

# Industry Profiles

by Paul Globus

## REEDGEEK UNIVERSAL – AN EXCITING NEW ALL-IN-ONE REED TOOL FOR THE GEEK IN ALL OF US

**R**eedGeek is an unusual name for an unusual product. The man behind ReedGeek is Mauro Di Gioia, a Nevada-based clarinet and saxophone player and entrepreneur. Mr. Di Gioia has obviously thought long and hard about reeds, and how to adjust and maintain them.

His questing mind has looked at all the traditional tools we clarinet players use to keep ourselves (hopefully) well stocked with playable reeds – from special reed knives and blades to sandpaper, files, reed rush and a host of other gizmos and gadgets. He learned to make reeds by hand and has developed some interesting (and novel) ideas about what works and what doesn't when faced with the task of adapting commercial reeds to our individual tastes and playing styles. The ReedGeek is the result of his analytical thinking about this subject, so near and dear to our hearts.

In order to gain insight into the idea behind ReedGeek and the business that bears this name, I had several telephone conversations with Mauro Di Gioia. I began by asking him about his own background and what brought ReedGeek to life.

### *Can you tell me a bit about yourself?*

I was born in Chicago and moved to the West Coast in grade school. I grew up in Lake Tahoe and the Sierra Nevada foothills. I began freelancing as a reed player in my late teens. I played on various recordings, formed my own bands, played in various venues around the States, opened for well-known acts, and played in pit orchestras in the Reno-Lake Tahoe area.

### *Where does your entrepreneurial streak come from?*

It comes naturally. I've always been a self-starter, worked for myself and been driven by my own creative ideas most of my adult life. When I was 16, I became a sponsored snowboarder and worked on developing the very first snowboards in the days of the sport's infancy. Early on, I drew parallels between my experiences as an athlete and those of a reed-playing musician. My thought was that the reed is nothing more than a snowboard or a pair of skis floating atop a pillow of powder – it's simply fluid dynamics. I also believed that all of one's equipment needs to work together as a system, whether it's snow equipment or a woodwind acoustic system.

### *How did get the idea for ReedGeek come about?*

Ever since getting serious about music as a teenager, I've been on a quest for better equipment and sought out improvements. While mentors and teachers were encouraging me to spend more time in the practice room, I was always interested in experimenting with reeds, reed profiles and mouthpieces. This preoccupation with sound and mechanics later resulted in a business venture with the intent of improving instrument acoustics, mouthpieces, etcetera, which directly lead to the development of the first practical reed tool for woodwind players: the ReedGeek Universal Tool.

### *How would you describe the ReedGeek Universal?*

The ReedGeek Universal is an all-in-one reed adjusting and maintenance tool. It's a tool that's small and portable and very easy to use. You can pull it out of your case or pocket any time and make adjustments to single and even to double reeds.

### *Has the feedback about the tool been mostly positive?*

Very positive. In fact we're getting feedback from players almost every day who say that ReedGeek Universal is an indispensable accessory for professionals, students and amateurs alike. I definitely agree with that assessment.

### *What are the unique features of the ReedGeek tool?*

There are several unique features worth noting. First, the material: high grade, cutting tool steel. Second, the small, rectangular shape. Third, the multiple scraping edges machined to very close tolerances, none of which ever need sharpening. Fourth, the weight or heft. Fifth, the gentle scraping radius built into one end of the tool for precise adjustments. Sixth, the specially designed blades for modifying the reed's side rails. Seventh, the compact size. Eighth, the "safety factor," meaning there's no danger of slicing your fingers with the ReedGeek as there is with a knife or a blade. This last feature, by the way, is something touring musicians love to talk about. Getting past airport security with the ReedGeek Universal is a non-issue. With reed knives, as we all know, it's an entirely different story.

### *What do all of these features add up to?*

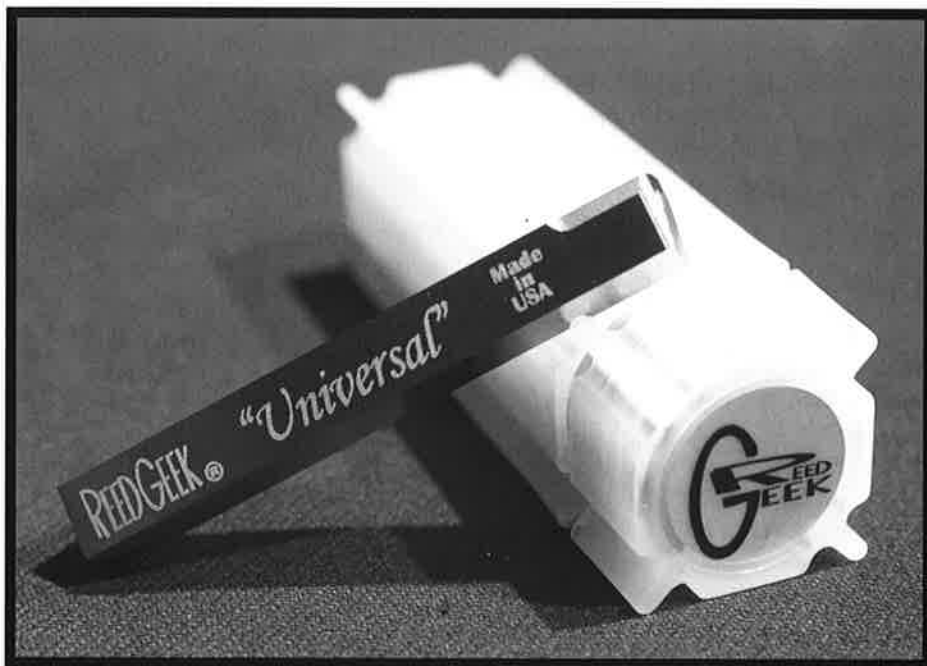
They add up to a multi-functional tool that I call "Universal" because it does it all. With a ReedGeek and only minimal practice, you can easily and effectively flatten the back of your reed to eliminate warpage. But that's not all. You can also remove imbalances at the tip. You can work the reed's profile from shoulder to tip, with great precision, according to your preferences. And you can take minute amounts off the side rails, freeing up the reed's vibrations.

### *Won't a good reed knife accomplish most of this?*

There's nothing inherently wrong with a reed knife, but the fact is most players don't know how to use a knife properly. And using a reed knife implies knowing how to sharpen it. I've known very few clarinet and saxophone players who have that knowledge and ability.

### *But assuming one knows how to use and sharpen a reed knife, isn't it as good as the ReedGeek?*

I don't think so. A properly sharpened reed knife's main function is to make reeds out



of raw cane. It does not excel in adjusting and maintaining pre-cut commercial reeds, and is notoriously difficult to use to adjust small areas across the tip, where many imbalances occur but where extreme delicacy and accuracy is needed to make adjustments successfully. And a reed knife won't work to flatten the underside of a single reed. It's simply the wrong tool for the job.

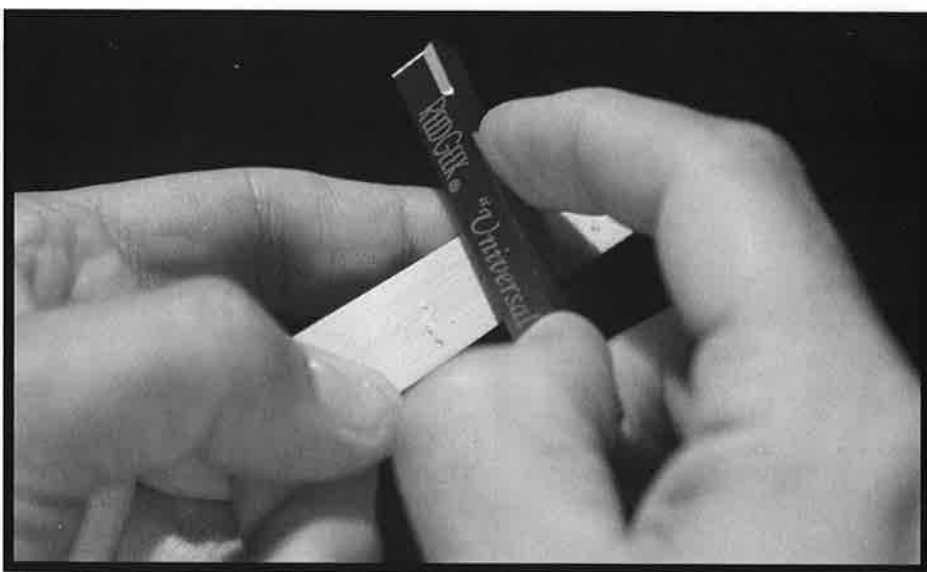
***Lots of players use sandpaper on a flat surface to remove warp from their reeds. They also use sandpaper or Dutch rush for balancing and tip issues. Are they wrong?***

I agree that sanding the underside of a reed is a commonly used technique by players of all skill levels. But from a mechanical

point of view, it's not the optimal method for achieving the desired result.

***Can you elaborate?***

Most players are not cognizant of how quickly sandpaper loads up. They assume that holding a sheet of sandpaper on a piece of glass and running the reed back and forth several times will make it flat. Seldom is that the case. There are other so-called re-surfacing tools out there that purport to remove warp, but they mostly polish the underside of the reed, often compressing fibers, rather than flatten it. As far as using a piece of sandpaper or reed rush to adjust the reed's profile, side rails and tip area, the problem is not only that the abrasive surface loads up quickly, but pinpoint accu-



racy is difficult if not impossible to achieve. I know of some other popular adjusting and balancing methods that use sandpaper to take the reed tip down to a feather edge but this too is less than optimal in terms of making one's reeds really sing.

***The ReedGeek tool has a certain heft that feels good in the hands. Can you talk a bit about the weight of the tool?***

The weight of the ReedGeek is no accident. I wanted a tool that would remove material from the reed of its own accord, almost automatically. The tool-steel material we use is just the right weight and hardness, I believe. One can, of course, exert more pressure on the tool in certain cases but the point to remember is that the weight of ReedGeek Universal alone, combined with the gentle scraping or adjusting motion, is usually all that is needed to achieve the desired results, be it removing high spots from the underside of the reed or making small balancing adjustments to the reed's vamp or tip.

***In one of the instructional videos on the ReedGeek website, you talk about using your hands as fixtures with the tool. Can you explain what you mean?***

A lot of players who adjust reeds with sandpaper and Dutch rush lay the reed down on a flat surface or use a small plaque. I advocate using the hands as fixtures because I take the view that our hands are actually very sensitive instruments in terms of feel, touch and balance, and this natural sensitivity, if developed, is really all we need to determine where we should concentrate our efforts. I also think that a good light source is essential because denser spots on a reed show up as darker areas when viewed through a strong light, as we all know.

***Also in your website video, you demonstrate adjusting the reed's side rails by bringing the reed to the tool as opposed to the tool to the reed.***

***What's that about?***

I'm glad you brought that up. It's something of a trade secret known to tool makers and machinists. In some instances, when you bring the work to the tool rather than the reverse, you give yourself a greater measure of control and an entirely more satisfactory result. If you determine through flexing the reed with your fingertips and visual inspection that one rail is heavier, I suggest holding the ReedGeek almost perpendicular

and bringing the rail up to “kiss” the special rail adjuster. It doesn’t take much. The same technique works to adjust the tip-corners of the reed, also known as the ears. By very lightly bending the right and left ears with your forefingers you can determine if one ear is heavier. I tell people to think of each ear of the reed as an airplane wing. Each wing needs to be identical for consistent airflow and lift. When the reed is in balance with itself and the mouthpiece tip, the sound starts resonating better and your playing becomes very natural. Of course, bringing the reed to the ReedGeek tool doesn’t work for all the things you may want to do to a reed but for certain tasks, like shaving the tiniest bit from the rails or the ears up near the tip, it works great. It’s another advantage of the ReedGeek Universal: it gives you that choice.

**How should one use the scraper radius?**

The scraper radius is built into the one end of the ReedGeek tool and is designed to make pinpoint adjustments to any denser parts of the reed. I advise players to use the scraper radius by holding the tool with your thumb and forefinger as a kid holds a pencil eraser. Teachers tell me

that young students can easily relate to this eraser metaphor. Hold the reed in front of a light source and very lightly “erase away” and shape any darker, denser parts of the reed. As I said earlier, the weight of the tool alone will do most of the work. One very important spot to use the scraper radius, by the way, is right below the tip, one-eighth of an inch or so in from the left and right tip corners.

**The ReedGeek is becoming increasingly popular. Were you expecting this level of success?**

Not really, but I’m delighted that ReedGeek is quickly and steadily gaining popularity. My goal was always to help students and professionals – and, of course, myself! – achieve better results with reeds. I feel very proud when I receive letters from players telling me how much more success they’re having with reeds now that the ReedGeek Universal is part of their kit.

**Where is the ReedGeek being manufactured?**

We’re doing everything right here in the good old U.S. of A. utilizing state-of-the-art wear steel and the most advanced ma-

chining techniques. Dressing the edges and polishing the tool is done by hand by yours truly. As orders have steadily increased, my wife, Peggy Di Gioia, is helping with cleaning and packaging, as are my parents, when I can pull them out of retirement.

**Who are some of your better known customers?**

I’m so thankful to have the support of many of the world’s foremost woodwind professionals. On clarinet our customers include Eddie Daniels, Ron Odrich, Ricardo Morales, Stephan Vermeersch, Larry Combs, David Shifrin, Larry Guy and many others. I’m also fortunate to have great support from master mouthpiece makers, including Mike Lomax and Clark Fobes, who has recently become a ReedGeek dealer. On saxophone, the great David Sanborn and multi-woodwind instrumentalist Bob Mintzer, are ReedGeek devotees, as are other notables, such as Steve Wilkerson and Tim Price.

**ReedGeek is available from a number of dealers across the U.S. Can players still purchase it directly from you?**

Yes. In fact, we really enjoy communicating directly with players and finding out exactly where ReedGeeks are being used around the world. Also, we welcome any questions and comments as we are continuously striving to improve.

**How much does the ReedGeek cost?**

The price of the ReedGeek Universal is more or less equivalent to the price of a couple of boxes of reeds. So it’s very affordable. I know you’ve heard this before but the ReedGeek Universal will pay for itself in a very short time. That makes me happy.

**How did you come up with the name “ReedGeek?”**

I wanted a memorable name. In actuality, people have been calling me a “reed geek” for some time now. When it occurred to me that the vast majority of us reed-players are by most definitions “geeks” about our instruments and our reeds, the name just stuck. And if you talk to my wife, Peggy, or anyone who’s ever seen my studio, the name is sure fitting.

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[See also “Product Review – ReedGeek ‘Universal’ Reed Tool,” by Heather Karlsson in *The Clarinet*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (March 2013), pp. 86–87. Ed.]

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