

Tips On How To Buy A Used Saxophone

Questions to ask before going to check out a horn:

When you text, email, or phone the person about the saxophone, here are some of the questions that you really would want to have the answers to.

- Is the horn in playing condition?
- Does it play in tune?
- What kind of finish does it have? (Lacquer? Silver plate? Nickel plate? Gold plate? Etc.)
- Is the finish original?
- When was it serviced last?
- What was done during that service?
- What is the serial #?
- Is there a model name engraved anywhere?
- Is there a model # engraved on the horn? (6M, 10M, etc)
- What does all the engraving on the bell say?
- What kind of damage has it had in the past?
- Are there any dents on the horn?
- Where are the dents? (Neck? Body tube? Bow? Bell?)

What to take along when testing horns:

- Mouthpiece that you normally use
- A good selection of reeds
- Cork grease
- Plumbing tape (in case the cork is too small)
- Neck strap
- Tuner
- Pad of paper & pen to take notes
- Another person to listen to it
- If that person is another sax player, even better. This will give you a second opinion on the horn, and give you a better idea of what the sax sounds like.

Overall appearance & condition:

- Does the case smell the minute you open it?
- Is the horn green, or have patches of green on it?
- Is it covered in red rot, or have patches of red rot on it?
- Is it blackened? (This likely means it's a silver plated horn that is in dire need of cleaning.)

What to avoid at all costs:

- Saxes with scratched out serial numbers. This can mean that the sax is stolen!

Neck

Any damage to the neck can have serious consequences on the tone and intonation. Ideally the neck should be free of dents and dings. Necks can be repaired, but it takes a very skilled sax tech to do the job well.

When buying a used saxophone, the questions you should be asking/looking for the answers to include:

- Does it have a neck?
- Is it original? For example, is it the right make and model to the horn? Does it have a matching serial #?
- Is the neck damaged, or was it damaged in past, like in a pull down?
- Any dents that go into the inside of the neck?
- Dents like these are likely to go into the neck. Often you can tell by putting you finger into the neck and feeling for a bump.
- If the damage is beyond where your finger can reach, your tech can tell you for sure with one of his/her specialty tools.

Body tube, bow, & bell

When buying a used saxophone that you want to play, (not hang on the wall) these are the questions you want to be asking yourself:

- What condition is it?
- Is it straight?
- Is it smooth?
- Is it round?
- Are there any dents in the body tube?
- Are the dents 5 mm wide or less?
- Dents that are deep enough that they go into the body tube can cause swirls in the air flow, and lead to tuning and tonal issues.
- Where are the dents located?
- Dents around tone holes can be problematic, because they may cause pads to not be seated correctly, or worse, damage the tone hole.
- Are any posts pushed in?
- Is there a bump inside the bell opposite to where the bell to body brace is?
- Is there a dent on the body tube where the bell to body tube attaches?
- Either of these two things indicates that the sax was likely dropped in its case.

- Minor dings and dents on the left side of the bow are pretty normal as players bump the horn into chairs, etc, and usually don't interfere with the tone.
- Is there any evidence of repaired damage on the body tube? For example, the lacquer shows signs of damage and almost seems to have lines that run up and down.
- Any soldering repairs?
- Are they well done?
- What kind of tone holes does it have? Drawn or soldered? Soldered ones like those on Martin saxes can be prone to leaking, or even falling off, and require the skills of an excellent sax tech.

Finish

- Is the finish original?
- Relacquered horns generally are worth less than ones in original condition. This is especially true if the horn in question is a Selmer.
- ID relacs by: fuzzy engraving; shiny finish on a horn that doesn't match its age; or lacquer overspray onto the pearl key touches.
- Really good relacs are sometimes hard to tell from original, because shops might re-cut the engraving. For example, Selmer Paris was known to relacquer horns for players. Those relacs are very hard to tell from the original.
- If the horn is relacquered, poorly done jobs may have damaged the tone holes.
- Silver, nickel, or gold plated horns generally sell for more than lacquer ones.

Rods

- Move the hinge tubes up and down and side to side.
- If there is too much movement, this will have to be repaired, and should be factored in to your offer.
- NB: Vintage Keilwerths are especially prone to wear in this area, and because of their rolled tone holes, repairs are tricky. A really good sax tech is your best bet when faced with this kind of repair.

Pads:

- What condition are they in?
- Are they soft?
- What kind of resonators do they have in them?
- Are the pads and resos matching? Or is there a hodge podge of different kinds on the horn?

Questions you should be asking yourself:

- Do you like the tone?
- Do you like, or can you live with the saxophone's ergonomics?
- Can you see yourself playing this horn for a few years?
- Does it meet your needs? For example, are you buying a vintage horn for university, when you should be buying a new one instead? Or are you buying a high pitch horn when you in fact planning on playing current music with others?

Do I really need all this information just to buy a used saxophone?

Yes, yes you do. And remember, there's nothing wrong with asking if you can get your tech to look it over and giving his/her input—this is especially true if you are buying an instrument worth thousands of dollars.

Thousands of dollars or not, buying a saxophone is always a very personal decision, and represents an outlay of your personal savings. My hope is that this article gives you some helpful tools that you will be able to use when you go out and try some used horns.