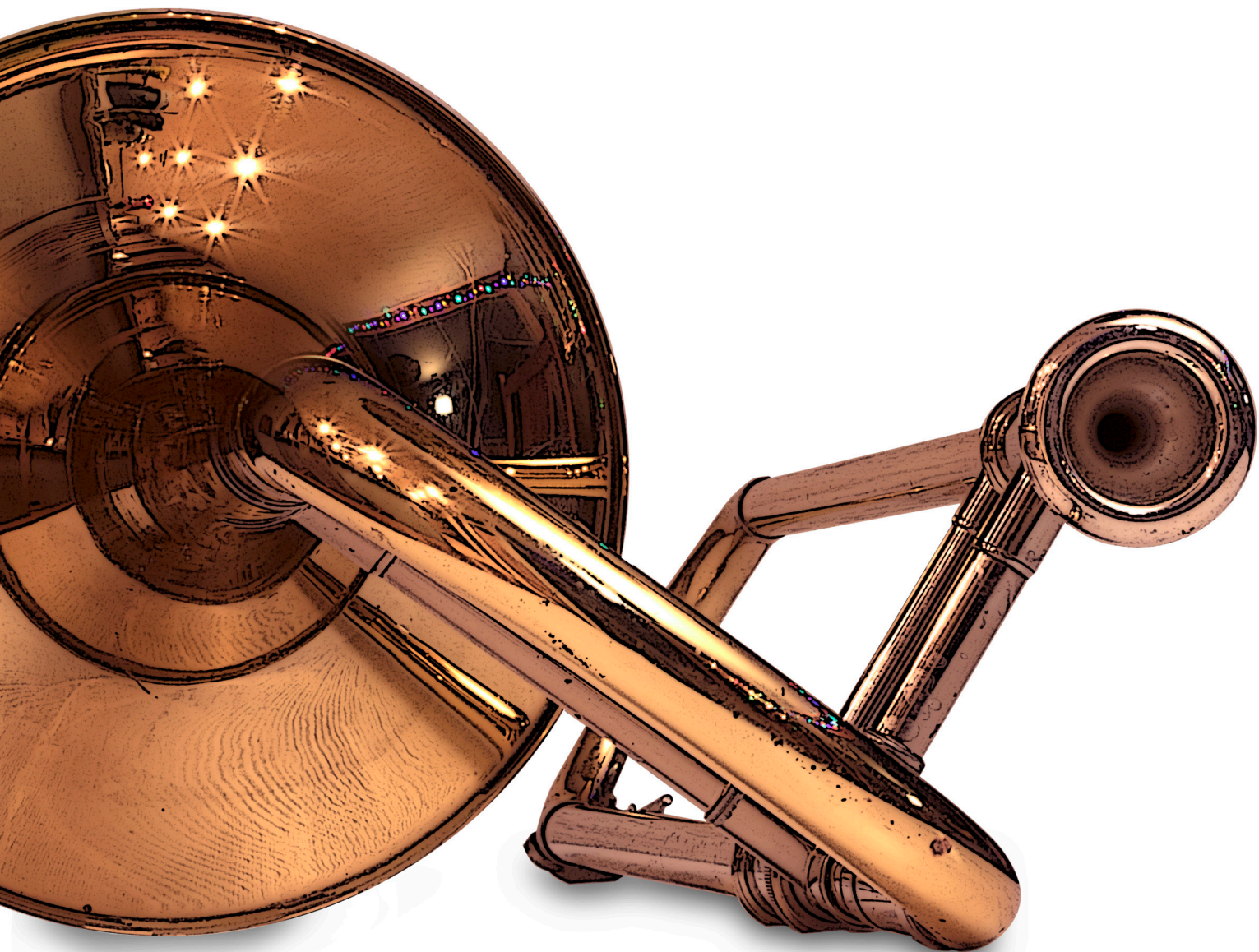


Alto Trombone Savvy

by Michael Lake



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1. Preface

Thank you for buying this book. My hope is that by reading, playing the exercises, and thinking about some of its ideas, you will become savvy enough about the alto trombone to perform at whatever level you wish for yourself and enjoy a greater confidence in your playing. The section entitled *Finding Your Unique Musical Voice* explores one of the most important topics in the book, namely that you possess a great trombone playing potential, but only if you discover and follow your unique voice and resist the trap of long-term imitation. All that's required of you is determination, the right instruction and a lot of hard work. Ready for that?

Let me get this out of the way: if you are hoping for a scholarly tome with historic literature on the sixteenth century classical instrument known as the alto trombone, notated in alto clef, you may still have time for a full refund!

Instead, this is a collection of my observations and experiences with the alto version of that most awesome of brass instruments called trombone. This is my opportunity to share with you things that I have learned over a lifetime that seemed to have worked for me and others.

“How many people will find this book useful”, is the question I asked myself when I began thinking about this book. I still have no idea. You may be a really good alto player curious about some ways to get an edge. You might be a lifelong tenor player curious about the fun you could have playing an alto. The group I'm most unsure yet hopeful of is the young boys and girls beginning their school's music program. Is it too much to ask that this smaller, lighter version of the trombone might be a great first musical choice for some? If so, here's the instruction I wish to provide.

There are many alto trombone players who would like to strengthen (begin?) their ability to improvise so the jazz section remains an important part of this book. As I was writing the section on improvisation, however, I soon realized that I had more to write and record as models and examples than I wished to fit into an alto trombone book—so much so that I decided to write a separate book called *Trombone Improvisation Savvy*. For many more models, exercises and thoughts about improvisation on *any* trombone, please refer to *Trombone Improvisation Savvy*. Consider this the robust introduction to the topic and to that book.

The book you are currently holding, however, contains a bounty of material that will provide you with a solid introduction to improvisation. Should you wish to explore more, my improvisation book will serve you well as will articles and videos on www.altobone.com.

I started playing tenor trombone at 10. I began playing the alto mid-way through Arizona State in the midst of my trombone studies and a regular gig that was paying for college. Wanting to be much more proficient than I was while playing both alto and tenor, I thought, *this isn't working so I'm going to play the alto full time*. And like any early explorer worth his salt, I burned the ship (sold my tenor) so it would be harder to go back into the safe confines of my familiar and comfortable tenor.

Around that time, I had applied for and won a National Endowment for the Arts grant to study with the great Frank Rosolino. Frank's tragic death that fall left me looking for some way to spend the endowment or else give it back. A good friend reminded me that he was spending that summer in Woodstock, New York at the Creative Music Studio. He also reminded me that none other than trombonist George Lewis would be teaching along with Anthony Braxton and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. It was my kind of music at the time, so I fulfilled my public duty to spend the government's hard-earned cash.



A year later and immediately out of ASU, I spent four years at what I'll call a musician's boot camp in Minneapolis. It was a great experience where I gained a well-rounded education in music, sales, marketing and discipline. I next played professionally from Philadelphia to Boston to New York. Lots of salsa, some jazz and a bit of recording. Along the way I played with some great musicians and found my way into a Grammy nomination with my four trombone (three tenors and one alto) Boston-based salsa band called Caribbean Express.



A few years later, I engineered a deal in New York to buy a large inventory of entry-level recording equipment from a Japanese electronics manufacturer. One of the units I kept for myself, a 6-track cassette recorder, started a life-long exploration of recording and music technology that has culminated into the recording/production facility I have built allowing me to produce the music I send out to subscribers and master into CDs.

A few years ago I needed a change so I moved back to my beloved Phoenix Arizona. Yes, it's a dry heat and yes, I am scared of rattlesnakes.

I perform locally but my musical fire at the moment is ignited by the music I produce in my studio. Leave your email at www.altobone.com and you will receive a new piece of music each month written and performed in my studio on alto trombone. My subscribers are my accountability buddies and consistently cranking out a unique piece of music each month is a fun means of focusing on composition while playing alto trombone. With writing and recording-like playing trombone—do something every day and you will improve. Maybe you'll even get really good at it.

There is a reason one my all-time favorite pieces of fiction is Jerzy Kosinski's Pinball. In my next life, I want to be Goddard.

But in this life I have written a manual of sorts for improving your skill on the alto trombone along with some thoughts on improvising jazz that applies to any instrument. In truth, I've labeled this book "alto trombone" but once you get past the pages teaching alto positions, this is a *trombone* book. Alto, tenor, bass or contrabass. I hope you enjoy it and more importantly, I hope it helps you become as alto trombone savvy as you desire.

2. Introduction

This book was born from dozens and dozens of questions about the alto trombone throughout the years from people like you who were intrigued by the possibilities of this little brother of the tenor. In fact, you probably bought this book for one or more of the following reasons:

1. You think the alto might hold some potential for you and therefore, want to play one.
2. You own an alto that has become a dusty fixture in your bedroom closet, and you'd like to again play, maybe this time with more satisfaction.
3. You currently play the alto - perhaps classically - and think you might like to play a bit of jazz on it.

Whichever your reason for picking up this book, I take seriously the responsibility of providing you the guidance you seek and helping you reach your musical goals.

I hope that in whatever capacity this book influences you, we can help bring the alto trombone into the musical mainstream where it can attain the position it rightly deserves.



I guess you can tell I am passionate about the alto trombone. I love performing on it and recording over interesting textures. I also enjoy answering the many questions I receive on playing the alto better. Throughout years of conversations, emails and comments, I've had the pleasure of connecting with players all over the world like you. Through this book, I finally get the opportunity to fully illustrate my playing philosophy, tips and tools.

As with any advice, some will work for you and some won't. Your task is to look through this information and find thoughts and exercises that you respond to, and once you've found them, practice and utilize them to make you the best alto trombone player you wish to be.

Can you play jazz on the alto trombone? Judging by how few play anything other than classical on the alto, you might be tempted to think not. But the belief I had back when I first picked up the alto was that it is a great horn that is—dare I say—built for jazz. Even more than jazz, I've played it on salsa gigs, recording sessions, big bands, cruise ships, combos and pretty much anywhere a tenor trombone would normally play. Yes, you can play more than classical music very well on the alto trombone.

Unique about the many of the exercises within this book is that they are crafted to utilize the unique overtone positions of the alto. For example, when first learning the alto, you will likely be tempted to bring your slide in to play F3 in first position as you've done your whole life on the tenor - rather than sixth. Building your muscle memory to the counter-intuitive positions is necessary for commanding the alto and absolutely for playing jazz fluently guided by your ear. These exercises are designed with that goal in mind.

Regarding the pitch of the alto. I am frequently asked what key the alto is pitched in. This book focuses on the Eb alto. I've never played any other. Since the fundamental of the tube is Eb, it makes sense to consider Eb to be the key of the horn.

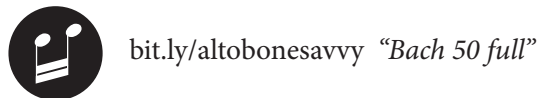
From the very beginning, I was never willing to consider the horn a transposing instrument like an alto saxophone nor could I demand that music be given to me in alto clef. So I play the alto as a C instrument in bass clef just like the tenor. Remember, the fundamental of the tenor and bass trombones are Bb yet we notate and refer to the notes as concert pitches. I will do the same within this book. Please don't ask me to play in alto clef!

I have never owned an alto with trigger. My choice of horn was driven by the desire for simplicity of the instrument. After all, I never wanted to perform regularly within the "false" register from E2 to Ab2 so a straight horn worked perfectly well. The exercises within this book will work fine for a non-trigger horn.

3. Accessing and utilizing the audio files

Fifty audio files are available to you as examples and accompaniments throughout this book. They are organized as a Soundcloud playlist and can be accessed through the URL: www.bit.ly/altobonesavvy.

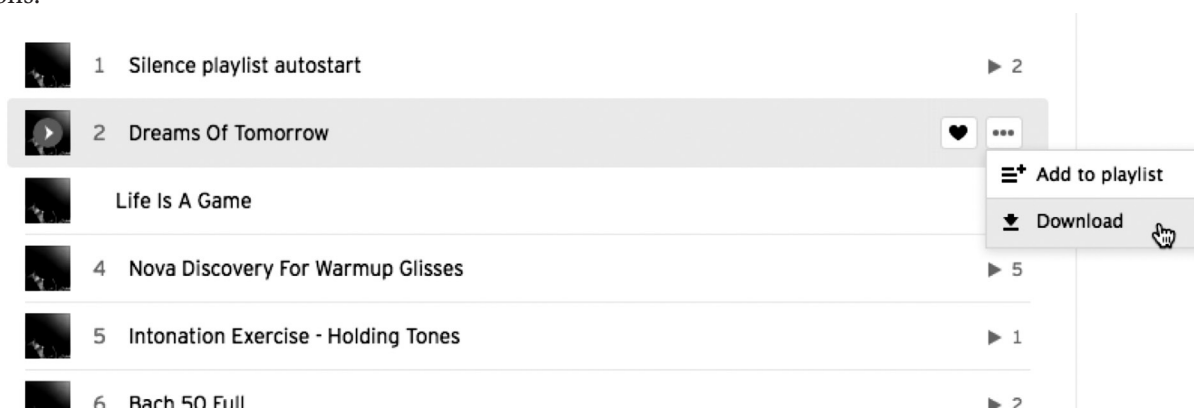
Each time a soundfile is available, you will see the music icon followed by the name of the file. For example:



In the above example, you would go to the soundcloud playlist at bit.ly/altobonesavvy and then select the file called "Bach 50 full" within the playlist. By the way, the full URL is: <https://soundcloud.com/mlake/sets/alto-trombone-savvy-audio>. I shortened the link to make it easier for you to get to the playlist of files.

I purposefully chose not to place these audio files on a disk within the book because I wanted to prevent the cost of the book from significantly increasing. I also felt that in a certain way, digital files accessible on-line was more convenient. CDs are becoming more and more a relic of yesterday's technology.

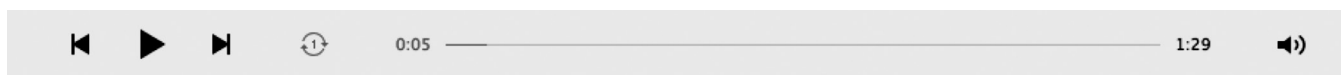
That said, I know this will inconvenience some of you. If you lack an internet connection that feeds a sound system, perhaps find a fast connection and download into a folder some or all of the files. Then feed them through your sound system which could be everything from a state-of-the-art sound system to an iPhone. Upon selecting a sound file on the Soundcloud playlist, click to the right of the file and select Download from the dropdown options.



One last tip concerning the Soundcloud playlist: Since there is no way currently to disable the autoplay feature within a Soundcloud playlist, I have inserted a file of silence at the top of the playlist so that you're not hit every time with the first track. It will get annoying after hearing it every time you go to the playlist. Someday, perhaps Soundcloud will fix that and I can remove this silent audio file.

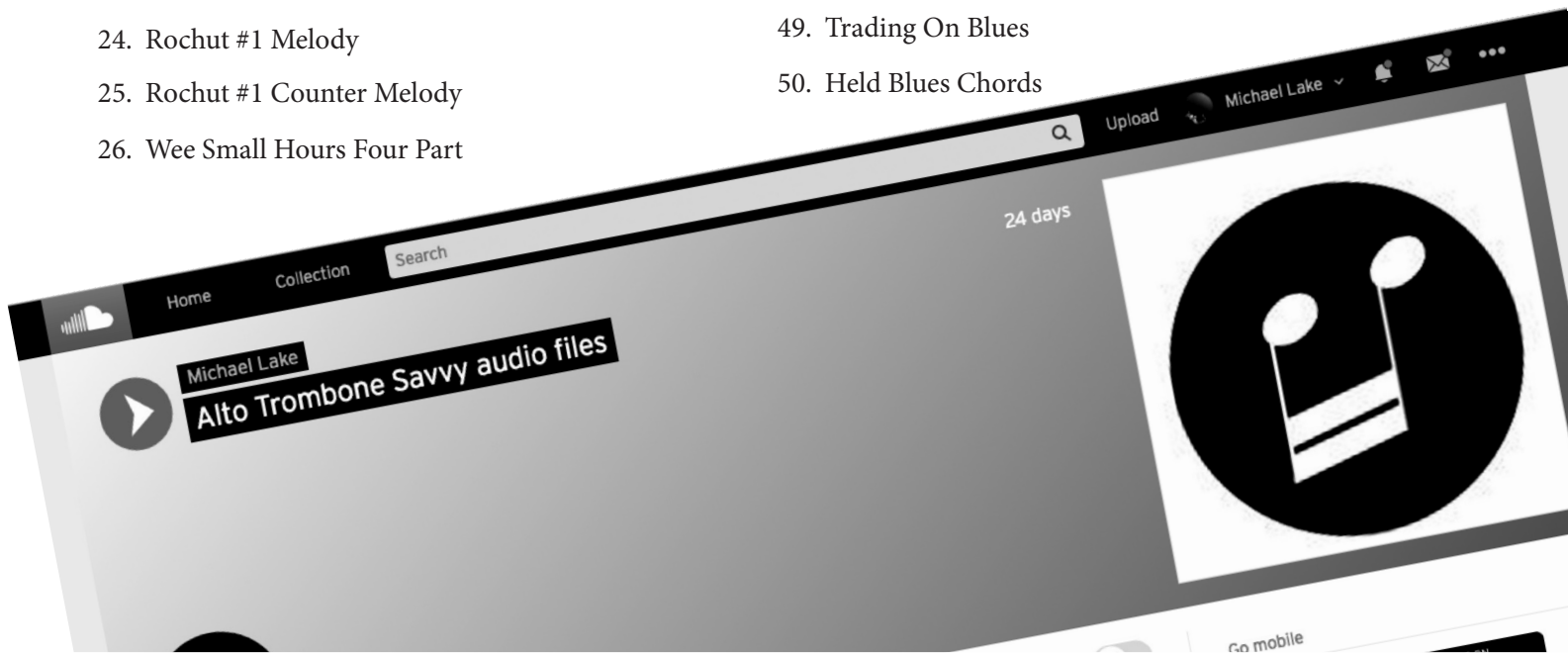
The very bottom of the Playlist page displays some controls for going to the track start, play/pause on current track and next track. There is also a cycle link that will repeat the current track if you want to keep cycling the track. A good application for that would be to cycle the tracks *Strings for Gliss Warmups* or *Dreams of tomorrow* as you take your time warming up on the written exercises or improvise ones of your own making. Those types of tracks also make for great intonation playalong exercises.

And hit the space bar for start and stop.



The audio files used within this book are as follows:

1. Chords Played by Tenors and Alto
2. Chords Played by Three Altos
3. Dreams of Tomorrow
4. Life is a Game
5. String for Gliss Warm-ups
6. Nova Discovery For Warmup Glisses
7. Intonation Exercise - Holding Tones
8. Bach #50 Full
9. Bach #50 No First
10. Bach #50 No Second
11. Bach #50 No Third
12. Bach #50 No Fourth
13. Bach #107 Full
14. Bach #107 No First
15. Bach #107 No Second
16. Bach #107 No Third
17. Bach #107 No Fourth
18. Bach #154 Full
19. Bach #154 No First
20. Bach #154 No Second
21. Bach #154 No Third
22. Bach #154 No Fourth
23. Rochut #1 Both Parts
24. Rochut #1 Melody
25. Rochut #1 Counter Melody
26. Wee Small Hours Four Part
27. Wee Small Hours Four Part No First
28. Wee Small Hours Four Part No Second
29. Wee Small Hours Four Part No Third
30. Wee Small Hours Four Part No Fourth
31. Vibrato Examples
32. String Accompaniment for Rhythm Exercise
33. Jazz Rhythm Exercise with Recorded Trombone Line
34. Jazz Rhythm Exercise Rhythm Only
35. Off Beat Bass Rhythm
36. Dream Repair with Recorded Trombone Line
37. Dream Repair Rhythm Only
38. Metro Crystals with Recorded Trombone Line
39. Metro Crystals Rhythm Only
40. Harp March with Recorded Trombone Line
41. Harp March Rhythm Only
42. String Bounce with Recorded Trombone Line
43. String Bounce Rhythm Only
44. Three Feel Flexibility Track
45. Rhythm Flexibility Track
46. Creative Slide Demo
47. Walkin Blues
48. Now's The Time Rhythm
49. Trading On Blues
50. Held Blues Chords



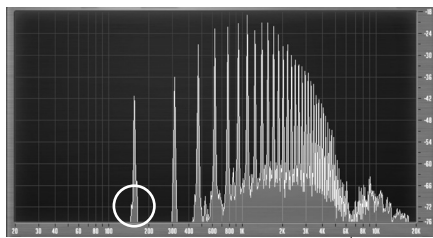
The harmonic signature of the alto

The alto contains higher harmonics. We're not talking about the partials on the horn containing the notes. The higher timbre of the alto is due to higher harmonics resulting from the shorter tube. As a result, the alto trombone has a certain bite when leading the top of a trombone section or ensemble. What do those overtones look like and how do they compare to those of both a small and large tenor?

I thought it would be interesting to compare the sonic "fingerprint" of the alto with a small bore tenor and a large bore tenor. For this analysis, I used my Yamaha alto and a borrowed Conn 6H and a Conn 88H. I used a Bach 6½ AL with each horn (large shank obviously for the 88H) I recorded each using the same microphone, mic proximity and signal chain.

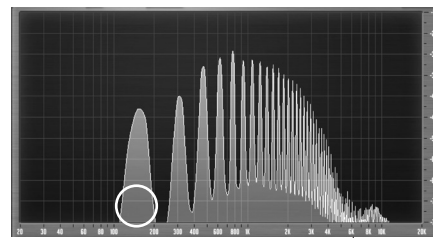
Would different 88H's or 6H's make much of a difference? I'm not sure. I'm using these as representative examples of a small tenor and a large tenor.

I played a middle Eb for the first analysis. Here's the frequency spectrum comparison for the Eb played on all three horns. I've put a circle around the fundamental Eb in each. The spikes higher up the frequency range are the note's harmonics. In the case of a trombone, they are rich harmonics full of overtones.



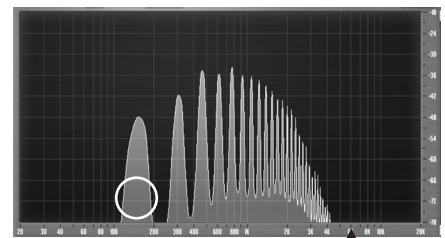
Yamaha Alto

6.5Khz



Conn 6H

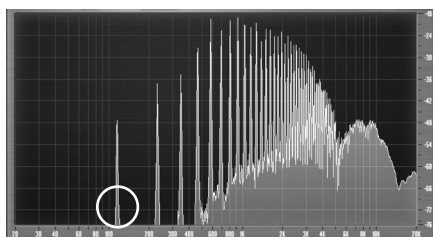
6.5Khz



Conn 88H

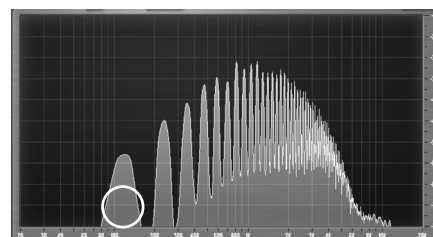
6.5Khz

For the above Eb, notice the greater higher frequencies of the alto starting at 6.5khz. The 6H has some in that range and the 88H has none. More interesting is the narrower overtone range range of the various harmonics on the alto and the much broader range of overtones of both tenors beginning with the fundamental. Bigger horns seem to create more overtones.



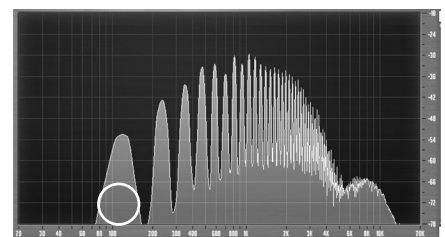
Yamaha Alto

5khz



Conn 6H

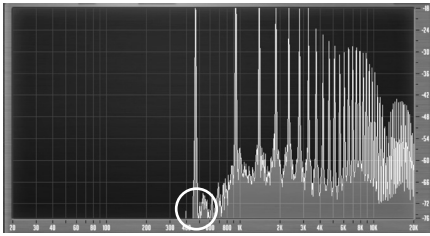
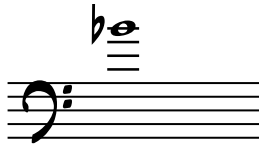
5khz



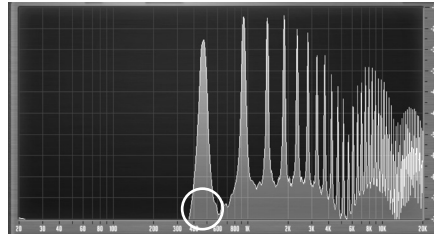
Conn 88H

6.5Khz

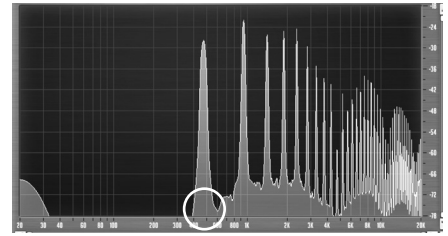
For this low Bb, again the harmonics of the tenors are much richer in overtones. And even though the alto has far more higher frequencies, it's interesting to see that the 88H had more than the 6H. In hearing both, the low Bb on the 88H was brighter and more resonant.



Yamaha Alto



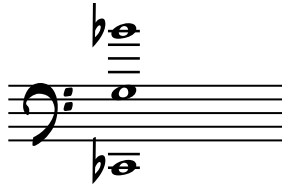
Conn 6H



Conn 88H

I next played the high Bb. Both the 6H and the 88H spoke very clearly on the high Bb. The high frequency harmonics were more similar between the three horns. Again, circles are on the fundamental pitches, Bb in this case.

I then tested a chord. Low Eb, G3 and high Bb.



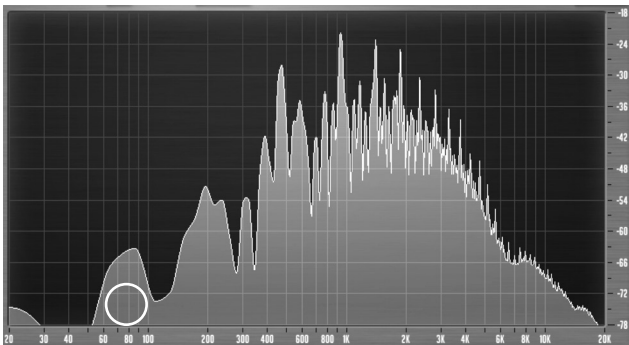
bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Chord Played by Tenors and Alto"



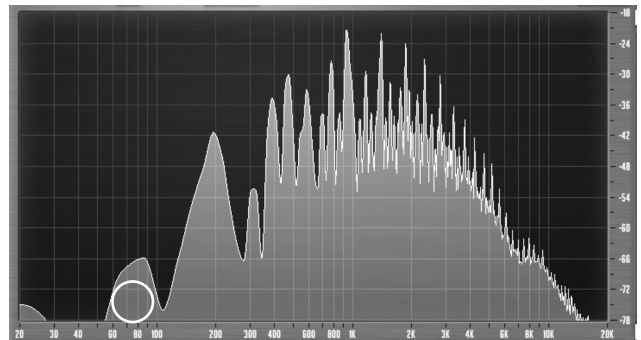
bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Chord played by Three altos"

The first chord was played with the 88H on the bottom, the 6H in the middle and the alto on the top. All three notes on the second chord were played on the alto.

The three different size horns produced the broadest and fullest frequency range. No surprise there. Listen to the two chords and hear the difference. No graphs on this comparison. Just listening.



Yamaha Alto



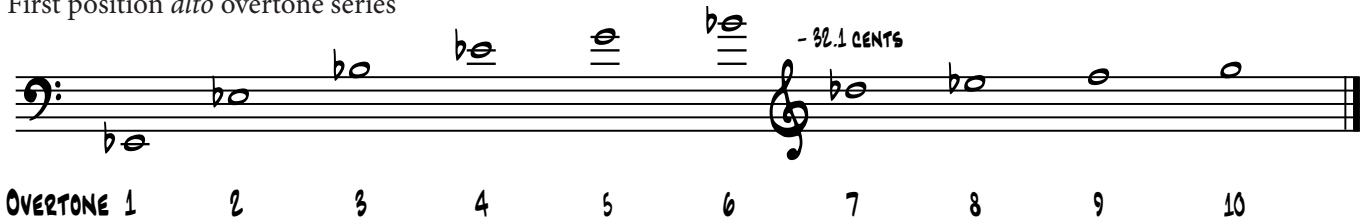
Conn 88H

Since the 6H has no trigger, the pedal Eb was played only on the alto and the 88H. Notice the high frequencies are pretty close. The Eb on the 88H was very resonant. Of course, this Eb is the fundamental of the alto and as such, is also very resonant. The 88H had more presence in the second harmonic but the much smaller alto nevertheless has a big pedal Eb.

What are the positions on the alto?

The fundamental of the alto trombone is Eb. It's the Eb a fourth up from the pedal Bb on the tenor. In fact, the secret to the alto is that the entire overtone series is a fourth up from the tenor.

First position *alto* overtone series



First position *tenor* overtone series



The placement of pitches on the alto overtone series provides an interesting distinction (advantage?) over the tenor trombone. Because the alto overtone series is a fourth higher than the tenor, the “space” between notes is greater. For example, Bb3 is on the alto’s third partial while it is on the tenor’s fourth. The next higher note for the alto above Bb is Eb - a fourth up. The next higher note on the tenor’s fourth partial is D - a major third.

This greater distance between notes plays a role in alto trombone performance. Reaching for the high Bb for example, is made slightly easier because of the greater distance between neighboring F below and Db above. It’s as if being given a slightly larger target within which to hit the bulls eye.

Technically, a partial on a trombone is the wavelength number. Partial #1 on the alto is the Eb fundamental, #2 is the octave higher Eb, #3 is Bb and so on. When you do a lip slur, you are playing the various partials or overtones of the horn.

Hitting high Bb on alto



Hitting high Bb on tenor



Working the more difficult extended positions on the alto

Okay, maybe *every* position on the alto is difficult for you at the moment, but there are certain intervals that present more of a challenge. If you are not used to the smaller slide on the alto, seventh position will seem odd. From time to time, you may extend the slide off the inner tubes because you're used to seventh position of the longer tenor slide.

I've read posts from players claiming that the Yamaha (and others) have no real seventh position. At least with the Yamaha I play (YSL671), seventh position works just fine. I will admit that it goes out to the very end of the tube with not much room to spare. The challenge is that seventh position E (E3) below middle C is a very common note - I would say more common than the similarly positioned low B on a tenor.

In fact, you may find yourself moving your slide more than you do on the tenor since that E3 and F3 (respectively sixth and seventh positions) are commonly played notes. You'll be going there often, so it pays to gain muscle memory for those more difficult positions. Play these as slow as necessary to hit the pitches correctly and in tune.

To make it a bit of fun, play it against the track "Dreams of Tomorrow" in order to better hear your pitch. It's easy to fool ourselves thinking we are fully extended to the sixth and seventh positions when in fact we are creeping up and consequently sharp. Hear your pitch with this track to verify you are fully extended.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Dreams of Tomorrow"

Here is Bach Chorale # 50 "In allen meinen Taten". This is mostly in F major and goes up to high C only a few times. There are five renditions: One with all four alto trombones and the other four containing only three of the parts, giving you an opportunity to play whichever part you wish with the other three. Perform the parts listening for your pitch-perfect place within the three other parts. Without a piano, synthesizer or other fixed pitch instrument, more of a just intonation makes for more perfect intervals and chordal intonation. Can you hear the difference?



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Bach 50 full", "Bach 50 no first", "Bach 50 no second",
"Bach 50 no third", "Bach 50 no fourth"

TROMBONE 1

TROMBONE 2

TROMBONE 3

TROMBONE 4

One more intonation exercise. This is a four part harmony on the ballad *In the Wee Small Hours*. Unlike the Bach chorale and the Rochut, this tuning is equal temperament. You'll be playing with a piano, bass and string section so the notes and intervals are fixed and therefore, not perfect (theoretically) like the a capella chorale and duet. Each of the four parts are provided as are rhythm tracks containing the full piece, and four versions each missing one part.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Wee Small Hours four part”, “Wee Small Hours four part no first”, “Wee Small Hours four part no second”, “Wee Small Hours four part no third”, “Wee Small Hours four part no fourth”

IN THE WEE SMALL HOURS

TROMBONE 1

8

12

17

TROMBONE 2

8

13

18

TROMBONE 3

Musical score for Trombone 3, measures 1-19. The score is written in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a triplet of eighth notes. The melody features various intervals, including a tritone (marked with a flat and a sharp), and includes several triplet markings. The piece concludes with a final cadence in measure 19.

TROMBONE 4

Musical score for Trombone 4, measures 1-19. The score is written in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a triplet of eighth notes. The melody features various intervals, including a tritone (marked with a sharp and a flat), and includes several triplet markings. The piece concludes with a final cadence in measure 19.

Here are some rhythm exercises with contemporary backdrops - more in the style of *The Elektrik Project* at www.altobone.com. I've created some rhythms that aren't quite as intuitive as the previous strings and jazz section. They become progressively more complex four-bar lines to be played over their associated rhythm tracks. Listen first to the rhythm in order to feel the beat. Perhaps start by singing the rhythm if playing it proves too difficult at first.

If you are a jazz player, improvise over these unique backdrops after playing the written lines. After all, the point of these exercises is to strengthen your rhythmic sense for the real world of playing music.

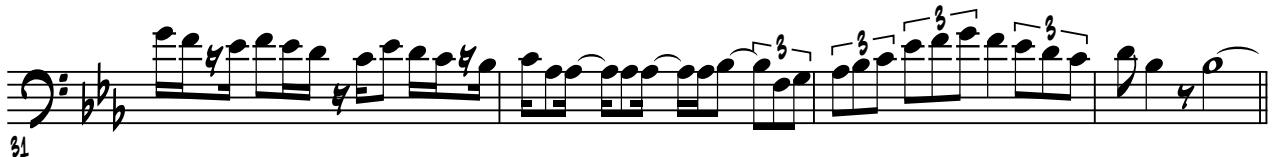
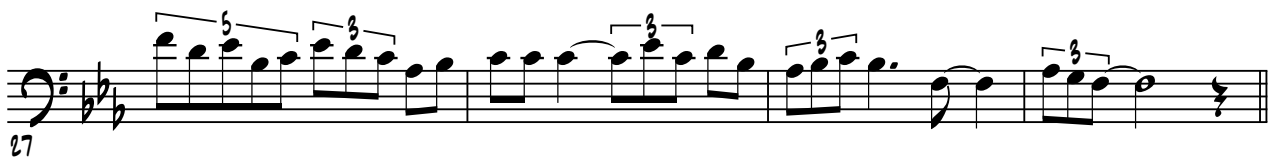
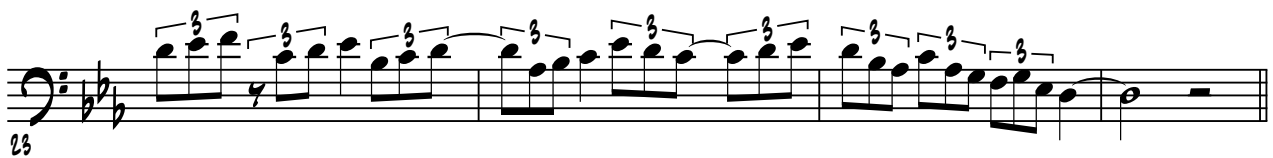
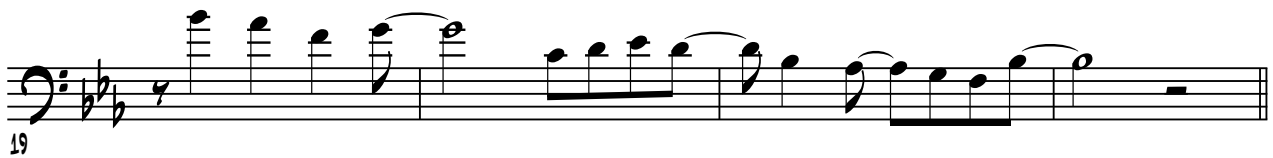
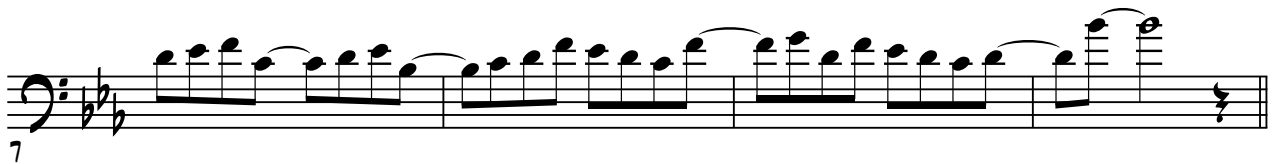
DREAM REPAIR



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Dream Repair with recorded trombone line" (Michael Lake playing the trombone line with the rhythm track)



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Dream Repair rhythm only"



9. Slide savvy

I often think that as trombone players we don't sufficiently use the one creative attribute of our instrument that no other shares. Not to anywhere near its capability. We work so hard at hitting notes squarely and minimizing the artifacts between notes that we forget that we can create some truly unique musical colors using our slide.

This is about style, no doubt. There's no rule preventing us from sliding up to notes, playing microtones, falling after notes, etc. But the slide does provide us with those musical effects should we choose to use them in our performances. This obviously applies to jazz players and soloists rather than orchestral players. Your conductor won't be amused by your new-found creativity of sliding between notes on Beethoven's Fifth!

Let me demonstrate some of the possibilities that come to mind as I play the blues. I am not suggesting that you model what I am doing. I've not transcribed this. Rather, I hope that it opens your mind to using the trombone in some new ways to ornament your personal playing style—to bring out your personality. Be bold and experiment! Start out simple and just go where it feels right.

I purposefully made this recording "raw". No effects and no making it studio pretty. That's part of the particular style of these two choruses. Because pitch and note precision isn't always the standard. Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't. I wrote in the first paragraph of Chapter 8 *Rhythm Savvy*, that in jazz, time and rhythm are the priorities over the "right" notes and pitch.

And this is one of those areas that is most definitely not just about alto trombone!

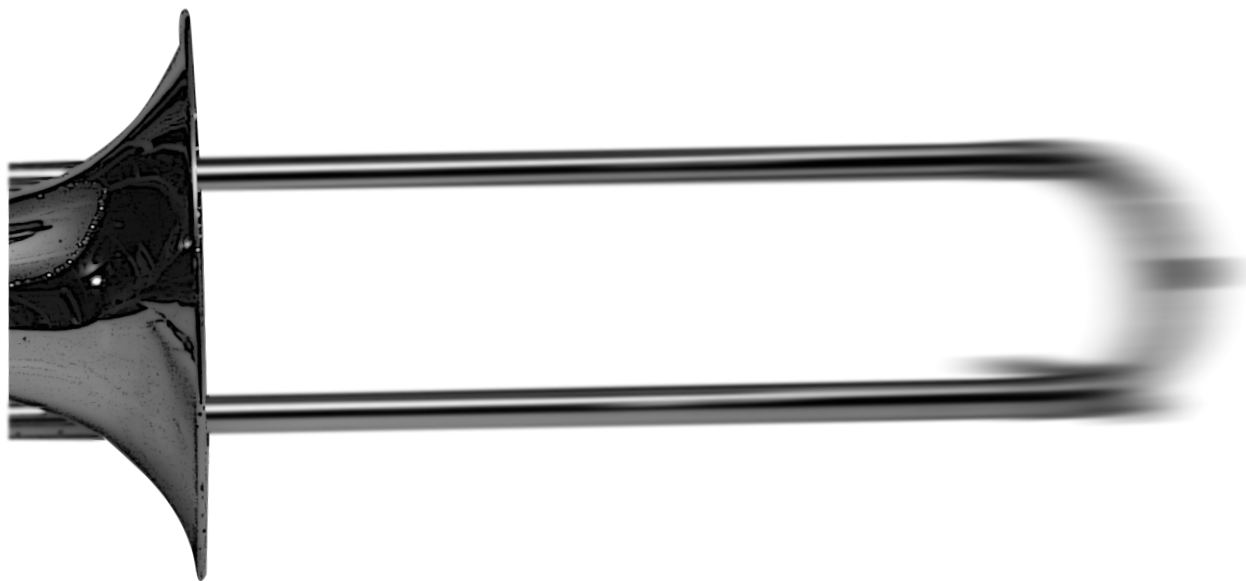


bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Using the Slide Creatively"

"Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just saw something."

It seemed obvious to them after a while. That's because they were able to connect experiences they've had and synthesize new things."

- Steve Jobs



10. Improvisation savvy

There is little I can say about improvising that applies exclusively to the alto trombone. As with the previous sections, I'll provide some beginning examples that accommodate the alto partials, but this section applies equally to tenor and bass trombone players wishing to improve their jazz playing.

I believe trombonists face a special challenge with jazz. Pretty much anyone can place their index finger on a piano's middle C and produce a great sound. Instantly. To create a consistently great tone on trombone, however, takes years. And once we master the tone, we have the added challenge of articulating those notes. We have no buttons to push or keys to press. Ta Tee Da Da...

So while pianists are rapidly running scales and chordal patterns, we may still be developing our clean articulation and slide facility to play in tone and in tune. Keeping up with the eighth note runs of the pianist (and trumpet and sax) proves more difficult. But we press on.

Then we hear J.J. Johnson, Frank Rosolino, Carl Fontana, Bill Watrous, Bob McChesney and others who are indeed keeping up with the piano, sax and trumpet. Our love and envy of their abilities sets the standard in our mind of how we think we should sound. And we press on.

Fast and high trombone playing is wonderful to behold, but it is not the natural sweet spot of the trombone. Our slide and the physics of the horn provide us with a distinct and wonderful contrast to those who simply push keys and buttons. How are you using that unique aspect of the trombone?

I'm not putting down other instrumentalists (I also play piano), but instead I'm trying to widen your perspective on what can be accomplished on this amazing brass sliding tube called the trombone. You might surprise yourself!

There are many excellent books available for trombone that provide ample exercises of scales and patterns in all twelve keys. I encourage you to invest your money and practice time in some of them. In contrast, I want to help you learn or improve your jazz playing with a different focus: *Melody*. I believe that melody, whether complex and dissonant or simple and singable, is at the core of great music.

Learning or improving your jazz playing requires improving the connection between your inner ear—the music you hear in your head—and what comes out of your trombone. Can you immediately play on trombone anything you can imagine in your inner ear? Few can, but let's set that as our goal.

Give yourself the starting Bb then sing this melody (an octave lower if that is easier). After singing, play it:



Do the same with this transposed version of the above melody:



Now, pick a note—any note—and sing the above melody. You need not be a good singer, but singing is proof that you hear the melody and singing removes the complication of the trombone. Once the melody is in your ear, play it with the trombone. Like the singing exercise, pick a note randomly and play the melody.

If it is hard, then celebrate that you've found something worthwhile to practice and improve!

10. The inner game of alto trombone

It makes perfect sense that a book on playing alto trombone should be mostly about... well, playing the trombone. But I don't want to short-change you by omitting some final thoughts on the trombone's inner game.

I believe that our brain and our lifestyle have as much to do with playing trombone well as having a solid embouchure or a fast tongue. Integrate all of that to make you the best player possible.

So I can't help but end this book with a few articles from my blog, each sharing a worthwhile lesson to help you play alto, tenor or bass trombone with great skill and savvy. These are improved versions of those original posts specifically edited for this book.



"I want them to come away with discovering the music inside them. And not thinking about themselves as jazz musicians, but thinking about themselves as good human beings, striving to be a great person and maybe they'll become a great musician."

- Charlie Haden

"Musicians should not play music. Music should play musicians."

- Henry Rollins

"The wise musicians are those who play what they can master."

- Duke Ellington

"I got a chance to work with Miles Davis, and that changed everything for me, 'cause Miles really encouraged all his musicians to reach beyond what they know, go into unknown territory and explore. It's made a difference to me and the decisions that I've made over the years about how to approach a project in this music."

- Herbie Hancock

Discover Your unique musical voice

We trombone players tend to obsess a bit over our technical prowess. We constantly strive to play higher, faster, and louder, and view ourselves as players in terms of our command of those much sought-after attributes. Okay, maybe not you, but a lot of players!!

Improve your ability to play faster, higher and louder but realize there is another critical aspect of trombone playing. Perhaps this applies more to the jazz/latin players and other improvisers than to the classical players, but then again maybe not.

That aspect is finding and playing true to one's unique personal musical voice.

It's natural to be drawn to emulate musicians with incredible technique. Who doesn't love Watrous' high range, Rosolino's angularity, or Fontana's speed? But can good music be made on the trombone without superhuman physical powers? And, more importantly, is the advanced playing of those trombone-athletes part of YOUR individual inner voice? While were at it, what IS your individual inner voice for trombone, anyway? Do you hear it or is it being drowned out by the little voice in your head screaming that you still don't play high enough, fast enough or well enough?

Your individual voice on trombone is a beautifully unique personality that plays music to the fullest extent of your musical gifts—regardless of your current technical level.

Faster, higher, louder. I am proposing that if you assume that your playing necessarily requires those attributes, you may be limiting your potential to perform great music.

Did Miles chase after Maynard's range? Did Paul Desmond chase after Bird's speed? Did Monk chase after Art Tatum's flawless technique? No. They each pursued their inner voice, and along with their supernatural musical gifts they became great musicians.

Think about a very technically proficient trombone player you've heard who played lots of high notes throughout their improvisation. Did you resonate with the playing

emotionally? Did it move you or simply blow you away with their technique? Did it say something musical to you?

I'm not suggesting that you forgo developing your technical proficiency. I'm suggesting instead to develop your proficiency as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. The trombone's mechanics are far different from other instruments so why do we assume that playing jazz well consists of rapid high notes - a style much more suited to trumpets, sax, piano, and most others.

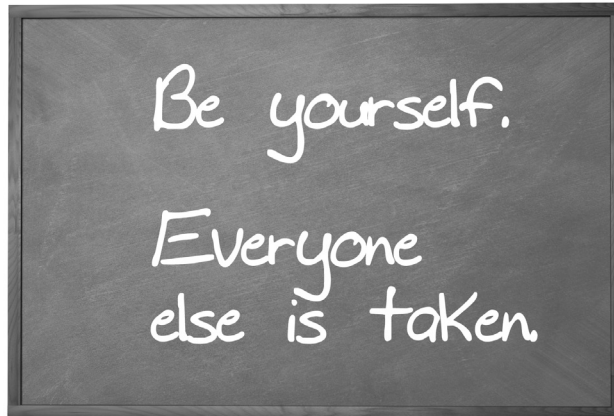
Now for some trombone players, that's their personal music voice, but must technical proficiency be the standard by how all trombone players are judged? Can you make music on the trombone without always playing fast, high, and loud?

In the end, there is no wrong way to use the trombone if music is the goal. Armed with whatever musical talent you possess, you have the best shot at making great music if you first hear your inner musical voice and then stay true to it with whatever level of technical proficiency that music requires. Before Jimi Hendrix, feedback was considered wrong.

Am I giving you a pass on improving your technique? No way. I don't call it art simply because something happens to dribble out of an instrument. Art is a purposeful focus of expression that requires a command of the medium. The question is: what are you commanding? Is it the vehicle of your inner music or is it the mechanical reproduction of artists you think you should sound like?

One morning in the late 1940s, Ray Charles had an epiphany. He realized that he was building his reputation by sounding like two of his heroes, Nat King Cole and Charles Brown. He was doing fairly well, but he wasn't setting the world on fire.

He remembered his mom admonishing him to be himself and to not be someone he's wasn't. He also remembered Nat Cole telling him "You're going to want to find your own way." Ray admitted being a bit scared to do his own thing but he did. The rest is historic music.



“But I don’t have Ray Charles’ musical talent” you might think. Well, this isn’t about the amount of musical talent you may or may not possess. It’s about getting the most out of whatever happens to be inside of you.

The question you must ask yourself is, am I playing what I hear inside or am I chasing after what you’re hearing from the media, your teachers, your peers and anyone you think has a more weighty opinion than you.

Now, there’s context here. If you are just starting out learning to play trombone, it’s okay to model someone. If you are trying to learn to play the trombone, it’s okay to model someone as I been encouraging throughout this book. The modeling, however, is simply a tool to improve an aspect of your playing you believe is necessary to your overall development as an artist. Please transcribe solos - lots of them. Use them as a means to learn improvisation, not as a substitute for your own improvisations.

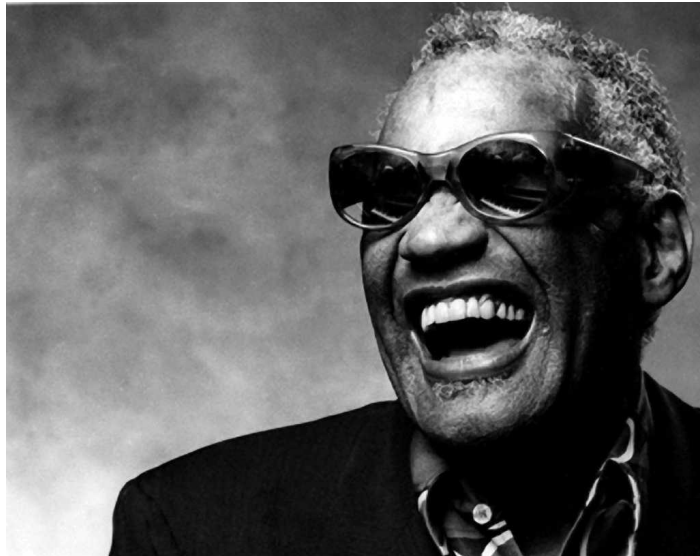
How will you know your unique voice?

I think everyone recognizes it differently. Perhaps some naturally fall into it and don’t have to think about it much. Others must dig deep in order to hear it. As a trombone player, are you trying to sound like a player you admire? If so, how’s that working for you?

Do you feel that your playing has been a long-term struggle to sound a certain way and you can’t seem to get there? Do you ever feel that if you played what you hear and in a way that would feel more natural, you would be rejected? Worthwhile questions I think.

There’s more context to this subject. As an orchestral player, your job is to sound a certain way. You were hired because you have the sound and style the orchestra was looking for. As the trombone player in a Broadway pit, an odd and unique approach is probably not welcome. As a soloist, however, you may have more stylistic latitude. As an artist creating your own music, you have perhaps the most latitude. So consider all of this within the context of your musical and professional goals.

If you aspire to be a creative artist on the trombone, listen to the voice inside. Be ruthlessly honest with yourself and admit if you are chasing someone else’s ideal of how trombone should sound. It can be scary but I know of no great artist who reached that stature by clinging long-term to how others thought he or she should sound.



I tried to find a rhythm, and I stopped comparing myself to anybody else. One of the great phrases for me is “Compare and Despair.” If I compare myself to Kate Middleton or Dame Judi Dench, I’m going to come out at the bottom and be sad.

- Jamie Lee Curtis

"I really like this interesting and well-disposed book. So many good thoughts, facts and tips on alto trombone. Great guidance for the searching alto souls out there. A must-have for the shelves."

– Håkan Björkman, Principal Trombone at Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra

"For anyone interested in learning to play the alto trombone, whether for classical or jazz, this book is a must. Clearly written, with excellent exercises and links to audio examples, Michael Lake has provided the trombone world with a wonderful new resource."

– Ralph Sauer, Former Principal Trombone, Los Angeles Philharmonic

"I highly recommend Alto Trombone Savvy for players around the world wanting advice on handling the alto trombone at the highest level. Classical and jazz players both share the same challenges, and it's great to have this book in either bass or alto clef to help answer some of those challenges."

- Carsten Svanberg, International Trombone Soloist and ret. Professor of Trombone at the University of Music and Arts Graz

"Michael Lake has a unique perspective and has written a unique book. Alto Trombone Savvy covers a wide range of topics and, in combination with sound files, gives students a solid aural basics to improve on the instrument. Michael's excellent playing—used in structured imitation exercises—is particularly helpful."

– Dr. Brad Edwards, Trombone Professor, Arizona State University Author of Lip Slurs. Lip Slur Melodies as well as the Trombone Craft and Simply Singing series.

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- Cristian Ganicenco, Principal Trombone, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

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