

Guided by Voices

Vocal jazz programs aim to develop singers' personalities

By John Ephland

Vocal jazz instructors offer many different takes on how to succeed in music. But talk about the absolute necessity of finding your own voice, and what may have been a cacophony suddenly becomes a well-behaved choir: Find your voice, and you're halfway home.

The trick is getting there.

Do I discover my voice as a soloist, or am I better suited for a group? What about tradition and where the music's going? Will I be able to keep up, and what if I find my "voice" is about teaching, writing music, arranging or being a studio engineer?

"Students need to be open-minded when they begin college," said Amy London, who teaches vocal jazz at the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York. "Many are afraid to fail. They come in with their sound and cling to it. Students who grow the most are the ones who are willing to fail and make changes."

"You are what you eat," said Jackie Allen, who teaches vocal jazz at the Chicago Center for the Performing Arts at Roosevelt University. "What you put in is what you get out. A student needs to copy and learn from the masters. And just as they learn the English language from their parents, [they learn music from] the artists they listen to, and the teachers they are exposed to."

For Stephen Zegree, the director of Western Michigan University's Gold Company, the idea of finding your voice is a given. "We not only encourage, but essentially require our students to find their own voice," said Zegree, the Bobby McFerrin professor of jazz at the Kalamazoo, Mich., school. "There are some programs and educational institutions that tend to produce students who develop similar sounds and styles. We take the opposite approach. We want to ensure our students have a well-developed and secure technique, and then encourage them to apply that technique and explore ways through repertoire, compositions and styles that make them unique."

En route to helping students find their own voice, each school must address musical tradition with an eye toward the future. They must decide how much to slant the curriculum toward or away from jazz, how much to emphasize individual or group vocal instruction, the practical aspects of performance and touring, and how to guide a student from start to finish. This stands as no small order.

Perhaps no better gauge of a school's musical philosophy comes from the hiring of instructors. "They need to be well-versed in traditional as well as pop styles," said Kerry Marsh, director of vocal jazz at Sacramento State University in Sacramento, Calif., and San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, Calif. "Teachers also need to be writers and arrangers, and to have some background working with ensembles with name recognition as well as high school groups."

Jan Shapiro, who chairs the voice department at Berklee College of Music in Boston, echoes Marsh's approach to developing a faculty. "Berklee isn't all about jazz, but the roots of American music," Shapiro

Janice Borla of North Central College teaching at her Vocal Jazz Camp



said. "I look for experts in those fields."

While talking for this story, Shapiro got a message from Steely Dan's Donald Fagen. "The field could, for example, be rock, pop or r&b," she added. "Instructors here may have won Grammys. We like teachers with a high profile, and who are recognized at least nationally with a lot of credentials."

Allen believes that in order to find a well-developed musical voice, it's important that students not get stuck in any particular period. "A part of the definition of jazz is that it's always moving forward, with individual styles," she said. "Teachers and students need to be conversant with The Beatles, Elton John, Burt Bacharach, Jimi Hendrix playing 'Manic Depression,' Miles [Davis] stuff."

Manhattan School of Music vocal jazz instructor Peter Eldridge, a



Kerry Marsh directs an ensemble at Sacramento State University



Western Michigan University's Gold Company



Jan Shapiro teaching at Berklee

founder of the New York Voices, likes to focus on the teacher's innate qualities. "It's what an instructor can do for students that's important," he said. "Focusing on sound, technique, lyric interpretation; teachers need to concentrate on the technical aspects first, what they can do to foster each student's uniqueness. We look for strong musicians and great teachers."

Eldridge noted the recent addition of Kate McGarry and Theo Bleckmann (his bandmates in Moss) to the New York school's vocal department, each of whom are different stylistically. "They have that wonderful mix of being modern singers with a great respect for tradition, knowledge and the evolution of the music," he said. "But they are also trying to do something with the idiom, and what can still be developed in jazz these days."

If students are going to become boundary-pushers, a school's program needs to explore tradition through roots music and the Great American Songbook with an eye toward contemporary styles. "Any jazz musician should know and recognize the great performers and innovators of yesterday and today, and their contributions," said Larry Lapin, program director for studio music and vocal jazz at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Fla. "The history and development of improvisation can only be beneficial to the aspiring musician if it is studied in depth and practiced diligently. For the vocalist, melodic variation and stylistic interpretation of melodies can only come from attention to instrumental improvisation. Another tradition has to do with the interpretation of lyrics—something that the instrumentalist doesn't have to deal with. This is historical and requires research and study.

How to personalize a song is learned through exposure to an aural transcription of the great jazz singers and in-depth analysis of their work. The student needs to first imitate, then innovate."

"For jazz," Marsh said, "the No. 1 thing with tradition is learning what it means to improvise. That's why we stress listening assignments. Here, students can learn the masters' time feel, nuance and delivery, as well as their conversational, storytelling approaches."

Zegree's approach also zeroes in on key innovators. "For solo vocalists, students can go back to early singers such as Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong, and continue through singers including Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Carmen McRae and Mel Tormé, on to current singers like Dianne Reeves, Mark Murphy, Bobby McFerrin and Kurt Elling," he said. "It is also important to know the history, style and tradition of vocal groups too, as well as the significant arrangers. We place an emphasis on composition and arranging skills, so again our students must know the history. Students of this music should be familiar with early vocal groups such as the Boswell Sisters and Mills Brothers, to the Four Freshmen, Lambert, Hendricks and Ross, the Hi-Lo's, Singers Unlimited, Manhattan Transfer, Take 6, the Real Group and New York Voices."

With the New York Voices, Eldridge has become part of that tradition, even as he looks beyond it. "You can always focus on one thing, but the school is a great place to step outside of your comfort zone," he said. "Being in New York Voices, I can handle the challenges I've encountered there. It makes you listen differently to the whole sound instead of just part of the sound. It's a great tool for opening up ways of hearing, if you were strictly just a solo singer. Kate, Theo and I have been redesigning the program, both historically and in terms of improvisation, piano skills and arranging, with an overview of the great singers and instrumentalists who've inspired the great singers. We also look at Brazilian and jazz styles, get into avant-garde singing, vocal techniques and electronics. It's all about versatility, to make students comfortable in a wide variety of contexts. That's part of being a musician in terms of survival: what can be done now that's not just a throwback to earlier periods. Find your own uniqueness. Why not try something different harmonically, groove-wise, not just a rehashing what came before?"

"I feel strongly about the Great American Songbook," said Janice Borla, director of vocal jazz at North Central College in Naperville, Ill. "But I am also adamant that students need to be knowledgeable about

Vocal jazz class at the New School



A performance at the University of Miami



instrumental innovators of the genre. They need to deal with instrumental tunes as much as tunes with lyrics."

London, likewise, has a dynamic, practical approach to history and tradition. "The No. 1 goal is to learn how to sing with a band," she said. "It sounds easier than it is. It involves writing charts, building your own book, passing it out so musicians can read your tunes and arrangements. I learned this early on when I moved to New York. To be able to direct the band, know my tunes, my keys, arrangements, when to get in and out and how to end a song. We create a bandstand in the classroom. There's a vocal rhythm section class with piano, bass and drums. Students learn the skills of working

with a band, how to be successful and professional on the bandstand. We'll cover learning with a lot of different styles like bossa nova, modern jazz, world music and blues; all with lots of different tempos and grooves. Teacher/pros like Bobby Sanabria, Junior Mance and Reggie Workman work with students in a variety of ensembles and styles."

In general, most programs tilt toward solo vocal studies for practical reasons. "There is much more professional work to be had for a solo singer than in vocal group work," Zegree said. "However, it is important to develop group vocal abilities, too, as there are musical skills—such as a sense of ensemble, blend, balance and intonation—that serve to raise a singer's musi-

cianship and intellect. These experiences also increase a singer's versatility."

When it comes to program offerings, Shapiro pointed out that Berklee helps vocalists prepare for the business world in areas such as pop, rock and country. "We offer music production with studio and session work at a high level of professionalism, so it's not only theory but what's current, including the latest technology," she said. "In addition to performance, some might be do film scoring with songwriting, one of a number of dual majors."

Ultimately, true vocal jazz success comes down to an honest, good voice, one that takes a lifetime to develop, and one that can get a boost by plugging into a good school. How should a student make the journey toward an authentic singing voice? "The same way the 'greats' did it—by being true to the music and true to yourself," Lapin said. "One must be a life-long student and never stop inquiring and learning. Turning gained knowledge and experience into something unique and identifiable is only possible when the artist continues to grow. If it's in there, it will come out. There are no guarantees, but it can never happen without total commitment."

Borla exposes her students to the idiom so that they are blown away by it. She encourages students toward more improvisation, with an emphasis on the individual voice as an instrument like any other. "They realize that they have a lot of work to do, that it's a lifelong process of being an artist," she said. "If you can't sing it, you can't play it. Lyrics sometimes get in the way, bringing it down to a concrete meaning that is not always desirable. Keep the music on an aural level; sounds rather than words. Why is instrumental music compelling? It fosters the listener's imagination. Vocal music can share in that experience. Think of the singer as an instrumentalist whose instrument is the voice."

London explained that students need to forget where they came from. "They like what they sounded like in high school and fear losing that," she said. "Instead, they should tell themselves, 'Let me learn some new stuff.' Ultimately, you have to sing from your heart, look for material that's right for you, lyrics you can identify with. Tell a story to the audience. You got to be honest; they can tell. Many times, the element of fun is lost; there's pressure, and you get nervous. That's when you have to ask yourself, 'Why did I start?' Access your joy, or when you are feeling sad. Then get serious." **DB**



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