

Who is Santy Runyon?



SANTY RUNYON

The simple answer to this question is that Santy Runyon is a musician and a designer of woodwind mouthpieces. As a musician, he's played as a boy in silent cinema bands in his Oklahoma country town, as a college student for meals in restaurant bands, as a professional in the Chicago Theater Orchestra during his working life, and later in his sixties as a leader of cabaret and lounge bands. He continues to play many instruments despite his ninety or so years: soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone saxophone, soprano and bass clarinet, bassoon, flute, piccolo, drums, and vibes. He's also arranged music professionally for big bands, theater orchestras, and jazz combos. In his day, he has traveled the length and breadth of the United States playing in the Pacific Northwest (Tacoma, Washington) to the East Coast (New York and Boston), from the Gulf Coast (Galveston and New Orleans) to the Great Lakes Region (Chicago). In terms of musical styles, Santy has over his 90 or so years seen popular music change and has had regular gigs playing dixieland jazz in depression era speakeasies, big band swing music in dinner cabarets, vaudeville and legitimate theater music, be-bop jazz, and lounge music in Cajun Louisiana during the 1960's and 1970's. As a mouthpiece designer, he first fashioned sax mouthpieces as a boy in Oklahoma during the years just after World War I. Later in Chicago during the 1940's, he established a manufacturing firm for the mass production of mouthpieces. In the early 1960's, he moved his operations to the Sunbelt near Opelousas, Louisiana.

The complex answer to our question, "Who is Santy Runyon?", has less to do with music and more with character. His given name is Clinton, but the key to understanding his character is his nickname, Santy. Early jazzman like Santy had a handle that signified their personality. For example, Louis Armstrong's nickname, Satchmo, is an alternate form of Satchel Mouth for his robust ability to eat, say and sing nearly anything. Santy's name is derived from *Santy Claus* for his predilection for gift giving. To this day, you can meet with Santy and if the conversation lasts a while, you may be offered a gift. Some of these gifts are as simple as his time to tell a story. His other gifts can be more substantial. As a young college boy, his regular gigs provided him with more money than his friends. His gigs also required fancy dress clothes which he often gave away. Later in Chicago during the Great Depression, he would give one of his saxes to a struggling musician so that he could get regular work.

Santy will usually tell you that his gifts do not require repayment. This is not to say that Santy is foolish with his gifts. He's been in the music business for over 80 years, a business which is not very forgiving with people unable to judge character. But what Santy knows is

that what is freely given to a good person usually flows back to its giver many times.



SANTY PLAYING BOP

Santy has given **two great gifts** during his lifetime: his time to his students and his mouthpieces to his fellow musicians. Santy has trained generations of musicians. He has also created a fine line of saxophone and clarinet mouthpieces used by a broad range of musicians ranging from grade school music students to the greats of jazz. These two gifts as a teacher and as a mouth piece designer, are worth telling in detail.

Santy tells a story about Bob Redwine concerning informal teaching:

"I told you about Bob Redwine? He was playing third alto with Jack Teagarden's band in the 1930's. I knew him in Tacoma Washington. [We] played in Tacoma Washington, and I knew him there. ...All of sudden, he is in Chicago .. [and] he knows I'm playing the Chicago Theater and he comes around and he says "Santy, ... I always like the way you play, ...I got fired" [from] "third alto; Can you help me?" ...And I told him what to do and he came back in another week and I gave him another lesson. A third time (followed). And pretty soon the lead alto man comes (to me and says) "What did you do to Bob Redwine?" I said, "Why?". "He pushed me off the lead chair!"

Over the years, Santy has helped other musicians improve their ranking in bands through his teaching.

Santy's teaching also took more formal forms. For years, he had a studio just within the Chicago Loop at 192 North Clark Street in historic downtown Chicago. His studio was located around the corner from the Chicago Theater where he played his regular gig for eleven years. After World War II, Santy also established three music schools for returning servicemen with educational credits from the GI Bill. Santy also taught at Wheaton College and Northwestern University in the Chicago metropolitan area and later at Lamar University in southeast Texas. Throughout his teaching career, Santy has had from two or three regular students (as he has today in semi-retirement) to several hundred in Chicago after World War II. For his lifetime accomplishments, the International Association of Jazz Educators, a professional group of music teachers and professors specializing in Jazz, recognized Santy for his contributions to education, product innovation and performance. Over the years, Santy's students include some of the greats of jazz known to aficionados like Charlie Parker, Sonny Stitt, Paul Desmond, Lee Konitz, Bill Page, Hal Dessent, and Jerry Coker. On a more widely known level,

Lawrence Welk and Cab Calloway hired entire saxophone sections composed of Santy's students in the early 1950's.



SANTY PLAYSTHE
CLARINET IN HIS STUDIO

His innovations in teaching jazz and swing music used common sense and technically challenging exercises. Most students in the 1940's had a difficult time in finding the first job because of their inexperience in playing in a big band. Santy developed one of the first "lab bands" which allowed students to play professional arrangements of the 17 or so standard pieces in a traditional big band. In his teaching, Santy employs repetition of the correct way to play; for it is through repetition that tone, style and technique "get under the fingers" so that the performance is approached with confidence.

His technical innovations in teaching the saxophone have to do with how to blow on the mouthpiece. As Santy tells in his practiced narrative which must have been repeated hundreds upon hundreds of times:

The reed and the mouthpiece are the vocal chords of the saxophone. Most naturally, what you do to the reed and mouthpiece is reflected into the instrument.

As a new learner when playing the instrument, you do not have the slightest inkling of the amount of (air) pressure to use. You could develop horrendous habits, that, in many cases, may take you several years to correct. This can be avoided by following my advice.

Just as the motor of your car must have gasoline to keep it functioning, a saxophone must have a steady stream of air. The motor may have six or eight cylinders, special type spark plugs, and scores of other gadgets, but without the all-important gasoline, it is all worthless. With a saxophone, the steady stream of air is likewise all-important. The reed, the mouthpiece, the embouchure, and the design of the instrument all play their part in better performance, but always keep in mind that without that steady stream of air, they don't mean a thing."

Beside the gift of teaching, Santy's other significant gift is the creation of a **line of woodwind mouthpieces**. Although a musician may select an individual saxophone or clarinet with great care, the mouthpiece that is used influences the type of music that can be played. Jazz mouthpieces used in combos are very different from concert mouthpieces used in symphonies. Jazz musicians like to bend notes, slightly altering their pitch to achieve harmonics with roots in Africa and the Caribbean. To a classically trained musician in



SANTY PLAYING
THE
BLACK SAX

European music, a bent note is an anathema. The goal is to achieve a single pure unwavering tone. Similarly these musical styles are profoundly different from a honking sax used in Rock and Roll as well as Rhythm and Blues. Here the goal is for the instrument to meld with amplified guitars and drums and yet pierce the wall of sound so that it can be heard. Santy has manufactured mouthpieces for each of these styles and many different varieties within these traditions.

These two great gifts have come with a great price. Because of Santy's commitment to his students and to developing mouthpieces, he never sought individual recognition as a virtuoso. If you doubt that Santy might have been a great of jazz, you need only to hear him play in his nineties. His tone is pure, sense of tempo solid and mastery of his instrument evident. One wonders what Santy sounded like in his late teens when he played dixieland jazz in a regular gig for a summer with **the then unknown Jack Teagarden** in a country town, Seminole, Oklahoma.

Both Santy and Jack were white country boys from the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles playing a musical style that was largely an urban Afro-American expression. In the mid 1920's, Jazz was chiefly confined to New Orleans red-light districts, funeral processions, and all white society dances. It would travel by river boat up the Mississippi River to the north. Jazz would develop in a few clubs in Chicago. Later, Jack would connect with Louis Armstrong in Chicago and Jazz would begin to escape its Deep South Afro-American birth and metamorphosize into a musical style that became a world wide phenomena. Hearing Santy today, there is no doubt that he could have successfully pursued fame within that early Chicago milieu as did Jack Teagarden. Santy eventually settled in Chicago later in the 1930's after five years of college and touring throughout the U.S. with Benny Maroff's and Henry Busse's Bands.

One can also wonder what Santy sounded like in his mid-thirties when he established his music school in the Chicago Loop. Here he trained Johnny Bothwell, a fairly obscure saxophonist, who later played lead alto saxophone with the Stan Kenton Orchestra, a noted big dance band during the 1940's and early 1950's. When Santy first met Johnny Bothwell, he was (in Santy's way of saying) in need of instruction. Santy offered lessons and a professional saxophone, the cost of which need not be repaid if Johnny did not double his earnings. And double his earnings he did; he toured with Stan Kenton and had a wonderful musical career. While playing during those wartime years, Charlie Parker heard Johnny's tone and was impressed. Charlie Parker arrived in Chicago to take lessons from Santy and purchased one of Santy's mouthpieces.



**SANTY PLAYS FLUTE AS
WELL AS MOST
WOODWINDS
AND
THE
BASSOON**

These were critical years for Jazz which had evolved through Dixieland and then Big Band Swing. Both these musical styles had matured. While Dixieland and Swing are still played today, these styles were then slowly ceasing to develop and soon to be replaced by bop played by **the then obscure Charlie Parker** and his friends (like Dizzy Gillespie, Art Blakey, and Miles Davis).

Bebop is typically played in small combos in clubs which replaced the larger and uneconomical big dance bands. These combos abandoned melodies for their own sake and utilized the song's chord structure within which they might pursue improvisation and deconstruction of the melody. By pursuing improvisation and deconstruction, jazz musicians became both performers as well as composers. Hearing Charlie Parker playing his signature songs, "Now is the Time" and "Cherokee", one hears a tone, a sense of rhythm, and a musical feel for improvisation that echoes in Santy teaching the musical etudes from which Charlie studied. You can hear Santy's early appreciation of bop when he's playing from his exercise books written some 50 years ago. He pauses occasionally from playing to say expressively, **"That's bop!"**.

In the late 1950's **bop would implode** due to drug use among its adherents. The coroner would estimate Charlie Parker's age at 55 at the time of his drug related death in 1955, yet he was some twenty years younger, a mere 34 years old. According to some scholars, the estimated rate of heroin addiction among boppers was horrendous: one half had used heroin, one quarter were addicts, and one-fifth died from their drug habit. Santy would have none of it. Art Pepper, another bop saxophonist, would play with Stan Kenton in the 1940's, only to be lost in his heroin addiction until the 1980's. During his come back, Art adopted a red Runyon mouthpiece when his career would be reborn after he escaped the clutches of heroin.

Here perhaps is another reason that Santy never pursued life as a virtuoso. Not only would Santy have been alienated from his home, students, and business when touring, he would have also entered a world which was antithetical to **Santy's clean living**. If you ask Santy about what has enabled him to remain active well into his nineties, he will typically tell you about two things. First, Santy will tell you in no uncertain terms that drugs will destroy your health and creativity. He will also tell you about the ill-effects of tobacco which effects the breath of woodwind players. The second thing that Santy will tell you about remaining active is the health benefits of playing a woodwind instrument. These instruments require abdominal breathing, focused attention, and above all discipline. Each of these requirements, especially discipline, reverberate through-

out a person's life, enabling a person to live a full richly developed life.



SANTY ON A SATURDAY AFTERNOON IN HIS STUDIO SHOWING HOW ITS DONE.

Today, Santy is semi retired, yet remains active. He has survived two bouts of skin cancer which have not slowed his zest for life. He still has a few students who come by on Saturday afternoons for lessons. He still designs and tests mouthpieces that continue to be manufactured in the thousands and shipped around the world. He still manages his business, though only occasionally visiting his manufacturing plant. For exercise, Santy fishes in his bass boat which he hauls behind his car. All and all, a full life for most men of any age.

To Santy, his life is music: playing woodwinds, composing and arranging music, teaching students, and designing mouthpieces. Yet, life is much more: it is discovering the gifts which he received as a young child; it is developing those gifts as an adult; it is freely giving those gifts to his good friends. **It is simply being Santy.**



SANTY'S STUDIO WHERE HE COMPARES NEW MOUTHPIECES TO HIS PROTOTYPES.

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