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BENDING TOWARDS THE LIGHT A JAZZ NATIVITY



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BENDING TOWARDS THE LIGHT: A JAZZ NATIVITY

by Marcia Hillman



Photo by Peter Seifing

Celebrating its 26th year and already a holiday tradition, *Bending Towards The Light: A Jazz Nativity* will be performed for the second year at BB King's on Dec. 22nd. It is the Christmas story told in full costume with great jazz players and singers in the roles of the Kings, Shepherds, Angels, Mary and Joseph plus an instrumental ensemble and additional guests. The Christ child is portrayed by a single light shining through the stage in front of Mary. The show is a combination of well-known carols with original music by Anne Phillips, Bob Kindred and Dave and Iola Brubeck and text taken from the Bible. The players enter on stage carrying their costumes and don them in front of the audience.

It all began as a suggestion by the late John Garcia Gensel, the "Jazz Pastor" of Saint Peter's Church in Manhattan. "He actually came to me and asked me to write a Christmas benefit program to be held there," recalled Phillips. "The show was premiered at Saint Peter's in 1985 and has been running annually in New York ever since in different venues. We did it at St. Bartholemew's in December of 1986, the first of seven years of performances there and, in 1993, it even crossed religious boundaries as well as musical ones when we presented it at the Steven Weiss Free Synagogue on West 69th Street. It is also performed in different cities all over the country," she continued. Phillips is not only responsible for the writing duties, but the singer/songwriter has done the arrangements, conducts and produces the show with her husband, saxophonist Bob Kindred (who is also music director) under their non-profit organization Kindred Spirits. Both of them also take part as performers in the presentation. The direction is by Tad and Beth Jones.

The original cast was a collection of some of the finest artists around at the time. Clark Terry, Charles "Honi" Coles and Doc Cheatham were the Kings (whose individual gifts were music, not frankincense, myrrh and gold) and Maxine Sullivan as the Angel. Included in the jazz ensemble were pianist Tommy Flanagan, bassist George Mraz, drummer Grady Tate, guitarist Gene Bertoncini and Kindred, Marvin Stamm, Wayne Andre and Jerry Dodgion in the horn section. Marretha Stewart and The New York Voices added their vocal talents, pianist Dave Brubeck was featured performing his "God's Light Made Visible" and Pastor Gensel narrated. "One of the highlights of that first show was trumpeter Clark Terry singing 'Mumbles' to the Christ child," Phillips commented.

The show is always a "work in progress" in that there are some changes in the cast every year depending upon who is available at the time and the venue. There have been as many as 30 voices in the choir and as few as two through the years. The second year included the casting of percussionist/bandleader Tito Puente as one of the Kings. Phillips remembered, "When I called Tito and told him what it was and that we weren't paying anybody there above scale, he said 'I'm in!' just like that. His manager called me once and told me I was killing him because Tito had all these other jobs and he could only do one night. But then Tito would do it

every night. I miss him so." Puente was one of the Kings every year until his death in 2000. The second year of the show also brought the husband-and-wife vocal team of Jackie Cain and Roy Kral into the cast as Guardian Angels. Kral even wrote a scat chorus for "What Child Is This". The duo continued to perform their angelic roles up until Kral's death in 2002. Trombonist Al Grey also was a King or a guest artist for many years until his death in 2000.

The fourth year saw several additions to the show. The first was the inclusion of the song "Bending Towards The Light" by Phillips and Kindred that resulted in the changing of the title to its current one. The second was the addition of a boy Shepherd, played by a boy soprano chosen from the famed Newark Boys Chorus School. "Usually the boy sopranos last about three years before their voices start to change and then we have to choose a new one," Phillips remarked.

There have been many special moments through the years, according to Phillips. One was the year the Jazz Nativity was done at Avery Fisher Hall and the late Charles Kuralt stepped on stage to introduce the show and said the following words: "In Bethlehem in the grotto where Christ was born, a light shines into the darkness. The light is meant to serve as light serves for so many religions and philosophies - as a symbol of truth and love and hope...hope that even in a dark season, we may begin to see the world bending towards the light." Then there is the "Deck The Halls" finale (which Phillips terms as "an organized jam session") where the guests and everyone else do their own thing. But most of all is the list of stellar artists who have been in the ensemble or been guests (Toots Thielemans, Frank Wess, Benny Powell, Bill Mays, Ted Rosenthal, Tim Horner, Ron Carter, Slide Hampton, Arturo O'Farrill, Bill Charlap and more) and the notables who have put on the crown of king, including such tap dancing greats as Harold Nicholas, George Hillman, Charles "Cookie" Cook and Max Pollak and musicians like Lionel Hampton, Paquito D'Rivera, Steve Turre and Stanley Turrentine, among others. Many of them have appeared more than once over the years.

Each King has brought his own particular talent as his gift. Trumpeter Jon Faddis (who has been a guest many times and played a king three times) has fond memories. "It was a royal feeling. But the program is wonderful in that it brings together the old and the young. It tells the story through jazz. I love the story and there is my love for Anne and Bob. But the most important thing about the Jazz Nativity is I met my wife Laurelyn at the 1993 performance."

Lew Soloff enjoyed his kingship as well. "It's fun to be a king. I always perform in the show whenever I'm asked. It's a wonderful thing to do and I will continue to do it whenever I can."

When asked about his stint as a king, Warren Vaché said, "I'm not one for acting and having to get dressed up, but it was great being with such good musicians and the very talented kids. It's good to see them involved."

A soundtrack recording of the Jazz Nativity is

available. It is a compilation of selections from three different performances through the years and has a "cast of thousands". Performances of the show have been recorded every year by John Uhl, a sound engineer from Pennsylvania. Phillips related that the people "at Avery Fisher Hall were so impressed with his recording of the performance there that they offered him a job." He is now plying his engineering talent at Jazz At Lincoln Center's Rose Theatre.

This year the cast will include Wycliffe Gordon, Maurice Chestnut and Houston Person as The Three Kings and a jazz ensemble of Bob Kindred, Lew Soloff, Jon Gordon, Art Baron, Dean Johnson, Tim Horner, Adam Asarnow and Candido, with singers Stephanie McGuire, Amy London, Robert Encila, Dylan Pramuk and Phillips with guest performers Jon Hendricks, Warren Vaché, Russell George, Max Pollak and Arturo O'Farrill. Phillips is thrilled to have two 90 year olds - Hendricks and Candido - on this year. Hendricks is "thrilled" to be included again this year, having contributed his vocalese expertise and joyous energy to prior performances. Candido, who has been playing in the show for 16 years, remarks, "The first time I was in the show, I was a King because I filled in for Tito [Puente] who couldn't make it because of a very bad snowstorm and I have been in it ever since. I like being a part of it very much. Each time I do it, it's like the first time. It is very beautiful. Everybody is for the show and the show is for everybody. That's how I feel about it."

There will also be performances in places such as Colorado Springs and Evanston, Illinois and wherever there is a jazz community that makes a request to license its use. In addition, Phillips and Kindred have also formed the Jazz Nativity Children's Project that makes it possible for thousands of New York's inner city children to attend - thanks to individuals who have sponsored them at just ten dollars a child. Also in development is a version in Spanish that is being worked on by Paquito D'Rivera, soprano Brenda Feliciano (a participant in prior years) and Candido.

The Jazz Nativity crosses musical boundaries with its combination of genres. It is a creation that Phillips likes to say "sweeps people into the performances." She goes on to add "people who have come one year brought friends the next. It matters little whether they are jazz aficionados or not. They love it and go away with a new understanding and appreciation of jazz and it may be the biggest audience builder for jazz around." The Reverend James A. Forbes of Riverside Church once remarked, "Seeing the Jazz Nativity should be a prerequisite for entering the Pearly Gates!" And somebody once said that it was "the 'Peter and the Wolf' of jazz". The Jazz Nativity puts forth a warm and intimate atmosphere that brings together the players and the audience, the old and the young, jazz experts and initiates to celebrate the holiday and the wonderful music we call jazz. ❖

For more information, visit annephillips.com. A Jazz Nativity is at BB King's Dec. 22nd. See Calendar.