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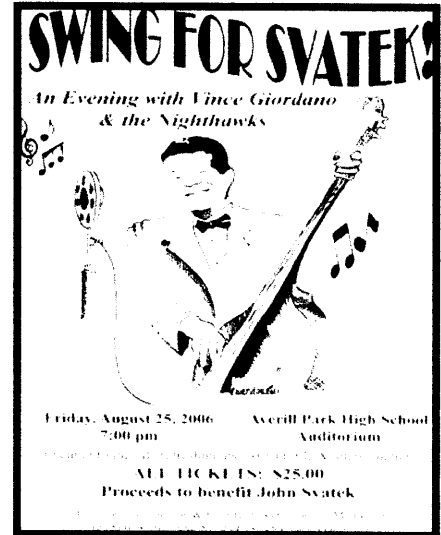
Saturday, September 9, 2006 11--5

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Singing Instrumentalists – A Vital Current in Jazz

by Tom Pierce

The rich river of Jazz, fed by the great musical streams of the Blues, Gospel, Marching Bands, Folk, Afro-Cuban, Classical, Rhythm & Blues and the Great American Songbook comprises many currents. One of the most vital and enduring of these consists of singing instrumentalists, whose work reflects all of the above tributaries.

Musicians have leveraged their unique advantages in adapting the American song form, which is the primary raw material of Jazz. Their rhythmic dexterity, compelling phrasing and sense of dynamics facilitate infusing vocals with the essential elements of instrumental Jazz – improvisation, blues feeling and swing. Although some have lacked outstandingly strong voices, their more meaningful ability to distinctively and convincingly tell a story has always fascinated and touched listeners.

From early New Orleans, countless musicians have added vocals to entertain, to provide lyrical expression to their compositions or to take a respite from their playing, without losing audience contact.

Trumpeter Louis Armstrong, the first important Jazz soloist, is also still acknowledged as arguably the

greatest influence on ALL American popular vocalizing. A colleague of his, trombonist Jack Teagarden, was also praised for his warm, inviting singing. Like Armstrong, he was also a pioneering innovator on his instrument. The popularity of these brass players, as well as several reedmen, such as alto saxophonist & clarinetist Woody Herman, also derived from the stylistic and phrasing similarities between the way they sang and the way they played.

However, as historically important and popular as these singing horn men were, *pianists* ultimately became the most prominent category of musicians who vocalized. This has included legends like Fats Waller, Nat "King" Cole and Ray Charles, up to today's best selling Jazz artist, Diana Krall.

Pianists had the advantage of typically knowing both the music and lyrics of far more songs than most instrumentalists, as well as having the invaluable experience of accompanying vocalists, either themselves or others. Some pianists, like Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae, became so much in demand as singers, that later fans were frequently unaware of their career beginnings

as instrumentalists.

Nevertheless, numerous excellent singers have arisen on all other instruments. Alto sax player Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, a commanding blues shouter from the 40's and "30-something" tenor saxophonist Curtis Stigers, who charmingly utilizes a diverse range of contemporary and classic songs, are but two reed examples.

Two extremely popular singers, doubling as virtuoso guitarists, are George Benson and John Pizzarelli. Additionally in the string family, bassists Jim Ferguson and Jay Leonhart express themselves vocally in highly personal, enchanting and witty fashion.

Lastly, drummers who sing fascinate this particular observer more than any other group. The extraordinary Buddy Rich's engagingly sensitive vocal style on the 1956 "Buddy Rich Sings Johnny Mercer" contrasts interestingly with his aggressive instrumental approach and outspoken personality. The warmly effective balladeer Grady Tate, a much sought after session drummer for over 40 years, has long been a personal favorite.