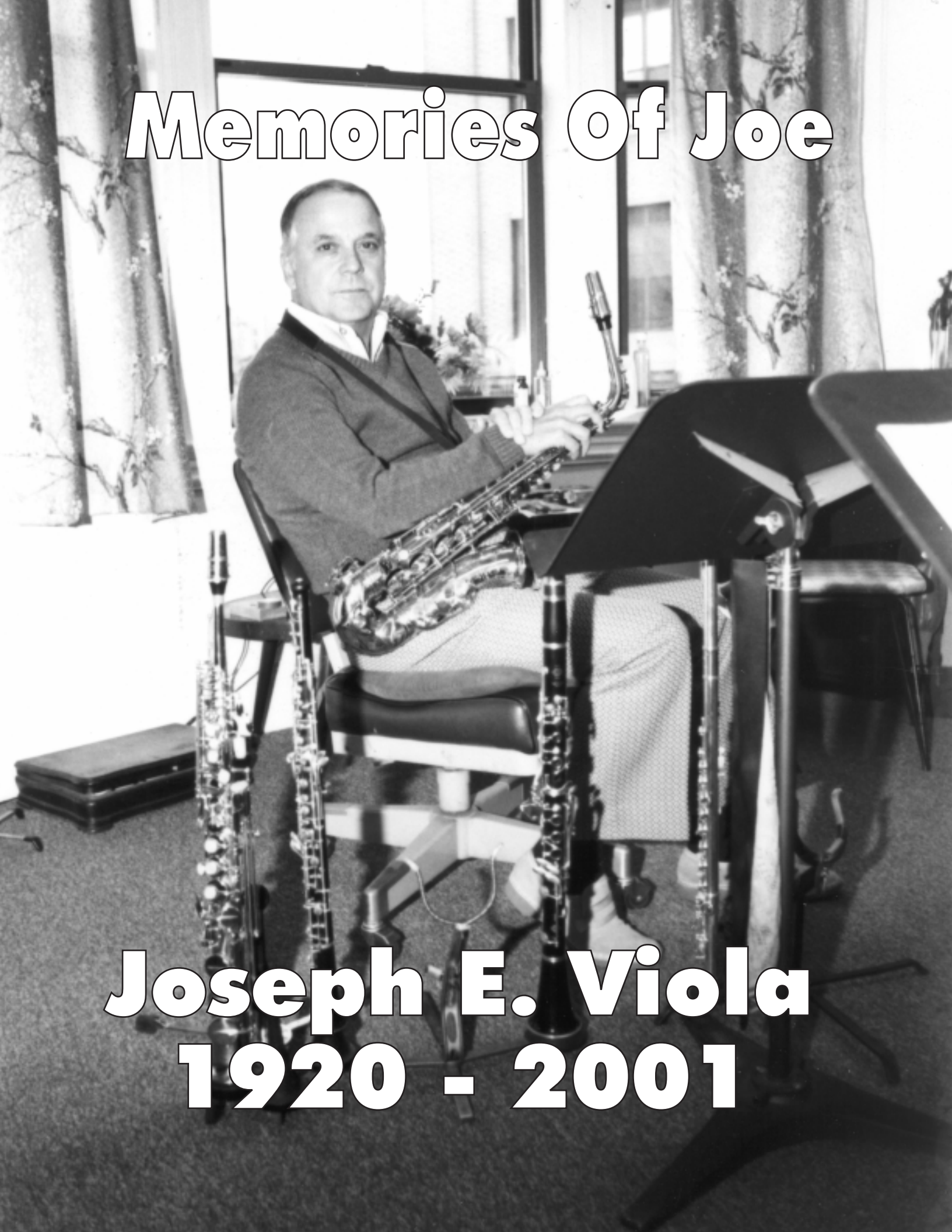


# Memories Of Joe



**Joseph E. Viola**  
**1920 - 2001**

**“I really enjoy teaching and I take a sincere interest in my students. To me that’s my job! I’m very concerned with what they do as a player, I really am!”**

**Joseph E. Viola**  
June 25, 1920-April 11, 2001

Joseph E. Viola of Stoneham, Massachusetts, a master woodwind player, and teacher of many of the most significant saxo-phonists in jazz, died Wednesday April 11, 2001 at the Arnold House in Stoneham. The Founding Chair of the Berklee College of Music Woodwind Department was 80.

Mr. Viola was born and grew up in Malden, where he began his musical career with lessons from his brother Tony, one of two older brothers who were active musicians in the Boston area. At 13, Mr. Viola had been playing saxophone for about a year when his brother first brought him along to play on a job.

Music quickly became his occupation. At age 18, fresh out of high school, Mr. Viola was earning his living playing alto sax. A band he was traveling with soon broke up-stranding him in California. But the teenage saxophonist rapidly found both a new job, with bandleader Ben Pollack, and a new teacher, Benny Kanter, a former mainstay of one of Benny Goodman’s original orchestras.

After a year with Pollack’s band, Mr. Viola returned to Boston for six months, and moved to New York, where he played for four years, earning an enviable reputation. With the onset of World War II, he spent the next four years in the Army, playing in an Army band and “performing medic duties.”

At war’s end he began studying the Schillinger method of composition with Berklee founder Lawrence Berk in a small studio off Massachusetts Avenue in Boston. He also began to take oboe lessons with Fernand Gillet of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. “Fernand really captured my imagination. He was the kind of teacher that would always play with you and he would demonstrate something and talk about it and notate it in detail on paper. Analyze every move you made.” His oboe studies with Gillet continued for five years.

Shortly after it began, Lawrence Berk asked Mr. Viola to join him in his new school on Newbury Street in Boston. For most of the school’s first decade and more, Viola taught theory, composition, saxophone, clarinet, flute, and the bulk of the ensembles. Some of the very talented young musicians in those groups included Herb Pomeroy, Ray Santisi, Toshiko Akiyoshi, Charlie Mariano, Dick Nash, Sadao Watanabe, and Quincy Jones. In later years, his students included Joe Lovano, Walter Beasley, Jerry Bergonzi, Seamus Blake, and Antonio Hart.

While an expert and versatile teacher, he remained an enthusiastic student as well. In 1955 - decades before “professional development” or “sabbatical” became part of any Berklee teacher’s agreement - Mr. Viola went to France to study with saxophonist Marcel Mule, whose playing had impressed him. They became lifelong friends.

Viola is the author of several, seminal music method books. The jazz methods contained in the three volumes titled *The Technique of the Saxophone*, first published during the 1960’s, remain a vital part of Berklee’s curriculum. Volume Two, devoted to chord studies, has been adapted for bass, brass, flute, guitar, vibes, and violin and translated into German, Italian, and Japanese. His *Creative Reading Studies*, first published in 1982, is a mainstay for even the most advanced professional musicians.

As the school grew into a full-fledged Berklee College of Music, with departments and divisions, Mr. Viola became the first woodwind department chair and designed the standards which have shaped countless, top-flight musical careers. He raised no stylistic barriers. “I’ve always tried to equip my students to play all kinds of music,” he said.

Mr. Viola himself was always well-equipped and in demand, from gigs with Frank Sinatra and Lena Horne to regular performances with the Shubert and Colonial theater orchestras, the Boston Pops, and the BSO. He also founded the Berklee College Saxophone Quartet with John LaPorta, Harry Drabkin, and Gary Anderson and led that group to notable success.

When Mr. Viola retired as Chair of the Woodwind Department in 1985, the trustees of the college created a named scholarship endowment fund in his honor. He was named Chair Emeritus of the Woodwind Department and continued teaching until 1996.

In 1997, his Berklee colleagues created a tribute concert in his honor, which featured some of his most famous students, including Jane Ira Bloom, Richie Cole, Donald Harrison, Javon Jackson, Tommy Smith, and Bill Pierce. Colleagues and students came from the world over to thank Mr. Viola for the impact he has made on their professional careers and personal lives.

Perhaps the ultimate reason for their devotion is best understood in a few words from Mr. Viola himself: “I really enjoy teaching and I take a sincere interest in my students. To me that’s my job! I’m very concerned with what they do as a player, I really am!” In March of this year, Mr. Viola received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Massachusetts Music Educators Assn., in recognition of his unique and enduring contributions to music education.

Mr. Viola leaves his wife, Alice (Botto); his sister, Lillian Centracchio of Stoneham; son Robert, and daughter Paula Elaine; and three grandchildren.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to the Parkinson’s Disease Foundation.

Those wishing to send condolences to the family may do so at this address:

17 Sunrise Avenue - Stoneham, MA 02180.

## The Memories Thanks Joe!

Joe Viola was an extraordinary man. As a teacher he had an uncanny ability to get to the heart of things instantly. No words or notes were ever wasted. As a musician he was a consummate artist. He had the kind of mind that quietly exuded virtuosity in everything he did and he made it look easy too (whether it was music or golf). He had a sound, a way of singing through the instrument that could make you cry and make it seem as if the instrument had disappeared while he was doing it. He was one of the most kind and gentle men I have ever met. He had heart and humor and a profound love of music and the musicians who made it. And if you were lucky enough to be around him as a student or a friend, you couldn’t help but be moved by his spirit. There will be a lot less song in the world without Joe Viola. I will miss him more than music.

**Jane Ira Bloom**

I first walked into Joe’s office in 1965 as a high school summer student at Berklee with a passion to learn to play the saxophone. I don’t remember exactly how many notes I played, not many, until he realized there was something wrong with my embouchure. I was putting my upper lip, not my teeth, directly on the mouthpiece. That new-wave technique stemmed from taking saxophone lessons in elementary school from the band teacher, whose instrument was

the violin. Joe took out his handkerchief, wrapped it around my finger which he then put in his mouth to demonstrate the proper emboucher. I knew immediately I was in the right place.

Joe Viola was the most inspiring man I've ever known. His mastery of the instrument, combined with a musicianship second to none, would have been enough for any student. But Joe was also the kindest, most down-to-earth person you could find. John LaPorta called him the "salt of the earth." I learned quickly from Joe and others at Berklee, including John LaPorta and Herb Pomeroy. However, after a few years my jazz tenor playing was being rivaled by a classical alto, and listening to Coltrane was taking a back seat to Stravinsky. With the soprano I seemed to be comfortable in both worlds. Joe asked me to join the Berklee Saxophone Quartet and later Gary Anderson, my best friend from our early days at Berklee, became the baritone player.

Those few years playing with Joe and the quartet were the most formative of my musical career. Joe's musicianship in that context went leagues beyond what I had ever experienced in other ensembles, in the countless hours during my lessons with Joe, or when we got together during his spare time to play duets. There was an artistry that I came to understand as we played Bach and Mozart, along with original works for the quartet by John Bavicchi, Jeronimas Kacinskas, and John LaPorta. With Joe at the helm we were also at home with the French quartets. Joe had the deepest admiration for Marcel Mule and if he had an idol it would have been him. John LaPorta also brought much artistry and a great depth of music to the quartet. The difference between the two was that Joe spent all his time with the instrument whereas John was teaching ensembles, composing in his spare time, and had less time to practice. Both had the most amazing sense of hearing. I remember John had written some very obscure, inventive lines based on a standard tune. He told me that probably very few people around the school would be able to recognize the source with the possible exception of Joe and Herb. The next time John came for the quartet rehearsal I asked him to put Joe to the test. Sure enough, after just a few bars Joe had it.

The quartet was a marvelous experience. However, while we did one recording and several concerts in the New England area, it didn't go beyond that. John and I were in favor of doing more but Joe was reserved. I think it stemmed in part from the fact that despite all Joe's ability and talent, playing music at the level that he really cared about and was personal to him made him strive for perfection that was difficult to obtain. John also said that he personally played better during a concert where Joe was better during rehearsals.

There are many others like me who came to Joe with a passion to play the saxophone and who have their own personal tributes of gratitude. Even when I started thinking about medicine, Joe introduced me to physicians who were also excellent musicians and it gave me the courage to follow my dreams. The perfection and artistry that I learned from Joe has served me well in medicine. Joe Viola shaped my life immensely and while I am deeply saddened by his passing, I rejoice along with all his other students for the many things he gave us.

**Harry A. Drabkin, M.D.**  
Professor of Medicine  
University of Colorado  
Health Sciences Center

When I first met Joe Viola about 25 years ago, he spent an enormous amount of time teaching me how to repair saxophones and I remember that during the first week we spent together, it took one week just to get one B pad right. First Joe said it leaked in the front and then it leaked in the back and it took forever to get it right, but Joe was patient and kept after me. He taught me how to repair saxophones with the same care and patience that he taught students how to play them. If it wasn't for Joe, I would never be where I am today and I always wanted to thank him.

Studying repair with him was no different than studying music. He was exacting, virtuosic, caring, and patient. He gave me not only the skills of saxophone repair but an understanding of how to behave with the people who played the saxophone, including students and professionals. When you've met an honest man, like Joe, who cares for people, it effects you and you remember it. He gave me an understanding of how to do the right thing for people, to be honest in business, in music, and in life.

Joe was a big part of my life. He taught me what it meant to be a repairman and more importantly what it meant to be a human being. Every saxophone I repair I think about Joe Viola. Thank you for everything Joe.

**Emilio Lyons**

I have known Joe and worked with him for over 30 years at the Berklee College of Music. He was a good man and a profound musician who had a quiet manner with a talent for understatement. Several years ago someone asked me, "What made Joe so special as a teacher?" Obviously he had never studied with Joe. I had to think about that. Joe was the element that made him so unique! When you were with Joe you felt like you were the only student he ever had. When you spoke to him, even on the phone, you felt like you were the only person he cared about. And for that moment you were! He instilled in each of us a unique part of Joe Viola that was only for you. He was a minutely different Joe Viola for each of us. Something very special. He still is. That flame that he lit inside of each of us is still going and it becomes our obligation to him to pass it on. Hopefully we will meet again and he will look at us and say "Now, that's the way it's supposed sound, so what took you so long."

**Paul Wagner**  
Berklee College of Music

I saw Joe Viola as the master of all masters. He was kind, humble, understanding, and the best saxophonist that I had ever encountered. He knew things that people thought never existed. He taught me how to believe in the supernatural saxophone. Just sitting next to him was a lesson in the art of understanding life. His command of the instrument was overwhelming, so smooth, so sleek and light as a feather. He is now, and always will be, a God to me and everyone else. God bless you Joe Viola. I love you.

**George Garzone**  
Berklee College of Music

Although I was never Joe Viola's student, I learned much from Joe during our twelve year involvement with the Berklee Faculty Saxophone Quartet. He was, in my estimation, the finest soprano saxophonist I have ever heard! His commitment to the highest levels of musical performance set the standard for the rest of the quartet. I have had the privilege of enjoying his close friendship for almost forty years and have always found him to be a kind and generous man. He will be missed by all of us who knew him!

**John LaPorta**  
Professor Emeritus  
Berklee College of Music

I studied with Joe Viola from 1979 until the end of 1980. I was one of the few jazz oboists at Berklee at the time and Joe always seemed to enjoy my lessons, which were classical and traditional in content and we spent a lot of time comparing horns (he loved Laubin). I always play(ed) a Loree. We also loved comparing our reeds. He saw right away that I made basically a Philadelphia-style cut reed and since he loved playing golf in his office and hated tying reeds he asked me to tie some staples up for him so he could have ready made blanks for him to scrape. I felt honored to be able to "tie reeds for a master."

Joe was a true musician, always striving for perfection with a no nonsense vibe. I was playing alto at the time as well (which I didn't really feel an affinity for) and he sensed it on the first lesson and

said, "you play like an oboist. The oboe is your true voice, not the alto sell it and buy and English horn." I respected him and within one week the alto was history—never missed it. I've been playing oboe and English horn for 25 years now. The first time I played *In Your Own Sweet Way*, it was a duo. Me on oboe and Joe on piano. To this day when I hear it I still always think of Joe. I'm fortunate to have that memory and the privilege to have had him as a teacher and a sincere source of encouragement, even years later when I would pop by the school to say hi to him. Thanks Joe for everything—God bless!

**Caris Visentin Liebman**

I studied with Joe from 1969 to 1973. Joe was a timeless human being. I considered him not only a teacher but a friend. Long after I graduated from Berklee, Joe would always stay in touch with Christmas cards and letters about music and life. Joe Viola also taught on a highly personal level. He brought something of his own into each lesson and each encounter. I doubt I'd be the saxophonists I am today had I not encountered Joe. He made everything make sense. Another aspect of Joe was his open mind. That was inspiring to me as a young man. Joe was ready for anything. I remember him always asking, "What are you listening to?"

I feel very lucky to have known him as I did and to have studied with him. His soprano saxophone was beautiful. I can still hear it in my mind. One time in 1970, at Berklee, I heard in the early evening a unique event. Someone was taking a lesson with Joe after the classes at the school were over. Two stunning soprano sounds just floated out of Joe's second floor office. I waited to see who this other player was taking a lesson with Joe. About forty minutes later Joe walked out with Stan Getz!

**Tim Price**

I always felt safe in Joe's office at Berklee. I knew that what I was hearing in there was the truth, music OR words. He was a master of the saxophone and of life.

**Claire Daly**

I began studying with Joe Viola at an unusually early age, in 1971 when I was 16 and still a Winchester High School student. I consider this one of the most fortunate events in my musical career. I had never encountered most of the major etude books or learned any major repertoire, and knew next to nothing about harmony and improvisation. Joe took me through the majority of the Mule books, the Karg-Elert studies, and methods by Lacour, Londeix and more; in his corner studio came my first exposure to the Creston, Glazounov, Ibert, and many others. I learned my first jazz tune with Joe at the piano. I still play on the great Selmer soprano mouthpiece he gave me; it was at his urging that I bought my first tenor.

Most important, Joe taught me how to get a sound and to breathe. I spent much of the first four weeks of my lessons with his fist jabbed into my stomach, showing the intensity needed for real breath support. After I left Boston to go to college, I still studied with Joe every summer and during breaks. His lessons were workouts that tested my progress and served as "reality checks." Could I play that last movement up to tempo now? "Your sound is smaller, Dave are you playing in those practice room closets? Find a big room to get a big sound." "What tunes do you know?"

Sitting next to Joe was my first exposure to a true "major leaguer." It was a great gift to be able to play together. He recorded us every week, matching sounds as we traded phrases, playing Mule etudes at tempo. After a few weeks, I got the knack and probably began to get cocky; he must have seen my amazement the first time he effortlessly took his 16th-notes up an octave!

One of my most vivid memories came at one of my low points. Before one of my high school era lessons I ran down Boylston Street to the record store and stupidly left my Mark VI alto and Conn tenor on the back car seat. When I returned, only the Conn was left. I went into Joe's office in a panic. Without hesitating, he reached

into a file drawer and gave me two phone numbers. "They always end up in one of these two places," he said calmly. I paid \$50 to buy it back at the Suffolk Loan Company in West Roxbury, and I play that alto to this day.

Count me as one of the countless saxophonists Joe shaped into musicians. His sound, his manor, his approach to life and music are so deep with me that it is only in writing this that I realize his impact.

**David Demsey**

William Paterson University

Recently when I was visiting my family in California, I came across a box of old letters. As I was going through them, I found a letter that Joe Viola had written to me, in response to one I had written to him around the time I left Berklee. The 3 page letter was very warm, funny, and supportive, and I was struck with how good it made me feel to reread that letter 20 years later. Joe really took the time to care about each one of his students and had a way of making each one feel special. I feel very lucky to have had a continuing friendship with Joe that lasted long after my college years were over.

**Laura Dreyer**

Studying with Joe Viola was a rare privilege for which I will always be grateful. When I arrived in Boston the fall of 1977, I only knew that I wanted to be a saxophonist but I had no idea how little I knew or how far I needed to go and my loving and supportive parents knew even less. Fortunately for me, Joe Viola and Andy McGhee were there to set me straight and comfort my parents. After I had been at Berklee for a couple of weeks, Andy told me to take an audition with Joe to become a performance major. Joe had me come in early one morning and play, and most of it wasn't pretty. Every time that I play an Ab major scale on the clarinet, which I couldn't do that day, I remember that morning. Joe patiently set me up with some clarinet lessons and told me to come back in the spring. I was in a panic, and Joe was gracious enough to talk with my mother over the telephone and let her know how I was doing and what I might expect. After a lot of worrying and practicing, I was able to satisfy him and my journey continued.

When I began studying with Joe in the summer of 1979, he convinced me to buy a used Whitehall soprano for \$300 and we played the Schmitt *12 Concert Duets* during our lessons. It was only much later that I realized how much I learned playing duets with Joe. Sound, phrasing, intonation, everything that I needed to know demonstrated in the second part every week! Later, when someone complemented me on my intonation on soprano, all that I could say was "Of course I play it in tune, I learned to play soprano from Joe Viola."

The impact of Joe's teaching really became evident to me when I started teaching a lot of saxophone and clarinet students. I would begin to explain things about sound and air to them and everything that he said would come flooding back to me, and after I explained a concept and demonstrated it, my own playing would improve, just as if I had just come from a lesson with him. It was remarkable and I then realized what a tremendous gift he had given me and all of his other students.

Thanks Joe, and God bless.

**Robert L. Hughes Jr.**

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