A Vocalist's Best Friend (Or Foe)

Pianists and Singers Discuss the Art of the Accompanist

By Bob Davis

Ann Hampton Callaway, singing with pianist Kenny Werner at a private charity event in the Hamptons, tells her audience, "This is like a religious experience."

Relaxing after an intimate performance in Buffalo, N.Y., vocalist Sheila Jordan reflects on an exhilarating interplay with her pianist. "When you just feel it, and you get to another plateau, I love that."

"When we're 'breathing' together," says vocalist Nnenna Freelon about the connection with her accompanist, "that's the high point."

It's a definite high. When a singer and pianist are in the zone, in what theologian Martin Buber called an "I—Thou" relationship, the musical merging transcends the partnership and transforms the performance into a musical heaven on Earth. But when it doesn't click, it can feel like a much lower place.

It's not easy. The relationship is a delicate balance, both personal and professional, intimate yet public, that ranges from hostile host–flea relationships to ecstatic encounters. Achieving symbiosis between a singer and a player involves matters of character, competence and connection. It raises issues not only of performance, but also of power and purpose.

"The strongest relationship for any singer is with the pianist," says vocalist Dianne Reeves. "The best accompanists are people who love to play with vocalists, and who become an extension of their stories."

Onaje Allan Gumbs, who has accompanied Reeves, agrees that "being able to provide an orchestral palette for a vocalist is one of the most rewarding experiences as an accompanist. To lift a song to a place that even the vocalist had not imagined is most gratifying."

"How many times," asks John Pizzarelli's pianist Ray Kennedy, "have you heard guys say, 'Yeah, I'm working with some singer' in a disparaging tone of voice, because they'd rather be blowing 'Giant Steps' with their friends? I love to work with singers. There's nothing like it when you have that hookup and it's happening and it's a gorgeous result. One of the best things a pianist can experience is to have that feeling, that musical closeness."

Getting to that place involves many variables, starting with the shifting roles of the vocalist and the accompanist—roles that range from

power struggles to creative collaborations. When singers hire pianists, they may expect an order-taker who simply lays down chord changes, or a co-contributor who engages in an interactive, challenging musical dialogue.

At the very least, the pianist must support the singer and the song. Kenny Barron, who has accompanied the likes of Callaway, Jordan, Jane Monheit, Roseanna Vitro, Joe Williams and Carmen Lundy, advises pianists not to get in the way, and not draw attention to themselves. "Your role is to lay a cushion in terms of chord voicings, without being too busy when you comp," he says. "Just try to be as supportive as possible."

The ability to enter deeper into a musical conversation depends, he explains, on the likes and level of the vocalist. "Sometimes you're locked into playing voicings a certain way so you don't throw the vocalist off. But if the singer has a certain level, you can be more creative and play a strange voicing that would work with a horn player."

One vocalist who enjoys the higher level of interaction is Nnenna Freelon. She prefers someone who will both listen to and propel her. "Because when I sing, hopefully, my ears and my heart are open," she says. "I'm not looking for somebody who necessarily will just follow me because I'm not the possessor of all the good ideas. But if there's an interplay and a back-and- forth conversation, that's when I'm happiest. It's a dance, almost."

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

In the pas de deux of pianist and vocalist, it's generally the former who follows and the latter who leads. But not always.

"I've worked with people who just want to lay it down, which is cool because that gives me a certain kind of freedom," says singer Kurt Elling, who has a long relationship with his accompanist, Laurence Hobgood. "I know exactly what they're going to play, so I can choose the most interesting notes within that. And then there are people who want to do a Chick Corea thing and go all pointillist, which is also cool as long as there's a malleability to their ideas, where they're able to respond intelligently and collaboratively. If I have a strong idea and want to say, 'We're going here,' just respond to that, and I'll be respectful of you as well. Because we're here to work together."

Elling rattles off a definite list of his preferred accompanist attributes: "Somebody who listens. Someone who is going to hear where you're going and be able to complement that; who's rock-solid in their time; who's not going to mess the thing up by rushing, or going to sleep and falling behind. Somebody who has pretty lightning-fast reflexes, not only aurally but also visually. If I give a signal that is obvious, that needs

to happen. If I give a musical cue that everybody should know, don't be sur prised that it's coming out of a singer and just go with it."

The level of leadership depends, says Barron, upon the level of the vocalist. "Some vocalists have that level of confidence where they will take charge," he says. "This I how I want it. Boom. Others who are not so certain may be a little more tentative. In a situation like that, the pianist may have to take charge a little bit. But it has to be discreet. You have to do it without stepping on anybody's toes."

Gumbs perceives his role as providing a cushion of support for the vocalist, assisting in telling the story through tastefully placed melodic, harmonic and rhythmic backgrounds. "In many instances, I'm the life raft for the vocalist. Sometimes a mentor, a sounding board. a collaborator, an arranger, a vocal coach, a musical director, a librarian," he says. "Some will have great knowledge of their music and can communicate their wishes to you. Others will not have a clue and I end up having to take their hand and guide them for the entire journey—even on material that I have just seen and on music that they supposed1y already knew. It can be frustrating when a vocalist does not know the structure of a song, or even the key of the song."

It's a frustration many accompanists have felt when singers have stepped up to the bandstand ill-prepared. Not every accompanist is blessed with perfect pitch. and not every vocalist knows their keys. In fact one of the more practical pointers proffered by Marion McPartland is to "give them a good introduction, depending on how talented they are. Sometimes you have to make sure you give them the starting nod, to give them something to get into the tune. But then when you have some marvelous jazz singers, anything you do for the intro will get them started."

Preparation is paramount to Jordan, who has not only her book bar also her act together. Jordan went so far as to send .charts two weeks in advance of a workshop performance so that the less-experienced accompanist would be confidently prepared for performance. Jordan coaches her vocal students to learn the music in depth. "If you're singing and all of a sudden the piano player leaves out a couple of bars, know the tune well enough to jump in there," she says. "Don't turn around and give guys dirty looks. I hate that. Nobody has to know. And if you know the music well enough, regardless of what happens or whose fault it is, nobody has to know." She smiles, leaning forward. "And you don't have to go up and tell them afterwards either."

On the gig. Jordan asks her piano player to, "play for me like you would a horn player. This way I know I'm going to get all that space. Because if they're playing a lot, that's what I do. So what do you need me for?"

ROLE PLAYING

Overplaying by accompanists is a common complaint among vocalists. Dee Dee Bridgewater had toured for many years with a pianist who was suddenly unable to join her. What at first felt like a huge blow turned out to be, she says, a blessing in disguise. Her left- behind pianist had been filling up so much of the space, and doubling her melodies, that he wasn't allowing her the room to improvise. His attempts to anticipate her phrases locked her in musically and curtailed her freedom to fully explore the material. His absence, "Freed me," she says. "It opened my eyes. It opened my ears. I have an innate sense for how to harmonize and improvise, so I don't need all this embellishment that he'd been giving me. I told him when we got back together that he's going to have to start giving me my proper space. That's what a pianist should do."

Vocalese legend Jon Hendricks puts it more bluntly: "Get out of the way." He laughs heartily and continues. "The secret of accompaniment is not how much you can play. It's how little you play. Just support the song. Don't show what you can play. We know you know all that. OK, bravo. You'll have a solo, then you play all that."

When Hendricks instructs accompanists on what he calls a particular and peculiar art form that takes *25* years to learn, he advises them to study Mile Davis' recording of "Bye Bye Blackbird" and listen to when Red Garland's hands touch the piano. Suddenly, the dinner table at which Hendricks is sitting becomes the studio, and Hendricks becomes Davis and Garland. "Miles says, 'De de de de deeee d-de. Baump Baump. De da duh, did dd dee. Bau Baump. Daaaa dam da-dahh. De dauh doump de doomp." Hendricks stops. "There's no piano going on here!" He laughs again, then emphasizes, "Don't play anything unless you have to. If you have to set up a chord for me, touch it and get out of there, because I've got it.

"Betty Carter was the same," Hendricks continues. "We detested the piano players that play while you're singing, because a good lyric sings itself. What are you going to play on the piano while you're singing, 'Last night, when we were young. Love was a star, a song unsung.' You're going to play nothing but the introductory chord. You don't play what's

going on. That's the voice's job. You accompany him by laying the chord down that he's on at the time. And all you have to do is play it once because it resonates through the whole other three counts."

Although Werner agrees with Hendricks' minimalist aesthetic about how less is more and about how to play the spaces, it's not necessarily, he says, the key to playing for a singer. That depends on the individuals. Werner's path to perfect accompaniment is for pianists to focus totally on the vocalist, thinking not at all about their own playing. "A lot of piano players are just trying to see what they can get away with playing while the singer's singing," Werner says. "I understand that because a lot of singers are not that interesting to listen to. But if I'm going to take that gig, then I'm going to center on them. If you think about yourself, you're always a little off, a little behind the beat of what's going on. But if you fill your head with that voice, your hands will start responding without micromanaging them. If the singer has more of a piquant style—rhythmic, spicy, sharp and less melodious—you're going to comp with a more jagged counterpoint. And if the singer loves their own legato, then you're going to play long notes that blend in with that."

Contemplating comping at his London hotel before his set at Ronnie Scott's, singer Andy Bey notes that any way you want to look at the situation, the key is communication. You can communicate through a lot of notes, or minimal notes, but it still has to say something. "Ella Fitzgerald was very resourceful, and Billie Holiday was minimal, but they all had an ability to communicate something to an audience," Bey says. "I always think of it as a musical dialogue. There are times when I'm playing and you don't hear the voice. And there are times when I'm singing and you don't hear piano. But it's like this dialogue and you're trying to set up little rhythms and little vibes and things, because I'm thinking about a backdrop behind myself. It's space, and music and more space. And rhythmically using the space to enhance the sound. It's more about the sound more than just playing a pretty chord. It's trying to create a mood."

Of the many other elements accompanists must consider, of prime importance to Herbie Hancock is to know what the lyrics are. "How else are you going know what the song's about?" Hancock asks. "The singer's singing a song with words, right? There's a story to tell. If she's talking about something that's sad, and you're playing something that's happening, it might not be appropriate. When you have a sense of the lyrics, then you have a sense of what the singer is trying to portray. You might be able to add colors that support the lyrics."

When Benny Green accompanied Betty Carter on his first professional gig, he was taught that his first priority was to support the melody. "A vocalist has no keys or valves to press; she depends on her accompanist to be able to hear the melody in the fabric of whatever harmonic backdrop is provided," Green says. "She should hear it within what you play. That's not restrictive; there are still opportunities. The music is there whether you play notes or not."

"As accompanists," Kennedy says, "we all have to recognize that the singer is the main voice. The singer's head is more on the chopping block than yours. I can relate to how it must feel to have the spotlight on you when your voice is all you've got there. If the piano's out of tune it's not my fault. But if they end up out of tune, people are going to say that singer can't sing; they have pitch problems."

Kennedy then adds that his role is to put himself in the singer's role. "There's a thin line of separation between the singer and the accompanist when it's going well. It's almost like they're the same person."

Is it empathy? Intuition? Hendricks says it best "It boils down to good manners."

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