

Excerpts from Kevin Mahogany Interview Conducted by Beatrice S. Richardson

Jazz has a rich tradition and a set of rules to go by, but it's brand new with each artist. Kevin brings a fresh sound to jazz; a sound that feels good and you are sure to feel the romantic effect that his music has on you.

“Time and change are constants in the universe. They are also constants in our everyday life. Time goes on. Change is inevitable. Both are sayings used on any given day and in a variety of settings.

When I first discovered vocal jazz, I believed that I was born too late. I should have been hanging out with Joe Williams in Chicago, trading rhymes with Jon Hendricks, singing all night in a Kansas City jam session; swinging and singing with Big Joe Turner or shouting with Jimmy Rushing. As I grew up some of them were still performing. I would get a chance to meet some and talk to them and actually perform with a few.”

-- Kevin Mahogany

JazzReview: I understand you play both clarinet and saxophone. Why did you decide to switch to vocals?

Kevin Mahogany: A couple of reasons: one, my clarinet was strictly traditional, meaning legitimate, as they call it... classical, Mozart, concert, band and orchestra. As we know, there aren't a whole lot of positions available for clarinet players. The saxophone was the instrument I enjoyed, but it wasn't a passion. I love playing in the section of a big band, but I never considered myself a front man. I've often talked about picking it up again just for the fun of it, and doing a song or two maybe on an album, but that's about it. I didn't have the desire to play the saxophone like a true saxophone player does.

JazzReview: Combining jazz and Motown, you've developed an extraordinary sound in jazz. Was this something planned or did it just happen naturally? We both grew up on the Motown sound, but you've turned those favorites in to a jazzy/Motown sound.

Kevin Mahogany: To just take it and redo it as it was originally done, there's no creativity in that; if I'm going to do that, I might as well be in a wedding band. The objective of jazz is creativity...to take something that is so well known and to make it your own. That is a true test of jazz creativity. That's what I try to do. I want to make it my own, but still have it be recognizable. That's not easy to do, but hopefully people will hear it.

JazzReview: As a male vocalist in jazz, there are a lot of women in that arena. Was this difficult for you? The men in jazz seem to be older.

Kevin Mahogany: There's always been more women than men in the area of jazz vocals. Back in the 40s and 50s jazz music was the pop music of the times...but it wasn't always called jazz. Male vocalists like Billy Eckstine, Arthur Prysock or Johnny Hartman were not referred to as jazz vocalists even though they were then, and remain so today. Hartman was rarely referred to as a jazz singer until he recorded with John Coltrane.

Nowadays, it's more lucrative for black male singers to sing R&B instead of jazz. The difference between jazz and the other styles of music is that jazz is all about longevity. Tony Bennett, Jon Hendricks and Mark Murphy are still singing jazz. I just finished working The Four Brother's Tour with Jon who is 82, and Mark, who's 75 and they both can still get it done.

You can sing jazz forever, but it's harder to do that with R&B. Most people don't want to see an 80-year old guy singing, "whip it, whip it," [laughter]. But, I watched thousands of people enjoying Jon Hendricks and Mark Murphy.

Jazz Review: So, there's longevity in jazz How did you get your start in jazz?

Kevin Mahogany: I started off in jazz as an instrumentalist, playing in the big band in Kansas City at the age of 12.

Jazz Review: I'm sure you've been told that your sound reminds one of Joe Williams. Was he one of your earliest influences?

Kevin Mahogany: No, everybody thinks that, but he wasn't. My earliest influences were all R&B; from there I went to jazz vocals, a bit later than most. As I learned about it, I developed an appreciation for Joe, probably because of our similar voice range. He was one of the last baritones still singing. There aren't that many baritone voices out there.

Jazz Review: Do you have any specific advice you can give to an aspiring vocalist?

Kevin Mahogany: You have to be prepared at all times. You must be prepared whenever the opportunity arrives. You must have your songs, your tapes, your photos, and yourself ready. You have to be willing to sacrifice with no assurance of success.

I teach at the University of Miami. I used to teach at the Berkley School of Music. In the late 90's, I met a young woman named Alexis Booth. She had been voted Downbeat Magazine's "Best High School Jazz Vocalist" during her last year in high school. She sang at one of my concerts. She came and asked me the same question:

What advice could I give her as an aspiring vocalist?

I told her flat out... 'Alexis, you've got a lot of talent, but don't underestimate the value of a university degree. Play it smart and finish college before you attack the music scene. You'll never regret it.'

I was delighted to learn that she took my advice and recently graduated Magna Cum Laude from Tufts University, and is actively pursuing a career in jazz.

JazzReview: That is excellent advice because you have a lot of artists wanting to get into the business and getting discouraged early on. Kevin, are you from a musical family?

Kevin Mahogany: Yes, in the sense that my mother had us all take music lessons, but no one else continued on passed high school.

JazzReview: Prominent journalists have described you as “the standout jazz vocalist of your generation.” This is a great compliment and I have to say it’s well deserved. How do you plan to maintain the standard?

Kevin Mahogany: I didn’t say it [laughs] so I don’t have to back it up [more laughing]. I can only do one thing and that is do my best. As long as I’m doing my best, then I’ll be satisfied. I can’t live up to anyone else’s standards. I just have to do what I can do.

JazzReview: What else can we expect from Kevin Mahogany in the next 5 years?

Kevin Mahogany: I truly hope to continue singing, but I also want to continue to develop new artists for the future...new jazz artists. I have been fortunate enough to have a teaching position at the University of Miami in Florida. It’s a nice position. There I can see the future of jazz, the artists of the future, and have the opportunity to work with them and hopefully, pass on to them that which I’ve learned from those who came before me.