

Rare Silk - What It Is!

Gene Aitken

INTRODUCTION

Rare Silk is one of the new, young, and exciting vocal jazz groups that is creating a lot of attention from vocal jazz enthusiasts. They've sung in Carnegie Hall, the Aurex Jazz Festival (Japan), the Boston Kool Jazz Festival, and the NAJE Convention in Chicago this past January. And, in addition to appearing the better part of a year with Benny Goodman and his quartet, they are currently singing in many jazz festivals and clubs throughout the mid-Western and Western United States. By the time this article is published in the Fall issue, 1982, of the *NAJE Educator*, their own new album will have been released. All of this Rare Silk has managed to accomplish within the short period of four years.

Their rapid growth, however, has not been without the usual growing

pains that most have gone, or are going through. Rare Silk has argued, they've laughed, they've learned, and they've worked hard. They are an enthusiastic and sincere group of musicians who have come from obscurity into the limelight. . . and they are human beings who are willing to give of their time and talents to help others succeed.

Much can be learned from their individual musical backgrounds, their group's beginning, their "breaks," their transition from three to four singers, and their ability to successfully function for four years as a group. Based on first-hand experience, Rare Silk has some thoughts for music educators and musicians about rehearsing, education, attitude, etc. Rare Silk has paid, and is still paying their "dues." Their success is a result of commitment and a desire to become the very best in their musical area.

INDIVIDUAL MUSICAL BACKGROUNDS

Rare Silk's members, now in their late 20s and early 30s, have interesting, varied and unique musical backgrounds. Mary Lynn and Gale Gillaspie had a limited musical background while Todd Buffa and Marguerite Junneman each had a rich musical experience and education.

Mary Lynn and Gale grew up in the Los Angeles area in a home environment in which jazz played an important part. Their father, a trumpet player, had an extensive jazz record collection and they credit much of their musical knowledge and feelings today to their early listening experience. "We used to listen a lot when we were young to the Dorsey Brothers band, Billy Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Frank Sinatra. We knew the words to the tunes, or could sing the melodies of the big band tunes. . . we listened all the time."

Their educational experience in the school music program, however, was not as rewarding. Although Gale participated in high school choir, she was not exposed to the basics of music.

. . . reading, music theory, piano, or improvisation. "Choir in school was fun and a hip thing to do. . . we just never learned a lot about music." Mary Lynn, on the other hand, attempted an instrumental approach in music via the clarinet. Unfortunately, her short-lived association with the instrumental music program was due to several factors. "When I was 12 years old, music just wasn't presented in a way that made you want to carry through. It wasn't creative. Just play these notes here on the paper. . . that's it! The style of music wasn't the music of the time. . . it was real simple classical. . . kids had a hard time getting interested in it."

Neither of the Gillaspies attended college although Gale went to fashion school and spent some time modeling professionally. Both sisters still listened a lot to jazz. It was Gale who made the first step into singing while in her late 20s. "When I was 27 years old and living in the mountains in Colorado, I started to sing rock-n-roll. . . I was terrible! I moved to the Denver area and started to sing some jazz. Sitting-in in various clubs for fun, I started singing some Billy Holiday tunes, music I had remembered from days as a child while listening to my father's records. I sang anywhere, anytime, and with any group that would let me sing."

Todd Buffa's musical background in the home was similar to that of the Gillaspies. . . an exposure to jazz by listening. "My dad was always playing jazz. . . I developed a taste for jazz. . . dixieland and big bands." In high school, Todd's participation in music was limited to a short term in the high school concert choir. He did, however, spend much of his time as a rock-n-roll pianist. Todd credits his high school band director with recognizing his interest in music. "Although I didn't play in the high school band, the band director did let us check out of study hall to use the music room to jam rock-n-roll. . . it was a healthy environment to be in. . . I think it kept the musical interest alive."

JAZZ EDUCATORS JOURNAL

Gene Aitken, director of the Jazz Studies Program at the University of Northern Colorado, is one of the most exciting, energetic clinicians available today. His enthusiasm never fails to captivate both performers and audiences.

Gene has extensive background as a professional musician, including appearances with performers such as Vicki Carr, Accidentals II, Four Freshmen and Henry Mancini. He has taught in Seattle and Renton, Washington, and Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, where he was manager of the Geuene Symphony and administrative consultant to the Oregon Arts Commission. Active in numerous professional and community organizations, he currently serves as National Vocal Jazz Chairman for the National Association of Jazz Educators and is widely sought after as a clinician in both classical and jazz fields.

Since Aitken's arrival at UNC, the Jazz Studies Program has shown tremendous growth. UNC performing groups are nationally known, ranking among the best of university ensembles in both educational and professional performance polls. During the past two years, the UNC Jazz Studies Program has won eight **down beat** Awards, a *Big Band Magazine* citation for the *New Recording of the Month* (March, 1980), funding support for special projects from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities, plus invitations to appear as featured performers in a number of major jazz festivals and music educators conventions across the nation.

Vocal Jazz I and Jazz Lab Band I have received recognition in Japan, Canada, Europe and the United States for their record albums *Alive I*, *Alive II*, *Hot!* and *Hot III!* The UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival was recently cited by the National Association of Jazz Educators as the Most Outstanding Jazz Festival in the United States.

After graduating from high school, Todd spent a year jobbing with his rock-n-roll group. With a desire to learn more about music, Todd enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay where he studies music and played piano in the jazz band. He still did not spend any time singing. . .except on certain occasions. "I would sing only after having a few beers. . .I wanted to hide behind the piano." But finally, in his late 20s, and after being in and out of school for several years, Todd decided to go to Colorado to attend one of the colleges which had a vocal jazz program. It was here that he began to sing jazz tunes with one of the jazz combos and began part-singing in one of the vocal jazz ensembles.

Marguerite Junneman, on the other hand, had an excellent musical background. Her parents, being both classically educated musicians, insisted that Marguerite study classical piano. While in high school in New York, she also played clarinet in the band and piano in the jazz band. Additionally, she took advantage of the special courses offered in high school. . .2 music theory classes, ear training, and music composition. "The high school music program was exciting. . .they had an excellent program. . .it almost over-prepared you for college."

She moved to Colorado to attend college to further her musical education. She credits one of her instructors with encouraging her to extend her musical experience beyond what was offered in college. "He encouraged me to challenge myself beyond what I was accomplishing in school. . .which was playing the clarinet and piano. So, to find a creative outlet, I began singing in a rock band."

THE BEGINNING

Vocal and instrumental jazz groups are often formed on a chance meeting of a couple of musicians. Rare Silk is no exception. In May, 1978, Marguerite was singing with a rock band that was about to break up when Gale asked if she could sit-in. Later that evening Marguerite and Gale decided that since the band was breaking up anyway, they would get Gale's sister, Mary Lynn, learn one of the Boswell Sisters' tunes and sing it with the band later that week. They learned the tune. . .sang it with the band. . .and the crowd loved it!

At the same time, a new radio station in Boulder was ready to go on

the air and wanted to include some local talent on a regular basis. One of the people coordinating the programming on the new station knew Marguerite and knew the three gals were talking about trying to start a singing group. They asked the trio if they could prepare a weekly 15-minute show. "We didn't even have a name. . .and much less, we only knew one tune. We talked about it. . .Well, why not? . . .we'll give it a try!"

The trio chose the name of Rare Silk, and then began to work on expanding their repertoire. "We worked as waitresses during the night so we would have our days free to rehearse. . .everyday. . .we decided to learn three tunes a week and give ourselves six months and see what was happening."

The radio show continued to be an incentive, forcing Rare Silk to broadcast a 15-minute show once a week. "Although we used a different rhythm section each week (we'd have to use whoever would play), we began to build a repertoire. . .they were mostly the old swing era, big band tunes." By the end of eight months, Rare Silk was working a few jobs in addition to the radio shows. At that time, they made the decision to quit their evening jobs, find a steady back-up rhythm section, and try to develop their potential.

THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

The radio station for which they were working planned a live direct broadcast from a well-known jazz club in Boulder. Unknown to Rare Silk, the group had built up a large following

from their radio audience. Thus when they entered the club that night, they found a large crowd had shown up. . .plus the cameras and lights from the local television station that was videotaping the concert. "We were definitely weak-kneed. Although we were not real good on our first on-stage performance, we did have energy and a fresh sound. The first performance was scary. . .we had no idea of what to say between numbers. The important thing, though, is that we felt good about our performance afterward. . .we tried to have a professional approach." This concert experience gave Rare Silk the push and the momentum to work even harder.

THE FIRST "BREAK"

Rare Silk continued to perform in the greater Denver area over the span of several years. They were aggressive about finding their own work. When they heard that Benny Goodman and his small group were coming to Macky Auditorium in Boulder, they contacted the coordinator of the concert and convinced him that Rare Silk would be an ideal "warm-up" group. After the concert and after hearing Rare Silk perform that night, Benny Goodman asked the trio to join him and his rhythm section.

From their performance in Macky Auditorium in Boulder to Carnegie Hall in New York City, to the Kool Jazz Festival in Boston, to the Aurex Jazz Festival in Japan, Benny Goodman gave Rare Silk prime billing. This also included their first record album. . .a



Ingrid Lundahl

Rare Silk

live recording from the Aurex Jazz Festival featuring Benny Goodman and Rare Silk.

THE TRANSITION

Their success was good in one respect: they had achieved recognition and gained much valuable experience. But success also presented a problem. . . what was their next step after they finished with Benny Goodman? Rare Silk needed new energy. . . and a new direction. They had heard Todd Buffa sing at a college jazz concert and decided to have Todd come to one of their rehearsals. The new sound worked. . . 3 gals and 1 guy. . . it was a unique sound. They tried different tonal colors, more rhythmic vitality, and getting away from the older jazz tunes to the more contemporary jazz tunes.

The transition also was not without problems. "When we added Todd to the group, the old audience seemed taken back. . . almost like he was invading their territory. We lost some of the old audience, but gained a new audience. . . and more of them. Most important, though, is that we evolved musically. . . we sang new tunes, more complex harmonies, and had a renewed energy." It was over a year before everyone started to feel comfortable and the groups new identity took hold. The transition was complete.

THE 1982 NAJE CONVENTION

Last Fall, 1981, Matt Betton, Executive Director of NAJE, contacted Rare Silk. Since the vocal jazz movement in secondary schools and colleges had been growing so rapidly, Matt decided to invite them to the Chicago NAJE Convention as guest artists.

At the Convention in Chicago they were heard by many artist management companies, secondary education and college musicians and educators, and other jazz artists. This one concert did much to bring educational recognition to Rare Silk. In addition, it provided Rare Silk with important contacts and gave them a renewed confidence in their abilities.

RARE SILK TODAY - SOME THOUGHTS FOR EDUCATORS AND PERFORMERS

On Management

One of the first important steps Rare Silk took was obtaining professional management. "The timing for professional management is very critical. It can't be too early in a career, yet it can't come too late. Professional

management gave us one element we didn't have enough of. . . more time to rehearse. . . we now do not have to spend time trying to find jobs and trying to work out contractual details."

On Rehearsals

Rehearsals are all taped on a four-track recorder. "We now are able to isolate each individual voice. Plus, we get immediate feedback. The time we now spend in rehearsal on phrasing, pitch, interpretation, balance, etc. is quality time. We rehearse every other day. Each member gets their parts on one day, and has the tune learned, if not memorized, by the next rehearsal two days later. Everybody works hard and makes an equal contribution to the group."

On Programming

They've updated their programming. . . everything from tunes to dress. "We'll program a few older tunes so that the audience knows that we know about that music. Music is learned from the basics. We also look nice, because what we have to do is nice. . . performance is visual, people hear what they see. We also have a sense of dignity. We have roots in Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, the Hi-Los, Betty Carter, Mark Murphy, and Eddie Jefferson. We have a great respect for these people and at the same time a respect for our own growth and individuality."

On Sound

"We believe our sound is evolving both as a group and individually. We would like to evolve much like Chick Corea . . . going through different cycles, but doing them all well. To stop changing musically is to stop growing musically."

On Education

"We believe that much can be done in the schools to help young musicians gain the performance experience so necessary today. First of all, the schools and community need to get together to provide the students with a professional environment in which they can experience a wider part of music education. Performing in a concert situation in the school auditorium is a great experience. But, it is still in school, in front of their peers . . . an easy place to hide, and not really part of the professional environment. Peer audiences can be very forgiving. There is a chemical change that happens in a club or in a jazz festival when it is away from home base."

"Second, is the element of improvisation! A must for all students. . . and especially vocalists. Explore the creative outlet. Let teachers see what is inside the students and let the teacher nurture it. Learn to sing outside the changes. . . but, learn to sing inside first so that when you sing outside you know you're not inside. You need the inside as a point of departure. . . Music is still a discipline. . . A major scale is still a major scale. . . ALWAYS!"

Lastly, vocalists need to practice their art. Vocalists are just now beginning to be recognized as musicians. They have been flagrantly irresponsible for not educating themselves. Singers have not had to learn music. . . the environment before now didn't demand it. Choirs can be vital learning situations and can be focused on education. . . not just rote singing. Learn music theory, piano, music reading and all the important basic fundamentals."

On Attitude

"One of the most important things is to learn to be gracious. Don't be too hard on yourself and on others. When you are uncomfortable as a musician. . . go look in the mirror."

"Music is fun, you must want to do it. It looks glamorous and it is. . . but only for the brief period of time that you're on stage. The rest is really hard work. It's like building a house. . . the feeling you get back depends entirely on the amount of sweat and labor you've put into building that house."

On Working Relationships

"It is important to work together. Let the people you work with be the people you work with. Don't try to make them into a person like yourself. . . let them have their own identity. Facilitate communication. However, let everyone know your real feelings. Learn to deal with other people and yourself in a mature and gracious manner."

Finale

Music must convey a beautiful feeling. . . that is the end result. Many times when people learn music they learn only the technical aspect. They don't experience the feelings of the music as one would who grows up listening to music for what it is. Ideally, music is a result of listening, experience, and education. Music is a thing of beauty, a beauty we need to share with everyone."