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The Boston Globe

## Saxophone mechanic has gig down to an art



(JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

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By Cindy Atoji Keene  
Globe Correspondent / August 3, 2008

Saxophone mechanic Bob Drinkwater remembers the first time he tried to overhaul an instrument. It was a ragged old alto sax that needed restoration, showing its age with worn-out pads, creaky springs, excessive abrasion on the post, and other wear and tear.

Drinkwater was familiar with woodwinds, and decided to give it a whirl - how hard could it be to bang out the dents and repair it? He disassembled it piece-by-piece, and then looked at the mess of hinge rods, corks, screws, keys, and dozens of other parts lying on the table before him. "This is too much," he thought.

But today, over 25 years later, Drinkwater has saxophone repair down to an art. He is one of the few professional saxophone mechanics in the Boston area, regularly servicing local recording artists such as Gordon Beadle, Doug James, Amadee Castenell, Scott Shetler, and other blues and jazz players, as well as everyday musicians.

Hidden in a cluttered shop tucked behind a loading dock in Stoneham, Drinkwater's tiny enclave is stuffed with musical memorabilia and photographs, as well as an assortment of pliers, files, torches, pads, and other tools of the trade, many of which he has to craft himself to fit the job.

### You must have come upon some saxophone repair horror stories over the years. Can you tell me about some of them?

I had one customer who had work done on his baritone sax and then put it in a soft gig bag and had it shipped to Idaho. It was a disaster waiting to happen. The sax got dented, and then I had to fix it all over again. He knew better - I'm not sure why he didn't send it in a more protective container. Another customer, baritone player Doug James, who used to play with Room Full of Blues, also got his instrument repaired. But then he picked up his case - and the handle broke. He was back to square one. He only had one hour to fix his horn before his performance and it just couldn't be done, but luckily he had another baritone he could use. That's what happens when a horn hits the deck.

**So how do you get rid of dents like this?** I use what's called a dent ball. It's a long rod with a ball at the end of it; the balls come in different sizes depending on the size of the dent. Brass is a soft metal, so it dents easily, and you need to carefully rub or tap the horn surface, being mindful not to raise new dents or put creases in the metal, or even punch a hole in the brass. It can take as little as 30 seconds or as long as two to three hours, depending on how many dents there are.

### How did you get into saxophone repair?

I worked for many years building flutes for the Wm. S. Haynes flute factory in Boston. That's where I learned my craft, forging and fitting keys, soldering, filing, assembling, and working in the finishing department. I now put that technology into saxophones.

### How much does it cost to get a saxophone fixed?

I charge \$40 an hour, and it costs about \$600 to get a saxophone overhauled. That includes disassembling the sax, which means I can adjust and tweak the playing performance during the reassembly process. Pads are individually treated, and then leveled and checked for leaks. The spring tension is adjusted, and key vents are optimized for accurate intonation. Then I wipe it down and oil it and play-test it, for any further adjustments.

### You don't polish the instruments?

That's one of the biggest things that people do to mess things up. Polish can get into the keys and sludge it up. You need to take the whole horn apart before you polish it.

### What are other saxophone enemies?

Another big problem is the weather - if you leave an instrument in the trunk of the car in the summer, the pads can fall off because the heat will melt the glue. Cold weather can do the same thing, making the glue become brittle. Water damage can make the pads swell and eventually dry, crack, and discolor. And don't eat or drink when you're playing. Food particles, particularly sugar, are a problem.

### The fact that you're also a musician must help you in repairing these instruments.

Yes, I play the flute, clarinet, and of course, saxophone, both tenor and soprano. In fact, I own six saxophones of my own, and play two of them all the time -sometimes even together at the same time. I perform big band music with the Fred Manzi Trio at ballroom dance halls, mostly for seniors. I'd love to play music full time, but it's practically impossible to make a living at it.

### What's the most unusual request that you've received?

I had one fellow who came in; he was recovering from a stroke and could only play a sax with one hand. He had a baritone sax and wanted me to rig it up for one-hand playing. He could hardly pick it up, let alone play the instrument. But I did what I could for him.

### You must be quite the handyman, since you're able to fix these instruments.

I'm ambidextrous, and good with my hands. I get into a Zen when fixing instruments, especially when it's a long job. But at home, I'm like a bull in the china shop - I can't even change a light bulb. ■

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