

MY DAY WITH GIACOMO GATES

By Tom Pierce



I confess to long having an intense love affair not only with Jazz music, but also with listening to and talking with Jazz musicians. Their personalities, knowledge, humor, and willingness to share the secrets of their craft with others have made time spent with them while attending live performances very special.

My most recent opportunity was on Friday afternoon, September 29, 2006, when I happily responded to Tim Coakley's request to escort singer Giacomo Gates from his hotel to the two clinics he would do in association with his evening performance at the Whispermome.

Immediately upon picking him up and driving him over to SCCC for the first clinic, it was obvious that he was a very mature, warm, articulate person, with great love for the music and extremely easy to talk to. One insight he made early on related to my background in the early 1960's seeing live so many of the legends of the music in New York City. He felt that it accounted for much of my obvious passion I still feel for the music, as it's enormously valuable in developing an appreciation for Jazz, to at least listen to (or better yet, see live), the great originators and innovators that today's Jazz is based on.

He made this point soon again at pianist Nat Phipps' Improvisation class at SCCC, which included approximately 15 students on a variety of instruments and one vocalist. He

also stressed the importance of all Jazz musicians knowing the melody and lyrics to songs before attempting to improvise in their solos, which while truly being "spontaneous composition," should also "tell a story" and make lyrical & harmonic sense.

He and Nat Phipps made interesting critiques after each young musician was asked to both play and scat a song. These included the point that



Giacomo Gates talks to students

it was key to play what is naturally inside yourself, based on what one hears from his accompanists, and not let their particular external instrument (sax, trumpet, guitar, piano, bass, etc) inhibit, rather than enhance their expression. Nat reinforced this point after observing that with many students there what they scatted was often more interesting, in terms of imaginative music ideas, than what they played on their instrument. This indicated that the ideas were obviously there inside them and often came out more easily in their voice (scatting). All in

all, I found the one-hour class fascinating, and indicated to Nat Phipps that I would love to come back and observe the class toward the end of the semester.

After returning to the hotel to pick up guitarist, Tony Lombardo, we drove to the Hamilton Hill Arts center to meet up with music director, singer-songwriter Jody Shayne. The audience there consisted of 15-20 youngsters, approximately age 6 – 10. Giacomo urged them to move from their initial seats in the back to the front, so he could have up close faces to sing to.

The rapport that Giacomo and Tony established with the youngsters was achieved not only by their bright, energetic song selections like "Doodling" and "Route 66", but also their both effectively reaching out to engage the youngsters. But the high point was their fascinating interplay with Jody Shayne, who was asked to sit in on a counterpoint duet of "How High the Moon/Ornithology", Harry Edison's "Centerpiece" and Monk's "Straight, No Chaser." The combination of the spirited vocalizing, unpredictable scatting and delightful harmonizing had the youngsters, the staff and this observer cheering heartily.

As often happens when one is happily absorbed in an activity, I was amazed when I returned them to the hotel at 5:30 PM, that the 5 hours with Giacomo had flown by so quickly, and had provided me with a truly memorable day.

Photo by Jody Shayne