

Tips on working for Singers



Here's a conundrum. If singing is so great, and such a central element in jazz music, why do singers feel that many musicians merely tolerate their presence, and sometimes positively dislike them? Is this just the natural paranoia of the creative genius? Not really; it's true. And the reason for this is that much as they like the 'sing thing', many musicians have come to fear and loathe the 'singer thing'; for this latter is a true egomaniac from the deep, driven by a dark prowling *angst*, who pursues self gratification and aggrandisement before all else. And since we humble musicians tend naively to pursue excellence for its own sake and in the service of jazz, we sometimes feel a bit of lukewarm fear and loathing about the singer, that's all.

Here are some tips to deal:

Giving away the note

Always remember that singing to an audience is one of the most exposing and terrifying things you can do, and that plucking a note out of space is difficult. In the classical and commercial worlds, singers know what they can expect to hear before they find each note. Whereas in jazz, improvising musicians may never play a song the same way twice. But what is freedom for the blower can be a humiliating prison for the singer who has to come in on top. So always make sure at these entry points that the overall key centre and first beat of the bar are easy to hear, and that any difficult target notes are signposted in your voicings. Singers rely on you. Speaking of which, there's a good story about a pianist who had to give a singer a note for an unaccompanied passage, and because he had the hump with her, gave it a semi-tone wrong. And when the full orchestra came in.....lost his job.

Keeping your job

Singers live in a state of serial monogamy with their intimate pianist arrangers. Every singer's pad is a collection of love letters from previous pianists. All of them written in private code. And this is the important point. Every arrangement you do for your singer must have clear immaculate parts for all other instruments, and a brilliant piano part which is only playable by you. It will have bits in it where you sound fantastic, but you must commit these to memory, and never write them down. In this way, you can go off and do other gigs quite secure in the knowledge that your dep piano player can't possibly sound as good as you.

Lying and Cheating

These are essential. Because they expose themselves so much, and can generate such extreme reactions, singers are constantly in need of reassurance, and need to know that you value them, rate their skills highly, and are committed to the relationship. Sometimes this will involve lying. Your singer may insist, usually under the dangerous influence of another piano player, past or present, on an arrangement which you are uncomfortable with. In a difficult key, or in a style which you've never quite mastered, or with some nasty voicings. It is sometimes possible to bluster your way out simply by attacking the absent arranger. Tear the parts up, saying "These chords are crap!". Or try, "It's a lovely arrangement, but...it doesn't really work for this song/your voice/the sort of direction you're taking at the moment..." If none of this works, cheat. I used to work in duo with a Chicago singer called Gail Peters, whose favourite number was an extended boogie-woogie in the key of D flat. A very nice key it is, too, said by Ornette Coleman to be the darkest and most bluesy of them all, but not nearly as easy as nearby C. Which is where I played it every night. She looked at me a bit funny a few times, and mouthed the question "D flat?" To which I nodded vigorously, and with a hint of annoyance, as if to say "where else would I be playing it?". Everything went fine for the best part of the week, until, lost in my boogie, I suddenly felt Gail's grim hand upon my left arm. She'd crept over to spy on me as I played. "That's not D flat!" she hissed in fury. "Even I can see that's in C". Whoops!

Sex

Music and sex do not mix. They are too similar. But the intimacy between musicians and especially between female singers and male pianists spills over all too easily into other areas. Female singers often find in their pianist the fatherly combination of love support guidance and soul-mateness which they can never find in other men. And pianists often find in a singer the daughter they always wanted, a woman ready to accept their power, a woman ready and willing to be moulded. Seductive and dangerous stuff! Spending long emotionally-charged evenings with a woman's bum twitching in your face can lead mind and body astray. But resist. It will only end in tears. The dynamic patterns in a band, which rely on intimacy with distance, are heavily distorted by sexual relationships, and often degenerate quickly. The looks that pass between band members while playing cannot be private. However, if, as sometimes happens, a singer, perhaps cynically, should offer you sex while you are rehearsing and arranging for her, and you are unable to resist, don't forget that she still deserves your professional respect. So make sure you charge her for the work you've done.