

# Accompanying a Singer

By Per Danielsson

One of the most demanding tasks for a Jazz pianist is accompanying a singer. It is a more delicate and less forgiving role than is played in many other jazz situations. Always keep in mind that the goal of a singer is to communicate words in a musical setting and the pianist's job is to support this effort. Mentally, we have to fully assume the role of an accompanist, not a soloist. If the singer is a good musician he or she will let the band members take solos, so don't worry!

Just because the pianist has a supporting role does not mean he can't be creative. With taste and good judgment the pianist can certainly utilize the freedom of jazz, which can also inspire the singer. When a singer can rely on and trust the accompanist, the communication seems natural and the musical results are much better.

Following is a list of important points to keep in mind when working with a singer. In time many of these ideas will become automatic. It is however, recommended that you refer back to this list every so often.

## 1. Awareness of the singer's register

In order to fully support the singer you need to know the quality of the particular voice as well as the limits of its register. This information will help avoid conflicts with volume and clarity.

- A. If you know that the singer has a very soft low register, you can support it by keeping your comping sparse and avoiding the keyboard's lower register. Comp in the mid-register or work with fills in the upper register.
- B. If the singer gets very weak in their upper register, support him/her with a thicker texture in the low mid-register.
- C. Usually, low male voices require sparse comping to avoid making the sound muddy and unclear. Higher female voices need more support from the low to mid register in order to make a fuller sound.

## 2. Adding Fills

When filling and improvising around the singer an accompanist must use good judgment and taste. It is helpful to familiarize yourself with the singers preferences in background fills. Some singers prefer sparse comping while others don't mind plenty of fills.

- A. Fills can be either single note lines or rhythmic chordal comping. Keep in mind that "comping" fills can be very effective when placed right. Also remember, you don't have to fill all the time. Silence can be wonderful.
- B. Avoid conflicts. In other words, place the fills in a way that they don't distract the singer. This requires you to focus and listen to the singer. Finding common stylistic elements, the singers "trademarks," will help you to predict musically what is going to happen.
- C. Turn the fills in to meaningful musical statements. Make sure the phrases have a beginning and an end, and can stand by themselves as a musical phrase.

The following example indicates suggested fills and placement. The indicated melody is the vocal part.  
 (Hint: learn the following tune in all twelve keys!)

## Placement of Fills

Medium Swing

The musical notation consists of four staves, each representing a different chord progression. The time signature is 4/4. The first staff starts with a C<sup>Maj</sup>7 chord, followed by a Rhythmic Fill, a triplet of eighth notes, an E7 chord, and a Solo Fill. The second staff starts with an A7 chord, followed by a Rhythmic Fill, a D<sup>min</sup>7 chord, and a Solo Fill. The third staff starts with an E7 chord, followed by a Rhythmic Fill, a triplet of eighth notes, an A<sup>min</sup>7 chord, and a Solo Fill. The fourth staff starts with a D7 chord, followed by a Rhythmic Fill, a triplet of eighth notes, a D<sup>min</sup>7 chord, and a Solo Fill that concludes with a G7 chord.

### 3. Rubato Sections

When playing with a singer you will most likely encounter rubato introductions or entire songs that are performed rubato. This skill is perhaps the hardest to learn, but when mastered, sets the good accompanists apart from the mediocre.

- A. Following:** Most singers usually have a planned out stylistic approach and it's your job to follow him or her. Some singers want the accompanist to strictly follow their phrasing, which requires you to hear the singer first. In other words, the accompaniment will be slightly behind the singer, but if you are attentive and respond quickly this delay will sound natural. Keep in mind that the singer is in charge and it's the accompanist's job to follow.
- B. Lead the way:** Sometimes you will experience singers who are waiting for the accompanist to start phrases. Do not hesitate to start phrases and take charge. The singer is waiting for you! When using this approach it is important to be clear in setting up beginnings of phrases so you do not confuse the singer. Sometimes it is also helpful if the accompanist emphasizes the starting pitch, but make it a part of the set-up so it doesn't become too obvious to the audience.
- C. Exact accompaniment:** This is when the rhythm and phrasing of the vocalist and accompanist is played exactly together. A rehearsal is recommended to achieve this difficult task unless you are very familiar with the singer's style. Do not hesitate to write out a lead sheet in order to be consistent with the comping of a certain tune.

## 4. Knowledge of the Composition

To have knowledge of a tune that you are playing sounds obvious. In jazz, however, we sometimes get sloppy about knowing the original version of a tune, both regarding harmony and melody. It's also very helpful for an instrumentalists to learn the lyrics of a song in order to get the melody and harmony right. This is even more important for an accompanist because it will help to follow, predict and support the singer.

- A. Make sure you know the correct melody. The singer might deviate from the original version, but it will help you to support the vocalist and anticipate the phrasing.
- B. Knowing the original harmonization of a tune is crucial. Remember that singers are less forgiving when it comes to chord substitutions. A lot of times substitutions can throw a singer off, especially in rubato sections when the singer relies on support from the accompanist. Remember, the accompanist has a supportive role.
- C. The use of chord alterations can definitely "spice" up a song, but make sure to avoid conflicts. For example, if the singer ends up on the third of a dominant chord, don't stress a #9. If the singer ends on the fifth of a major chord, don't play the #11. With common sense and knowledge of the tune you can easily avoid these types of conflicts.

### Example 2

Avoid this!

Melody note

Musical notation for Example 2. The vocal line (treble clef, 4/4 time) has a melody note of G#4. The piano accompaniment (treble and bass clefs, 4/4 time) consists of four measures with the following chords: A7(#9), CMa7(#11), GMaj7, and Amin9. The piano chords are shown as block chords. The G# in the A7(#9) chord and the #11 in the CMa7(#11) chord conflict with the G#4 melody note.

If you want to use the exact quality of the above chords, with the given melody note, voice them like this instead. This way you avoid conflicting with the melody note.

### Example 3

Musical notation for Example 3. The vocal line (treble clef, 4/4 time) has a melody note of G#4. The piano accompaniment (treble and bass clefs, 4/4 time) consists of four measures with the following chords: A7(#9), CMa7(#11), GMaj7, and Amin9. The piano chords are shown as block chords. The G# in the A7(#9) chord and the #11 in the CMa7(#11) chord conflict with the G#4 melody note. The voicing is corrected to avoid conflict.

When working with jazz singers it is expected that the accompanist knows the classic jazz standards. It's also expected that he or she knows them in several different keys. Indeed, it is important for all students of jazz to practice tunes in different keys, but it's especially crucial for pianists and guitarists who want to work with singers.

Many times a singer will show up to a job without music or with very basic lead sheets, sometimes in a different keys. It then becomes accompanist's job to make sense of it all and support the singer. It sounds like a tough job, but when you master this skill, the rewards can be great.

By learning the unique and challenging techniques involved in accompanying a vocalist, pianists not only increase their earning potential, but expand their musical world with new and potentially creative musical situations.

## **Listening Material**

Mel Torme with George Shearing  
Mel Torme with Mike Renzie  
Tony Bennet/Bill Evans (two CD:s Available)  
Tony Bennet with Ralph Sharons Trio  
Carmen McRae  
Maureen McGovern  
Diana Krall  
Johnny Hartman with John Coltrane

It is also helpful to listen to how backgrounds are written for big bands and orchestras. Perhaps some of the most tasteful accompaniments in jazz are the Nelson Riddle and Don Costa arrangements done for Frank Sinatra. (Frank Sinatra "Live at the Sand's" with Count Basie's Orchestra is excellent).

This list could of course be much longer. However, the mentioned recordings demonstrates very clearly what has been discussed in this article.