

TERRA NOVA

What's New?

Make music fun to watch and fun to perform

Terra Nova is an exciting new a cappella vocal jazz group currently performing extensively in the Los Angeles area. They, along with a small group of visionary performers such as the Nylons and Bobby McFerrin, have selected to go the a cappella route, opting for a belief rather than any commercial end. As we move into the late 1980's, a cappella music seems to be catching on and providing the listening audience with an alternative . . . music using only the human instrument.

In June of 1986, Terra Nova (meaning new earth or new ground) won the 1986 Playboy/Hennessy Jazz Search and the honor to open the Sunday portion of the 1986 Playboy Jazz Festival at the Hollywood Bowl. In addition to this, Terra Nova received a tentative record deal from Cranberry Records, under the ownership of jazz buff, Kareem Abdul Jabar, with Cranberry holding a first right of refusal contract. At the writing of this article, Terra Nova just completed its record demo and the offer from Cranberry Records is still pending. In the meantime, there seems to be a growing interest in this group of young a cappella singers.

Approximately four years ago The NAJE Educator presented another group by the name of Rare Silk. Since

By Gene Aitken

that time we have watched this group develop and receive worldwide recognition including two Grammy nominations. As Rare Silk did several years ago, Terra Nova will share some of its insights into the daily problems they've faced along with some suggestions based on their several years of experience.

At the conclusion of this article, Terra Nova has provided our readership with a partial selection of one of their new tunes for your enjoyment.

THE BEGINNING

As with all new groups several personnel changes seem to take place. Terra Nova is no different. The current members, Randy Crenshaw, Gale Johnson, and Bill New met through a Los Angeles group called The L.A. Jazz Choir, under the direction of Gerald Eskelin. Their fourth member, Donna Watton, was selected after the group Terra Nova auditioned more than 90 alto voices for a vacancy. Prior to this, Terra Nova began as an eight-voice a cappella vocal group called 8 to The Bar. Later, after some differences as to whether the group should or should not be a pop-rock ensemble, it became a six-voice group called Vocal Point.

After finding out that Vocal Point was not an original name, the singers renamed the group Terra Nova. Finally, after losing two members to other vocal groups, Terra Nova became what it is now . . . a four-voice a cappella vocal jazz group. A metamorphosis to this extent is not unusual for any musical group having two or more members.

INFLUENCES

The group had several influences such as the Hi-Los and the Singers Unlimited. One of the main individual influences was Steve Prosser, a vocal jazz instructor at Berklee School of Music who insisted on the purity of a cappella jazz. It was at Berklee and working with Steve Prosser that Randy Crenshaw's concepts were formed. Randy, Terra Nova's musical director, was fascinated by the human voice and its potential. Also the uniqueness of approaching vocal jazz from an a cappella standpoint had not previously been done. These reasons were not unlike those of Bobby McFerrin.

REHEARSAL SCHEDULE

Terra Nova maintains a weekly rehearsal schedule of three hours on three different days. They try to keep weekends open for performances and personal time. After rehearsals tempers may flair, which is to be expected. The

best idea is to work out healthy ways to communicate, to express feelings and to talk before anger builds up. It is important to get to know each other by planning a certain amount of social events. Groups don't have to live in a commune in order to be successful, but the individuals do have to be able to communicate and have more than just technical rehearsals.

CHOREOGRAPHY

Working with a choreographer in the 1980's is essential at some point. Performance is 75% of what we see and 25% of what we hear. It is the responsibility of the vocal jazz group to expand their horizons and add visual support of some type. The key word is REALITY. Educational groups need to include visuals into their performances. This means lighting, costuming, staging and yes, movement . . . don't discard any of these. Statues standing on risers with the director out front is probably not very realistic today.

At the high school or college level, keep the group size to about 12 to 20 singers. Use the resources which are already in the group and look at the movement possibilities of the group from a practical point of view. What are the capabilities of the group? Do all the men have two left feet? Work with a small group from the choir first, about four individuals, and figure out some visuals. Choose ideas that will be easy to learn in a 6-week period. If it is movement, the same moves will probably work in another piece of music.

For example, the tune *Stolen Moments* is not a showy tune so perhaps keep the movement minimal. Ask, what is the mood? Maybe it's a lighting idea. Or maybe it's facial and body expression or perhaps a different configuration.

On a tune like *Giant Steps* perhaps it is quite simple to write choreography into the chart itself. Do the head and a solo, then perhaps write-in a half chorus vocal drum solo with one person being the hi-hat, one person being the bass drum, one person being the snare drum and one person being the cymbal. These four people would be in the configuration of a drum set. Then have a vocal soloist behind them as the drummer.

Make music fun to watch and fun to perform. Adding a creative visual to the performance of jazz doesn't have to cheapen the performance nor should it take away from the musical values of



L to R: Bill New, Gale Johnson, Donna Watton, Randy Crenshaw

the performance. They **can** work together.

MICROPHONES

In the studio, while recording a demo tape for Cranberry Records, Terra Nova used Neuman U-87s and AKG 414Cs, the latter providing a crispy hi end. On pass one, they used four mikes on four separate channels. With each microphone having a tight cardioid pattern and the group having good visual contact, the basic track would then be the best possible. Also, if there were any errors, one of the parts could be punched-in without having to record all four parts again. Passes two and three were accomplished using one omni microphone with the singers in a close circle around the microphone.

In the mix-down, the omni recordings thickened the original four-track recording and removed some of the rough edges. It didn't provide us with a thick sound, just one that was a little fatter. If there was a vocal part that was unbalanced in the mix, then we would boost or attenuate that part from pass one.

The ultimate goal of the recording session was to produce a representation of a live performance. Today, vocal jazz groups tend to do too many overdubs, the result being a recording that sounds unrealistic.

PROBLEMS

There is one problem that seems common to all groups . . . EGO!! Everyone wants to be a leader and in a group of this type, democracy does not work the best. Select a musical director in the group. It seems to work better if the musical director also does a majority of the arranging. When you're in rehearsals try to avoid any confronta-

tion which is ego-related. A group will go farther if they have less talent and get along well than a group that has a lot of talent but can't relate.

AGREEMENTS

Although agreements seem to be an item one would consider several years down the road, Terra Nova learned that is really not the case. It is a good idea for the individuals concerned to sit down and talk about the direction of the group, its goals, the level of commitment of the individuals, and the financial arrangement including costs of promo packages, purchasing equipment, distribution of money, etc. All of the preceding should be discussed, agreed upon and written down at the formation of the group, not after six months of rehearsing. If there is a change in personnel anticipated, a contract will provide the group time to find a replacement and likewise give the new person a trial period to see how they fit in both musically and personally. If, after a six-month trial period, everything is satisfactory, then have the new person sign the agreement.

ADVICE

Open your eyes and be realistic. At first you'll probably have to have a part-time job since a very small percentage of musicians actually work at music full-time, especially in the beginning. If music is something you desperately want to do and don't want anything else, then do it. If you would be satisfied doing something other than music, then do that. Get your technical skill together!! Jump in with both feet and don't let the odds bother you. There is plenty of time for an avocation and spending time committed to music can be an enriching part of one's life.