

# What is Vocal Jazz?



Gene Aitken

Historically, the vocal jazz movement began in the Northwest around the late 1950's. Although there were isolated high school and college vocal jazz groups in other parts of the United States, most vocal jazz activity centered in the Seattle area, probably as off-shoots of the Four Freshmen, the Hi-Lo's, the Signatures, and the Axidentals. Although difficult to pinpoint the exact beginning, I believe some credit should go to a group of eight University of Washington students who were active in the late 1950's and early 1960's and were probably one of the first major vocal jazz influences in the Northwest. This "new sounding" group, called the Axidentals II (Jan Harder, Judy Wall, Dale Gleason, Dave Harder, Gene Aitken, Dick Paulson, Bob Owren, and Bob Bingham . . . many names still familiar in the vocal jazz area), invited itself to sing in several local clubs in Spokane during the week of the Washington Music Educators Convention in 1961.

Here, perhaps for the first time, a vocal jazz ensemble using scat-singing, per-

formed before a large number of music educators. From this point on, it was innovators like Waldo King and Hal Malcolm who took vocal jazz into the educational circle and fostered its development. Both King and Malcolm initiated the Mount Hood Community College Vocal Jazz Festival, a milestone in the history of vocal jazz. At this Festival came the exchange of ideas, the listening . . . this was the center and the beginning of vocal jazz music throughout the United States.

Vocal Jazz means different things to different people. To some, vocal jazz means choreography, show tunes, or the

---

*Gene Aitken is Director of the Jazz Studies Program at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Co. as well as a free-lance bass player in the Denver area. During the summer months, he is Director of the Jazz Program at Birch Creek Farm in Door County, Wi. and co-principal trumpet with the Peter Britt Orchestra in Jacksonville, Or.*

latest pop/rock/disco. To others, it may mean the sound of the Singers Unlimited, the Hi-Lo's, or Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. However, vocal jazz is much more than the sound of the Singers Unlimited, the Hi-Lo's, or the Four Freshmen and the Axidentals . . . it combines these basic styles and concepts with the art of jazz improvisation.

First of all, vocal jazz implies that there is no choreography. Sure, there is some movement, but only that which is natural. No time is spent away from the music working on coordinated hand, foot and body movements. I have nothing against the "Show Choir," concept except every bit of time spent on choreography takes away from the time an ensemble needs to spend on the music . . . and in vocal jazz, emphasis must really be on the musical aspect.

Second, vocal jazz implies that a certain type of literature is going to be performed. The ensemble must be able to perform non-metric acappella ballads using extended chords or color notes of chords. The ensemble must be able to perform straight ahead "time" or "swing" charts employing jazz techniques and concepts using a jazz rhythm section with or without horns. The ensemble should also be capable of performing latin tunes, jazz waltzes, funk and jazz/rock charts, again, using jazz techniques and concepts for both voices and rhythm section. Today, there is sufficient vocal jazz literature available such that one does not have to resort to older style charts that did not have a rhythm section or jazz concept in mind when written or arranged.

Third, and most important, is that vocal jazz implies improvisation . . . for improvisation is the essence of jazz. Vocal jazz improvisation is not a shotgun approach to the use of nonsense syllables (scat-singing), but a studied, thinking approach based on many hours, days, and years of practice, listening and experimentation. No one all of a sudden wakes up in the morning and "lucks" upon improvisation. The vocalist must put in as much "dues" time as the jazz instrumentalist.

At a recent seminar held for both vocal and instrumental jazz music educators at the University of Northern Colorado, Jamey Aebersold, brought vocal jazz improvisation into perspective. He indicated that most vocal jazz improvisors are not aware of chord progressions much less know what scales go with chords. They are not aware of extended chord sounds nor are vocalists aware of common tones between chords or the use of guide tones. The vocal jazz improvisors are not thinking about what they are doing, they are just employing a haphazard, catch-can, approach to improvisation with no pre-learning through the use of listening, patterns, cliches, scales, chords and nuances used in vocal or instrumental jazz. I couldn't agree more.

Jazz improvisation can be learned. Through the use of James Aebersold's

records and his workshops and clinics, he has proved this. But it takes work on the part of the music educator and the student. Scat-singers must know and be able to hear the chord progression on an improvised solo section. Time must be spent at the piano playing a section, listening to the chords over and over again. Vocalists must know and be able to sing the scales that go with each chord in addition to singing the chord tones and the chord extensions. Most important, vocalists must know what notes in the chord he or she is singing at all times. They must know the common tones between chords, the common scales between chords, the important guide tones of each chord, and a myriad of other jazz techniques used by good vocal and instrumental jazz soloists. Sure, at the beginning it is slow for the vocalist to learn these fundamentals of jazz, but it is equally as slow for the instrumentalist. Getting started, and learning what and how to practice is perhaps the biggest challenge of all.

Vocal jazz workshops being held at Edmonds Community College, Edmonds, Washington; Foothills College, Los Altos, California; and the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado are doing much to bring vocal improvisation to the

forefront as perhaps one of the greatest problems now facing both the vocal jazz improvisor and the vocal jazz music educator. Jamey Aebersold's new album, "Getting It Together" is aimed at serving the vocal jazz improvisor as well as the beginning instrumentalist. Numerous books written by Jerry Coker deal specifically with improvisation and is equally valid for the vocalist as well as the instrumentalist. Last, but not least, is the importance of listening to good scat-singers like Joe Williams, Mel Torme, Mark Murphy, and Ella Fitzgerald . . . and then copying their style and scat-syllables. Listen to Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, etc., the great jazz instrumentalists who have had a marked influence over scat-singers.

Then there are all the other important ingredients for the "What is Vocal Jazz?" Cookbook . . . time (one of the most important concepts in jazz), interpretation, sound, nuances and subtleties that can be learned from listening, reading and experiencing.

Oh, by the way, to dispell an "old wives tale," singing vocal jazz literature will not injure or ruin the voice. Usually what happens is that literature is chosen which is beyond the capabilities of an ensemble such that the vocalists have to misuse their voice to obtain the end product. This, plus a lack of teaching good basic voice fundamentals create the so-called problem, not the music. Misusing a voice can be equally attributed to the concert and church choirs. The vocal jazz director needs to intelligently choose literature that is within the grasp of his ensemble. And then, the director must continue to emphasize good basic vocal fundamentals in every rehearsal. True, vocal jazz literature might require a straight tone, or a "white," airy sound, but these are sounds that are normal to the human voice and can be produced without any injury to the voice.

If you are not now involved in teaching vocal jazz music, give it a try. Vocal jazz music is developing rapidly, and in a matter of time, almost every high school and university will offer some type of vocal jazz ensemble.



Mike Erickson, a student at UNC, and recipient of the outstanding collegiate vocal jazz soloists award given by downbeat.

Jack Herrick