

Paul Cohen

Vintage Saxophones Revisited

Billy True's One Man Saxophone Band



I often wonder where these ideas come from. Perhaps it starts with the lack of a centuries old tradition; the saxophone is relatively new as wind instruments go, and clearly not tied down to staid and respectful modes of behavior. Maybe it is the instrument's contemporary nature that make players so restless? Could it be the stylistic and technical flexibility that make players push it in directions no one else has considered? Or are saxophonists just more non-conformist and idiosyncratic (OK, eccentric and zany) than any other group? When one looks at some of the amazing variations on the saxophone that have been produced, one first gasps, then wonders over and over.

Through the years I have come across many such astonishing saxophones. Most are the creative efforts of gifted individuals with a vision that won't quit. Few reach production stage, most are prototypes or produced in very limited numbers. Readers of this column will recall the Loomis "Double Resonance" alto, the Ruffed and Heisted Royal Slide Saxophone, as well as the Conn-O-Sax and Martin Juhn's Circular Slide Saxophone. And to their equal is the amazing device that allows one player to play three saxophones at once: Billy True and his One Man Saxophone Section.

Playing multiple saxophones in more recent times has become better known through several well-known artists. Custom adaptation of pre-existing instruments included Rahsaan Roland Kirk's "Stritch" and "Manzello." These were a Buescher straight alto and a Saxello that were modified and customized for Kirk's unique



Billy True and his One Man Sax Section, from 1939.

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playing and musical style. Another player in New York who occasionally concertized on the street gained a sizable pedestrian following with a set of soprano saxophones fused together in such a way as to form a single instrument of unusual proportions and distinctive sound. Many internet followers have seen the 1981 patent application posted on various sites for a fused type of soprano and tenor that can be played by one person.

Not content with the possibilities of playing two saxophones at once, one inventor designed a contraption for the playing of three saxophones. In a patent application from 1938, Mr. Bill G. True from southeastern Ohio described an elaborate mechanism joining three saxophones (two C melodies and an alto) in such a way as to allow full independent control of each. The saxophone on the left side is played by the left hand with customized keys to allow a full range, while the saxophone on the right side is operated with the right hand involving a considerably more complex key system. The middle saxophone and the octave key to the right side saxophone are operated by the feet in an elaborate system of wheels and pull lines. Although his experimentation with multiple saxophone playing (starting with two instruments and gradually adding the third) began as early as 1932, nowhere in the patent application does Mr.

Trew explain what led him to conceive and design such an elaborate device. The patent was granted in 1941, and it seems he made only one unit.

But what a unit! I had the pleasure of visiting Mr. True's grandson who invited me to see the instruments and the setup. Mr. True used two Conn C Melodies and a Conn alto (beautiful instruments from the 1930s). He altered one C melody and the alto (those on the outside of the trio and played by one hand) by adding a series of special levers and keys that enabled him to play down to low E on both saxes. The design of the keys, elegantly sculpted with pearls at the finger touches, blend in perfectly with the saxophone and remind me of the custom keywork on my one-handed Buescher curved soprano. Appended to each instrument is a thick bar which fastens onto the instrument stand. The middle instrument (the C melody operated by strings) has an elaborate miniature system of pulleys and wheels connected to the keys, all of which are closed. When the string is pulled from the foot pedal, a key or keys are opened. The strings stay attached to the instrument, and are detachable from the foot pedal hooks that are adjustable to keep the appropriate tension. The pedestal consists of 8 foot pedals each of which pulls a string and opens a key. Combinations of pedal pushing gives chromatic notes. To accommodate what must be an embouchure of frightening proportions, Mr. True has a rare set of five metal Kasper saxophone mouthpieces in both C-melody and alto sizes. The mouthpieces have huge chambers which provides a resistance that must be of help in sustaining the air expenditure for simultaneous blowing.

The entire outfit neatly fits into two cases. One case contains the three saxophones and all accessories, while the other case, smaller and heavier, contains the foot pedals, detachable stool and saxophone attachment devices. The Conn company did not help Mr. True customize his saxophones, but they did assist him in other ways. They relacquered his instruments with all the attachments to give a beautiful and consistent finish through all the horns. They also built the triple saxophone case. In an invoice I found from Conn, they charged \$42.00 for the case, but offered a 50% courtesy discount for a total of \$21.00! Then \$5.00 more for the zipper cover. Conn featured Billy True in a 1939 Conn circular along with Ross Gorman, Claude Lakey and Harry James.

Billy True's invention was not a sudden impulse. He was a professional saxophonist, composer and arranger active for years in the 1920s and 1930s. He toured with many ensembles and often fronted his own group. True eventually gave up touring and took a job in the steel industry while continuing his professional music career on a local level. When Mr. True perfected his



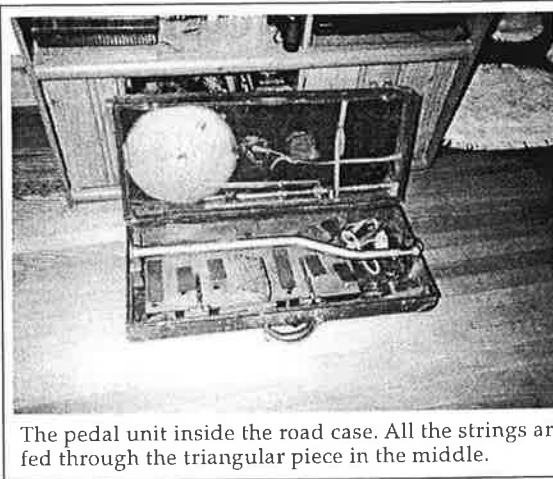
Billy True and his three Conn saxophones; Two C Melodies c. 1936, and an Eb alto, c. 1937.



All three saxophones, pedal unit, sax stands, music, accessories and stool fit into these two cases.



The triple saxophone case holding two c-melodies and an alto. Five metal Kaspar saxophone mouthpieces are at the top right corner, while a large reed holder is to the right of the alto bell.



The pedal unit inside the road case. All the strings are fed through the triangular piece in the middle.

invention and mastered its playing he began a series of public performances. He caused quite a stir as he performed locally, in New York City at the Conn factory store on 48th street, and on nationally broadcast radio programs. I listened to several transcription recordings of radio broadcasts, including The Hobby Lobby Program on February, 1939 on WJZ (Newark, NJ), the Musical Steelmakers Program on March, 1939 over WOR, another Hobby Lobby Program on June, 1942 over WCBS (appearing with Jean Cagney, sister of Jimmy Cagney), and the Wheeling Steel Corporation broadcast on October, 1943 over the well known 50,000 watt WWVA, from Wheeling, West Virginia.

I was not prepared for what I heard. His playing is absolutely amazing! The tone is beautiful, intonation perfect, articulation very smooth, and it sounds like a sax section. He plays music both rhythmic and sustained, up-tempo tunes and ballads, all with three part harmony. And often there are contrapuntal lines and changing inner voices that sound quite intricate! Some of the pieces were well known popular works of the time, while others were original compositions. Other times he played with a back-up band, some times solo. But at all times his playing was completely convincing. If I did not know it was his "One Man Saxophone Section" I would assume it was a sax section from a 1940s big band.

The Metronome, a well-know music magazine of the time, took note of Mr. True's New York performances. In an article from the February 1939 issue, they wrote:

Billy True of Steubenville, Ohio is in New York and has local musicians, especially sax men, plenty excited over his ability to perform as a one man 3 sax section. Billy plays three saxes at once and in three part harmony. Just how Billy made this feat possible is a story that runs over some seven years or more of

hard work and experimentation. It all began one night back home when he was tuning his two saxes. His wife said jokingly, "Why don't you try playing them both at once?" Billy took her up and began fooling around. Then he had an idea. He practiced on the two saxes regularly and became good enough to be featured in Tommy Christian's orchestra.

But Billy wasn't content with playing just two saxes at once. After all, playing two clarinets or saxes was a fairly common trick. So he conceived the colossal idea of teaming up three saxes and playing them.

In 1932 he had his first crude apparatus finished, but this outfit only permitted him to play licks and limited him on chord formation. He retired this first effort and went to work again, this time to make a contraption that would allow him to play the third sax with his feet by a series of pedals capable of producing the chromatic scale. Says Billy of this, "If I'd had full time to put on the job I could have turned it out in much less time. As it was, it took about five years of part time work to perfect it." Result of Billy's labors was a set of three saxes mounted on a single stand and so arranged for

fingerling (and foot work) as to enable him to play any note of the sax range and any chord formation. The saxes are not joined in any way but are held upright by the stand he constructed. There are the three separate standard mouthpieces pointing inward and he takes them all into his mouth while playing. It is the middle sax (C- Melody) that he plays with the pedals, which are connected to the sax keys by a series of cords and mechanism. The two outside saxes (left sax, Eb alto; right sax C melody) were adjusted by his own plan to enable him to finger them with only one hand to each instrument, yet obtain full chromatic range.

Fakes Too

Billy has a solid repertory of tunes he plays on his "sax section," has learned to read the three saxes at once and can even fake on the three of them. Nothing stops him, he plays sweet, swing or blues. Outstanding are his renditions of The Sheik, Mood Indigo and a composition of his own, Just Someone. He is very modest about his achievement and speaks in an offhand way of adding a fourth sax to his "section." He's got the plans all drawn up for this and only needs a little time to rig up some additional pedals, plus some practice to get used to the four mouthpieces and extra footwork. His systems are all fully patented, and he doesn't think it at all improbable that future saxists may learn to play three or four saxes instead of just one at time.

At this time, his plans are indefinite, but we're sure you'll be hearing plenty of him before long. This past month he has been

demonstrating his saxes at C.G. Conn's Radio City store in New York. He is also a thorough musician and composer, having turned out some 350 original tunes.

The flexibility of the saxophone, tonally and mechanically, proved fertile ground for exploration and experimentation in this century. We are most often aware of the musical implications of such flexibility: a rich integration into the cultural mainstream of music making encompassing classical, jazz, popular and commercial styles. Its mechanical flexibility and relative newness spawned many efforts at improvements, modifications, and attempts to expand and extend the role and capabilities of the instrument. Radical innovations, such as Billy True's remarkable invention, reflect an effort to point the saxophone in new directions. To be sure, some of these directions may seem frivolous or inconsequential, but as each new effort reveals possibilities never before realized, expanded and lasting artistic uses will invariably follow.

Billy True never did add his fourth saxophone, although I found plans and a fourth saxophone in the attic. I wonder what stopped him. §