mater. During Tracy's student years, saxophone was not considered a legitimate instrument by many U of L faculty members—especially if one were using it to play jazz.

Tracy was very much focused on jazz in those years, nurtured by lessons with Jamey Aebersold, but he was also comfortable performing the occasional saxophone part with

the Louisville Orchestra, whose members included a number of U of L music professors. Although some of them didn't have much regard for Tracy's instrument, they came to respect his musicianship.

After graduating with a double degree in performance and music education, Tracy and U of L maintained somewhat of a love/hate relationship. A couple of years later, he was invited to teach at U of L, but saxophone and jazz were still being treated like illegitimate children at a wedding, so Tracy took a gig as an artist-in-residence with the Kentucky Arts Council, travelling around Kentucky and serving as a consultant to high school band directors who wanted to

have jazz programs but were not properly trained in how to run them.

When Tracy was invited back to U of L in 1985, much had changed. School officials were much more aware of what jazz could bring to a music program, and Tracy was able to build a program that now offers a Masters Degree in performance with a concentration in jazz and a Bachelor of Arts degree with an emphasis in jazz studies. A Bachelor of Arts degree with an emphasis in music industry is also offered. The program includes extended residencies by leading jazz artists as well as an annual jazz week, which features a week's worth of concerts,

workshops, and clinics. Saxophonists who have appeared at jazz week include Michael Brecker, Don Braden, Dennis DiBlasio, Joe Henderson, Benny Golson, Pat La Barbera, David Liebman, James Moody, Chris Potter, Stanley Turrentine and Phil Woods. In addition to Tracy, the faculty includes Jamey Aebersold, who has supported the program financially and through his name, and nationally known composer arranger John La Barbera. There are enough students to fill two big bands, a Brazilian ensemble, a vocal jazz ensemble, and five combos.

Ironically, although he was hired primarily to run a jazz program, Tracy has become more involved than ever in classical music as a result of teaching saxophone at the school. That is especially obvious on his 1999 CD project, *Facets*, which features a variety of works written by composers with ties to Kentucky and to the University of Louisville. Along with jazz-oriented pieces composed by Jamey Aebersold, John La Barbera, Don Braden and Andre Wilson, the CD also contains modern classical works for the instrument composed by Charles W. Smith, Frederick Speck, Marc Satterwhite, Christopher Gallaher, and Steve Rouse.

The varied compositions combine to present a full representation of Tracy's artistry. His mastery of classical saxophone informs his jazz playing, which has remarkable depth and is notable for a non-reliance on jazz clichés. Tracy's improvisations have a classical logic with no technical limitations. Likewise, his classical performances maintain a spirit of spontaneity and flow while meeting the demands of the composition. By serving the music in terms of playing exactly what each piece calls for, Tracy proves that the saxophone can respond to a full complement of musical demands.

Tracy is also the author of *Jazz Piano Voicings for the Non-Pianist* and *Jazz Saxophone Survey: A Descriptive Analysis of 38 Saxophonists*, and he co-authored the book *Pocket Changes: 335 Standard Chord Progressions*. He has written several articles that have been published by the Interna-

MIKE TRACY'S EQUIPMENT

TENOR.....

Yamaha Custom

Mouthpieces

(Jazz) Sugal Super Lieb Grenadilla Wood 7, or Gold Plated Copper 7

(Classical) Rousseau New Classic 5

Ligatures

(Jazz) Oleg

(Classical) Rovner

Reeds

(Jazz) LaVoz Medium

(Classical) Vandoran 3 or 3, 1/2

ALTO.....

Yamaha Custom

Mouthpieces

(Jazz) Meyer 7

(Classical) Rousseau New Classic 5

Ligatures

(Jazz) Oleg

(Classical) Rovner

Reeds

(Jazz) LaVoz Medium

(Classical) Vandoran 3 or 3 1/2

SOPRANO.....

Yamaha Custom

Mouthpieces

(Jazz) Sugal Super Lieb Grenadilla Wood 7

(Classical) Rousseau 5

Ligatures

(Jazz) Sugal

(Classical) Rovner

Reeds

(Jazz) LaVoz Medium Soft or Soft

(Classical) Vandoran 3 or 3 1/2

Mike Tracy also has a collection of old Selmer saxophones:

- Modele 22 (tenor)
- Super Sax (alto)
- Balanced Action (alto and tenor)
- Radio Improved (tenor)
- Mark VI (2 altos, 3 tenors, 2 sopranos)

tional Association of Jazz Educators, and his article *Blue Note Classics: An Analytical, Comparative and Historical Study* was published by both the *Qualitative Research In Education Journal* and the *Jazz Educators Journal*.

When and why did you start playing saxophone?

I started playing saxophone in 1959 when I was in the fourth grade. I wanted to play trumpet, but I had an overbite. If I had played trumpet, I would have been one of a million back then, but there weren't that many saxophone players when I started.

The music teacher, Miss Stoll, was really a great lady. I went through that first year with her, and in the summer she had a band program for the more advanced students. We would play every Saturday morning, and she would also have an activity for us, like visiting a museum, and that made all the kids want to come.

I also started taking private lessons from Jack Crutcher, who played clarinet and saxophone in the Louisville Orchestra. He could play in the symphony, then go play a Dixieland job and then play in a big band or studio setting, and you would not know that any of those was not his major area of focus.

Jack was a pleasant person who was quietly demanding because he would play with you. And as we played, I found that I was trying to play like him. Jack was very particular about playing in tune and getting a good sound. He didn't always describe what he wanted, but by his example he set a standard that I think has lasted with all the people who studied with him.

Another thing Jack did that always knocked me out, which I've also picked up on, is that he would transpose. I only played alto back then, and he'd play tenor or clarinet with me. Here he was transposing a fourth or fifth while basically sight-reading all the stuff I had worked on for a whole week. Even after I got more advanced and was playing more difficult pieces, he would still do that and never miss a

beat. So that was a goal that, again, he set by his example.

How did you pick a college?

Unfortunately, I didn't have a lot of guidance about how to apply for college. I wanted to go to the University of Cincinnati, but I did not apply until late in the game. I got a phone call from Cincinnati on my prom night telling me my application had arrived a day too late, so I couldn't go there.

The University of Louisville didn't have a saxophone teacher. The only place I knew of that I thought I could get into was the University of Kentucky. So I auditioned that summer, got a scholarship and went there for one year.

And UK had a saxophone teacher?

Actually, they didn't, which was not uncommon in 1969 when I started college. In most schools, the clarinet teacher taught saxophone. The regular teacher was on sabbatical, so I had a replacement whose name was Dean Turner. He really pushed me and I practiced four to six hours a day.

But after a year I felt that I had made a mistake going to Kentucky, because I wanted to be with a real saxophone teacher and they didn't have plans to hire one. I mentioned to John Hoover, who I had worked with in summer band programs and who conducted the University of Louisville Marching Band, that I was unhappy at Kentucky. He asked me if I would be interested in coming to U of L. I said I would if they got a saxophone teacher. So they contacted Jamey Aebersold. At that time, I didn't know Jamey from anyone else. I was just happy that they were hiring a real saxophone teacher. So I auditioned and got in. That first year, I was Jamey's only student.

At that time, I didn't have a clue about jazz. At UK, being an underclassman, I didn't get to be in the jazz band. For me, jazz was taking songs that Mr. Crutcher had written out like "Stranger on the Shore" or "Stardust" and essentially doing theme and variations with the melody.

When I went to my first lesson with Jamey, he asked if I knew my scales. I said, "Well, sure." I was pretty cocky. So he asked me to play all the major scales, and I did. Then he asked for the minors, so I played pure minor for him. He asked if I knew dorian. I said no, so he showed me, and I struggled through it. Then he started naming all these scales, and I realized that I didn't know what I was getting into. So this door was being opened to me by someone who was on his way to becoming one of the most important jazz educators in the world.

Jamey pushed me as hard as I could take. That first semester I remember being overwhelmed with all the different scales that I had to put together with chords. Theory was being taught one way at school, but jazz players think of it a different way.

Was Patrick primarily a classical saxophone teacher?

He was solely a classical saxophone teacher. He came from the Sigurd Rascher school of playing, which was a very different approach than I was used to. But I learned a lot from Lee. He introduced me to pieces by Karel Husa, and I played the Webern *Quartet* on tenor saxophone and the Ibert *Concertino da Camera*. Lee opened a world to me that I wasn't very familiar with.

Did the U of L orchestra ever have any sax parts?

No. I always felt that was a missed opportunity. But I frequently played bass clarinet in the orchestra.

I was in a five year program to get a double degree; I was a performance major and a music ed. major. A recital was required for the performance degree, as in all schools. So I came to do my hearing, and I did the *Bozza Aria*, the *Husa Elegy and Rondo*, the Ibert *Concertino da Camera* the Webern *Quartet* on tenor sax, and a jazz piece: *Spain* by Chick Corea. I was told by my advisor, who was a violinist, that I would not be allowed to do jazz on my recital. Of course, since I was the first saxophone major the school ever had, my advisor didn't know what to do with me. So when he heard jazz piece, he didn't know how to handle the situation.

I mentioned this whole thing to James Livingston, who was the clarinet teacher and director of the University Orchestra. Although he wasn't a big fan of the saxophone, I had earned his respect, and we had played together in the Louisville Orchestra. So he interceded on my behalf, they let me include the jazz piece, and everything worked out fine.

I'm certain that all those experiences affected how I teach and how I treat students, because I went through some grief to do what I did. I'm not saying I deserve a medal, but I felt that I was sometimes treated unfairly for being a saxophone player and for wanting to do other forms of music than classical. I didn't want to play jazz instead of what the school wanted; I wanted to do it in addition. As I got older and started teaching, I kept that in the back of my head. I've tried to avoid being dogmatic about one certain thing and to let students have a voice in determining their own direction.

Okay, so you played your recital, you graduated...

I got out of school in '74 with no idea of what I was going to do.

What had you thought you were going to do for a living when you decided to major in music?

I didn't care. My dad told me, "Do what makes you happy, because I hate my job. If you can make a living playing music, great."

When I got out of school, I didn't have any idea what I was going to do. I had started playing some professional gigs, but I couldn't live off that. In those days there were more opportunities to play commercial club dates than there are now, but I wanted to play jazz or classical music. I formed my own band, but we didn't work that much.

So I substitute taught in the public schools and gave a lot of private saxophone lessons. I really enjoyed working with young people, and it was an easy way to do what I loved and make some money. I also did some part-time construction, worked at a gas station, and all kinds of stuff. I also put my alto away for about two years and focussed on tenor.

Jamey had been teaching at Bellarmine College in Louisville, and he was leaving. He recommended me to replace him. I spent two years there, and I think I did some good work, but mostly I was experimenting and learning. I learned how to play piano because piano players wouldn't show up for the combo rehearsals. I learned how to play walking bass lines on the piano because bass players wouldn't show up. I had to sit behind the drumset and keep

time if the drummer didn't show up. It was a great opportunity. We had five to seven small groups a semester and a big band. Horn players from U of L would come over to Bellarmine and play in my group. Bellarmine had a lot of guitarists, bassists, drummers and pianists, but no wind players.

Didn't Aebersold start his summer jazz camps around that time?

Right. While I was still at Bellarmine in 1975, I went to my first camp at DeKalb, Illinois. It was amazing to see all these great musicians that I'd listened to, like Woody Shaw and Joe Henderson and Eddie Gomez. I remember auditioning for Lou Marini. Next thing I knew I was in one of the top two groups, and it was directed by Joe Henderson, who was an idol of mine. Mulgrew Miller was the pianist.

I snuck a lesson with Joe. I went up to him and said, "Mr. Henderson? Could I get together with you?" He said okay, and one afternoon we went to a practice room and spent a couple of hours. He showed me this stuff that I was totally clueless about. I wish I'd had a tape recorder with me.

The next year, they needed another saxophone teacher, so Jamey asked if I wanted to do it. So I got to teach the beginning level students. I went into it totally gung-ho, and I probably put in twice as much time as I needed to, but it was a great learning experience and I've been teaching at Jamey's camps since 1976.

Why did you leave Bellarmine?

After two years I could see that there was no future there, so I went to U of L and told the dean that I would like to bring all those people I was teaching over to U of L. I had about 70 people, and about 35 or 40 of them were U of L students who were coming over to Bellarmine to be in my bands and take lessons from me because there was no jazz at U of L. So U of L said okay.

I started teaching at U of L in 1977 and stayed for about five years. Again, there was no precedent for something like this, so the students and I were learning together. My only guidance had been people like Jack Crutcher and Jamey. I tried to figure out how they would have done it.

Around that same time, the National Endowment for the Arts was offering study grants, so I applied and was fortunate enough to get one to study with Jerry Coker. I had always admired his playing and teaching, so I spent a summer going to Knoxville to study with him. A couple of years later I applied again and got an endowment to study with Dave Liebman. I spent a year going back and forth to New York to get my tail kicked because Dave has all this energy and drive and he empowers that to his students.

All along I was practicing and studying with Jamey, and the camps were my lessons too. As I said, I've learned a lot by watching, and Dave and Jerry both helped that, as well as all the guys at the camps. I learned from hearing them play and also from watching them teach. Not all great players are great teachers, but you can at least learn something about how you might want to do it differently. So I would try to use those opportunities to develop my own philosophy and approach to sharing with others.

And then you left U of L.

Right. They didn't appreciate or understand what jazz

could add to the student's education. It was no different than when I had been a student, and it was very frustrating. I wasn't able to handle the administrative politics—how to say the right thing to get what I wanted. They had built a new music building, I had about 70 or 80 students, and they wouldn't give me an office. I had two big bands and combos, and they didn't give us a rehearsal space. They didn't respect what we were doing, so I left.

I heard that the Kentucky Arts Council was looking for Artists in Residence. So I looked into it, got the job, and for eight years I got paid to do what our educational system wasn't doing. I would go into a school two or three days a week and rehearse the band and work with the kids on improvisation. There was a national initiative to do this, and there were about 30 or 40 of us throughout the country.

In Louisville, there was a Youth Orchestra, which was a great group for kids to play in, but there was never a place for a saxophone. That bugged me, so I decided to start an area high school jazz band. We called it the Louisville Jazz Workshop, and I had the best students from the area come in and play. It was an excellent group. Don Braden played in it at one time, and we'd have guest artists like Dave Liebman and Bobby Shew.

How did you end up back at U of L?

Around 1985 the U of L's professor of trumpet, Leon Rapier, called and asked if I would consider coming back to U of L and teaching jazz. I said that things would have to be done differently. I found out later that jazz had become an important part of NASM (National Association of Schools of Music), and U of L had almost nothing. They had one jazz band, but they were not teaching improvisation. So we worked it out, and I came back teaching jazz, running a big band and small groups, and I was encouraged to teach saxophone students who wanted to study with me. And they even gave me an office!

At the same time I went back to teach I also went back to school myself because I didn't have a masters. So I got a Master of Arts in Higher Education, which is essentially an administrative degree. I did that while I was teaching part time. After I got my master's, I went from part time to full time.

Let's discuss your saxophone teaching. What's the difference between the way you teach saxophone and the way Aebersold teaches?

Probably the biggest difference is that I get more into the technical and physical part of playing. For example, with Jamey I worked on altissimo register, but never on overtones. He could do it, but he never spent a lot of time helping me develop it, whereas I'll do a lot of that with students.

I also try to incorporate different styles. If you're a jazz-oriented player, then you need to play a classical piece. For example, Hindemith's *Sonata* is a major work you need to know. If you're a classically oriented player, you need to experience playing Charlie Parker lines and to know that that's an important part of our instrument.

Elaborate on that in terms of what you said earlier about helping students go in whatever direction they want. If certain students say, "I just want to play jazz," how do you find

the balance between letting them do what they want and requiring them to learn non-jazz pieces and techniques that you think every saxophone player should know?

Any time I have students come in, whether they're jazz or classically oriented, we make a list of recordings they need to know over the course of the semester. We pick out four or five different styles—whether it's swing, bebop, Latin, a Bach transcription, a Hindemith *Sonata*, or an orchestral work—and we listen to these over the semester to try to incorporate those styles and techniques into their sound. And I think most of our students realize the value of doing that.

Yes, there are people that don't ever want to do anything other than classical music or nothing other than jazz. And with them, it's a struggle. I think that with anybody who is focused so narrowly, one of two things will happen. Either they'll be very frustrated or incredibly great—if they're as focused as a Michael Brecker. But even people of that nature listen to all forms of music. I've been fortunate enough to have dinner with a lot of wonderful jazz players, and they're not just talking about jazz, they're talking about music. I think that's one thing a lot of young people forget—that their idols, regardless of what style they play, have had experience with other styles. So I try to share that with students.

One thing I learned when I got my degree in higher ed. was that people make a lot of changes in their life, and we all take detours at times, and it's all part of the natural process. I can't force anything on my students, because if I do, I will actually push them away rather than bring them to what they need to do. And in terms of what they need to do, I can't assume that I know it all, because I don't. They know stuff too, and one of the greatest things is watching them grow and change. It teaches me and helps me stay somewhat young.

How do the opportunities for a saxophonist graduating today compare to the opportunities you had when you graduated?

There were more opportunities to play gigs in the '70s than there are now. The playing is different, too. People are expecting so much more, but quite frankly, a lot of the students coming out of the schools now are playing so much better than a lot of us played back then. So it's hard to say if it's easier. In some ways it's easier because you have access to more information, but in other ways it's harder because there is more that you need to access.

Do your students talk to you about life after college? What do they think they're going to do after they graduate?

Most of them are getting Music Ed. degrees, and they say "At least I can teach." I tell them that's not the right attitude. I *love* teaching. I like the idea of watching a student develop and finding things that I didn't find, and there's stuff that each of us brings to it that we can share with each other. You can't just toss off a music educator as someone who can't do anything else. As far as the performance majors, a lot of them realize that it's just the luck of the draw sometimes as to whether or not they're going to get a chance to play, and it can also depend on where they are and who they're with.

You taught Don Braden when he was in high school. With someone like him, did you know he was special the day he walked in for his first lesson, or was it something you watched develop?

I don't remember thinking that at the initial lesson or two, but as I watched him progress over about half a year, it was obvious that he had all this innate ability. You just told him what to do and he would do it. And he also had the gift of being instinctively musical.

Another former student I'm very proud of is Tom Walsh, who is a professor at Indiana University. He's a classical and jazz saxophonist. He is a marvellous player and a wonderful teacher. I feel fortunate to have had him as a student when he moved to Louisville from Illinois. He met me through one of Jamey's camps, and we've had a long relationship since then.

When students audition for U of L, are there common things that surprise you in the sense that you can't believe that someone wanting to major in saxophone in college doesn't already know this?

That usually depends on whether or not they've had lessons and with whom they've studied. Unless they live in a large metropolitan area, most of the students do not have access to quality private instruction. So they'll overplay the instrument, or not play with enough air support to get a good sound. Also, the intonation is bad. Their choice of material, no matter what style they're playing, can leave something to be desired. A lot of them come in playing All-State audition music as opposed to playing an actual piece of music. That's kind of a constant thread with people who haven't had private instruction.

Do people try to impress you by playing a difficult piece as opposed to a simpler piece that they would be able to play better?

That happens a lot. A band director will give a kid this piece that everybody they know plays, like the Creston *Sonata*. Well, the kid might push the right buttons, but he isn't playing any music. A lot of times kids will come in and play a piece that's over their heads. I'd rather have them come in and play a piece that's within the realm of their capacity so they can actually show what they can do.

How did your CD 'Facets,' come about?

As I was starting to teach both jazz and classical music to my saxophone students, I had to get my alto sax out and get back in shape. Also, we have a lot of composers at U of L, so I had people asking me to play the pieces they were writing. So I was learning all this new music and I wanted to do something with it. I decided to make a CD of new pieces.

Do you consider Facets a perfect representation of what you are about as a player, or does it just represent part of the picture?

It leans more to the classical side, but I think it represents where I was at that time. I'm working on another CD that will be solely jazz, but it will also feature unison lines and interactive parts with other instruments that call for what many people would consider a more classical approach

where you have to play precisely what's there and not take any freedom until you take your solo.

Describe your playing life these days.

I still play with the symphony when there is a call for a saxophonist, especially in the pops concerts. I also got to play the Prokofiev "Romeo and Juliet" recently on tenor.

I have a dance band that works probably 50 gigs a year. I still play a lot in trios and quartets when possible. The past couple of years I've gone to England with a pianist from Cincinnati named Phil DeGreg. We just go from town to town playing duet concerts, which is really fun. A couple of months ago, Steve Alee, a pianist from Indianapolis, and I went to Belize and did the same thing there. I've met some wonderful musicians in other countries, and that pushes me to keep my playing level up because you never know who you are going to get a chance to play with.

So I do whatever comes up, like Mr. Crutcher did. As I get older, I get more selective. Because of my university gig, I don't have to take every job that comes along. But I love doing anything that is challenging and rewarding. §