

## The Alpha Sax

*A review by Theo Travis – February 2010*

I first heard about the “Alpha sax” about a year ago. I heard it was like an alto sax, but smaller, lighter and that it was specially designed for children who were too small to play a regular alto. The sax has the low B and Bb keys on the left hand block of side keys removed as well as the the top Eb and F keys. The placing of the low C and Eb keys on the right hand are such that the stretch is less for small hands. There are also other design modifications so fingers do not have to stretch so much eg the placing of the left hand G# and C#. It means that small hands and small fingers can play the sax without getting hugely frustrated, strained or damaged. The sax is also considerably lighter than a regular alto sax.

I teach quite a few children the sax, and can see at first hand the enthusiasm of kids as they hold a sax and get their first note. The look of glee as they realise they have just made a sound on the coolest of instruments is just great. I heard that the design of the Alpha sax meant that children could probably play the sax a full two years before they would otherwise have the hand stretch to be able to. In practice this means in UK school year 4 instead of year 5 or 6. I was intrigued so I thought I would give it a go.

First of all I tried the sax myself. I wanted to know it is a “proper” sax, and not just a gimmick. Put simply, it is a proper sax! It plays just like an alto with a range of low C to High D – a full two chromatic octaves plus a tone, and within that you can play anything you would on a normal alto – and it sounds good. Listening, you would not be able to tell the difference. So it is definitely not a toy! My experience is that it is excellent and captures the enthusiasm of younger students to enable to get them started younger than they could otherwise. This will mean that by the time they are, say, 10 or 11 years old, they will be several stages further on in their playing ability, which can only be a positive thing, and can only open up more playing opportunities in those all important years from 11 to 18. Also it is significantly lighter for them to carry to and from school. I have known the weight of an alto be an off putting factor, as pupils simply don't want to carry it to school and back, so it becomes a burden rather than a thing of fun.

I also have a saxophone student whose own daughter expressed an interest in learning the sax. She was really excited at the prospect of a pink sax and so dad bought a pink Alpha sax. Now father and daughter are having lots of fun playing sax together and she thinks her pink sax is simply the coolest thing in the whole world.

The Alpha sax is such a great idea and it works brilliantly. I would wholeheartedly recommend it and think that every primary school should have one!

### Theo Travis

Professional saxophonist/ flautist/ recording artist/ producer/ educator



[www.theotravis.com](http://www.theotravis.com)

[www.myspace.com/theotravis](http://www.myspace.com/theotravis)

## Theo Travis

The London-based saxophonist and composer Theo Travis has made a name for himself on the British jazz scene for his virtuosity and soulful style as well as his fine compositions. Born in Birmingham, Theo studied classical music at the University of Manchester whilst playing in various jazz and rock bands. He signed to 33 Records in 1993, has released 3 solo albums on the label to date and has just finished the improvised album *Bodywork* with drummer John Marshall and guitarist Mark Wood. In Oct 1996 Travis released *Secret Island*, his third CD on 33 Records which also features guitarist John Etheridge. The album has several blues-oriented tracks and a tune inspired by the Iain Banks novel *The Crow Road*. Following the release of *Secret Island*, Travis and his band undertook a 27-date UK tour. His performance at the 1996 Glasgow International Jazz Festival was voted "Outstanding Concert as Voted by the Audience" for which he won the prestigious Scotrail Jazz Award.

Travis' second CD on 33 Records, *View from the Edge*, was voted Best British Jazz CD of 1994 by the Jazz on CD Readers/Critics poll. He was also nominated as Rising Star in the 1996 and 1998 British Jazz Awards and was named Best Newcomer of 1993 by the Financial Times. Travis was featured in a session for *Jazz Parade* on BBC Radio 2, and was praised as "one of the very best young tenor players of this or any jazz generation in Britain" by presenter Digby Fairweather. In July 1994, he appeared on a one-hour interview on New York radio station WKCR-FM. He was also commissioned to write new music for the 1926 Hitchcock silent film *The Lodger* which was performed live in September 1996 as part of the Derby Metro's 100 Years of Cinema Festival. Travis was acknowledged by Penguin author Nicholas Royle as one of the inspirations behind his novel *Saxophone Dreams*. Theo Travis was awarded a music degree (with honours) from Manchester University. He played in NYJO, with whom he toured Spain. He performed at New York's legendary Blue Note club in 1987.

In addition to working with his own groups, Theo has worked with musicians including Jim Mullen, Norma Winstone, Dick Heckstall-Smith (including on his recent acclaimed CD *Celtic Steppes*), Tony Coe, John Marshall, Mick Karn and the late Slim Gaillard. He has performed at the Brecon, Edinburgh, London, Glasgow, Bradford, Llangollen and Swanage Jazz Festivals, and at jazz venues nationwide as well as on local and national radio. In August 1997 he toured Japan with Mick Karn, Steve Jansen, Richard Barbieri and DJ Krush. Travis has been awarded three Jazz Services touring grants and was commissioned by West Midlands Arts to compose a suite for jazz septet, *Broad Street Changes*, which he performed on a short tour of the Midlands.

Since May 1999 when Theo filled in for Didier Malherbe at short notice for a European tour, he has been part of the group Gong. Originally formed in the late 1960's Gong have undergone various personnel changes, but is mainly associated with the main front man Daevid Allen. Other Gong luminaries have included Pierre Moerlin, Steve Hillage, Mike Howlett and Bill Laswell who for a time was involved in the New York Gong. The music has been described as cosmic/ psychedelic/ jazz / improvised / progressive rock / space metal etc etc. Theo not only plays saxes and flute, but did most of the keyboards on the CD *Zero to Infinity* (SnapperMusic). He also co-wrote most of the album. Theo has toured with them since 1999 playing over 125 gigs in Britain, Europe, Scandinavia, America and Japan. Theo tours regularly with the Theo Travis Quartet which has performed 12 separate weeks at Ronnie Scotts Club, London, at the Red Sea Jazz Festival, in Eilat , Israel and at jazz clubs and festivals all over the UK from Cornwall to the North tip of Scotland.

In 2006 he replaced Elton Dean in the Soft Machine Legacy with whom he has performed internationally and recorded the album *Steam* (for which he contributed three original compositions).

Theo continues to write and record with his experimental ambient band Cipher (with Dave Sturt). See [www.cipher.f9.co.uk](http://www.cipher.f9.co.uk) They have made 3 CDs and written scores for many classic silent films of the 1920s and toured all over the UK performing them live in independent cinemas accompanying the films.

Theo's 2007 project *Double Talk* features the soulful Hammond organ of Pete Whittaker, the guitar of Mike Outram and the drums of Roy Dodds. Their new album *Double Talk* is released in 2007 and the band will be touring extensively in 2007/2008.

Theo also performs with ambient and progressive rock artists and has performed or recorded with Robert Fripp, David Sylvian, Bill Nelson, Hatfield and the North, Richard Sinclair, Porcupine Tree, Harold Budd, Jah Wobble, the Tangent, John Foxx, Gong, Porcupine Tree, Anja Garbarek, Kangaroo Moon, No Man and Bass Communion.