

# Groundbreaker for vocal jazz

By Amy Duncan

Baileys Harbor, Wis.

Gene Aitken, a jazz educator, pulled a minor miracle out of a hat one Monday night here in this a tiny little town on the equally tiny peninsula of Door County.

With little more aid than a telephone, he

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managed to organize a 15-piece big band to play at a local jazz room, much to the delight of local music fans. Some of the musicians had driven the six or more hours from Chicago, and had even given up other gigs to be able to perform with Gene.

Just about everyone who has come into contact with Aitken feels that same sense of loyalty. Best known for his groundbreaking



Gene Aitken: educator, performer

work in the vocal jazz movement, Gene is widely respected for his vocal jazz ensembles at the University of Northern Colorado, where he has been director of jazz studies for the past five years. Says Jim McCulloch, a colleague and pianist who accompanied Gene's ensemble for two years:

"Gene doesn't like to grandstand very much, so I'll do it for him. He has been in the spotlight for the past three years more than anybody else. His vocal jazz groups and the scat singers and arrangers for those groups have won six awards in the past two years from Down Beat magazine and the National Association of Jazz Educators [NAJE]. Gene writes a regular article on vocal jazz for The Educator, the NAJE magazine. He's a very powerful force in jazz education."

Each year Gene coordinates the UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival, inviting high school vocal jazz groups to perform in a situation with both college groups and a guest star — past guests have been Joe Williams, Buddy Rich, and Clark Terry. He also works with Jamey Abersold, jazz educator and clinician, on a series of jazz clinics and summer camps. In fact, Gene was responsible for interesting Abersold in putting vocal jazz into the summer camps. In addition, Gene holds a two-day clinic every year on how to teach vocal jazz, with a prominent name in that field presiding.

But what, really, are "vocal jazz" groups in the schools? How do they differ from the standard choirs and glee clubs that have always been around?

One has only to think of groups like Manhattan Transfer, the Hi-Los, the Jon Hendricks Family, or Singers Unlimited to get an idea of how the style of a vocal jazz group differs from the standard show chorus. But if you're not really familiar with those groups, what exactly is it that characterizes their music?

"The essence of vocal jazz is improvisation," Gene explains. "One good example would be to take any show tune, and then add

an element of improvisation and extended chords — a lot more color to the chords. In vocal jazz, you take the time to zero in more on the lyrics, accentuate the phrasing, and fluctuate the tempo. Many times it helps a vocal jazz soloist if he can visualize himself as a saxophone or trumpet player."

And, of course, vocal jazz involves both scat singing and vocalese — the former being the improvisational singing of nonsense syllables; the latter, previously improvised jazz solos to which words have been set. Such material can be very difficult, but as evidenced on Gene's latest album with his current 20-voice vocal ensemble ("Hot II"), the students are very adept at singing the most complex harmonies, not to mention lickety-split vocalese and scat. And, what's more, they really seem to love the challenge.

Gene has been involved with jazz for as long as he can remember, starting out as a trumpet player, doubling on baritone horn, and later switching to string bass. He considers himself fortunate to have attended one of the few high schools in the late '40s and early '50s that had jazz in the curriculum. That was in the state of Washington, where the vocal jazz movement in the schools really began. Gene's name is associated with the Axidentals, probably one of the first vocal jazz groups in existence.

Says Gene, "They and the Hi-Los and the Eligibles all studied with a guy named Gene Byron, who was the premier jazz vocal coach at that time."

Gene went to study at the University of Washington at a time when vocal jazz had not yet hit the colleges or high schools, and met some kindred spirits.

"We thought, gee, why not get a group of eight people together and start a vocal jazz thing? This was 1962. So we began rehearsing five nights a week and started singing around the area. We performed for the Washington music educators in Spokane — some people heard that and got excited about it, and that kind of touched off the whole vocal jazz movement."

But Gene is quick to give credit to his colleagues in the field.

"The people who are really responsible for developing vocal jazz and taking it beyond that step and into the schools were Waldo King, who teaches at Roosevelt High School in Seattle, and Hal Malcolm, who is at Mount Hood Community College in Gresham, Ore. Those two people took vocal jazz and really pushed it into the high schools. That has developed to where there is vocal jazz in the high schools all over the United States."

Gene stresses, however, that most of the activity is still going on in the West and Northwest.

"Colleges are beginning to spring up with vocal jazz groups in the East," he says. "But it moves very slowly. It began in the North-

**'Many times it helps a vocal jazz soloist,' says Gene, 'if he can visualize himself as a saxophone or trumpet player.'**

west and hung around in Washington and Oregon and a little bit in Idaho. Now Colorado is pretty well grounded in vocal jazz; Arizona, Texas, Michigan, and Wisconsin are just starting to move."

After Gene received his BA from the University of Washington, he taught school for a while, then went to Germany to study, where he received his master's degree in music at Oldenburg Pädagogische Hochschule.

"I felt that there was a real lack of fundamentals in classical music in my background, so I studied at a German pedagogical high school, majoring in teaching voice. I spent a year there, studying voice, playing string bass in the orchestra, and more than anything else just observing what the Germans were doing — they were completely in-

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# Gene Aitken, teacher and pioneer in the vocal jazz movement

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volved in music.”

Gene's experience at the University of Northern Colorado began with a jazz studies program which, through his own efforts, evolved into a vocal jazz program.

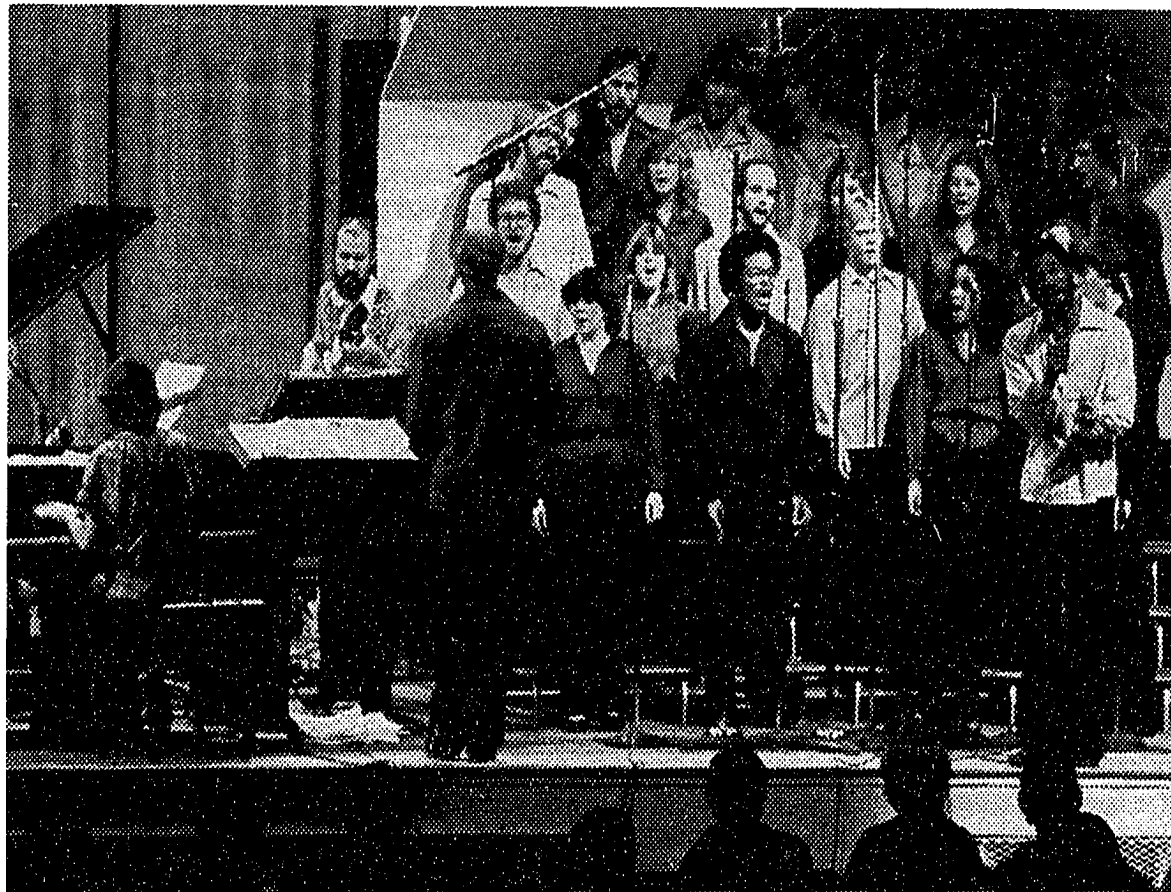
“There was nothing in vocal jazz there at the time, and so I proposed it to the voice faculty at the beginning of the year, through meetings and meetings, and by April of that year they agreed to see what would happen! But we finally got it off the ground.”

“We began to get the students involved in writing, singing, improvisation. Jamey Abersold took an interest and began teaching vocal jazz and he fell in love with it. It just seems to be a movement that's gaining an incredible amount of momentum in the schools. As it stands, unless there's vocal jazz in the schools, the singers don't have any jazz outlet at all. It's a medium of music that needs to be explored, but it's hard to initiate change in the school systems.”

Educators have to support one another to get the vocal jazz programs rolling. Musical arrangements are difficult to obtain, simply because there aren't that many around, and often teachers do their own arrangements or transcriptions and then share them with others. Yet, despite the difficulties involved, Gene reports that 30 or 40 other colleges have started vocal jazz programs this past year.

Is this having any effect on the club scene or the recording industry?

“Yes, I think so,” he says. “In Denver we have a group called Rare Silk that came out of the educational system. The clubs are open to it. They're finding out that bringing in a vocal



**U. of Northern Colorado's Vocal Jazz Ensemble I: complex harmonies and scat**

jazz quartet with a rhythm section really does make them a lot more money. It seems that use of words in jazz by a group is very effective — people like vocals because they can relate to the lyrics.”

That's certainly true of a group like Manhattan Transfer, which seems to gain in popularity every year. Does Gene think that the college programs had something to do with

the extraordinary popularity of a group like that?

“Oh yes, yes. As a result of these programs you have an already-educated audience. In Colorado, with 300 high schools, I bet you've got 10,000 people involved in vocal jazz. And there are something like 28,000 jazz instrumental ensembles in the United States in the high schools alone — that's a lot of folks

involved in the movement. I can see that going right along and continuing. People love big-band music, and now we have the vocal jazz . . . it's creating an audience for the professional musician. Before, a group like Manhattan Transfer wouldn't have had a chance.”

Does he seek to emulate its style?

“Any group has to have some model to look at. We looked at the Hi-Los, the Four Freshmen, the Double Six, Singers Unlimited, Quire, and Manhattan Transfer. We looked to those groups for ideas, but we looked beyond that . . . you can't stop there, you have to look further and try to anticipate where vocal jazz is going.”

Gene's hope is that the music will grow and spread, and he spends plenty of time tending to that hope himself. As Jim McCulloch puts it:

“Gene encourages lots of people. He's always there to give you time if you give him a call. . . . You can call him from anywhere and ask him to send out a chart, or whatever, and he'll send it right out to you. He gives everything he has, he shares everything he has — he's a real father that way.”

As far as Gene is concerned, it's all for the music.

“When you're singing a phrase it has to be the most beautiful thing in the world,” he smiles. “That beauty is communicated to the audience. I want to take the experiences I've had and put them through the eyes and ears of the students. They'll gather this and many other experiences and carry those on to a higher level. So that's why education is so much fun!”