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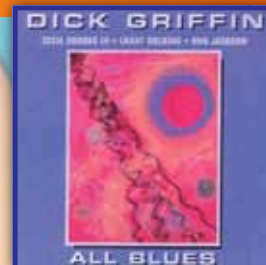
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Jerry Costanzo

By Joe Patitucci

JJ: You started out playing saxophone, and in fact played in a big band that your father led in the 1980s. What attracted you to shift your focus to being a vocalist?

JC: Yes, I played alto sax in elementary school through high school. My father gave me and my two brother's weekly music lessons. I hated it! When I was supposed to be practicing my boring lessons, I would instead be trying to copy everything I heard on the radio and on

also broke out my Jamey Aebersold music minus one collection that I used to practice my sax to and started singing all the standards to learn lyrics and improve my chops. I sought out vocal coaches, I started going to all the jam sessions where I worked out tunes, met and networked with the who's who of the local jazz scene. Friends, family and the local musicians started taking me seriously and I started getting my own gigs. I could go on and on but that's pretty much the story of the movie so far!

“First piece of advice that I remember someone telling me is ‘if you’re nervous before you do a show or walk on the bandstand, just know that the audience wants to like you.’ It works every time.”

records. I never became a good reader of music. Now I know it was a bit of dyslexia that prevented me from becoming the kind of instrumentalist I wanted to be but that curse became a blessing because I developed a pretty good ear and could improvise and copy just about anything I heard. After high school, I started listening to jazz and that's when I finally started to have some fun playing my horn. Fast forward early 90's, my father and a pal of his had started a big band some time in the early 80's, mostly made up of guys from a fire department marching band. My dad asked me from time to time to come down to rehearsals, usually just to fill an empty seat in the sax section. They were a pretty sorry bunch. Most of the guys were more interested in drinking beer then getting serious about the band. As the years went by the band actually evolved into quite a good working big band, the level of players that joined the band improved tremendously. At the time I had a full plate with the daily 9 to 5, home, family, raising a child and the day to day grind. My music took a back seat for years and I only broke out the horn occasionally. To fill the void, I started listening to the sound track of my youth. Not the pop and rock of the 60's 70's & 80's but the music I grew up listening to around the house, my favorite music! Nat King Cole, Sinatra, Dino, Ella, Johnny Hartman, Billy Eckstine, Tony Bennett, Dina Washington, Julie London. The list goes on and on. Jazz, big band swing and the "American Song Book" became my passion. I would sing along to my favorite singers and standards all day long to pass the time. At the time, I was approaching my mid thirties and thought if I'm going to get serious, I can't waste any time, so I got busy. I asked my father if I could come down to the big band rehearsals, I would bring a new arrangement every week and the guys were always happy to let me run them down and give me constructive criticism and encouragement. I

JJ: Some of the great vocalists like Carmen McRae, Shirley Horn, Mel Torme, among others were also more than proficient instrumentalists on piano and other instruments. How has your comprehensive musical background contributed to your style and maturity as a vocalist?

JC: As far as being a proficient instrumentalist, I tried but I never had the discipline it takes, I would have always been just a mediocre sax player. I know lots of guys who are happy just to play their part in a section but not me, I wanted to stand out. If I couldn't be a hot shot soloist then I don't want to play, I'd lose interest. I said I didn't have the discipline but I realized later in life I was just chasing the wrong carrot, I was frustrated. My father handed me a saxophone when I was 7 years old, what did I know? I thought it looked cool. Truth is I always wanted to play the piano. My father was a woodwind player and part time music teacher so I guess he figured it was just a natural progression. I probably would have found my voice much earlier in life had I been presented with a piano or guitar. In retrospect, now that I am a full-time working vocalist and bandleader and doing something I love, I have that passion, focus and discipline that eluded me in all my previous endeavors, both musically and personally.

JJ: Talk about the concept behind your new recording *Can't We Be Friends?* and the development of the album from concept to release.

JC: *Can't We Be Friends?* is my second release. I wanted to do a recording that was uniquely my own. I want people to listen to it and know that it's Jerry Costanzo and not a clone of the usual crooning suspects, although I do get inspired from many of my favorite legends of the past, as I'm sure many singers of standards do. First, I compiled some of my favorite tunes and lined them up on a play list. The next step



was to bring together a "Home Run" rhythm section that was up to the task. Tedd Firth (piano), Mark Sherman (vibes), Joe Cohn (guitar), Ben Wolfe (bass) and Jimmy Madison (drums). *East Of The Sun (West Of The Moon)* is the first tune on the CD. The George Shearing instrumental was always my favorite version from the record "That Shearing Sound". That vibe set the theme for my entire recording, described in my liner notes as "George Shearing meets The Nat King Cole Trio meets Milt Jackson" I absolutely love the sound of piano and vibes together. I conveyed my concept to my good buddy and world class reed man, composer and arranger Andy Farber, who I have been collaborating with for over 10 years now and who produced and arranged my first CD "Destination Moon". He came up with an arrangement that I think is going to be my most successful cut. The title track "Can't We Be friends? came next, once again arranged by Farber. I always loved the up-tempo Sammy Davis Jr. version and also love the verse that Sinatra does in his ballad version. So I asked Farber to combine a ballad verse that leads into an up-tempo chorus. Another winner, I hope. Third up is *Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps, (Quizas, Quizas, Quizas)*. The inspiration for this one came from a version performed by Desi Arnaz on an album called Babalu, where it's done as a medium tempo Rumba. We took that concept but instead of a Rumba beat throughout, the tune breaks into a medium swing after the first chorus with killer solos by Farber on tenor and Mark Sherman on vibes, then back to a Rumba in the second chorus. This one should make some noise too. Track four, "I Just Can't See For Lookin" This one was arranged by Tedd Firth (piano). Originally, Farber was supposed to do all the arrangements on the CD but days before the recording he was sidetracked by a jingle engagement with an insane dead-line, so we reached out to a few of the band members for help. Tedd agreed to arrange this one as well as track

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6 “Penthouse Serenade.” I discovered “Just Can’t See” on the “B” side of a Nat Cole Trio 78 RPM. This was a pretty obscure tune given the fact that side “A” of the record was one of Cole’s most successful tunes “For Sentimental Reasons”. Anyway, Tedd did a great job with the arrangement as well as “Penthouse Serenade” where my inspiration came from the album *Forty Years-The Artistry Of Tony Bennett*. Track 5 – “Love Me Or Leave Me,” Track 8 – “Oh You Crazy Moon,” and Track 9 – “Mean to Me,” were all arranged by my Pal Mike Carubia, another world-class arranger, composer and trumpet player. “Love Me Or Leave Me” was inspired by the Peggy Lee version. Oh You Crazy Moon, Mel Torme, Mean To Me, The Dean Martin version. Track 7- “You’re

Driving Me Crazy” is another Andy Farber arrangement where the inspiration came from a Billy Eckstine compilation album called “Everything I Have Is Yours.” Finally, track 10 “Stairway To The Stars” was inspired by the Johnny Hartman version and arranged by Dan Block. Dan is another super solid reed-man and arranger whom I’ve had the pleasure of sharing the bandstand with many times. Dan wrote the arrangement the night before the session and I picked it up at his apartment on my way to the recording studio. Dan owed Farber a favor so he called it in the night before when he realized he wouldn’t be able to get to it in time. If not for Dan stepping up to the plate we might have reverted to plan B, to fake the tune just so I could have the 10 tunes I had envisioned for the project. So in a nut shell, I’d say the

project is a tribute to some of my favorite standards and singers as well as an underling theme describing my romantic failures over the years. Ha Ha!!!

JJ: Tell us about a few of the humorous, interesting or dramatic moments that you’ve experienced in your career singing the Great American Songbook.

JC: My life is full of dramatic moments but I wish I were better at controlling my emotions on stage! See I’m a sucker for a ballad and I tend to get all emotional when I sing a song that stirs up certain memories, it takes all my will and composure to keep from tearing up. I guess it’s a good thing that I can connect to a song so emotionally but it’s not always a good thing when

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you're in front of hundreds of people. Okay, here's an interesting, humorous story. I got hired to sing some Sinatra tunes at a private event at this seedy catering hall, whose location will remain anonymous. I get to the gig and notice that most of the guests look like characters from the Sopranos. I'm only supposed to perform for an hour, so I do my thing and then approach the table where the guy who was supposed to pay me was sitting, to let him know I'm finished, you know "nice meeting you and can I get paid?" He looks at me, looks at his pals and they all start laughing. Then the guy says "Hey, the kid wants to get paid" and they all laugh some more. Then the guy says, "you ain't done yet, get back up there, I'll tell you when you can leave." They all stopped laughing and looked at me in a very, very scary way. After I turned three shades of white, I thought maybe I'll just abandon my equipment and run, or I'll oblige the gentleman and start singing since I probably wouldn't have made it to the door anyway. So I started walking back to my microphone, still wondering what I'm going to do and the guy yells out, "Hey kid!" and I turn around and he says "We wuz only messin wit cha" and they all start laughing again. The guy hands me what he owes me, plus a \$500 tip, they all shook my hand, said I was great and they'd love to have me back again.

JJ: If relevant, could you identify one or more jazz artists – vocalists or instrumentalists – who have made a significant impact on your own direction?

JC: I'm a big Count Basie fan. I'm a sucker for big

bands to begin with, but Basie is my favorite. As far as singers go, I'd definitely say Nat Cole had a big influence on me. Also, Mel Torme. They didn't call him "The Velvet Fog" for nothing.

JJ: What words of encouragement or support, or quotation or fragment of wisdom have you received from a mentor or associate is it that provides inspiration or guidance in your life?

JC: First piece of advice that I remember someone telling me is "if you're nervous before you do a show or walk on the bandstand, just know that the audience wants to like you." It works every time. A good piano player friend of mine told me once "don't take yourself so seriously, have fun, Just sing man, sing!"

JJ: You're an astute business person – booking and leading bands of all sizes in many different situations. Could you share a few of the understandings that you've learned as being essential for success in this business – or business in general.

JC: Don't sit around and wait for the phone to ring. No one can promote you, your music or your business better than yourself. Be flexible, the conditions on a gig might not be ideal every time but as they say "the show must go on." Don't be a prima donna. Don't be afraid to ask for what you're worth, once you pull your pants down, you can't pull them back up. Think big, be big, but be humble. Avoid egotistical or bad attitude side men, they can really "harsh your buzz" on the bandstand.

JJ: What have you discovered about human nature – either on the bandstand or apart from music entirely?

JC: I could write a whole chapter on that subject but that will take too long. So I'll just say there are still some good, hard working, honest, moral people in this screwed-up world.

JJ: What kinds of activities do you do to constantly develop your vocal skills?

JC: I am always learning new tunes. I sing songs, I work on phrasing. I don't do vocal exercises anymore. I work pretty regularly, so to warm up I usually just sing in the car on my way to my gigs. I do focus on breath control and definitely utilize techniques that I have learned over the years from various coaches and many that I have discovered on my own that work for me. I also think it's important to stay healthy. I don't smoke except for the occasional cigar and I am an outdoor person. I do a lot of walking and bike riding. As a singer it's very important to have good lung capacity and for me there's nothing better than cardio exercise.

JJ: What do you do to recharge your batteries in the face of the hustle and bustle of our contemporary world?

JC: It's important to take time out, focus on family and friends. I usually try to block out a little time during the slow season between January and March, my wife and I will try to take a trip or visit family out of state, or visit our son in California. ■