

Jay Clayton

Her Story Singer, Improviser, Composer, Author,
Educator Part I in a Series of an Extended Interview

Interview By Nora McCarthy

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The Beginning: With A Song in Her Heart

JAZZ OUTSIDE: Jay, first let me say what an honor and privilege it is to interview you for our first edition of *Jazz Outside Magazine*. Most importantly it is such a pleasure for me to present you to our readers and give them the opportunity to learn more about your life work and contributions to the music, both the inside and outside of jazz as you have had your feet planted firmly in both since your career began in 1963. I remember my mother once told me when I was about sixteen years old that women who learned to type were never without a job. Pursuing music of course was for dreamers and not an option. What was it like for you growing up? When did you realize that you wanted a career in singing, what were your early influences and ultimately how did you break onto the New York jazz scene? Walk us back through those early years.

“When you’re improvising,
especially totally free, I say, “I
hope there’s something in there.”

JC: Well that’s how I survived until 1980, a lot of times in the middle of it all I’d say, “I wish I hadn’t taken that typing course.” that’s the first thing I did. Thank God. I took it in high school and the first thing I did, when I came to New York in ‘63 was that, I mean I had a teaching degree, but I didn’t want to teach, I was 21 years old, I wanted a job I didn’t have to take home because I knew I wanted to hang out and hear the music so I went to Office Temps. Of course, I could type so at \$4.00 an hour there I was for many years. I didn’t want to take a real job thinking, “Oh, but what if I get a gig, you know?”

JAZZ OUTSIDE: The truth of the matter is, is that back then, women were pretty much rele-

gated to those types of jobs. That’s it. You went to high school, you learned to type in high school and *if* you went to college, because not everybody was doing that, they were getting married and having kids.

JC: Well I am from Youngstown, Ohio. I came from a big Italian family. I was one of the first ones that went to college, now everybody does, it’s just tacked on after high school but no one had gone before me. My father never even finished high school. My mother’s parents had thirteen kids and my father’s had eight, so my whole life as a girl was just about weddings, graduations and things like that—all family. That was my life and Frank Sinatra was a big deal. That’s where I get a lot of my repertoire. But I believe you should follow whatever your love is, even if you don’t know for sure what it is. I didn’t know I was going to be a jazz singer, I just discovered it because a cousin, who was a little older than me, gave me three records—Miles, Ramsey Lewis, and Dave Brubeck. I had never heard jazz; I had no idea what it was but that was it. I think before I went off to school somebody gave me an early Sarah Vaughn, I had an Ella, so what I did was, when my cousin gave me those things, “Oh my God,” I said,

“What is this?” Honestly, that was it. I also joined Columbia Records and for a penny, they’d send you a whole bunch of records and you tick off the category and I ticked off jazz so every month, I’d get a jazz record, that’s how I got them.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: How old were you when your cousin gave you the records?

JC: I think I was about seventeen, it was before college.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: Columbia Records is responsible for educating so many musicians from the era you and I came out of up until they

stopped doing that. It’s crazy, how many musicians/singers say that though.

JC: Is that right? I had no idea. I mean, though what was my source going to be? I’m in Youngstown, Ohio; I couldn’t even find a *DownBeat*. I remember looking for *DownBeat* because I knew that was a jazz magazine. On the other hand, I will have to tell you this because it is pertinent, there are no coincidences. You know how we say everything has a reason? One of my friends in Junior high school—I hung out with two girls—we were like the threesome, one of them married a jazz bass player, and he was a real one, he just never left Youngstown. Steve Zordich was his name—he died a while ago-- he was also a visual artist. Youngstown was totally segregated but he’d go down into the Black part of town—he was respected—so he got these gigs in hotels and I would go sit in. I already knew some standards because my mother sang the standards but she didn’t know it was jazz—she sounded like Billie Holiday—and she was not able to follow her dream because her Italian father wouldn’t let her because you had to do that kind of music in the floor shows back then until two in the morning. But she used to sing these songs around the house and I knew all of them. A lot of my repertoire I knew from just knowing it, you know?

JAZZ OUTSIDE: So your mother was singer as well?

JC: Yes, But she couldn’t follow it—she couldn’t do anything with it. Remember the American Songbook was pop music then. They all knew it; it was played at the dances. Truthfully, one of the first times I ever sat in and I’ll never forget it was at a dance, because I’m just old enough. Rock-n-Roll came in but just before it did, this would be 1958-59, they still played the standards at the dances and there would be a live band. So we would go and I asked to sit in and it was “Moonlight in Vermont.” Don’t ask why, but I’m just saying, something happened. It wasn’t like I decided anything and I still wasn’t thinking, “I’m a jazz singer.”

JAZZ OUTSIDE: What was high school like for you and the pre-college years?

JC: Well, I was in the high school A cappella choir. I was always the administrative type. I was very shy but I was also a bit of a leader. Truthfully, I can’t remember the exact sequence but when I was a senior the A cappella choir raised money and my teacher brought us to New York. I’ll never forget her. She died but I always wanted to go back and tell her that I did follow my music. But, that was my first time in New York City; it was like four or five days. We stayed right in mid-town and I didn’t hear any jazz and we never made it to the Village, but I was smitten, with New York City—go figure! I knew I was coming back. Now, a lot of people can’t live here but that was my first experience with New York City and I was like, “How am I going to get back?” I didn’t know it

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was going to be through jazz. But, then I went to college because somebody from the college visited my high school. I didn't even know what college was, I'll be honest with you; I mean, what would you learn? But, I instinctually liked to teach. I didn't know what I was going to teach but when I took French in high school, that teacher, who was also great, had us go into the grade school and teach, and I liked it. It was pretty cool. But then I questioned that when you went to college how did they teach you to teach? Which I still say, you can't. But, I picked the furthest college from my home. I knew if you went to a state school, it was cheaper but I was wondering how I was I going to tell my parents; I really wanted to go. Then the friend I was planning on going with backed out so I went all by myself.

Then another coincidence happened when I got to college. There's a jazz musician there who had been in the service who already knew the music, and of course there was no jazz educa-

years. Colantone, is my family name and it's actually a very musical name. I was Judy Colantone and originally it was Colantuono. I changed my name my first day of school because I didn't want to be "Judy" because there were a lot of "Judys" at that time, you know like, Judy Garland, anyway, everybody named their kid Judy. Truthfully, I wanted a change myself. I didn't know a soul in college. I was that brave. My poor parents drove me six or seven hours away to go to college and left me there in this bare kind of dormitory room. But, my roommate had told me about a friend of hers whose name was Julie who called herself, "Jay," so I said, "OK, I'm Jay." I didn't know one person so I could tell them anything, which I did. Sometimes I didn't turn around when they called me but... and I'll forever be Judy in Ohio but I don't care, I mean, anybody can call me Judy now but at that time it was like, I was Jay Collantone.

Now, I'm in college, taking classical, and my roommate said, "Why don't you become a music major?" Because, I knew theory pretty good for that age and then she said, "John M. Watson, why don't you go sing for John Watson, he'll tell you if you can sing. (John was a trombone player who also died recently—he ended up in

did our gigs for \$10, now it's up to \$50 [laughter.]

JAZZ OUTSIDE: Listening to your singing over the years, you have a beautifully vibrant and smooth tone with a bell like quality to your upper register, several octave range, superb elocution and command over your instrument, first of all, how did you learn to sing like you do, so effortlessly and free? Did you ever study classical voice and if so from whom?

JC: I'm going to be honest with you about the classical thing, the range and everything, definitely. I even continued a little bit when I got here but I didn't love those exercises at the time, but I knew it was widening my range and yes, it truly helped me, especially with my shyness but I don't think that's where the true sound came from. I truly believe your true sound comes from the material and really being connected to it, that's what I believe. The longer I teach, I'm so into repertoire. One of the biggest things I do with my students is help them with their repertoire. Finding out who they are, choosing tunes they love and really meaning it. We know singers who didn't do any classical stuff like that and they have their own sound. Sheila is a good example; Nancy King is a good example. I make up my warm up things, I think it's good for every singer, I believe in it, because I know which ones of my students use them. Some people do it more than others. There are singers, who if they don't do it, they sing out of tune. I also know that some get this sort of good classical technique, but it's not their distinct sound. Because they're choosing material that they don't connect with.

It's not whether it's classical or jazz, the source is the same, is what you're saying. The voice is the same whether you're singing classical or jazz, you have to breathe, and if you're not doing it, then you've got to work on that. You have to listen. All these exercises have to do with the ear too. Singing exercises and so on. But anyway, technique is technique. But, I just believe everyone has their own methods and everyone should know what they need to do and there's plenty of places to go, if you feel you need it, do it. I believe your technique is your own business. You have to know thyself; there are no rules like there is in classical where everybody has to do these exercises. When you're singing you're thinking these three things. You have your technique of course. You have your message—your feeling. You have your concept which is more like your style. And, those have got to be even in a way. In other words, if I hear a singer and I think, "Wow she has this beautiful voice, I don't know what she's trying to say, she sang it just ordinary." I know they're not getting across because they've got nothing and you don't need much. And then there are people that stylistically are just a copy. The concept comes out of just being true. I'm not saying it right, but I will say it right in my next book. It's a personal thing, and you just follow what you love. When people say, "Just sing a particular kind of

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"I think when you get the experience of singing, "free or out" your core inside singing becomes more connected, more you. And, that's why we do it. Because when you're singing free, you have to be there—you have to be present. You're there."

tion because you know I would have done that, but I took classical because I had taken piano lessons and theory—I had to take theory—my piano teacher made me take theory on Saturdays. In retrospect, that saved my butt, because when I got to college, my roommate, who was a classical singer and I would sing around the dorms, A cappella, the standards, that's how much I was into them but still without knowing I was a jazz singer.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: What is your family name and when did you become Jay Clayton?

JC: Clayton is my married name, my husband was drummer Frank Clayton—I married in 1968 and kept his name. I was married for twenty

Chicago.) John was already doing little gigs around, he was older than me and he knew the music. Then there was a classical bassist, who was also a piano player, who I'm still friends with in Seattle, and they had a band, so I went and sat it. And again, I'm telling you I remember it like it was yesterday. Certain early jazz experiences just flash right in front of my eyes, and that was about fifty years ago around 1960-61. So, he was cool, he played a little piano and I went and sang a couple of tunes, I could see his little smile, he asked me to come down again. So, you see what I'm saying? Why was he there; why was I there? And what happened is the other guys knew the music and we would listen to records at night. I was studying classical but at night, they were the ones who turned me on to Monk and all those people. I didn't know who Mingus was. I hadn't even heard Billie Holiday because I wasn't around any jazz lovers even though I did see June Christie when she was singing with Stan Kenton, but I didn't know about jazz singers, but there she was singing. So anyway, that's really how I started. They would turn me on to all this music and I would listen and I learned tunes. I got my book together, just like I preach. I knew the original keys didn't feel right. I had those notes but they didn't feel right. So I made my charts and we

"When you choose your friends, don't be short-changed by choosing personality over character."

- W. Somerset Maugham

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music and then you can do whatever you want," I don't believe that, I never did and I still don't. They (singers) do a little pop music for a while, they do this, they do that—of course I couldn't because I didn't even like pop music that much—it doesn't work for me. No one can show me one example of a singer who did that first and then got famous doing what they really love.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: Were you the kind of singer that was very aware of what she wanted to hear in her voice?

JC: No, I was not aware.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: Explain.

JC: You just do it and you like it or you don't and just intuitively it starts to get better.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: That's what I meant about the awareness, for instance when you first heard yourself recorded, say at any early age, did you ever think to yourself, hmmm, there's something here that I can improve upon or perhaps change for the better? If the sound wasn't your main focus, how then did you go about it?

JC: It's just not how I do it. In other words, I do it more by feel and by continuing to "do." My thing with singers today, and I know a lot of them, I love the singers in New York. I have to say, you and I both, we know a lot of the singers and singers are pretty, pretty cool. There's a lot of camaraderie going on. Sheila says, in the past it wasn't like that. A lot of times even professional singers came to me and it's not about their sound, I don't care about that, if it's not in tune, that's not good, but mostly, I still want to get back to the point I made earlier, I think it's what they're singing, they don't know what they're singing about. When I teach I keep saying, stop doing that "jazz singer" thing. They think to be a jazz singer they have to keep changing things and be all hip. I love most of

the singers but when they come to me, I take a look at their repertoire and as soon as I look at it I ask "do you love this, do you like it, or are you indifferent?" I only work with the loves and they're not all love. I'll ask, "Why are you doing that song?" They say, "Because I like the melody." "Yes, but what are you talking about?" "Well it's about a girl. . ." I say, "No!" For me it's about the message more than anything. And then the concept of that sound, I want *their* sound. We do have our own sound. And sometimes we overdo what sound we want to have. I never had any idea about what sound I wanted to have. I know we have some idea about things we don't like, but as far as what I did want. I didn't know. I never worked on sound that way. But, back to the exercises, they work if you do them. If they're too hard, then maybe you need to work on those exercises—nerves play into it a lot also.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: I think we're essentially saying the same thing. I believe that the truth and the sound are one. The truth is the message which is what you're saying. And yes, I agree with you absolutely that singing shouldn't be suffering, we're supposed to be enjoying ourselves, because if we're not, nobody else is either.

JC: And, they don't know why, but that's why.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: I listened to both of the records you sent me yesterday, the new release, *harry who?* and *The Peace of Wild Things*. They're both great. I put on *harry who?* first and I was immediately pulled in with the first note sung.

JC: I'm glad you liked them. But of the two, you know I wanted you to hear, *The Peace of Wild Things* because you're so into the improv too.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: I think that *The Peace of Wild Things* is a work that is going to go down in history as an important solo vocal CD. It's subtitle is, *Singing and Saying the Poets* and you dedicate it to Sheila Jordan and Jeanne Lee. It is a flawless work of art. Yes of course, I enjoyed both CDs, they are drawn from the same well. To be able to do both inside and outside so naturally, speaks not only to your artistry but your history and they are two sides of the same coin.

JC: Ever since I started teaching because people would come up after concerts, I'd tell them you can't teach this, go listen to the music, but they'd keep asking so I started doing workshops. But I do both and I teach both, and I believe in both.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: Those pedals of yours! That's another aspect of your creative expression, another identity.

JC: It's an extension of my vocabulary.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: You're a transformer. It's wonderful sonic art that you create with the

"In the beginning of a change, the patriot is a brave and scarce man, hated and scorned. When the cause succeeds, however, the timid join him...for then it costs nothing to be a patriot."

- Mark Twain

pedals. And, like you said, you can't teach that because those are sounds and images that you're visualizing and hearing and reproducing from your vision.

JC: I think of it as composition. I apply for grants, but there are only a few that you can apply for that really understand that kind of thing. Some of those pieces, like the one for Jeanne Lee, "No Words, Only A Feeling" I didn't even plan it, the whole thing was improvised, the entire thing. There is a bass line there that I had somebody transcribe, I made that up. I remembered how Jeanne used to do that piece, she had a bass player, and she wrote this little line, but I didn't have the line. I just wanted to dedicate it to her. They don't realize what we're doing. Improv and composition are the same thing but you're doing it on the spot. Just yesterday, I wrote something. I'm going to put it in my next book. Through the years, I knew I loved both and I never didn't do both. A lot of people don't even know that I do words. But the point is. Why am I doing this? I'm teaching the free, I'm teaching the standards and then I wrote this. "I think when you get the experience of singing, "free or out" your core inside singing becomes more connected, more you. And, that's why we do it. Because when you're singing free, you have to be there—you have to be present. You're there." I don't like all free music, and I certainly don't like all free vocalists, that's just taste. But I know the process of doing it, when you're really in it, as you know, you don't have words to hide behind or anything. You can sing a tune and not even be there, the words come out, they go with the melody and you don't have to be there. So anyway, because we both do them both, I want to write another book on improvisation. I hope you have my book, *Sing Your Story*.

JAZZ OUTSIDE: Oh, that's a great book for all singers but especially for emerging singers, it is a clear map to get you organized and prepared, it is full of the right information plus it's simple and concise. The exercises on the enclosed CD are really great for getting in shape. In the meantime, check out Jay's expansive discography on her website, www.jayclayton.com.

To be continued.....Sheila Jordan, The Loft Scene, Seattle years, Teaching/Workshops, Current Projects, CD Reviews and much more.

"Leadership is not magnetic personality, that can just as well be a glib tongue. It is not 'making friends and influencing people' - that is flattery. Leadership is lifting a person's vision to higher sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations."

- Peter F. Drucker

Jay Clayton

Her Story Singer, Improviser, Composer, Author, Educator—Pt. 2

By Nora McCarthy

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JJ: When did you begin to use your voice as an instrument—were you always an improviser?

JC: When I was in college, which is where I really started, I didn't scat over the tunes. I was just building my repertoire. I think I started scatting in the early seventies, because that's when I started with this band, Unity, Byron Morris' band. He lives in DC. Actually Frank was in the band and they rehearsed at our place and he happened to mention to them that I sing and the next thing I know I was in the band. But I remembered they did a few tunes—I know they did a blues where I could solo over a blues, you know. But in the seventies, a lot of that Latin stuff came in a lot of vamps, sort of Latin Jazz, so I really got into scatting over vamps, and I really like that. I guess that's when I really started more wordless, over the blues, over vamps. When I think about it, I used to hear things, like I'd hear Miles, and I'd kind of solo along with him with records, but I didn't do it out in public, because I heard him like he was a voice, and singing the melodies, that's how I heard his improve. So I would hear these lines in my head. I wasn't thinking, I'm gonna scat now.

“... no wonder singers had bad names, they didn't know their keys, they couldn't count off their tempos; I remember watching them.”

But it wasn't until several years later that I got the courage to try it. This is interesting because it has to do with your whole approach and my approach too about in and out. It must have been the free stuff, in other words, because singing free, that aren't any words, of course you can make up words but that didn't even come into me until years later. I think singing free was the basis for finding other things other than words.

They were all improvising all of the instruments, and I just jumped in.

JJ: So were you thinking at the time, or probably not, that I'm an instrument, just like they are?

JC: No. the “just like they are..” is OK. I never tried to be an instrument. But even when I was doing the standards, I felt as a singer, I should be more a part of the music. They were playing all the time—we get to sing two choruses and we go off the stage. That's really where it was. Whereas in the free music, there was no head, there was no, “now the singer sings.” You're right, it was truly equal. I wasn't trying to be an instrument but I was part of the music. There was no difference. I could do whatever I wanted, they could do whatever they wanted, that was the basic principle, there was no function in other words. Even the rhythm section—they could play time or they could play free. I think this is the first time I've

articulated that. And then It was right around that time, this is interesting, that I wanted to find out all the things that the voice could do. That's why when Steve Reich asked me to sing, it wasn't jazz. It wasn't even improv. But I was singing kind of instrumental parts. And, I like it, because that is when I discovered, “I am an improviser.”



JJ: It was very freeing for you I can imagine.

JC: It was freeing for me, I had no idea what I was doing and I had no recordings of it. However, what I do have recordings of, and when I talk about Mark Levin ... the every first time I recorded was with Mark Levin, and I haven't heard it in forever. I have no idea what I was doing myself, there probably was some free stuff on there. My son has that record, but I don't know if they ever got it on CD. That was also Billy Hart's first recording, that's how long I've known him. My son Dov, who is now 42, was 4 months old and I know because Mark Levin wrote a tune called birth of the Dov and he put a little teeny picture in the back of Dov. I still have to make a CD with my daughter's picture on it. It was right around that time in the 70's that I started to do these workshops either with myself or with Jeanne Lee, just to see what the voice could do. I kept looking for structures and jumping off points to sing free. So, it was free, the vamps, the blues and then one by one I started to find standards that I could actually blow over, but it was all by ear. Even though I am so-called “learned,” I studied music and everything, I never actually studied jazz. I took some lessons with a couple of piano players and got some voicings and learned to comp for myself. Then I started teaching and I wanted to play for my students. Early on, it was just to be more a part of the music.

JJ: And the musicians, both in and out, were very open to this progression that you were mak-

ing with the voice. You mentioned Jeanne Lee was there. Were there others that were going in this direction?

JC: I cannot think of other singers except there was Patty Waters and there was the label ESP, and she was on that one. They didn't last so long but they were doing the really free things, but I cannot think of any others. I really think of Jeanne and I as the one. When I heard her I flipped out. Of course later, there was Ursula Dudziak, but she didn't actually go through the free improv period but she was doing her thing.

JJ: I remember when I first heard Ursula—did you first hear her in New York?

JC: The first time I heard her was on a record that I don't remember the name of—it was her and an electric piano player. She does a lot of things, she just goes all over, a lot of funk kind of based things and then all her solo stuff with electronics.

JJ: Wasn't her husband Michael Urbaniak I know I had an album of hers, don't remember which one it was, but she was singing on such another level, her range – she was way up in the air.

JC: And very precise. Then getting back to the voice improvising freely, hearing lines, and then singing wordless, you have to find articulation when the words are the way to move. Without words you have to find other ways to move, how do you articulate? Ursula and I are very different. But I also heard stuff that she discovered that was the same kinds of articulations as me, because I feel like it's a tribal thing. In other words, in the world, even going way back, people thought I studied Indian music, I didn't. It's just that I think that any voice that is in the world, any voice that starts singing without words, we're going to find some of the same things, same ways to move, to articulate.

JJ: It's spirit—like when you chant, you've never been a Buddhist and maybe you never lived in India but you can sit down there and join the choir of voices that are chanting and just resonate with every one of them. Natural sounds that's what's going on—they're coming from the earth and from the universe.

JC: This is an aside. Do you know about my thing with Kirk Nurock, pianist, composer? The way I met Kirk, though he's not a singer, he used to work at what he calls, natural sounds. He used to work with actually, non-singers. And he taught them little things to do, with no words and he composed with them. He'd have a "growl" or a "trill" and these people who weren't singing, were making this music that he choreographed. The way I met him was a friend of mine called me up and told me to turn the radio on, WBAI. And, there was Kirk Nurock and the Natural Sounds and they were doing all this stuff that I just discovered. So I called Kirk up and I said, "I just heard this thing and I think we have something in common here." I just wanted to meet him. Then I went over to his loft and I didn't

know he played piano—he's great, so when I went over to his house we talked about it and he knew about me and he said, "Let's just play" it was just free and there was a connection that you wouldn't believe. Then he started to feature me with that Natural Sound group. He'd have workshops and people would just come and do that stuff. Then he'd make up an environment and I'd just solo. He wrote a piece for me with them and he called it, "Git Gong" because one of the things I did when I was singing free was "git gong"; he picked up on one of my licks. We also have a whole project of Emily Dickenson stuff that we just now editing. We do a lot of things like that.

also took private lessons. So my ideal thing is to take a private lesson, where we'd work on certain tunes and get your repertoire then you've got to try it somewhere so we'd take it to a workshop where you work with a real piano and sometimes I'd get a rhythm section for them and you're also singing for people because your singing for people in the class. I always encouraged the singers to go "sit in." There was a period of time in the seventies where it wasn't as easy to go "sit in" but now there's a lot of open mics.

JJ: Yes, I can speak on that with regard to the younger musicians because they have a fear of

"I'll never quit teaching; I love it, why shouldn't I make a contribution? I wouldn't teach if I wasn't singing because I am just teaching what I know. In other words, I'm not telling them what to sing, I'm telling them what to do to get better. I tell them in a nice way, I'm not trying to break anyone's spirit."

JJ: Since we are on the topic of education, when did you begin to teach voice and list some of the places where you have taught? Please expound on your private lessons, Scat Lab and various workshops that you've designed and presented around the world.

JC: I've taught so many places, it's almost like, where haven't I taught in terms of the workshops. The first workshop I created might have been with Jeanne Lee, but it was more free and that's when I started to write structures that became pieces. I started to look for things to evoke their sounds. Little pieces, little games, little structure, anything to get them improvising freely but give them something to hold on to. At some point I'd have them just sing free, because that's what I did with the instruments. Then I realized that it was so important for the tunes because that's how you get the melodies and sing in tune and get your message out. So I started to do standard workshops where I hired a piano player. Sweet Josh Wolff in Seattle was one, but here James Weidman was one of the first ones to play for those workshops. This was around the mid to late seventies. I'd hire a piano player, and the students would come, just like the workshops in schools and they'd sing a tune and we'd talk about intros, endings, counting off tempos, all the basic. Then I'd set up a concert for them. Some of these people in the workshops

knowing how to "sit in" or even being welcomed to "sit in" because a lot of them may not know many of the musicians who are out there playing and that's the paying the dues part that you can't spare them from, they have to push themselves. But they have the hardest time, getting up on the bandstand even in that kind of a situation.

JC: When I sat in back in the sixties—we're talking about going to where people were doing a real gig ... but they just happened to be doing tunes and asking if you would sit in. That's never going to happen now; that's over. And that was scary. The instrumentalists were doing that too. I remember when Jaki Byard was doing a thing on the Lower East Side that was not for singers, but man, I would go down there and ask to sit in. I remember Jack DeJohnette ... he came to New York around the same time I did ... he was playing piano, and I sat in with Jaki Byard. He was very dear by the way. But I had done my homework. Because I would go to sit in, and no wonder singers had bad names, they didn't know their keys, they couldn't count off their tempos; I remember watching them. But, I was determined, I was counting my tempo off and I was scared to death. But that doesn't happen anymore, that's over. I had to do it that way. But I also realized that these singers have got to sing in front of people. So the sitting in is different but my showcases were more like a classical recital. I produced it and prepared them for, this

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wasn't like sitting in. They'd prepare two tunes plus they'd be learning from everyone in the workshop all the possibilities. You do two contrasting tunes, how do you start it how do you end it and then I'd find a good place. I got a good band for them and it was concert. I made a plan just like I was planning my own set.

JJ: You got a lot of satisfaction out of being really instrumental helping these singers find themselves on the bandstand.

JC: That's right, get them out there. That, still to this day, I do that.

JJ: How loving.

JC: Of course I make some money from it because I charge them but for me it's part of my teaching. I say you can't learn everything in this little box, which is a private lesson. That's the preparation. It is very important. Most of what I do in a private lesson, and I do this for professionals who come to me, is help them find the repertoire that's really them. Singers come to me often and they've been singing for a while and I look at their repertoire and I've got to question it. I say, "I don't believe you on that tune." The first thing I do is go right through their list and ask, "Do you love it, do you like it, or are you indifferent?"

JJ: Why do you find that they choose certain songs?

“... they'll say that they really love the melody, but I'll ask them, 'What are the words about?' They don't care so much. But I believe if you are going to sing a lyric it better be one you can connect with ... how are you going to phrase if you don't know what you're talking about? ... you sing like you talk.”

JC: Sometimes they think because they're hip and they like the way somebody else did it. Sometimes they'll say that they really love the melody, but I'll ask them, "What are the words about?" They don't care so much. But I believe if you are going to sing a lyric it better be one you can connect with. Because how are you going to phrase if you don't know what you're talking about? Then you're hanging on notes but really true phrasing when you think about it—you sing like you talk. And, I'm not hanging on a note; I'm hanging on a word. Teaching jazz is not a how to. It's what to do. Singers don't know what to do to get better, but I do. If they don't know their tunes, I help them learn them.

JJ: You can't teach something you haven't ex-

perienced yourself. You know how to get there—you know the route.

JC: That's what I love about it. I feel that my job, and Sheila too by the way, or any of us, is that when you're teaching, I want to stop the eyes from rolling from the instrumentalists. Yes, I know....musicians are prejudiced, but if you know the (*&(&, they'll like it. If they hear music, all that other stuff drops away that you're a singer, you know what I'm saying? I feel that the difference that some singers don't have the same hearing experience. They have heard the instrumental music. And you have to hear all of it. I'm not just singing vocal jazz, I'm singing jazz. I heard Miles, Mingus and all of that; I'm influenced by all of that stuff. If you think you want to sing jazz, you've got to be able to hear the music. I'll never quit teaching; I love it, why shouldn't I make a contribution? I wouldn't teach if I wasn't singing because I am just teaching what I know. In other words, I'm not telling them what to sing, I'm telling them what to do to get better. I tell them in a nice way, I'm not trying to break anyone's spirit.

JJ: That's exactly right, right, and right.

JC: If you look at the singers that are respected and the singers that aren't, and by the way, they're not going to tell you that, I'm going to tell you that. I tell them, first of all, you don't know this tune, and second of all, I don't believe you. I can tell you almost every one of my tunes, where I met it and why and what it means to me. I can tell whether you're connected or not or you care about the lyrics, I think that is very important. The listeners don't know why they don't like you or why they like you, I do. They believe you. Everything stops, time stops, they believe what you're saying.

JJ: Please talk a little about the Scat Lab.

JC: This whole notion of what to do, one thing I know that there's a lot of singers scattin' and I don't think it's great—they don't know how to work on it—so I developed these scat labs. I call it a practice approach. It's a place to come where you actually practice scattin' but it's with me as a guide. I choose, in most cases, which tunes, because I find harmonically friendly ones and you get the influence of all of these other singers. We trade fours, they learn tunes and it's the repetition.

JJ: Is there more than one person in the scat lab—is it like a group scattin' together?

JC: Oh yeh, it's a group, like a workshop. Sometimes three people come. I started doing it down here in my apartment; I've been doing them uptown since I moved back, off and on. I only do it when I can. There'll be sometimes when it's every week for a while, when I'm in town. You don't have to sign up for them, you just show up. This way it's loose. Every week I email a bunch of singers and tell them there's a scat lab and they tell me if they're coming. It's \$25 for about an hour and a half. The other day there was 3ight people here. Sometimes it's four, sometimes three, it's OK. I give them little tips. Did I ever give you my twelve step program?

JJ: No. There's no end to you!

JC: If you're in the middle of scattin', and like I say about some singers who don't listen to the music, if you're going to scat over the changes, you're never going to hear a horn solo without swinging 8th notes, but you often hear vocal solos with just little blues licks, in other words, it's input/vocabulary. So they'll be scattin' along and I'll hold up a flash card. The very first step is *space*. There's no space, I tell them to leave some space and we talk about that. Then *repeat an idea*. Nothing new, but I put it in twelve steps. Now I might hold up a flash card that says, *swinging 8th notes*. So they've got to keep doing that, if they can, or I'll hold up one that says, *long tone*. Sometimes, they never hold a note. I keep looking for little things to help. That's all. I particularly want my private students to do this.

JJ: How many books have you written and what was the inspiration behind them?

JC: I only wrote *Sing Your Story*. I have all this stuff that I do, the blues collage, my approach to improvisation, I thought why carry it all around, I'll just put it in a book, that was the inspiration

JJ: I always go back to your book, I love your book and I love those exercises.

JC: I call my book *A Practical Guide for Learning and Teaching the Art of Jazz Singing* because I think it's also helpful for people who are teaching for ideas of what to do. What kind of activities to give to your students. It is my philosophy. But, I believe you have to perform to learn. I learned everything I know out there. I had places to go, sessions, where I could just solo, solo, solo, it's not like I was up there doing my tune and doing one chorus here or there. Now you have to find other places.

JJ: I think you inspiration is love, that's what it feels like to me. Love of the voice.

JC: I think the biggest thing is motivation, inspiration, nurturing and giving specifics about what to practice.

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JJ: After having studied voice with a few others over the course of my career, I would say that there is a level of caring that you have that others don't because immediately you identify with the singer. You love what you do and you care about the singer.

JC: I don't mislead people. But if your teacher doesn't give you some confidence, that helps. Confidence is 99% when you're out there. It's very hard to sing when something has shaken your confidence. It's worse than playing the piano, they go through it too, you're hands will go, but when it's you, the singer, the source is your sound; you've got to feel good. But I say nurturing is part of it. Guiding people out there—there is such a thing as out there. Some people don't want to go out there but to me there's no reason not to, you've got to sing in front of people, or what's the point? Don't worry what people think, we all do but the bottom line is, "I don't care!" Just be yourself. It's not easy. Jazz Outside: With regard to improvisation and vocal technique, please talk a bit about your concepts and what is most important for young singers to understand and know about the voice and the responsibility the singer has as an integral part of any music ensemble.

JC: To paraphrase my thoughts on improvisation—you start with the easiest thing. That's why I start with the drone then vamps, the blues, and you have to work with harmonically friendly stuff. You have to know what that is, that's why you go to people who are more experienced; you ease your way into it.

JJ: Jay, you have an extensive discography, from straight-ahead to avant-garde. Of those CDs, do you have any favorites?

JC: I probably don't have any favorites but I guess I would always need two of them. I would have to say, *Circle Dancing* covers a big gamut. In *Downbeat*, there was an issue where singers voted for singers and they picked thirty singers and I was the thirtieth one for *Circle Dancing*. It was the one singers loved. I'm talking about Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, these were all big names. This CD has some original music, it has free, and it has standards.

JJ: When did you record that?

JC: *Circle Dancing* was maybe about fifteen years ago. It was recorded in Seattle. That band was Seattle based people. There were three faculty people from Cornish, there were Briggan Krauss, who was student of mine, great saxophone player; trumpet was Jim Knapp who was teaching at Cornish; drummer was Aaron Alexander, who also was a student.

JJ: It was released in January, 1997 on Sunny-

side Records. They're all on Sunnyside Records. The first one was *Beautiful Love*, with me and Fred Hersch and then came *Circle Dancing*.

JJ: Do you see a difference or a gap between singing Standards and singing Free? If so, how do you bridge that gap?

JC: That's hard to say because, it was an organic merge. My first record under my own name was *Jay Clayton All Out*. And it was mostly *out*. I record what I'm doing at that time. But, I cannot answer how I bridge the gap but I think it is, again, your concept comes from what you love. I do not believe you decide on a concept. I do not say, "Here's how I want to sing." So, it's just a matter of doing material that you love and it just made itself. The answer is, I don't know. It was organic and yes, I continue to do that. There will be some sets that are more standard than free. This last CD, *harry who?* is definitely straight ahead in terms of the material. Now, I'm going to do a gig—I don't think in the last 20 years, I've done a gig where it was either/or. It's interesting, this is a good question. When I worked with Granelli, that's the most free, in other words, we don't even talk—we have our own sort of free structured things that we know and they might come out, but even with him, I'm going to do a straight ahead ballad. I don't really know but I think it has to do with continuing to do material that you connect with and that you love and that allows you to be free, whether it's a standard or not. And that's how it comes together. I know when it wasn't together and that was in the late sixties early seventies, but I knew that I loved both and so it just worked out from doing it.

JJ: When did you begin to incorporate electronics—via a vis—pedals into your music and why?

JC: I worked with Granelli in duo, it happened in Seattle, it had to be in the nineties, he's a drummer but he was working with electronics, I wasn't. I had a little keyboard that I traded in for a chorus pedal all it does is sort of change your voice a little. I never wanted to change my voice but it kind of widens it. Then I knew some other young people who had these digital delays but they were only two seconds and I borrowed one, but it was too short. But then I bought a Korg that was four seconds. That was my first one and that's Jerry Granelli's fault and after that I started to experiment with and I started to make my first solo piece. The electronics is just an extension of my vocabulary. If I have them set up, I may use them three times in the set, max or once even. It can take over, I think it's dangerous. Everybody uses them different. That happens with instrumentalists too. You don't know who's behind the electronics.

JJ: You're also known for working with poetry—when did that aspect become a part of your musical format?

JC: First I thought of it as making individual pieces because at the same time—here's an interesting thing—sometimes when I'd be singing free, I needed a word and I didn't want to mess

up the standards, I don't like that, standards have their own freedom and I was singing free, it was out in Seattle with a group called Quartet, which is another CD, with Gary Peacock, Julian Priester and Jerry and I, and these words just came in my head, "Sometimes I wander." And, I just went for it because we were doing a totally free thing. And later on I made my solo piece out of that text. I knew a poem by Emily Dickenson called, *I'm Nobody* and I used to use just that. I started using poetry for two reasons, one: I needed the word when I'm singing free and, two: their messages were more philosophical than the love ones, but I liked both. The standards are mostly about love, I wanted to go a step further. And poets say things that you believe so well. I can make up my own words, but they do it. And, then I discovered e.e. cummings. Forty years ago, I sang some songs that this piano player wrote to e.e. cummings and he would do it with a rhythm section but it was actually songs and I have old recordings of that. I was aware of e.e. cummings but I never improvised with his words. Then I went back to e.e. cummings because I found some things that were short enough that I could get the message across, and I improvised with them. Again, I still feel, a lot of times, I hear people work with words but I don't know what their message is. That's another approach. Finding again, what is the vehicle and can I get the message out. My biggest breakthrough was, maybe, ten-fifteen years ago. I didn't want to do it too much because it didn't feel real, contrived a little bit, till I got. I sing/say, that's what I call it. New pieces come out but I am definitely connected. Not just making sounds. I think it had a lot to do with needing the word in a spontaneous composition situation and wanting a new message, worldlier, more spiritually. Emily Dickenson, I know several and Kirk and I have lots in the can. I did get a little grant a few years ago for me, Jerry and Jane, I wrote a piece called *Lines and Spaces, the Dream Suite*. I used Langston Hughes and I used quotes that people said about dreams, the piece was cool, but I'm not done with.

JJ: So do you write poetry?

JC: I have some but I don't do them, I only have two. I have one that I started to do, I don't know if it's mine. [laughter] I have one that I did for the first time at the Shapeshifter Lab—a free concert with Jerry and Briggan and I. I've had it written down for a long time and I don't know if I did it or somebody else did it. As far as the poems, I keep memorizing them and I don't always know when they're going to come out, how about that? See, so all of a sudden, out will come this poem, but it can't come out if I didn't memorize it. The work is just in memorizing it so that it is internalized and then it will pop out. It takes I few times. I don't take it lightly writing poetry. Just because you wrote it doesn't mean it's great.

JJ: I hear that and thank you for saying it.

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