

A short and incomplete history of Selmer Saxophones

by Jason DuMars

- Many professional saxophonists agree that the best vintage saxophones were manufactured by the H. Selmer company in Paris, France. The reign of Selmer's domination of the professional saxophone market has spanned nearly 80 years. With humble beginnings in the early 1920's, Selmer began producing limited numbers of high quality saxophones. The first model was simply called "[Modele 22](#)" and featured several finishes, sizes and engraving. Some of these horns were custom made for players in France and the U.S. The Modele 22 sported the engraved signature of Henri Selmer (complete with the 4 place, Dancourt, Paris address), sculptured braces, and occasionally decorative engraving. Some of the early horns were quite elaborate. I once had the pleasure of owning a gold plated, ornately engraved Modele 22 C tenor. This horn wound up with Ted Hegvik in Pennsylvania who collects C saxes.

The next model that Selmer officially produced was the "[Modele 26](#)." This model had a slightly less stuffy sound and featured an elaborate engraved trademark stamp for the Selmer company. Many of these horns were engraved, but far less elaborately than their earlier counterparts. There was a period of transition between the two models where some horns had no model number at all. The serial numbers of these horns is generally around the 10,000 mark. Experimentation would become more daring with the next two models.

Selmer's [next models](#) were a mixture of concepts and design that would help them become the leader of the saxophone wars which were heating up through the 1920's saxophone craze. Professional players of the day called these horns Pea Shooters or Cigar Cutters (based on the unique octave key mechanism). While these horns were officially called Selmer Super Saxophones, the nicknames would become their name in the history books. these models ran

from the 12,000 to 20,000 serial number range (This may not be 100% accurate as I am writing this from memory).

The next and final model for the 20's was the short-lived "[Radio Improved](#)" model. The differences between the Radio Improved and its predecessors are few. Most Radio Improved saxophones were either plated in Silver or Gold. (Saxophonist David Bilger has been spotted more than once playing this model.)

Selmer's next saxophone took a quantum leap in design. So much so, that it left the rest of the saxophone world scrambling to compete with it. The [Selmer Balanced Action](#) would become the basic prototype for what is now considered the "standard" saxophone design. Radical changes included: bell keys placed on the right side of the horn with the rods running down the front of the horn instead of the side, radically redesigned octave key mechanism, a standard alternate front F key, and modern palm key design. The new Selmer also sported a mother of pearl G# key and a flat side key design. To top off this stunning work, Selmer had the USA assembled horns engraved by Conn's top instrument engravers. The result is a strikingly beautiful and facilitative horn. Owners of these horns seldom part with them!

As Selmer rode the tide of their new model, their development team was busy trying to improve the design of the new horn. Some of these early balanced actions had an inch-tall octave vent on the neck that looked like a tea kettle. Others had 3 octave keys operated by one mechanism! Selmer even produced a few Soprano and Baritone prototypes, but for the most part, production was limited to the Alto and Tenor.

The next model was a limited success and saw very few horns in production. This was the [Dorsey Model](#), named after Selmer aficionado, Jimmy Dorsey. These horns were produced between the 26,000 and 27,500 serial range. Selmer took a "retro" approach to this horn. It was essentially a Balanced Action body with Super model keys. They were elaborately engraved and had the Jimmy Dorsey name (on some).

Selmer's next models were blurred into each other. Research and development were in full swing, so no official model name was assigned. The serial ranges are the only way to define what type of horn it is, although many players group these (28,000-50,000) horns

as [Super Balanced Actions](#), or simply Supers. In my opinion the horns produced between 28,000 and 32,000 are the best of all of the pre-Mark VI horns. My Alto (serial number 28,164) plays incredibly well in tune, and has a rich, resonant sound. These horns had pictorial scenes engraved on the bell, refined action and a slightly darker tone than earlier balanced actions. The horns produced after the 32,000 range lost the pictorial scene and gained rod guards on the back of the horn. Alto saxophones produced in this range had a single bell guard instead of two separate ones.

The next official Selmer release would change the history of the saxophone and the way it is played forever. In 1956, the advertisements said it all: NEW... MARK VI UNQUESTIONABLY SELMER'S GREATEST SAXOPHONE. Boy were they not kidding! The [Selmer Mark VI](#) took the saxophone world by storm. Here's a list of saxophonists playing Selmers as listed in the Midwinter 1957 issue of Selmer's Bandwagon magazine:

[Paul Desmond](#) (who was a young 1956 Down Beat and Metronome poll winner)

[Stan Getz](#) (also a Down Beat and Metronome poll winner)

[Serge Chaloff](#) (who owned one of those rare Balanced Bari's!)

[Buddy Collette](#) (a Selmer user since 1941)

[John Murtaugh](#) (says: "I have played Selmer tenor for 10 years and the mark VI is the greatest ever!")

[Lee Konitz](#) (Selmer user since 1944)

[Charlie Barnet](#) (remember Cherokee??)

[Buddy Morrow](#) "All-Selmer Sax Section"

[Fred Hemke](#)

[Marcel Mule](#)

It seemed that Selmer Saxophones could not get any better... until the mid-1970's. This is where Selmer seemed to take a wrong turn. The next official Model, the [Mark VII](#), pales in comparison to it's ancestors. Rumors have it that the machinery used to produce the Mark VI (a total run of nearly 250,000 horns) just wore out from use. Other theories maintain that Selmer needed to produce a cheaper horn to compete with rising competition from the US (remember that King was producing the Super 20, Conn the 6M, 10M horns and Buescher the model 400 during the reign of the Mark VI). (Personally, I think change/experimentation was in their nature and

they needed a break from the same horn.) The Mark VII is a much heavier horn than the VI and has a bigger bore. It tends to have a boomy bottom end and a slightly "whiny" high end. Not to mention the production errors that were more frequent on horns made after the 250,000 mark. (some of these late horns are really great though too, you just have to weed through them).