

## Vocal Jazz – A Look Back

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From the early days of jazz, the voice has been one of its primary instruments. Singers Bessie Smith, Billie Holliday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Billy Eckstine, Bing Crosby and countless others were pioneers in vocal jazz. Vocal groups the Boswell Sisters, the Mills Brothers, and the Rhythm Boys (Bing Crosby's first group) were influential to singers and ensembles that came after them. Researchers Jan Shapiro and David Thorne Scott have both written about the innovative style and scope of influence of the Boswell Sisters, and have considered them one of the first vocal jazz ensembles.

Other groups that shaped the evolution of vocal jazz include the Modernaires, the Pied Pipers, the Mel-Tones, and the Andrews Sisters. These groups fronted top big bands during the Swing era, including the Dorsey Brothers, Glenn Miller, and Benny Goodman. The harmonic and rhythmic elements of jazz that were central to the success of vocal jazz ensembles became more sophisticated and innovative with each decade.

During the 1950's, the popularity of vocal groups was at its highest. The Hi-Lo's with their complex and unique arrangements (by Gene Puerling) of a wide variety of musical styles, and the Four Freshmen one of the most influential close-harmony groups of the decade continued the evolution of the vocal jazz ensemble with their individual styles. In the late 50's, Lambert, Hendricks & Ross turned back to the roots of instrumental jazz and sang jazz classics in a be-bop style, with only a combo as accompaniment. Their creative and skillful improvisation along with cleverly written lyrics to classic jazz instrumental solos has influenced many of today's jazz singers and vocal jazz ensembles.

Another innovator of the 1960's was Ward Swingle. His Swingle Singers sang note for note out of Bach's Well Tempered Clavier and Swingle was surprised by how easily Bach could swing. Their 1964 recording *Jazz Sebastian Bach* was a breakthrough and showed that almost any genre could be performed in jazz style by a vocal group. The Singers Unlimited epitomizes the best in intricate harmonies, vocal blend and color, and expression of the lyric. Their fourteen albums, recorded during the 1970's, have been released as a CD set called *Magic Voices*. The title perfectly describes what the listener will experience – pure magic. And, we can't forget the Manhattan Transfer, probably the most popular and versatile vocal jazz ensemble in America today.

Jazz, as popular music, has been around since the 1890's. But, jazz in an educational setting began in the late 1940's when a few pioneering colleges and high schools started jazz dance bands. It was not until 1967 however, after the Tanglewood Symposium Declaration called for the inclusion of jazz as part of the music education curriculum, that jazz began to grow at a rapid rate. By 1979 it was estimated that there were more than 500,000 students in jazz-related ensembles across the country, and over 70 percent of middle and high schools had at least one instrumental jazz ensemble. The growth of vocal jazz ensembles has not been as steady or as widespread.

The vocal jazz ensemble movement in an educational setting was initiated by three men whose unique talents, educational training, musical experiences, mutual support systems and friendships enabled them to conceive and implement the first vocal jazz ensembles. Waldo King, Hal Malcolm, and John

Moawad are the recognized pioneers that led the vocal jazz movement in Washington and Oregon in the early 1960's. Malcolm's Mount Hood Jazz Choir performed at the MENC National Convention in Anaheim, California in 1974. This was the first time a vocal jazz ensemble had performed in such an important venue. The performance brought national attention to the concept of vocal jazz.

King, Malcolm, and Moawad influenced and nurtured a second generation of vocal jazz proponents that included Frank DeMiero, Ken Kraintz, Gene Aitken, and Phil Mattson. This group of vocal jazz educators continued the movement by sharing their knowledge of vocal jazz through workshops, clinics, camps and festivals. Other innovator include Larry Lapin, who created the jazz vocal program at the University of Miami, Paris Rutherford who will retire in 2009 after 30 years at University of North Texas, Steve Zegree at Western Michigan University, and Kirby Shaw who has been writing great vocal jazz arrangements for every age since the early 1970's.

There are many wonderful vocal jazz programs in middle and high schools and colleges and universities across the country. If you ask the director, who influence them and where they learned about vocal jazz, nine times out of ten, they will mention a person who attended a workshop or clinic given by an educator who studied with one of the originators of the genre.

Recordings and videos of vocal jazz performances are readily available on YouTube, iTunes, and can be purchased on CD. ALL of the mentioned "vintage" vocal jazz singers and ensembles are worth checking out. There are hundreds of vocal jazz ensembles – professional, community and school – that produce recordings. Here are my suggestions for the groups of today:

1. The Real Group – the premier professional group in the world; they write original tunes and arrangements and sing everything a capella. **THEY WILL BE AT MANSFIELD UNIVERSITY IN PENNSYLVANIA FOR A RARE AMERICAN PERFORMANCE ON FEBRUARY 24, 2009.**
2. Take 6 – their first CD is their best, great gospel tunes again proving that vocal jazz can be anything – six guys that can really sing!
3. Groove for Thought – six guys, some of them teachers by day, that sing some of the most creative and intricate arrangements around.
4. New York Voices – college friends from Ithaca, NY influenced by jazz, pop, Brazilian and R&B, which take the art form to a new level.
5. Voice Trek – three sisters and two guys make up this St. Paul, MN based group, their natural blend and warmth of sound are their trademark. They sing great original arrangements too!

In 1987 the United States Congress passed a resolution which recognized jazz as "a rare and valuable national American treasure to which we should devote our attention, support and resources to make certain it is preserved, understood, and promulgated." Vocal jazz is part of the American art form which has been nurtured and advanced by singers, vocal groups and educators for the past 75 years. It will take learning from the past to ensure vocal jazz has the future it deserves.

\*\*\*Get your students interested and involved in vocal jazz: Encourage them (students in grades 10-college) to audition for the 2010 Eastern Division ACDA Vocal Jazz Honor Choir. Details on page?