**Saxophone scales – 12 practice tips:**

What follows is a common every day scenario in saxophone teaching studios around the globe.

TEACHER: OK, let’s warm up by playing a few scales.

PUPIL: (Horrible panicky feeling slowly creeping over entire body – especially the fingers – blood rushing to the brain and blocking all coherent thought process). Do we have to? I have awful problems remembering them.

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Do we really have to practice scales? Well the answer is yes, if we really want a half decent saxophone technique, and of course, once achieved, to keep that technique from going rusty. There are all kinds of scales for many purposes, but let’s keep to the basic major and minor versions for the moment. These scales will help you to build a solid technique and enable you to play in all keys. Here are twelve ways to help you gain the maximum benefit from time spent learning scales.

• Use scales as warm-ups. Make playing your scales the first thing you do after opening your case and assembling your instrument. Pick an easy one to begin with, maybe F or G major. Set a slow metronome speed and play nice long notes.

• When practicing a scale, make it sound as musical as possible. Scales are not necessarily a piece of music (although great music can be created from just a single ascending or descending scale). But every time you place that saxophone in your mouth and blow, make it sound as good as you possibly can. And that, of course, includes playing scales.

• Create an imaginary audience. Perform your scale. Enjoy playing the scale. Play it expressively, and all the while concentrate on the three T’s: Tone, Tuning, and Timing.

• Always play the scales at a speed you can manage accurately. If you are repeatedly making mistakes, then you are playing them too fast. Slow down. Playing them fast and wrong means that you are actually learning them wrong!

• Vary the articulation. Play them two ways, both tongued and slurred. Visualize them like this:

• Slurred \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ as a line with no gaps between the notes

• Tongued \_\_ \_\_ \_\_ \_\_ \_\_ \_\_ \_\_ \_\_ keep the line in mind and gently break it with your tongue, avoiding short separate sounding notes.

• Memorize them as soon as possible. Commit them to memory. A scale book may be a very useful reminder of both the form and notation but cast it aside and play them by ear as soon as you are familiar with them. Listen to the structure as you play them. Sing them. Train your ears. After a while you will be able to work out new scales by ear. If you find it difficult to remember the complete scale in one go, break it down into smaller units; three notes at a time, then four, and so on.

• Learn one scale at a time. This is very important. Set yourself a “Scale Of The Week”. Most people, average around a week to consolidate a scale if they practice it daily. Even if you are a quick learner, avoid the temptation to learn too many at once. It’s confusing.

• Learn and practice the related arpeggios. Arpeggios are broken chords and should be learned along with the scale. In major and minor scales these are the 1st, 3rd, and 5th notes of the scale.

• Learn to recognize scales and arpeggios in the music that you play. Look for fragments of scales and arpeggios in the tunes you play. You will spot them in most forms of western music. That’s why we learn them.

• Play your scales regularly. Once learned properly, they are very rarely completely forgotten. However, if not played often, they can become very rusty. Keep on top of them. Play them regularly as part of your practice routine. Start with those that you know and finish with the one that you are currently learning.

• Enjoy playing your scales. Scales need not be boring. The more you play them the easier they become and the easier they become the more you will enjoy playing them. Once a scale is learned in strict time try varying the rhythmic structure. You could apply Latin or funk rhythms for example or “jazz quavers”. Experiment.

• Recognize the benefits. As you learn more scales you are gradually laying the foundation of a secure technique. Not only are you consolidating finger patterns for all the different keys, you are simultaneously improving your breathing, tone, timing, intonation, articulation and aural skills.