

Regional

Saxophone elicits passion among its players

The saxophone is one of the most popular musical instruments in contemporary music, common from jazz bands to even some selected symphony orchestras. Its melodic abilities and range has made it, in its different forms, a very palatable instrument to all ears. Someone who teaches how to play it is Jason Swagler, an assistant professor in the department of music at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Despite his accomplishments and passion for the instrument, he said he began his musical career more interested in guitar.

"Even though I'm known as a saxophonist I feel like I'm a guitarist trapped in a saxophonist's body," Swagler, a native of Centralia, Ill., said. "I always say the saxophone chose me. A couple of my family members played saxophone, but the only reason I ended up on saxophone was not my choosing. On the day I got to try out all the instruments for the public school band, the band director selected the saxophone for me. I wanted to play drums because that was close to rock 'n' roll, but he told me, 'We already have enough drummers, why don't you try the saxophone?'" Despite his initial disappointment, his parents made the best of it and convinced him that it would be a good thing.

"Fortunately for me, my grandparents had a great saxophone that was my uncle's," he said. "They dusted it off and that's the same horn I continue to play." Swagler went on to obtain his bachelor's and master's degrees in music from SIUE. One of the reasons why the saxophone has become so popular, Swagler said, is its expressiveness.

"It's got a beautiful tone quality in the upper register," he said. "The lower register has some very unique tone qualities



Photo by Devin Rodino

Jason Swagler

and it can sound really beautiful and it can sound very harsh at the same time, so it has a wide range of expression that contemporary musicians have caught on

to." Swagler recently published a jazz album with a group of friends.

"We have played various shows together through the years and we are good

friends as well," he said. "We decided one summer to put a project together and play an awful lot. We met on a weekly basis and just improvised and played through material. The album is sort of a culmination of those experiences through the summer.

"We went into the studio and the entire album is either first or second takes because we wanted to capture the spirit of the moment essentially and not try to overproduce and just kind of represent what we had been working on," Swagler said. "Four musicians trying to communicate together after those experiences playing gigs and playing together that summer." He chose "Rough Stuff" as the album's title for a variety of reasons, he said.

"A lot of times when we met to play, if it wasn't at a gig we were meeting at my house," he said. "I live in a very old house in Alton. It's almost 200 years old, and my wife and I we are both avid preservationists and it's always in various states of rehabilitation, so that was a little rough. That summer, as well, we were supposed to perform a weekend at Jazz at the Bistro in St. Louis, but the day before those shows I got appendicitis and had to have my appendix removed. So that was a rough summer." Unlike other albums that may take up to six months or more to complete, Swagler's project was done fairly quickly, in a day or two.

"Some musicians try to make everything as perfect as possible and they are trying to layer track on top of track," he said, "where this is more the act of documenting a moment in time where musicians are coming together to create something and whatever happens, happens essentially. But there is some preparation that goes on ahead of time. In the

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case of these albums the preparation was either just playing a lot together or 'gigging' a lot together and then deciding on repertoire and going into the studio and documenting it," he explained. This, of course, means that improvisation is part of the process and that is not unfamiliar territory for jazz musicians like Swagler. In fact, he said he teaches that to his students.

"A lot of what an individual needs in order to learn to improvise is based not only on knowledge, but also on experience," he said. "So sometimes an improvisation class is just a way to get musicians together to gain that experience through improvising and then talking about what worked and what did not and then offering suggestions, trying to get into the philosophy of how we, as musicians, improvise. People improvise all the time." When it comes to assessing whether a student has what it takes to become a successful musician, Swagler said that there is no exact science.

"Sometimes it's not as apparent, and sometimes it's very obvious that a student has 'it'," he said. "It usually takes a bit of time to kind of coax out things from students, but when a student really has 'it,' that's apparent within 30 seconds I would say."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.