

INTRODUCTION

Music schools and conservatories are very good at graduating wonderful jazz pianists who are then thrust, unsuspectingly, into the professional music world hoping to be the next Bill Evans or Herbie Hancock. Little do they realize that they may spend much of their careers accompanying ¹*girl singers*.

Vocal accompaniment is a skill quite different from that of the jazz soloist, but this art is rarely part of a jazz school's curriculum. The purpose of this book is to provide essential and practical knowledge on the art of accompanying singers. It's aimed at everyone, from the beginning student accompanist, to the music teacher, to the professional piano player. In fact, it's for anyone wanting to brush up their skills for the next gig with a vocalist. The book does presume a basic knowledge of jazz harmony and keyboard technique.

One of the most powerful musical marriages of the 20th century is the one between jazz and the ²*Great American Songbook*, and this repertoire will be the basis for our exploration into the mysteries of the accompanying art. These songs, often from obscure and long forgotten musicals, are kept alive by the jazz musician, the indefatigable ³*song sleuth* (I plead guilty), and the adventurous vocal artist searching to expand their repertoire. The main reason that so many ⁴*standards* are still alive and thriving today is because they are treasured by improvising jazz musicians who delight in their melodic and harmonic magic, and the vocal artists who revel in their witty and intelligent lyrics. This book is aimed at the jazz-influenced piano player but also takes into account the tradition of the theater and cabaret accompanist.

The magic of these standards is that they can be performed in a myriad of styles, from swinging jazz to exotic Latin rhythms, in addition to their original theatrical treatment. There's much to be learned from all the various styles of popular music: keeping in mind that, however you decide to interpret a particular song, the final goal is to create beautiful music and make the singer sound good!

We'll study the obvious, but often forgotten, fundamentals of this art of playing for singers as well as exploring the more subtle and complex tricks of the trade. Whenever the word singer or vocalist appear in this book, you can often substitute the word instrumentalist because many of the same principles apply whether backing a ⁵*cabaret* artist or some hot alto player. Though, as we shall discover later, there are also some vital differences.

We'll look at the challenges of accompaniment from the point of view of the solo pianist, the piano/bass duo and the piano trio.

We'll discover all the harmonic options that are best suited to the art of the accompanist and reveal the mysteries of correct voicing or, as I like to think of it, how to sound like an orchestra while playing only 3 notes.

We'll explore the secrets of 'out of tempo' accompaniment, a musical device of some mystery, usually notated as *colla voce*, rubato or freely.

We'll look at the basics of arranging. Accompanists will often find themselves in the role of musical arranger/musical director, and the ability to quickly whip up a professional, easy-to-read chart is an essential skill.

We'll find out how to run a rehearsal, organize a show, and how to conduct from the piano with no hands! We'll deal with the difficult but essential role of accompanist as both diplomat and psychologist.

"The best way to make a singer comfortable is to play well for them; make them feel comfortable musically. And then if things get tough - if someone gets stressed out, count to ten... and work it out. It's just music."

Bill Charlap

Along the way, we'll *learn from the masters*. I've included words of wisdom and personal tips from such great accompanists as Tommy Flanagan, Norman Simmons, Lee Musiker, Jimmy Rowles, Bill Charlap, Mike Renzi, Tedd Firth, Christian Jacob, Sir Richard Rodney Bennett and many others, as well as insights from those singers who play piano for themselves, a particular breed that need to be closely monitored by us keyboard accompanists; singers such as Shirley Horn, Diana Krall and Nat 'King' Cole.

At this point, I need to introduce you to my wife and musical partner, Wesla Whitfield, an extraordinary vocalist with whom I've made 21 albums. It's her guidance, good taste, showbiz savvy and love of the American Songbook that has shaped my career as an accompanist. She'll be featured often in this book because she taught me everything I know about song interpretation and therefore, how to accompany singers!

Some of the best lessons I have ever received on the art of accompanying and playing jazz have been in informal situations rather than the classroom. I studied at Leeds College of Music in England—don't ask how long ago—and often found that I had more fruitful discussions on the finer points of music over a lunchtime pint with my tutors than I ever did in the tutor's study! I have also been able to absorb the knowledge and good taste of my elders and my peers in numerous ⁷*green room* conversations over the years.

There's something about jazz that demands that we learn it organically, 'on the streets' so to speak. And so I've tried, along with some feeble attempts at colloquial humor, to make this book sound more like a couple of hipsters chatting on the pavement outside a jazz club than the somber tone of the text book that it really is!

“Accompanying someone cannot be explained by a singer to a pianist. He either knows what to do or he doesn't. An accompanist and a guy who can play the piano are two different things. You have to find someone who is completely sympathetic to the soloist as a singer and not to the soloist as an instrumentalist. It's a completely different thing. Even if a guy can play his buns off, it does not necessarily mean he can accompany a singer. There are some guys who can accompany a singer and who can't play a damn as far as soloing is concerned. That's the difference, and it's a vast difference. A guy must really love to do it. He cannot do it just because he has nothing else to do.”

Carmen McCrae - jazz vocalist extraordinaire

Even though I have the greatest respect for Carmen's opinions (she is my favorite jazz singer), I *am* going to risk being foolish and attempt to guide and teach you in the unexplainable and mysterious art of vocal accompaniment. When I started out playing jazz, I couldn't solo or accompany, or play the piano (I was a clarinetist). . .so there's much hope for all of us! Let's dig in.