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 Andy Bey Interview

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*You must have done a lot of planning to create this recording.*

Oh yeah, we worked at it—me and Jordan. Jordan is a brilliant producer. He really knows how to give and take and put things together in such a way. But it was planned. It was definitely planned. He sent me number and things—tunes—to get my opinion. Once thing led to another, working on the concepts. I had a concept in mind, but when you’re working with a producer who has a certain kind of vision and a concept—a person who’s wide open in terms of different styles, different tunes, different concepts. What I like about the CD is that the concept is very broad but it’s not obvious. It’s not trying to say, “Well, I can do this. I can do that.” There’s a lot of variety, but at the same time, it’s done with taste. I really enjoyed doing it. There’s some fire there, but it never seems to get out of hand. It still maintains a certain cohesiveness.

 *Is restraint hard for you?*

It’s not hard. It’s like a piece of cake actually. It’s something that I was working on when I was working with Andy and the Bey Sisters. We always had a tendency to do different things. The versatility—I had all this to draw from, from my experience with my sisters and just working with people like Horace Silver and Gary Bartz in the ‘70s period. In my own writing and playing experience [gap].

*Do you consciously have to think about limiting your technique?*

Believe me, in terms of technique, I never like technique to sound like it’s technique. Even though I like the clarity. I’m a very subtle person, but at the same time, I can be very strong and powerful also. At the same time, it’s still about ... you develop taste. Sure, early, when you’re young you do things in a way that’s ... because you’re young you’re thinking about the notes. Of course, I’m still thinking about the notes but in another way. I’m thinking about economy in some ways, in knowing when to and when not to. But always try to tell a story where it’s not wasteful and where it’s not pretentious.

*So Herb sent you some songs to think about?*

He sent me “River Man” first. He said, “Andy, I hope you like this tune. If you don’t like it, trust me.” Of course, I trust him, and I liked the tune. It was different, but it’s not that far different from the concept that Nick Drake did. Only thing, when I heard his recording, I couldn’t understanding what he was saying a lot of times—his diction. I like the sound of his voice and I like the concept of the tune. It’s beautiful, but I couldn’t understand what he was saying sometimes. He had a way of muffling the lyrics. A lot of folk-rock singers have that quality. But I loved the sound, and I loved the way he played guitar. It was very interesting harmonically. The tune was very interesting. It was simple, but it was very strong. It had a nice complexity about it, but being as simple as it was. So I liked it.

Then, he sent me this Spanish tune, “Drume Negrita.” I had some experience singing phonetically with my sisters when we did some tunes in Spanish and Portugese. I didn’t speak it too well, but we did what we did. We sang some tunes in French also. That wasn’t new to me because I was used to doing things. Plus, I was on the Startime Kids Show when I was a kid. It was like a TV variety show. We did all kinds of different settings and vignettes and stuff every Saturday night. I was 12 or 13 years old. I was aware of show tunes, the Broadway composers, just through listening. [gap.]

*Let’s stick with “River Man.” How do you determine your approach to such a song?*

I’ve been experimenting more and more with my head voice anyway, my soft palate, what I did with Ballads, Blues and Bey. I wanted to do that. I wanted to show another side of me. The second album was kind of easy. I knew that I wasn’t going to approaches the song loud or with the power voice. I just worked with it. The song was already arranged. All I had to do was work in my concept. I think I’m basically singing it in the same key that he sings it in. But I’m using the soft palate You have to practice every day, in terms of keeping the soft palate working. Sometimes I’m in between gigs—I don’t have any gigs—but I still have to stay in shape. I have to do breathing exercises and sing long tones so I’ll be able to sing whenever I want to. I’ll be able to sing in that soft palate. Even if I decide to belt on a few numbers, I can still come back to that. I never sing forte around the house. I used to. Occasionally, I will if I’m working on something specific. But I very seldom sing forte when I’m working on material. I stayed in the pianissimo. That’s really important to stay in that because that helps your power voice.

*There’s a lot of feeling there.*

I’m glad it feels that way to you. It’s something that I enjoy doing. I realized this when I used to be learning material—like I’m at home late at night and I wanted to sing. I had to develop that softness. I wanted to always learn a song in the most quiet way. When I was a teacher—I was teaching in Europe for a while, in Graz, Austria—I would be teaching singers how to use the soft palate. Not to say that they had to change their style but to have a resting place where you can ... if you start too loud you don’t have no place to go. It’s better to start pianissimo and, then, build to that. The pianissimo really helps your power voice, because you’ve got that pocket working. It’s like it expands the whole palate: your power, your midrange, and your pianissimo, midrange, low range, high range. I’ve been able to work with that. I had some lessons. I had a few teachers that helped me to understand pianissimo, singing in the soft palate. [gap] Singing on the breath has a lot to do with the soft palate. You hear a lot of breath in my sound.

 I have three distinct voices in a way. I have the strong, almost tenor-type power voice. I have the falsetto. And I have like the low bass baritone. I try to use all of that. Sometime I’ll use all of it in a song, and I might just use the soft palate all the way through to give it more variety. You try to do something different with each song, not that you want to be totally to the extreme, but you have a different for each song’s requirements.

*When I first heard you, in the ‘70s, you seemed to emphasize that chest voice.*

That high baritone, bordering on tenor.

*On “Midnight Blue” you start in that soft palate and, then, end up full throttle.*

Full power, but then I came back.

*Yeah in a nice arc. Didn’t the doo-wopers use that head voice that you’re talking about?*

They don’t use it all the way. They might sing in the chest area, but then they’ll wait ‘til they get to a high note and they’ll go falsetto. But the whole idea, to keep your sound in a certain thing, is to bring your falsetto down to your chest area, to make the sound breathy. [Illustrates] You let that breath do the work in all the registers. A lot of singers will sing chest and, then, when they get to the break in their voice, they’ll switch gears. I can do that, but at the same time, if I’m going to sing a ballad—“Like a Lover,” “Blood Count,” or “Some Other Time,” I’ll stay in that same pocket. I don’t sing hard in the chest area. The whole idea is to keep the same thing going. So when you do switch, as the notes get higher, you’re still in that same position.

*So you’re talking about a head tone that hasn’t yet kicked into that falsetto.*

Right. ‘Cause it’s already falsetto. I’m using falsetto all the way anyway, even when I’m singing in my lowest tone, I’m thinking like that.

*That’s rarely been used by male singers in jazz.*

Especially by bass-baritones. You think of the Ink Spots, the lead singer. He had a wonderful voice. He used that ... I mean it was done a lot in the ‘30s and ‘40s. Bing Crosby’s early records, he was singing all falsetto. Even some of Frank Sinatra’s earliest records, he had a very light lyric baritone, but as he got older he started singing more bel canto. Billy Eckstine had a wonderful falsetto, a wonderful lyric. But even then, they had the tendency to sing like the legit baritone. I’m doing something a little different. One of my old producers called it to my attention. [gap, taping a lot of original tunes] Range has nothing to do the with color of the voice. Basically, my color is very dark. I’m a bass-baritone. I can sing very low.

*You’re saying that it’s about timbre.*

Right. I been able to sing high due to the fact that I’ve worked with a lot of groups where I pushed a lot and sang hard. I learned to develop the top. But the top wouldn’t stay sometimes. So I could always depend on that bottom that I had. I had a strong bottom-heavy, chest. But when I started taking lessons with this teacher, Andrew Friarson, he was the one that convinced me by showing me different exercises to do that I could ... like different head voice exercises. Then having me sing songs in that position. He said, “You shouldn’t sing no louder than that. You don’t have to, because you’ve got all of that. Just learn to let the notes go up in the head when you get to a point.” He gave me an exercise—a scale to sing—that lets the breath do the work. He made me aware of a lot of things back in the ‘70s. I was really disillusioned somewhat, like in the late-‘70s [gap]. I got tired of belting in a way. I knew that that was strong. People loved that about me. They identified with that, but I just knew that I always had this other thing, because I used to do it from time to time.

If you listen to “Experience and Judgment” you can hear that I have somewhat of a soft palette, because I love Sarah Vaughan. [gap, on Vaughan as a role model]. She had flexibility of range. She was a contralto, but she still had that soprano thing going on because of how she sang basically throughout her career. She never strained. The flexibility got wider and wider. The voice got lower and higher at the same time [gap]. All the experience and all the living showed in her voice.

*I almost think of your voice as a tenor sax.*

I loved Coleman Hawkins, Prez, Ben Webster all those cats. What I love about those cats is that they were virtuosos, but they really knew how to play inside a melody. They knew how to embellish on a melody without playing just the chord changes. A lot of cats nowadays, young cats, they’ve got excellent technique and they can play all over the horn, but it’s going to take some time for them to really develop a voice and really develop how to embellish on a melody without changing it necessarily—not just using it as a vehicle for blowing.

*Did you improvise at the sessions?*

I improvised in the sessions. I’m disciplined enough to practice. That’s because I’m a good piano player. I’m an improvising piano player. [gap]

*Herb was telling me something about your work on “Get It Straight.”*

I wrote some new changes. The song is usually [gap, when the tape had to be flipped]. Like I do it in the key of “C.” [gap while Bey explain the “harmonic twist” he gave the song] The chord changes are not easy to sing on. But I knew enough scale patterns. I know enough about improvising and enough about rhythm to really make it work. I don’t make scatting a thing I have to do all the time, but when I do it, I make sure I know what I’m doing in terms of singing on the chords. You have to be able to sing on the changes in order for it to be effective. For me, anyway.

*On that one you must have multi-tracked piano and voice tracks.*

That was for the tune “Believin’ It” actually. I laid down the piano track. I sang with the rhythm section, but then I laid down the piano track first. I changed the vocal around once everything was set. But when you see me in a club—the guitar player that was working with me that played on “Like a Lover” played with me in the club on “Believin’ It—[gap, talking about Strayhorn]

*Did you get to cover what you wanted to on this record?*

Oh yeah, I really did. I feel that this record shows more of who I am than anything that I’ve made—on a personal level—and in terms of what I’m dealing with as I get older. Ballads, Blues and Bey, that was a beginning in a sense. But even this record that I did in Europe was a beginning in a way. [gap]