

Anne Phillips

Interview by Eric Nemeyer

Jazz Inside: Now going into its 26th year performance since you and Bob [Kindred] created the Jazz Nativity, could you discuss how the initial germ of an idea evolved into the completed artwork for its premier performance?

Anne Phillips: In the summer of 1985 John Gensel suggested me for the writer of The Jazz Nativity that was to be held as a two night fundraiser at St. Peter's Church. I had just met Bob and had fallen in love with him and his sound - that warm beautiful tenor saxophone sound of sound that became the first sound you heard in The Jazz Nativity - "Silent Night", played solo in the darkness. How's that for a romantic start? John gave me the Christmas story reading from the Gospel of St. Luke and I wove traditional Christmas Carols and original music through it to tell the story. It needed a punctuation mark at the end. I remembered "Gods Love made Visible" Dave Brubeck's exciting 5/4 carol from his Christmas cantata, "La Fiesta De la Posada." Iola's lyric, "God's love made visible, Incomprehensible ... "what a perfect statement! Fortunately, I've known Dave since I was seventeen and a freshman at Oberlin. In fact I sang on that famous Brubeck at Oberlin concert. He graciously gave me permission to use it and happily agreed to be part of the show! Tommy Flannigan slid off the piano bench and Dave moved in and played on his song that first year and many times afterwards. That song should be a Christmas

venue, St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Ave. The basic work, my music, most of my vocal and band arrangements, have stayed the same but it has grown. "The First Noel" needed to be more exciting so Bob wrote a new killer chart for our saxophone playing shepherd, Phil Woods. (Phil had been a King and when we called to tell him about his new role as a shepherd he said "What next - a camel?") Jon Gordon now plays that role. We wanted the third King to be a Latin King. I didn't know Tito Puente but I knew someone who did. Tito said yes and was in it every year from then on! Bob wrote the Latin part of my Three Kings chart. Jackie Cane and Roy Kral became the Guardian Angels. One year Roy came in with a wonderful written scat chorus to be sung in unison with Bob on baritone to add to my arrangement of "What Child is This?" which they sing. That became a part of the show. And another year Darmon Meader wrote a shout chorus for the finale of "Deck The Halls" for the Voices. We are doing that this year. The song "Bending Towards the Light" came into the show and became its title a few years later. It is a song Bob wrote for a show when he was music director at a boy's camp in the Adirondacks, Camp Dudley. I wrote a Christmas lyric for it, we added a child, a shepherd boy, to sing it. About every three years we make a trip to the Newark Boys Chorus School to choose a new



AP: There have been so many dramatic AND humorous episodes! What comes to mind first is "The Missing Al Grey" story! I had gone with Al and his lady, Rosalie, to WBLS for an afternoon interview. Afterwards Al ran ahead of us to get his car out of a lot and we never saw him again! He had vanished! Rosalie and I waited at the lot but no Al (this was long before cell phones). It was bitter cold and it was getting towards show time - I had to get back to St. Bart's. By 7:30 a distraught and frozen Rosalie came back to the church, too. Still no Al! It was a quarter to eight and we only had *two kings!* The cast was gathered in the choir room and Bob and I were trying to figure out whom to put into a robe to play the third King when suddenly the door burst open and in came a grinning Al!! "Wait 'til you see this!" he said. He unzipped his leather trombone case and held up his horn. The bell was smashed flat! What had happened: When he got into his car he had reached into the back to be sure his horn was there and it wasn't! He must have left it back in Valley Stream. It was rush hour but he had to go and get back for the 8:00 hit! So he hadn't waited to tell us, he just took off! When he got home, there it was, in the driveway. In horror he realized what had happened. He had left the house with his trombone in one hand and a bag of trash in the other. He had put his horn down to open the trash can lid then gotten in the car and backed up over his horn! Fortunately his mouthpiece was in his pocket. He grabbed a horn that a company had given him, but I don't think he had ever played it before, and raced back to the city just in time to be the Third King. There are so many memorable moments. The first time Clark Terry sang mumbles to the Baby Jesus, symbolized by the light. The show at the Patriot Theater in Trenton the weekend of the double snow storm when King Jon Faddis' car got stuck and a half an hour before the show we made Ingrid Jensen our first "Quing!" Getting Lionel Hampton and his

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standard!! The public doesn't have to know it's in 5/4 ... it's so "catchy" and easy to sing! The first three years the Bible readings were spoken by John [Gensel], then by Ed Browning, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, and then by the beloved jazz DJ, Jazzbeaux Collins. Pretty eclectic group! Then someone suggested that the work would flow better if it was sung and I set the Bible readings. I had just met the New York Voices. Perfect. So the readings were sung by the magnificent soprano and my old friend from my record date days, Maertha Stewart, and my new friends, the Voices. What fun to write specifically for voices you know! The second year we moved the show to a larger

Shepherd boy. This will be Jordan Kirkwood's third year. I'm afraid by next year he'll be a tenor. That gives you an idea of how the show evolved.

Ji: Talk about some of the most interesting, dramatic or humorous moments that have occurred during the annual performance of Jazz Nativity?

Hear Anne performing in the
Jazz Nativity on
December 22 at B.B. King's in new York
www.JazzNativity.com

(Anne Phillips — Continued from page 30)

wheelchair up the spiral staircase at the Lamb's Theater, getting him out of the wheelchair and on to the stage, and then getting him off. The year our dear third King, Tito, passed away, and then his replacement, Stanley Turrentine, passed away too. We had to find another King. I knew Jon Hendricks was in town. As carefully as I tried to phrase it when I called him Jon's response was "Don't call me!" He did do it however and is in it again this year as a "Special Guest."

JJ: Could you provide a glimpse into how you and Bob prepare each year for the performance and what kind of rehearsals are undertaken to tune up the masterpiece for a performance?

AP: How do we prepare for it each year? When we started at St. Bart's we did the show with a big choir and had a different singer for every role. When we moved into Birdland six years ago we discovered that it was just as powerful and even more theatrical with the singers in the vocal group playing all those roles: Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, the Guardian Angels. The band is still four horns and rhythm section including Candido. The arrangements are the same, but I do miss Gene Bertocini on guitar. The vocal group rehearses on its own, and then we have one rehearsal with the band the week of the show. The day of the show we have an afternoon run through with our theatrical directors, Tad and Beth Jones, and in the evening the show goes on! The hardest part is raising enough money to underwrite the performance and do enough advertising to get an audience. There's a lot of competition in New York at Christmas! It always amazes us, after so much work, to find how many New Yorkers have never heard of it or seen the show - even those in the jazz world. We used to get big articles with pictures of the Kings in the *Post* and *Daily News* but things have changed. We do have an annual interview with Michael Bourne on WBGO. This year it will be with Wycliffe Gordon. Even though everybody is doing the show for scale or just a little more, no one's ever asked for a big star fee, yet every year it gets harder.

JJ: What do you think have been some of the contributing factors that have contributed toward the Jazz Nativity blossoming into a perennial event and favorite?

AP: The Jazz Nativity brings a whole new audience to jazz. I think that's the reason it has become such a beloved part of Christmas in New York, and now in other cities. Because it is costumed, colorful, storied, a unique combination of theater and jazz, people who would never opt to go to a jazz concert come to the Jazz Nativity year after year. How often I have heard "I didn't think I liked jazz but if this is jazz I love it!" And there is no musical compromise. Just look at the people who have been in it - almost every jazz great you can think of. I think too, there is an undeniable love and admiration for each other's talent that radiates from the musicians out into the audience. Just look at the promo on our website! The finale of "Deck the Halls" where each

player and "Special Guests" who come up from the audience play on the same song in their own way becomes the most joyful education in jazz. I read in the *New York Times* a couple of years ago that it was too bad that there was no "Peter and the Wolf" for jazz. Sorry folks, there is. It's The Jazz Nativity. Children love it. The Jazz Nativity is a great introduction to jazz for children as well as for those who don't understand it. When we were in larger venues we had the Jazz Nativity Children's Project, a sponsorship program that gave hundreds of inner-city children the opportunity to experience the show every year. Their enthusiasm prompted us to start Children's Jazz Choirs though our not-for-profit organization, Kindred Spirits. We do them for the Madison Square Boys and Girls Club in the Bronx and Brooklyn and for the Juanita Ward Summer Reading Institute. An unplanned benefit to these children has been the help that singing great songs has been to their reading! Every ten session program ends with a concert where they are backed by great jazz musicians. The director of the Boys and Girls Clubs wants us to do a choir in each of their other five clubhouses. Any backers?

JJ: If you could wave a magic wand, what would you like to see occur with/for the Jazz Nativity in the following year or the future?

AP: If I could wave a magic wand! I can't put what I'd like to happen in order of importance but lets start with Inclinando Hacia La Luz - La Natividad En Jazz. Doing the show in Spanish in January for El Dia de los Reyes. There have been so many Latin Jazz artists in it already - Tito, Candido, Arturo O'Farrill, Paquito D'Rivera, Brenda Feliciano, Dave Valentine. There is no Hispanic Christmas show. It's a natural! A TV show. A documentary. We have hours of classic footage. A publishing house that will market it. Though our own efforts it is being done in several cities every year ... Colorado Springs, Greenville N.C., Evanston, IL but then, without a television show how can it get known? A performance at the White House.

JJ: Given your extensive activities over several decades, and how the music and the business have evolved, what challenges have you experienced or do you foresee for your own endeavors and the business?

AP: I feel so fortunate that I was in the music business when there were recording sessions all over town - live sessions. I was contracting the singers and singing on the sessions for almost every arranger in town. You can't tell me synth and layering one track at a time can capture that energy! There were such good times! My favorite story is from a date with Sammy Davis Jr. Claus Ogerman was the arranger and I was leading the vocal group. Sammy and the vocal group were in adjoining booths. Just as Claus was giving the count-off, Sammy leaned into our booth, took my arm and pointing to my freckles said "You see all those little brown spots? You ever realize that if they all got together *you'd be colored?*" Poor Claus heard no downbeat on his headphones, just our screams of laughter! It's

been a great year. My children's musical *The Great Grey Ghost of Old Spook Lane* has been published by Samuel French. My ten minute opera was part of an evening called "Opera Shorts" at Weill hall at Carnegie. This was the second time that I have written for those concerts. The challenges I have experienced most recently are those that have risen from a culture where financial gain is the be all and end all. It wasn't always like this. In the late 70s I wrote an article entitled "Why Isn't My Business Fun Anymore?" I wrote it because I saw a creeping depression taking over the most talented and experienced people in my part of the music world and then everywhere. Heads of major publishing houses were throwing up their hand and leaving because they couldn't stand the culture that had taken over their worlds. People wrote about it. *Quality vs Quantity* by Diane Tuchman, *The Giant Cash Register*, Russell Baker - every decision was now based on how much the book, the record would make and how fast. Some years later I stumbled on a book that confirmed everything I thought. *The Hunger For More*, subtitled "Searching for Values in an Age Of Greed" by Laurence Shames in 1989 "Letting the marketplace decide - that was a relief, as abdicating personal responsibility is always a relief." He thought it couldn't get any worse. It has. Continuing to do what we love in spite of it is our biggest challenge. And I wish everybody, including those who are a part of OWS, could read that book to have a better understanding of why we are where we are!



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ALLAN HARRIS

NY Times Review

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(Stephen Holden)

Watch Allan's new video www.youtube.com/timuralee

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