

by Michele Weir **JAZZ EDUCATOR'S JOURNAL MAY 1998**

SINGERS ARE FROM KRYPTON AND INSTRUMENTALISTS ARE FROM ORK



Sheila Jordan and Harvie Swartz.

Imagine a world where singers and instrumentalists coexisted as jazz-musician equals. They would regularly work together with mutual respect and equal responsibility for creative contributions to the music—without a “singer/accompanist” division. Vocalists would be invited to jam sessions and would not only improvise on a par with the players but might also be the composers of some of the music played. Even at IAJE Conferences, more singers would be interested in the instrumental clinics; players would enthusiastically attend the vocal events; and there would be a significant number of presentations featuring the two together, both being referred to as “musicians.”

Certainly it's true that examples of this type of working relationship exist, usually in cases where the singers have achieved a level of musical competency that is comparable to their instrumental counterparts. But by and large, these partnerships are the exception rather than the rule; and musical divisions between vocalists and instrumentalists remain prevalent.

The negative stereotypes associated with singers are not necessarily applicable to most of our jazz-singing community—however, they are founded in a certain amount of historical truth about vocalists in general. The following generalizations represent common prejudices about singers:

- Singers are more concerned with their *performance* than they are with the music.
- When singers are present in an ensemble, they tend to get top billing and more audience accolades than players—despite inferior musicianship.
- Singers spend more time hustling gigs or developing their “show” than practicing.
- Singers are often dependent on instrumentalists to write their charts and run rehearsals, yet they'll be downright indignant if one or their “accompanists” makes a mistake of any kind.

While these stereotypes may not apply to more accomplished jazz vocalists, there *does* exist a clear musical distinction between singers and players when it comes to their respective approaches to jazz improvisation. First, singers don't improvise solos (i.e., “scat”) nearly as often as players do; and secondly, singers are decades behind instrumentalists when it comes to the evolution of their harmonic content. As a matter of fact, for a vast number of jazz singers, the improvisational con-

cept in general is more reflective of the swing era than bebop or other modern jazz styles.

There *are* vocalists who are notable exceptions, yet I wonder why *more* of the singing population hasn't been greatly attracted to the realm of wordless vocal improvisation—and to exploring their potential for harmonic innovation. While many of the more interesting contemporary jazz singers reflect a modern-sounding concept in their tune choices, instrumentation, and arrangements, their note choices still tend to be less sophisticated and evolved than those of the instrumentalists considered their contemporaries.

Is it the case that the human voice simply can't execute the speed and chromaticism required of some modern jazz styles? Jon Hendricks seems to have little problem with bebop lines. Is it the case that there is some organic limit to the harmonic complexity a singer can *hear*? Darmon Meader (of the New York Voices) seems to have no trouble scatting on “Giant Steps” with clear harmonic definition and pitch accuracy—as well as great time and articulation. Is it that most singers simply aren't interested in paying the practice dues it takes to work up their skills to the highest level?

Traditionally, the nature of singers' improvi-

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sations has been manifest in their creative interpretation of the melody and expression of the text. I have no doubt that there are many who would wish to leave well enough alone: that is, let singers sing songs and players play improvised solos. I know both singers and players who would have no desire to change the respective, traditional roles that have been established—and there are certainly representatives from both camps who would be delighted if they never heard another singer scat. But I can't help feeling that there exists untapped potential which would foster a more harmonious working relationship between the two worlds and perhaps result in new and interesting musical directions. Why couldn't a singer someday be the innovator of a new style-period in jazz?

Differences in Approach and Background

1. Anyone Can Open Their Mouth and Sing

Singers have instant access to their instrument. That's not to say that they necessarily sound great with no training or practice; but they can certainly (at the very least) squeak out a melody with absolutely no training. Some lucky individuals seem to be "naturals" who have a beautifully coordinated voice without having to work for it.

Players, however, need training to make musical sense—or with certain instruments, to make any kind of sound. Therefore, from the get-go, there is a "dues-paying" component of being a player that necessitates a work ethic if the instrumentalist ever wishes to become accomplished

on his or her "axe." Although many singers are dedicated to fine-tuning their instrument in careful practice, it is possible for them to skip this dues-paying component and still make viable use of their voice with no practice or training. Perhaps this ease of access to the instrument is a reason that some individuals are attracted to singing.

2. Melody and Harmony

Singers can express emotion through lyrics, while players must express all feeling through other musical elements. This is a primary reason that singers are oriented to hearing melodies while players are generally more attracted to harmony. Singers can be like a fish out of water when they try to improvise on chord changes and invent new lines which reflect the harmony. It's been my experience time and time again that vocal students have great difficulty transcribing bass lines and don't easily hear thirds and sevenths of chords—even on what would be considered the most simple jazz standards. Singers simply aren't accustomed to focusing their ears on what's underneath the melody.

Conversely, players may be lacking in the expressive elements of their playing because their practice habits encourage them to play a pedantic array of scales and arpeggios without attention to the construction of a cohesive melody.



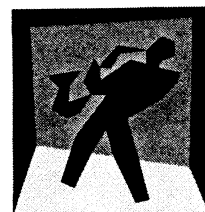
Lou Fischer and Carmen Bradford.

3. Jazz Education

Instrumental jazz education has existed for about forty years—vocal jazz education for little more than twenty-five. Since nearly all high schools and post-secondary institutions include big bands as part of the curriculum, players in recent history have had ample opportunity to learn about jazz traditions. By the time these students graduate from college, their understanding of jazz rhythmic feels, style, and articulation are completely second nature. These are the musicians who ultimately become teachers themselves and pass on jazz traditions to the next generation.

Although there is an increasing number of

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schools that offer vocal jazz choir in their program, vocal jazz pedagogy as a whole is not yet as widespread as the instrumental counterpart. Teachers often come from a traditional voice and/or choral background without necessarily *any* training in jazz, participation in a jazz band, or even participation in a jazz choir. Some jazz choir directors, through no fault of their own, learn about jazz primarily through the experience of directing vocal jazz ensembles—and have *no* experience in working with a jazz soloist, rhythm section, or improviser.

In traditional “classical” voice training, some of the aesthetic objectives are opposite to what is pursued in jazz singing. For example: the off-beat breath accents required to make jazz articulation is a no-no; there is a great deal of practice devoted to legato singing and virtually no attention to rhythmic feel; vibrato is almost constantly present rather than being saved for use as an expressive tool; vowel sounds are often modified away from their natural, conversational form; and effort is made to develop a voice with uniform tone and resonance rather than utilizing the variety of sound qualities characteristic of jazz singing. Given these considerations, it’s not surprising that classical singers don’t swing.

4. Improvisation Traditions

Instrumentalists’ featured solos are considered to be the improvisation they play *after* the melody, whereas singers’ featured solos are generally considered to be the creative interpretation *of* the melody. Typically, every cut on every recording by every jazz player contains improvisation: it’s a completely integral part of instrumental jazz music. Recorded jazz singers often do little or *no* scat singing on their CDs; and when they do, it may be found on only a few cuts. Of those few cuts, the solos are generally shorter than those of players—and usually less harmonically sophisticated. It’s clear that there is far less tradition of this type of improvisation for singers compared to instrumentalists.

Players have opportunity to improvise in a variety of settings: jazz band, jazz combo, jam sessions, and gigs. Even when singers *are* interested in developing their improvisation skills, there is very little opportunity for them to get practical experience with a rhythm section. In jazz choirs, few charts offer much improvisational solo space—and when they do, it may be a token sixteen bars or so; singers are not always allowed to join small-group combos in school, and when they are, they may be limited to singing the melodies; players would sooner invite a Ukrainian zyzzaphonist to a jam session than a singer; and on gigs, the singer is generally there for the purpose of being a front for the band and to present the melody and lyrics.

Few people seem to want to hear much scat-singing—partly because there is little tradition for it, and partly because there are few who do it well.

5. Practice Habits

Any player that is serious about being a good improviser knows that it comes with the territory to practice, practice, practice—often as many hours as one can squeeze into his or her schedule. Instrumentalists accept that this dues-paying component of improvisation is necessary and cannot be avoided if they wish to sound very good. There is no vocalist I personally know or have heard about who practices anything *close* to the amount of time that good players do. In the one or two hours a day that many dedicated singers *do* practice, much of that time is probably devoted to technique, repertoire, or perhaps the acquisition of musician-ship skills such as keyboard practice. It is the very rare singer who practices to develop scat-singing abilities.

One may argue that the human voice is not physically able to sustain long, consecutive hours of practice. While there is truth in this statement, it must be noted that brass players have a similar dilemma in terms of wearing out

their “chops”; yet they manage multiple practice hours by paying careful attention to fatigue and taking frequent breaks.

The down-side for instrumentalists in regard to long hours of improvisation practice is that they may end up thinking so harmonically that their playing sounds like a well-executed technical exercise. Melody may become subservient to a sea of meaningless notes. Players have the capability of playing cognitively without really “hearing” what they’re playing; and the fact that singers must “hear” everything *they* sing is both a challenge for them and also a blessing: they are more naturally connected to their innate musicality.

What Singers Can Learn

Singers can learn that vocal improvisation is tremendous fun. It’s like being in a playground of your creative self, and it’s well worth the effort necessary to get past the initial learning stages. Good singers whose ears are already accustomed to jazz will benefit the most by getting more practical experience of simply doing it. Since a personal practice rhythm section is difficult to come by, singers can work with Aebersold or other rhythm section-accompaniment CDs. If you’ve never done this, you won’t believe how fun it is! Getting small groups of singers together for jam sessions with the accompaniment recordings is also great practice. Simply having the opportunity to experiment with improvisation in this way—without time limitation or performance pressure—can be of tremendous benefit.

A little cognitive understanding about the chord changes can really help singers in learning to be better improvisers, and playing simple jazz piano is the key. For example, I’ve found that when singers discover that their primary objective in learning to sing on “changes” is to hear the *key centers* of a jazz standard rather than *every single chord change*, they feel a sense of relief and find great value in that information. When working on more challenging harmonic passages, the ability to go to the piano and play through the chords slowly is a skill that any singer will undoubtedly be thankful for having.

The best way to really learn the jazz “language” is through listening to and singing along with recordings: this is a way players have practiced for decades. Because there are relatively few great role models for *vocal* improvisation, I suggest that vocalists choose mostly instrumental solos to sing with and try to match them as exactly as possible in terms of note accuracy, rhythmic feel, and style.

Lastly, it must be emphasized that development of musical abilities doesn’t come without practice. When you love music, spending time practicing gives you a good feeling about yourself and strengthens your musical self-esteem. The more dues that are paid, the more the musical satisfaction.


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What Players Can Learn

Gearing the bulk of available practice time toward being able to burn on any tune at quarter note = 1274 is nice, but it will not suit every musical situation: sooner or later that ballad is going to come around, where the player will have to switch to Plan B. Great music communicates something to the listener and features intelligence in the construction of improvised solos. Sometimes a few sparse notes played in the right moment and in the right way will have more musical meaning than any amount of exotic scales played at lightning speed. In the long run, it may be more of a challenge to play simple but beautifully constructed lines that feature sound, style, and attitude rather than technique. Listening to experienced jazz singers is an ideal way to develop your sense of melody and phrasing. It can be quite communicative to phrase in a way that reflects the same rhythm and word-stress as the lyrics to a tune.

As with singers, players who don't have basic jazz piano skills are really handicapping themselves. It makes little sense to try to learn to improvise fluently on the chord changes of a tune yet not have the ability to see them on a harmonic instrument: the task is twice as difficult. Simple jazz piano is easy to learn: practicing a couple of ii min7 - V7 - I Maj7 voicings in all keys is a great start.

Lastly, I encourage instrumentalists to have respect for the historical contributions the great

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jazz singers have made to jazz—as well as to appreciate the challenges and special features of the human voice. Specifically in regard to improvisation, remember that vocalists must “hear” everything they sing without the benefit of being able to play a note mechanically if their ear fails them for a moment. Members of vocal jazz ensembles particularly require a well-developed ear: if you’ve ever tried to sing in tune the third of V7(#9) chords which are descending by half-steps, you undoubtedly have humble reverence for these singers’ challenges.

The Coexistence of Players and Singers

Fortunately, with the assistance of jazz education, the level of aspiring jazz singers’ musicianship skills is on the rise. Additionally, at educational festivals I notice a much-increased number of interested vocal improvisers—as well as those that have some real ability to do it well. Still, the need for vocal jazz training in teachers’ education programs is clear: there is at this time virtually no existing vocal jazz pedagogy in choral education programs, with the exception of a few Master’s degree teaching assistantships.

As the improvisational skills of jazz singers in our musical society continue to develop, we will hopefully also see more of a mutual respect and musical union between singers and players. Department chairs in jazz programs can support this process by assigning qualified singers to be regular members of jazz combos, designing improvisation classes to incorporate the needs of singers and/or developing classes specifically for vocal improvisation, and combining vocal jazz and instrumental jazz performances on the same concert. Hopefully, through an increased musical cooperation between singers and instrumentalists, they will learn from each other, ideas will flow, and there will be new creative inspiration for the evolution of jazz music.

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*Southern California and previously taught at California State University Long Beach and The Phil Mattson School. Michele’s vocal group arrangements are published with Hal Leonard, Aberdeen, and UNC Jazz Press; and she has written vocal and/or instrumental arrangements for Chanticleer, Beachfront Property, Holland America Cruise Line, Shari Lewis, and Disney. She has toured as pianist with Bobby Vinton and as singer in the Grammy-nominated “Phil Mattson and the P.M. Singers.” Michele will be working in Europe and South America this summer as Music Supervisor for the foreign-language dubbing of the soon-to-be-released *Dreamworks* film, “Prince of Egypt.” Her book on Vocal Improvisation is due for release in 1999.*



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