

notes of
hope

**STORIES BY MUSICIANS
COPING WITH INJURIES**

COMPILED BY DAVID VINING

MOUNTAIN PEAK MUSIC

notes of hope

All the authors in *Notes of Hope* have dealt with debilitating injuries that made making music painful, difficult, or impossible. Their stories are offered here as a testament to what is possible through resourcefulness, creativity, and perseverance.

By noticing common themes throughout these stories, musicians who are injured may be able to use them as models for how they can help themselves. For example, all the authors took charge of their recovery and realized a single "magic bullet" would not heal them. They sought advice from a wide variety of professional therapists, and combined those therapies in different ways to find a unique path to recovery. There is an element of experimentation present in every story. One gets the sense that, while each author is working toward a common goal, the road to recovery is as unique an expression of individuality as music itself.

These stories are real-life snapshots of musicians who have come to terms with their difficulties. Those who are in trouble and those who wish to avoid trouble will find refuge in *Notes of Hope*.



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*How Dystonia Brought
Balance to My Life*
Allison Dromgold Adams,
saxophone

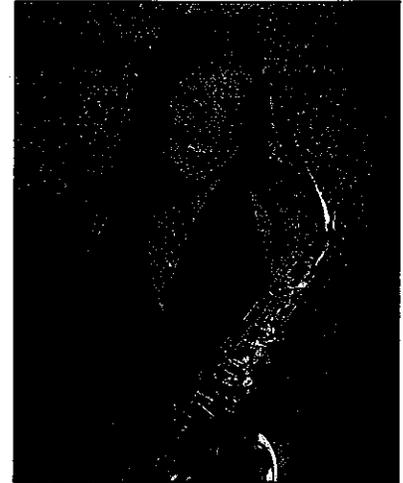
Fall semester, 2007

Professor Eugene Rousseau folded his arms and leaned back into his chair. As I put down my saxophone, he looked at me, studying me long and hard. "You sound...different," he said slowly, deliberately. "I know," I quickly replied, and launched into an emotional and tangential recollection of the last few months.

After coming home from a summer program in France, I had been determined to fix some aspects of my sound that had bothered me for quite a while—mainly sharpness in the upper register and a slightly pinched tone. Motivated and full of new ideas, I made dealing with these issues the goal of my remaining weeks of summer. I experimented with different mouthpieces, different reeds, and different ways to use my embouchure—I brought my jaw back, forward, down, constantly trying to find that ideal sound I had in my head. But instead of making anything better, I started to sound worse and worse. What's more, my jaw started sliding slightly to one side on its own accord. I soon felt like I lost the ability to keep my jaw in the correct spot, and I was starting to feel some irritation in the sides of my jaw from this new, asymmetrical embouchure. My sound was now more strained than ever. Every day I was upset with how I sounded, but I told myself that tomorrow I would find something to make it better. So I pushed on, determined to fix my problems before the new school year began.

Then came that first lesson in the fall of 2007. As I tried to explain the changes to Dr. Rousseau, I became more and more upset. When he had me try to play again, it was worse than ever—my jaw started shaking, and I couldn't control or sustain any tone. The slight irritation I had felt earlier around my jaw grew into intense amounts of pressure on the sides of my face. Frustrated with myself, I completely lost control of my emotions.

I played my ensemble audition a few days later without much success. I couldn't control my jaw at all, and I could barely make it through the music.



My face felt like it would explode from the pressure in my ears and right side of my face. The director looked at me kindly and said, "I'm not going to put you in an ensemble this semester. Take the time you need and do what you need to do to get back to normal."

I felt like I was drowning. I had no idea what was happening to me, and no idea how to make it all just go away. As a second year master's student at the University of Minnesota, studying with one of the most renowned saxophonists in the United States, I had always taken my musical abilities for granted. Everything had always come easily...until now.

I took a week off from playing and tried to relax. I thought that if I stopped playing for a while, the intense pressure and tension in my head might go away, but I was wrong—it still felt like someone was squeezing my head together from the sides. My ears hurt. My jaw ached. Someone recommended I see a dentist, so I quickly made an appointment. The dentist described my problem as TMD, a temporomandibular disorder. This type of disorder is often called TMJ, referring to problems with the temporomandibular joint—the joint in front of the ears where the jaw connects to the skull. The dentist told me that from the wear patterns on my teeth, it was likely I was grinding my teeth and clenching my jaw at night. He said my facial muscles were pretty wound up, recommended ibuprofen and hot/cold packs to help relax my muscles, and prescribed a night guard to fit over my front teeth while I slept. However, he commented that mine was a strange case since I didn't have any real pain, just pressure and tension. Everything the dentist told me to do helped, but the pressure remained, moving from the sides of my face to my jaw and then to the muscles surrounding my mouth. Sometimes it became a very intense pressure on the sides of my head above my ears. I thought one of my veins was going to burst!

I tried to take it easy, but my attempts to relax amounted to doing anything I could to stay busy and keep my mind away from the saxophone. I forced myself to get extra sleep and lay around, reading and watching movies. It helped. The pressure moved to my forehead and behind my eyes, but seemed to lessen. Still, if I even started to think about the saxophone or my career as a musician, the pressure came back full force. It was impossible, though, for me to step away from such thoughts. Everyone around me could play just fine, and that was *all* I wanted to be able to do. What was wrong with me? How could everything I had worked toward for so long just be yanked away from me in the blink of an eye?

My entire life had revolved around the saxophone since the beginning of college, and it was hard to be patient while I couldn't play. I attempted to

take time off, but after a few days I was always enticed to try again. My jaw remained shaky and unstable. It moved around on every note, sometimes even clenching up on the mouthpiece. My embouchure became so tight that it choked off the sound entirely at times. I began to notice how tense and over-engaged my muscles felt, even when I was just preparing to play. Was this something I could fix with time, or did I need to step away from the horn for a while? If I got myself into this whole mess, shouldn't I theoretically be able to get myself out of it, too? I had no idea, but was determined to get to the bottom of it.

To that end, I tracked and analyzed my progress constantly, keeping a journal of my physical and emotional states and what I noticed when I tried to play. Over time, I became aware that I felt consistent clenching in my face, especially on my right side. I also began to perceive that I was having trouble taking a normal breath when I tried to play. Instead of being full and relaxed, the breath was shallow and nervous, bringing more tension into my body with each inhalation. I tried muscle relaxants, but that proved to be a dead end.

In October, I began work with Immanuel Davis, the flute professor at the University of Minnesota. Professor Davis also taught a breathing class in the school of music using breathing bags and breath builders. His unique views on practice techniques and his creative approach to teaching seemed to make a difference to me. I had never before worked with someone who could spend an entire lesson discussing different ideas related to air and embouchure. With Professor Davis, working with just one note became a fun and interesting exploration into musical pedagogy and human anatomy. I also found that using the breathing bag and breath builder allowed me to work on relaxed breathing away from the saxophone, and techniques such as buzzing the lips could help loosen my tightly wound embouchure. I started to believe that ideas like his would be the key to my recovery.

Up until this point, I had been obsessed with analyzing the way I used my embouchure muscles. I always practiced in front of the mirror to track the way my embouchure looked and what my jaw was doing, and continuously tried to find ways to set up the embouchure to keep my jaw in alignment. As I did this, it became nearly impossible to produce a clean articulation, or really any kind of articulation at all. It was almost as if my tongue and embouchure had become linked—if I tried to use my tongue, my embouchure would collapse and strangle the sound.

I finally started to see a bigger picture. Although my embouchure and tense muscles were the most obvious calamity, I began to realize that I should start by dealing with the air and breathing issues I uncovered with

Professor Davis. As I started to find a more relaxed inhalation, I found I could sustain a more stable tone. I began to play small sections of music instead of just one or two notes, leaving out any articulation and trying to keep my tone supported with air. I found that although I could sustain a steady tone at times, my jaw continued to tighten up and slide around as I played, and the tone itself was very strained.

My progress was up and down. I held onto any glimmer of hope I could find, but every day was a struggle. I wrestled with my sense of self-worth and a fragile emotional state that left me in tears nearly every day. I was scared and I was lost. Overall, the harder I tried, the worse things seemed to become.

At the beginning of November, I began working with the University of Minnesota's TMJ & Orofacial Pain Clinic, an interdisciplinary office where patients meet with an entire team of professionals, including a dentist, physical therapist, and behavioral scientist. They labeled my condition "dystonia," a neurological movement disorder in which muscles contract involuntarily for unknown reasons. They assured me that this diagnosis was simply for lack of a better term. They didn't really think I had this debilitating ailment.

The dentist at the clinic made me a full night guard to wear over my bottom teeth while I slept, called an NTI-TSS because it takes advantage of the nociceptive trigeminal inhibitory reflex to open your mouth when you bite down too hard on something with your front teeth. It is one of the most effective types of night guard to prevent teeth grinding and jaw clenching, and I actually found it very relaxing to wear at night.

The physical therapist showed me exercises to help relax my facial muscles, and also did electrical stimulation therapy. This type of therapy uses a machine to send an electrical current through the body to relax specific muscles. It felt amazing! If I practiced right after one of these sessions, I noticed my jaw didn't move around as much, and I could blow air through the horn more easily. Unfortunately, my jaw still quivered and I couldn't maintain this relaxed state for very long. At any rate, it was encouraging.

With the behavioral scientist, I spent a lot of time talking about life and working on relaxation techniques. One helpful exercise she gave me was to record a meditation CD for myself in which I imagined a soothing place and cued myself to relax, starting with the crown of my head and working down to my toes. Through talking with her, I began to realize how lonely I truly was and how negative I had allowed my thoughts to become. Most of my friends had graduated the year before, and without them I felt really alone.

As I started to sense that isolation and depression were part of my issue, I began to deepen relationships with existing friends and found a strong group of new friends in the school of music. These people showered me with positive thoughts that countered the critical voices in my head, and encouraged me to keep believing I could get through this. When there were no words, they were there to give me a hug and to value me as a complete, functional human being at a time when I felt so broken and worthless.

At the same time, I also started working privately with a local Alexander Technique teacher. Alexander Technique is an approach to correcting habitual misuse of the body while learning how to use the body properly. In this philosophy, it is believed that the way we use ourselves, both physically and mentally, can create unneeded stress and tension in the body. This stress may be embedded in everyday motions such as the way we bend down or get out of a chair. Alexander Technique seeks to alleviate tension by bringing awareness to habitual thoughts and movements.

The University of Minnesota offered an Alexander Technique class in the school of music, which I had taken the year before. After my rocky start in the fall of 2007, I reenrolled in the class. The concepts were fascinating and applicable, but I needed one-on-one attention to be able to fully apply them to my situation. To this end, I began taking private Alexander Technique lessons with the teacher, Brian McCullough. I found it made me feel better, both emotionally and physically. We spent a lot of time working toward a relaxed, less restricted approach to breathing. After a lesson, I didn't feel so pulled down and tense, which improved my general attitude toward life.

Throughout the semester, I researched focal dystonia and other muscle conditions obsessively on the internet, but the outlook was often bleak. It seemed many musicians who dealt with such issues had eventually given up and stopped playing. One of the few promising stories I found was that of David Vining, and I contacted him to ask for advice. He sent me a name and contact information: Dr. Steven Frucht, a specialized neurologist at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. Toward the end of the semester, I contacted Dr. Frucht, who asked me to send my back story and a video of the problem.

In early January 2008, although I had taken a month off from playing, my symptoms were waiting for me as soon as I came back to the horn. Frustrated and discouraged, I scheduled an appointment with Dr. Frucht. The appointment was difficult and emotional. I recounted my entire story to an M.D., and then Dr. Frucht came in to see me. I played for him, but I could barely keep myself together. It was so difficult to relive the entire fall semester and finally face the fact that something beyond my control might

be wrong. Then came the diagnosis: embouchure jaw dystonia. Dr. Frucht told me there was no medical cure. Some people, he said, were able to find ways around it through methods such as Alexander Technique, but others never did. However, he added, I was still young and very capable; if I changed careers and went in a different direction, I could still be very successful.

Dr. Frucht's official letter states:

"By definition, FTSD [focal task specific dystonia] affects only one part of the body and occurs only during the performance of a particular task. From our experience patient[s] with embouchure dystonia could be separated by the pattern of their abnormal movements into several groups, including embouchure tremor, involuntary lip movements, and jaw closure. Embouchure dystonia responds poorly to oral medications and botulinum toxin injection.

Once present, embouchure dystonia rarely enters remission. Not infrequently, it may progress and spread to other oral tasks, often producing significant disability. It is not well defined why embouchure dystonia spreads to other oral tasks and thus for those with jaw dystonia, we usually advise to minimize their playing in order to minimize the risk of spreading of dystonic symptoms."

I was distraught, although nothing the doctor told me was a surprise. In many ways, I actually felt relief in having someone tell me, "This is what is wrong with you. It's not your fault, and it's not something you caused." I accepted the diagnosis, but was determined to be one of the people Dr. Frucht mentioned who could find a way around dystonia.

Spring semester, 2008

I went back to school for the spring semester knowing that, no matter what, I would graduate. I had done a recital the previous year, and it would count as my degree recital. I was excused from playing in a large ensemble, and I asked Dr. Rousseau if we could spend lesson time discussing saxophone literature and pedagogy rather than trying to perform. It was just too much pressure to walk into his office every week with my saxophone in hand, trying to show I had progressed. He graciously agreed. Alleviating the immediate pressure of performing and returning to Minnesota with a definite diagnosis, I began to let go of the negative energy I had been holding onto. I stopped obsessively journaling every aspect of

my condition. As I began to calm down, I found I could slowly rebuild my playing from a new direction.

By the end of February 2008, things really started to turn around. My Alexander Technique lessons were teaching me how to use my air correctly and reduce the tension in my body. My work with Professor Davis filled me with new, exciting ideas about how to practice—even just one note or one phrase. I started working with a new behavioral scientist at the TMJ & Orofacial Pain Clinic who was very encouraging and believed strongly in the power of attitude and perspective. My own attitude and perception of life began to change, and as it did, my jaw gradually stopped shaking when I practiced! I still couldn't coordinate my air and my tongue, and my chin continued to wobble, but it was a good step forward.

At the end of February, I played for Dr. Rousseau for the first time since before Christmas break. He was very encouraging of my progress, congratulating me on my discoveries and telling me how pleased he was to hear me playing again. Little by little, I began to play longer passages and could maintain control of my embouchure. By the end of the school year, I was making it through entire pieces with a steady sound, although the tendency to have a slightly pinched quality remained. I graduated as expected, and at the beginning of the summer I shared a casual recital with a friend, performing several works including a duet with Dr. Rousseau himself. It would have been a privilege to perform with Dr. Rousseau under normal circumstances; after this year of turmoil, it was an incredible honor to play side by side with my revered teacher.

Post graduation

My progress continued to be fairly steady, but I was disappointed that my rocky year kept me from going straight on to earn my doctorate. I had missed all of the auditions, and was now forced to take a year off and find work. I found a job at a preschool and, realizing that living alone the past two years had not been good for my emotional health, I moved in with my close friend, Christina. I quickly learned how much difference it made to share my living space with a good friend and have someone to talk to when I came home at the end of the day. At the time, Christina was working on yoga and Thai Bodywork certifications, so as she went through her training she would often experiment on me and we would discuss the things she was learning. I usually practiced my saxophone in the apartment, and she would watch me play and help me find ways to improve the use of my body and air. She often suggested different yoga poses to try while playing.

We worked on getting rid of all the tension I had stored up in my body, and through our collaboration I gained confidence and continued to improve my sound. I started to practice yoga myself, and found it was an incredible tool for working through tension and improving my overall well-being.

Throughout my year off, my playing continued to improve and my confidence grew. I began preparing for doctoral auditions, and was thrilled to be accepted into Timothy McAllister's studio at Arizona State University. Through his guidance and tutelage, my playing continued to soar, although it took a year or two to feel completely back in the game. I continued to practice yoga, and found I needed this presence in my life in order to monitor the aches and pains that playing created in my body. At the end of a yoga class, I could feel the old tension moving around in my face, continuing to work itself out although it no longer disrupted my playing. I also found I could not return to my old ways of practicing—long, intense sessions, and the incredible feelings of guilt I heaped upon myself if I practiced less than four hours a day. I needed yoga in my life to help me maintain balance and perspective. I had to remember that I had interests and passions apart from the saxophone, and that enjoying life was part of being a healthy, complete individual. This was truly the bigger picture I had glimpsed during the early stages of my battle with dystonia. At first, it was the realization that my use of air was the key to correcting my embouchure. Now, I could see that the interplay and balance of all aspects of my life was the key to maintaining happiness and success.

I had always wondered what would set me apart as a saxophonist and musician, and through my struggle with dystonia, I discovered what that would be: I would draw on my recovery to find ways to integrate the philosophy of yoga into music pedagogy, not only to help others prevent and recover from injuries, but also to help musicians establish good physical and mental habits early in their careers. I completed a two hundred-hour yoga certification class, and made this the topic of my dissertation, *Yoga and Saxophone Performance: The Integration of Two Disciplines*, available online through ProQuest Dissertation Publishing.

A happy ending

In December 2012, I graduated with a D.M.A. from Arizona State University, playing at a higher level than ever before. I moved to Ithaca, New York, where I was invited to be the sabbatical replacement for Dr. Steven Mauk, professor of saxophone at Ithaca College. I was also hired to teach saxophone lessons at Cornell University during the 2012-13 school

year. It was truly an honor to finally work as a professional saxophonist in the academic field, when only five years earlier that dream seemed impossible. In the fall of 2013, I was appointed assistant professor of saxophone at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Although I have recovered completely from dystonia, I am always seeking new ways to pair the practice of music with the practice of yoga so as to increase awareness of performance injuries.

As I look back, I can clearly see what I gained from this horrible experience with dystonia. I had adopted an unhealthy and unsustainable lifestyle encased in negativity, criticism, and isolation. My life revolved around my accomplishments as a performer, and I heaped excessive guilt upon myself when I didn't meet my own expectations. Did I cause my own destruction? It's impossible to say. Many experts believe there may be a genetic factor involved in dystonia, but I also believe my physical, emotional, and mental states at the time definitely played a role in my troubles. I could never go back to living that way again. My experience with dystonia changed my mindset and outlook on life, and forced me to learn to slow down when all I had wanted to do was follow my own plan. It allowed me to completely rebuild my playing and rid myself of the tightness and inflexibility that had been ingrained in my approach. It also provided me with direction and purpose in my musical career, and helped me understand the pedagogy behind the instrument in a completely new way. As a result of this experience, I became a better teacher and performer, and changed the way I approach practicing.

I strongly believe that everything happens for a reason, even if you can't understand the "why" until much later. Although the journey was hard, I am thankful for everything I learned and everyone I met along the way. I would not be the musician or human being I am today without this experience. Through the course of my recovery, I made lifelong friends and got to know the man I would marry. Had I not been forced to stay another year in Minneapolis, we would have never dated. I am so thankful for this detour in my life, and now I cannot imagine life without him.

My year with dystonia was a very dark time for me, and to this day I carry the tension that caused my downfall. I can feel it distinctly through the sides of my face even as I sit and write this now, reliving that terrible year. The tension comes and goes, but when I am stressed or upset I can feel it very intensely in my shoulders and upper back, through my jaw, and in the sides of my face. It never creeps back into my playing, and I am confident it never will. However, I have learned that I need to carefully monitor my

stress level and attitude, and I need an outlet such as yoga to be a regular part of my life.

Sometimes the thing you perceive as the root of the problem is merely the manifestation of something else, perhaps a bigger problem that is rooted in physical tension or misguided mental perceptions. Although your problem may be unique, you are not alone. Ask for help, surround yourself with a strong support system, and always dwell on the good in your life. I could not have overcome this without the love and support of my family, friends, teachers, and doctors. For them, I will be forever grateful.