

Janice Borla

Vocalist

Interview with Janice Borla
Taken by Jazz Improv

JJ: Tell us about your creation of the Janice Borla Vocal Jazz Camp? How has it grown? How has it met, exceeded or fallen short of your expectations?

Janice Borla: The opportunity to create a workshop for jazz vocalists came for me in 1986, when I was invited by the Saskatchewan School of the Arts to add a vocal component to its already existing instrumental jazz camp in Saskatchewan, Canada. Within three years the enrollment had grown from 12 to 33, so I had to come up with a way to accommodate that many students. The result was the basic format that the camp still follows today: a self-contained staff of faculty artists - three vocalists and eight additional instrumentalists - accommodating up to three dozen participants with a weeklong curriculum of workshop activities and nightly faculty performances, all tailored to the solo jazz vocalist. Realizing that it would work well here in the U.S., I presented the first camp under my own name here in 1989. At that time high school and college vocal jazz education was focused on providing ensemble experience, and I envisioned the camp as a needed resource for students to learn how to function as *solo* jazz vocalists, with ample opportunity to explore jazz improvisation. Part of its mission has always been to "raise the bar" for aspiring jazz vocalists - to regard themselves as *musicians* willing to

prepare and train and study and listen as any other musician if they wish to engage in what is in essence an *instrumental, improvisatory* art form. We've enjoyed solid enrollment every year since. We limit our enrollment, to ensure that the student-instructor ratio remains low enough for everyone to derive maximum benefit. Typically, we turn away students each year. The present paradigm works so well that I'm not really interested in expanding the enrollment. Its relatively small size promotes a tremendous camaraderie among the students, who provide a lot of moral support for one another as they experiment with improvisation and new vocal approaches. Over the years, I've seen a shift in our

student profile. When we began eighteen years ago, our participants were mostly adult. In recent years, we have seen much more interest on the part of high school - and even middle school - students, which I think reflects the progress institutional vocal jazz education has made in reaching more students and in embracing the development of jazz improvisatory skills as a priority. It also reflects a new generation of vocal jazz educators who themselves have jazz improvisatory skills, and therefore encourage their own students to seek further educational opportunities in that regard. Our growth has not been in the number of participants, but in the event itself. Over



the years the nightly concerts have evolved into a full-scale concert series attended by the general public as well as camp participants. Each year our audience grows, as does community and civic support for the event. The Mayor of Naperville annually declares "Vocal Jazz Week" to coincide with the event. In 2003, its fifteenth anniversary, it was honored with a featured on *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, broadcast nationally on PBS.

JJ: What jazz artists or recordings initially sparked your interest in jazz, and how have you worked to incorporate those concepts into your approach over the years?

JB: I have always been more interested in jazz as an instrumental art form, and so I've gravitated to the jazz vocalists who improvise. Earlier on it was Ella, Sarah Vaughan, Mel Torme, and Anita O'Day; then Mark Murphy, Al Jarreau, Bobby McFerrin, Jay Clayton, Ursula Dudziak, Judy Niemack. Not only are they great improvisers, but they also tap into the instrumental jazz repertoire itself. They have inspired me to follow that path, which in turn led to my delving deeper into some of my favorite instrumental jazz improvisers - Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, and Ornette Coleman. Now, I'm as happy singing tunes without lyrics, functioning purely as a horn would. I've come to realize that I am really a "vocal instrumentalist" - an instrumentalist whose instrument is my voice. Currently I am inspired by the recordings of Joe Lovano, John Abercrombie, John McLaughlin, John Scofield, Dave Holland, Kenny Werner, John Patitucci, Bill Stewart, Dave Douglas, Chris Potter, and Scott Colley.

JJ: Many believe that playing in clubs and learning on the bandstand is an important way to develop one's abilities as a jazz artist. Could you talk about the benefits and limitations that the academic environment provided for you in your earlier musical development and aspirations?

JB: All of my musical training was in the classical tradition: first on keyboard, then as a vocalist. While I grew up at a

time when jazz was commonly heard in film scores and on television as well as recordings, I didn't really focus on singing jazz until after I'd finished school. That being said, there were aspects of my musical education that are crucial to my music now. I was fortunate to have access to excellent vocal training at an early age, so my vocal technique is solid and automatic. I was also fortunate to study keyboard with a teacher who stressed the study of harmony early on, so my ears are totally accustomed to hearing chordal relationships - perhaps the most important part of my preparation for jazz singing. Later, as a graduate student at the University of Illinois, I sang in a 12-voice touring chamber ensemble,

the “Ineluctable Modality,” that performed avant-garde “new music” by such contemporary composers as Mauricio Kagel, Morgan Powell and Iannis Xenakis. I gained lots of experience singing with straight tone and a variety of improvisatory approaches, and I’ve retained a taste for experimental music ever since.

JJ: Could you share your experiences and compare or contrast the leadership styles of several of the artists with whom you worked – Clark Terry, Charlie Haden, Terry Gibbs?

JB: Actually, these are musicians with whom I’ve worked during specific events, rather than being a “sideman” in their bands, so I can’t necessarily address their leadership styles. That may be one of the biggest disadvantages of being a vocalist: you aren’t as a rule hired by a leader as a side-person unless the gig calls specifically for a vocalist. Consequently it’s a challenge to gain the gigging experience that the average jazz instrumentalist gets, the period of “apprenticeship” that young players typically spend working with an established leader. By and large, a vocalist must lead his or her own group in order to work.

JJ: Could you cite one or more key understandings that you walked away with, growth that you experienced, or dialogues that you had with musicians like Gary Bartz, Clark Terry, and Charlie Haden, that have impacted your own musicianship?

JB: One of my important encounters with a major jazz artist was performing on the same concert with Clark Terry in 1985. He asked me to join him on “Mr. P.C.” and it was clear I was expected to scat some choruses of blues and trade lines with him. That’s when I realized that singing vocal standards in a swing style and calling myself a jazz singer did not necessarily constitute *being* a jazz singer. I realized the importance of learning the instrumental repertoire and the improvisatory style. That night with Clark turned me around. A major factor has been my 20-year relationship with my husband, jazz drummer Jack Mouse, with whom I’ve enjoyed a very fruitful personal and professional relationship. Jack’s a gifted player and a very creative musician, and the greatest “pair of ears” I know. His knowledge of jazz is deep and comprehensive, and he provides his instrumental perspective while encouraging me to stretch my musical horizons. His dedication, work ethic and commitment to jazz as an art form are a daily inspiration.

JJ: Could you talk about your new CD, *From Every Angle*, and some of the ideas that led to its creation?

JB: The album is actually a continuation of the direction in which I’ve been heading with my two previous albums, *Lunar Octave* and *Agents of Change*. I want to use my voice as a true jazz instrument to explore instrumental jazz repertoire, wherein the melodies tend to be more ad-

venturous and the harmonic progressions less formulaic. To some extent the title of the CD refers to my fondness for angular melodies. The material I selected for this project runs the gamut from the bop lines like Parker’s “Segment” and Monk’s “Ask Me Now,” to Frank Foster’s sinewy “Simone,” Kenny Wheeler’s “Gentle Piece,” Jeff Beal’s “Jazz Habit,” as well as my own “Askew In the Cradle.” I think I’ve been singing melodies like these for years, but the shift here is that I realized that I *love* singing instrumental tunes without lyrics, and I decided to follow that impulse. So of the ten tracks, six are sung as wordless vocals. Guitarist John Mclean, who also functioned as producer, took the ball and ran with it. Knowing that I wished to participate as an equal member of the ensemble rather than merely as a solo voice with accompaniment, he created several arrangements for the project, including the opening track of “Alone Together,” that embedded me more deeply into the tunes than is customary for a typical vocal recording. Voice interacts in various ways with Art Davis’ trumpet or John’s guitar – unisons, counterpoint, improvised duets – with plenty of blowing space throughout. Pianist Dan Haerle, bassist Bob Bowman, and drummer Jack Mouse, who have played together as a trio for years despite their geographic disparity, are all highly conversational players, making the entire project an interactive, collaborative affair.

JJ: Your previous release, *Agents of Change*, received critical acclaim. As accomplished musicians, we know better than critics do when our music is at the level we want it to be or if it fell short. Considering that both compliments and criticism are, like perfume, better inhaled than

that an artist must remain true to his/her own personal artistic vision regardless of the critical outcome. Even highly-respected critics view the music through the lens of their own experiences and tastes, while the creative artist is ever interested in stretching the range of vision for us all. I released *Agents of Change*, an album with a decidedly instrumental, improvisatory bent at a time when jazz vocal releases, ostensibly marketed for mass appeal, remained largely ensconced in the vocalist-sings-standards approach and left improvisation to the instrumentalists. So I knew I was bucking the tide, and wasn’t sure anyone would “get” what I was doing, or care. But I wanted to make this album purely as an artistic statement, a documentation of where I was musically at that point. So it was especially gratifying to receive critical praise for the things about my music that were most important to me. In fact, jazz journalists with whom I discussed the album remarked that it was selected for review in part *because* of its departure from the norm. For me, it was a “pure act,” a matter of having enough faith in my own artistic abilities and instincts to just relax and do what felt right for me.

JJ: You’ve recorded for several labels, including DMP and Sea Breeze. Could you discuss some of the experiences that you have had in recording that have helped you develop your business acumen and understanding of human nature?

JB: I produced, financed, recorded and mixed every album I’ve released prior to “shopping” the project to record labels for distribution. While I have had very positive relationships with DMP and Sea Breeze, I learned in both cases

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swallowed, could you comment on the impact critics have on your music?

JB: Jazz critics – you love them, you hate them. You love them when they praise your efforts; you hate them when they don’t. Jazz history is filled with instances when the critics were proven wrong. Most artists find it exasperating that they wield as much influence as they do, because the American public has come to rely on the opinions of the “experts” to determine artistic merit. We all know instances of mediocre talent being exalted and great talent being overlooked because of critics’ artistic pronouncements. That being said, I believe wholeheartedly

that making any kind of impact with one’s release is like trying to create the “perfect storm.” Coordinating national and international retail distribution, radio airplay, and jazz journalist CD reviews in a synergistic effort is an extremely tricky thing to pull off for most independent labels, and ultimately requires the artist’s own energy, resources and tenacity to be successful. I have been extremely fortunate with my last two CDs to be associated with the BluJazz label, which has done an exceptional job of coordinating distribution and promotion of my music. Business plan notwithstanding, this is a “people” business, wherein networking is still the most

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effective means of procuring gigs, radio airplay, press coverage, and an audience base. An artist must be willing to be involved in building his/her audience base one listener at a time.

JJ: Could you discuss your approach to lyric writing? What kinds of interplay between lyrics and music occur for you before a piece is completed?

JB: First, I am mindful that adding a lyric attaches concrete meaning to music, which was conceived by the composer to be “abstract.” Therefore I am guided by respect for the composer’s original intent – insofar as I can discern what that might be without actually interviewing the composer – and the desire to create a text that “informs” the music, focusing on some aspect of its emotional content from the standpoint of how I feel when I sing it. Each lyric I’ve written has come from first practicing and singing the instrumental tune using neutral vocalization sounds or “phonyms.” Usually there is some imagery that is suggested by the song’s title, or by some unique aspect of its melodic movement, chord progression, and rhythmic style. Each of my lyrics has evolved in a little different way. The first lyric I wrote, to pianist Bill Evans’ “Five,” was inspired by the metric intricacies of the tune itself. Its tone was tongue-in-cheek and literally flowed from the pen in a matter of a couple of hours. It took much longer to complete lyrics for Evans’ “Remembering the Rain,” because the text was about Bill’s legacy as an artist, and was rather like writing a Japanese haiku – very few notes and syllables per phrase, the entire text consisting of just eight lines. It took great effort to distill my feelings about Bill and his music to a structure that concise. Peggy Stern’s “The Aerie” was another lyric that almost wrote itself – her sweeping melodic lines suggesting the imagery of birds in flight. The lyric I wrote for Joe Henderson’s “Black Narcissus” was probably a stretch from what Joe may have had in mind when he wrote the tune, but I was nonetheless thrilled when the Henderson estate approved them. I wish to emphasize once again, however, that by no means do I feel that there must be a text for me to perform a tune vocally. Some tunes just seem to work better in their “abstract” state. The human voice is just as capable of expressing emotion, of communicating thoughts and feelings, without words.

JJ: How have your activities as an educator – giving clinics, running a vocal jazz camp, and being the Director of Vocal Jazz with the Jazz Studies Program at North Central College – benefited or impeded your artistry?

JB: My involvement in jazz education has, in retrospect, had a profound impact on the evolution and clarification of my own musical concepts and style. Preparing and implementing a college-level jazz history course, which I still teach, drove home the fact that jazz is at its core an *instrumental* art form; that improvisation is what drives it; and that vocalists have for the most part been peripheral in its evolution. So I

realized that if I was going to be a full participant in this music, I could not do so without further preparation. I kept asking myself, “How does an instrumentalist become a jazz player?” I began to listen to the music as an instrumentalist would, absorbing the instrumental repertoire and rhythmic vernacular, studying jazz harmony, learning the music of the jazz instrumental innovators, transcribing and singing their solos – and that’s how I learned to improvise. And now, in a “come full circle” sort of way, I’m utilizing my own learning process to teach my students how to build those same skills. Vocalists have precious few opportunities to interact with one another in a gigging environment. For me a real bonus of my vocal jazz camp has been the opportunity it gives me each summer to work and sing with a “who’s who” of contemporary improvising jazz vocalists: Sheila Jordan, Jay Clayton, Judy Niemack, Janet Lawson, Karrin Alyson, Kitty Margolis, Judi Silvano, Suzanne Pittson, Roseanna Vitro, and Madeline Eastman, to date, all of whom have broadened my vision of what a creative jazz vocalist can be. Directing a college vocal jazz ensemble prompted me to begin arranging. I sought charts that would expose my students to jazz repertoire rather than just vocal standards or pop tunes, that emphasized the vernacular rhythmic style, and that opened up for solo improvisation. I am also a great admirer of the Vocal Summit projects of Bobby McFerrin, Jay Clayton, and their collaborators, and sought to create “head” charts that gave my students some contact with that highly improvisatory manner of multi-voiced interaction. I think what’s most exciting about being involved in vocal jazz education these days is that our future jazz audiences are coming from the middle school, high school, and college jazz programs that continue to proliferate. These students are excited about the music and better prepared as musicians than ever before. The future of this music depends on the continued cultivation of an *informed* jazz audience. Not every student is going to become a professional jazz artist, but they can all take with them an understanding of and appreciation for the art form that will make them lifelong jazz enthusiasts.

JJ: What pitfalls must we be vigilant about encountering or succumbing to in our lives as we pursue a life, career, and creativity in music?

JB: There are no shortcuts, no “fast track,” to becoming a creative jazz artist. Do not chase what’s “popular” nor be seduced by the tantalizing prospect of being “discovered” and set on the road to stardom. Talent and desire are only starting points. Technical skill and knowledge are important assets, but so is one’s life experience. A strong work ethic, consistency of effort, and bulldog tenacity give you staying power as a creative artist who’s in it for the long haul. Vocalists in particular have a long road to travel to become jazz artists. They encounter deeply entrenched attitudes held by most jazz musicians about singers, who for decades came to the music woefully unprepared when compared to the

average jazz instrumentalist – many lacking any music literacy, an understanding of jazz harmony and form, knowledge of the jazz tradition and its classic repertoire, let alone having any knowledge of how to work with a rhythm section or how to improvise. But vocalists have to realize that jazz *is* an instrumental idiom, and vocalists are only welcome on the stand to the extent that they can function effectively alongside their instrumental counterparts. On the other hand, vocalists who can demonstrate that they have “paid these dues” to gain such knowledge and preparation will earn instrumentalists’ respect and support, both invaluable commodities for those seeking full-fledged membership in the jazz community. Do not be discouraged about how long it takes. To quote Bud Freeman, “Real talent takes a long time to mature, to learn how to bring what character you have into sound, into playing, and that takes a whole life.”

JJ: How do you stay balanced?

JB: I’m at a point in my life where I’m aware of the need to maintain good health via nutrition and exercise. My early training as a dancer has morphed into my present practice of yoga. It is without a doubt the single most important thing I do to remain healthy and manage stress. While the physical benefits are obvious – body alignment, balance, agility – more and more I find the meditative aspects of yoga to be just as crucial. My best ideas about my music come to me when I am practicing yoga. And its benefits spill over into my singing: it helps me maintain a calm center, stay grounded and remain in the moment when engaged in jazz improvisation.

JJ: Could you share with us an idea or two, an inspiring quote, or some foundational understandings by which you lead your life?

JB: I find the Zen approach resonates, with its emphasis on essence, simplicity and nuance. These are qualities I try to apply both to my singing and to my improvising. “Leap, and the net will appear.” The fear of “making a mistake,” of failure or rejection – fear of the unknown outcome – is perhaps the biggest challenge in jazz singing. Confidence comes from knowledge, skill, and preparation, and once achieved, it’s time to take the leap of faith to let one’s intuitive, spontaneous self make the music. Success occurs when opportunity meets preparation. To quote Bill Evans, “Jazz is a *process*, not a product.” Being a jazz artist is an ongoing evolutionary process, nurtured by continual listening, study, practice, and performance. And it’s not about singing the “perfect” solo or recording the “perfect” track, but about the collaborative effort one makes with other jazz musicians to make music together “in the moment.” Life is, after all, improvisation.

