

The "New" NEW YORK VOICES

by Gene Aitken



The New York Voices is one of the few professional vocal groups that typifies what contemporary vocal jazz stands for today. Although it is hard to pin a label on their music, the group represents a mix of jazz, pop, and fusion styles. What gives the Voices their uniqueness is the individual and collective tastes and the strong philosophical commitment to quality and the jazz tradition. One thing is sure, when you hear them on their latest CD, *Hearts of Fire*, or catch them in concert, the Voices are an inspiration to all within reach. The sound, the lyrics, the excitement, the musicianship and their commitment to music are exemplary.

On May 15, 1992, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, at MusicFest Canada, the New York Voices made their first appearance with newest member, Lauren Kinhan. This multi-talented soprano had replaced Sara Krieger just weeks before. It was evident by the standing ovations received from the 5,000 plus in attendance that Lauren's rehearsal schedule had paid off and a new chemistry was born. The "New" New York Voices were launched! The future looks bright for the group with performances this fall in Germany, London, St. Croix and then opening for George Benson in Japan. The New York voices are then back in Tokyo for three weeks over the Christmas Holidays.

The Voices are important in the lives of today's young musicians. Students in vocal jazz music need to have a role model—someone they can look to and say "this is what vocal jazz music stands for today." The Voices are comprised of five marvelous singers, along with their supportive and gifted rhythm section. What happened that gave them their break? How, what and when do they rehearse? What goes on behind the scenes and what have they done that might help other groups in the same situation? When there is an opening in the group, as was the case this past year, what do they look for?

Darmon Meader, spokesperson and musical director of the New York Voices, provides some insight into these questions and others.

The Beginning

The Voices didn't just happen by accident. They began in the summer of 1987 with Darmon Meader and Peter Eldridge. By the fall of 1987, they were joined by Caprice Fox, Sara Krieger, and Kim Nazarian rehearsing new charts such as "National Amnesia," "Baroque Samba," and "Dare the Moon." After three to four months of rehearsals, their very first performance was secured in February, 1988, at Town Hall in New York City. For this Ithaca Alumni Concert, the Voices called important people in the recording and entertainment industry to encourage them to attend. One of those phone calls, to Mary Ann Topper of Jazz Tree Artists' Agency, paid off. She came to the concert, kept in touch and now manages the group. After Town Hall, the New York Voices did the usual routine of performing in New York area clubs. Early in 1989, GRP Records President Larry Rosen heard the Voices in a club named Visiones, located in New York.

"Although there were several labels interested in us by that time, the group decided to sign with GRP. We were in the

studio immediately in February and March, 1989. The album, *New York Voices*, was released June 1, 1989. Our first album release concert was held at the Blue Note in New York in June. From that point, it was a GRP tour to Europe in the summer with Patti Austin and Dave Grusin. By early fall, we had performed at Ronnie Scott's in London and the New Morning Club in Paris."

On The Road Again!

Every group, instrumental or vocal, usually has to have a "paying-your-dues" road tour at some point in its concert life. Seemingly exhausting at the time, these types of tours still have value for young groups. They provide exposure and the opportunity to perform many concerts in order to get the "bugs" worked out. Although many of these tours aren't financially rewarding, they are necessary. "The Motor Home Tour From Hell" (title courtesy of Peter) began with the Voices driving rented cars to Kalamazoo for a concert, having a motor home with driver meet them from the West Coast, working their way back to New York City, and then motor homing and concertizing down to Florida and back to New York City. While the Voices went to Europe to perform in Berlin and Amsterdam, the driver drove the motor home across the country to San Francisco. The Voices left Europe, met the motor home in San Francisco, toured the California Coast and spent three weeks traveling across country to New York.

"When we finally got back to New York, we flew to Japan for five days. It was our first exposure to Japan—one gig and a lot of press. We flew back and finished up one last week of touring in the New England area. And that was the end of the tour—and then we all died!"

Tours for the Voices today are quite different. Concerts in Japan, jazz festivals in Europe and performances in Carnegie Hall are just a few of the many venues afforded the group. Their albums are doing quite well, especially in Europe and Asia. The result is that the Voices are performing to sold-out houses on all continents. The other good news is that a third album under the GRP label is in the offing.

On Rehearsing

The rehearsal schedule for the Voices is rather sporadic, depending on their schedule. Rehearsals are well-planned and everyone knows what their responsibilities are going to be. In addition to rehearsing a tune, an equal amount of time is spent talking about the music and experimenting with the interpretation. Not a lot of time is spent working on sound, since singing with the natural uncovered sound works best.

"Compared to several years ago, we use a little more vibrato in our singing. When we are performing tunes like 'That's the Way of the World,' a lot of R & B colors are used. Also, the idea of using a little turn here and a big sforzando there can sound okay in some sense, but in most cases it sounds dated. We try to let the individual voices blend in terms of volume and let the individual color of the voices come out a little more. It might not lock harmonically and create all the overtones that would occur if you sang with a straight tone, but it will give more character to the sound. That's why groups like Manhattan Transfer, Rare Silk and

the Voices have identifiable qualities."

Vowels are very important, as are sounding and non-sounding consonants. When one sings the word "sigh," what comes on the downbeat? Is it the "s" or the "i?" Does the "i" vowel have a different color? Vowels provide the sound and the consonants provide the rhythm. All the performers must agree on the interpretation.

When soloists or groups scat sing, there is always a tendency to make the syllables sound like they're words. If they do, the interpretation begins to sound dated and square. Also, the written-out scat sound that works for men might not work for the women, especially if the women are in their upper range.

"The only time I had to start thinking about what scat syllables were used was when I started writing them for the group. That was an interesting self-analysis process. Basically, the other four singers try to simulate my approach to syllables. Then we make compromises because of range."

Searching for an Identity

The Voices don't limit themselves to one particular style of music. Each person leans a little differently, the result being a mixture of many styles and concepts. The Voices want to stay away from being labeled.

"Wynton Marsalis is jazz and Janet Jackson is pop, but maybe there's a gray area there in which a tune can blend all the influences together. It is not a matter of either/or. On the second album, we gave each tune a focus. A tune such as 'Giant Steps' is really 'Giant Steps', and an Earth, Wind and Fire tune is really an Earth, Wind and Fire tune. The audiences continue to influence and reinforce the repertoire of the group."

In general, it is interesting to note that in the United States when the Voices do an Earth, Wind and Fire tune, the crowd cheers. When they play a tune by Oliver Nelson, it's dead silence. The reverse happens in Japan. In one sense, the group would love to go up on stage and sing jazz tunes all night with an acoustic trio. But the economics of singing full-time in American jazz clubs with 100 people in the audience make this impractical. The Europeans and Asians seem to be more aware of jazz from a historical standpoint, are more appreciative of live jazz performances and turn out to hear jazz by the thousands.

Album Production and Management

When the first album was produced in early 1989, the Voices didn't have management. So from the repertoire of 15-20 tunes, the group chose ten tunes that they thought were the best. The producer made suggestions for some hip fades, endings that might be different than in a live concert, maybe a different bass player for one tune and maybe shortening a tune or two. That was it. Fairly straight-ahead.

"For the second album, only four of the arrangements from the regular live repertoire, 'Giant Steps,' 'Cottontail,' 'Stolen Moments' and, to some degree, 'Sassy Samba' were used. The remainder of the tunes on the *Hearts of Fire* CD were constructed and worked on as the album was recorded. Management and producers played an important part, especially in the tunes 'Too High,' 'That's the Way of the World' and 'Now That the Love Is Over.' The three cover tunes had to be agreed upon by a lot of

people. These were tunes that could make or break the group."

Although management was making tune suggestions on a daily basis, the Voices actually selected the tunes. The group went through many tunes of Chicago, James Taylor, Doobie Brothers, Al Jarreau and others in which they were interested. After a tune or tunes were agreed upon, an arrangement was written and then recorded. Six of the ten tunes on the album were completed in this way.

The Producer

Producers can be wonderful musicians or incredible business people. For the Voices, the musician element is at the top of the list. The producer is at recording sessions and at the mixdown.

"Although it's possible that the Voices could be self-produced—albeit the end might result in being a little to the left—jazz musicians would love it and the rest of the audience wouldn't understand. The purpose of the producer is to help bring focus to the music, especially when recording original material. Does the tune flow the way it is arranged? Is the chart too busy? Is it presenting the vocalist in the strongest light? The producer can play the devil's advocate and can be the person who is objective, someone who is on the outside."

The contract with GRP is between the five singers and does not include the rhythm section. Almost all decisions, such as deciding which musicians are going to record the jazz tunes, is a cumulative decision involving the producer, the group and Darmon, the group's musical director. When recording in the studio, a group has the luxury of choosing the best musicians for the tune being recorded. Also, producers have a pool of musicians they are comfortable working with.

Choreography

Although the group doesn't do choreography in the sense of steps, they do take time to plan, which is quite different from just standing behind five microphone stands and never changing positions all night. Each tune has a set-up, a different position that will help to bring focus into the music.

"'Chain of Fools' is fun, and the energy is a little different than 'Cottontail,' which is straight-ahead jazz with goofy lyrics—and is a lot different than 'Giant Steps.' The Voices try to keep one question in mind when planning a set-up. If one looks at a videotape of a particular song, could you turn the sound off and still figure out what's going on? Audience size also plays an important role. If the audience is 200, almost any movement seems too big, while before an audience of 11,000, you have to do a lot more movement in order to have any impact."

Communication

For most vocal groups that have tried and failed, working together as a team over a long period of time seems to be the most problematic area. For the Voices it is similar to a five-way marriage with specific responsibilities. Darmon is the musical director and is responsible for all musical decisions and for calling rehearsals. Both Peter and Caprice pick up on how the group is

interacting and how they are working emotionally. Kim is very involved with the sound and the lyric interpretation of the group.

"External influences begin to create problems when a group picks on all the faults and loses perspective of the positive and what it is they are trying to do. Sometimes spending too much time on what the group can't do rather than what the group can do creates havoc. Communication is the most vital part of the success of our group, and for any group."

On Auditioning

The recent opening for a second soprano (filled by Lauren Kinhan) provided unique insights into the auditioning process. Through word of mouth, more than 50 people auditioned for the position. What the Voices were looking for was not unlike what any group looks for. They wanted a great group singer who had an individual personality as a soloist, who would

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The original New York Voices from left: Kim Nazarian, Darmon Meader, Caprice Fox, Sara Krieger, Peter Eldridge.

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complement the other two women, who you could see yourself hanging out with during 15-hour travel layovers and a person who had excellent musicianship. The singer also had to be able to move comfortably between the jazz style and the more contemporary style and have sight-reading ability. Lastly, it would be great if the person could contribute to the repertoire and bring new material to the group. Much more was needed than just a good voice. This typical search for many qualities is not unusual. Today, more than ever, singers need both group and solo singing background as well as sight-reading skills.

"The caliber of singers who auditioned was outstanding. The difficulty was in the Voices' specific needs. However, when everything was said and done, it was interesting to make some general observations. The weakest part of all the auditions was in the area of sight-reading. The value of sight-reading needs to be continually stressed in schools today. If one is going into jazz, it is a basic foundation of the idiom. Also, many of the singers who auditioned were either group-oriented and not comfortable with a solo perspective, or were great soloists, but had no idea how to blend in a group.

Some Thoughts for Young Singers

Don't try to second-guess what one ultimately will do for a career. Keep some focus, try to move forward and at the same time keep an open mind and be willing to try new things and to create new experiences. Doors keep opening and one just has to take chances to see where they lead.

In order to be a good vocal improviser, one needs to realize that it takes a great deal of time and commitment. A singer has to learn harmony, style, improvisational techniques, transcriptions and other elements that are characteristic of a good improviser. Darmon strongly believes that vocal jazz improvisation is learned from an instrumental perspective.

"If you had asked me ten years ago, I thought I was going to be the next Michael Brecker. I had no idea I was going to be getting into the vocal stuff—I just wanted to play." Also important, is understanding the instrumental perspective of jazz, the harmony, the phrasing and the style. Transcribing a Coltrane solo, memorizing it, understanding the harmonic structure and style is just as important for a vocalist as it is for an instrumentalist. When vocalists take improv solos, do they really understand the harmony and style and have they listened and transcribed enough jazz soloists to understand the language of jazz?

"When I'm taking a solo on Caravan or Giant Steps, it's not a circus exercise for me. I'm really thinking about the harmonic structure, the changes and what I want to play. It's funny; I take a solo over one of those tunes and sometimes I wonder how many people really understand all the stuff that goes into that solo? Then the other part of me says, do you really want to know? "

Listening is also very important, not only for helping to develop improvisational skills, but to hear a singer's sound and quality. Singers like Whitney Houston, Take 6 or some of the R &

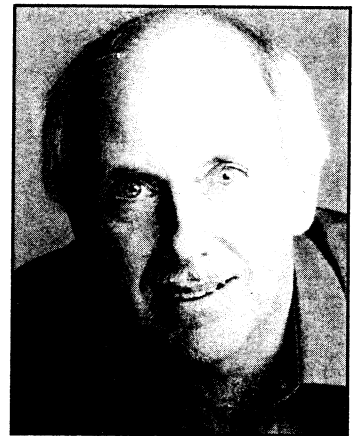
B singers offer a wide and interesting color palette.

Finally, one of the most difficult challenges in working with a group is emotionally feeling like you want to work together, financially making it work, and being sure you believe you've got something unique. If the group is just stylistically copying a lot of other groups, consider doing something that is original instead.

"Be sure it's you and it's for real. Also, learn to understand the business side of music. And while you're doing that, try to keep a clear idea of what you want musically and not let that get influenced by the business side. Often times it's more business than music, and that is understandable. Radio stations aren't there just to play music. Radio stations make money from advertising. Record companies don't just put out albums because they like the music. They have to put out albums so they can find a place to sell them and make a profit. And that's the reality of it."

Now, get ready! There is a new album in the making and the "New" New York Voices, the vocal group of the 1990s, have found a vitality that will take them in an exciting and refreshing direction.

Gene Aitken is Director of the Jazz Studies Program at the University of Northern Colorado. The Program has received more down beat magazine awards than any other institution in the United States and the only institution ever to receive a Grammy Nomination in the Vocal Jazz area. The Program has produced thirteen records albums and seven compact disks and is currently under contract with two major recording labels.



Gene Aitken

In addition to conducting many clinics and workshops in the instrumental and vocal jazz area in the United States and Canada, Gene presents seminars for Apple Macintosh, Pioneer and other companies promoting multimedia in education. He writes regularly for several computer and jazz magazines and presents multimedia seminars at state, regional and international conferences.