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Beat

New York Voices Celebrates 25 Years with First Live Album

For decades, vocal jazz groups have fought for recognition in the music marketplace and even among some jazz fans. A new live album by New York Voices celebrating the group's 25th anniversary, however, may attract some new converts to the genre.

The Grammy-winning quartet has never enjoyed the mass audience of previous generations of vocal jazz groups—from the Hi-Los and Four Freshmen in the '50s and '60s to Manhattan Transfer in the '70s. With the current vogue for tight harmony singing, as seen in the huge popularity of college a capella groups and TV shows like "The Sing-Off" and "Glee," New York Voices—and vocal jazz groups in general—are ready for a comeback.

On *Live With The WDR Big Band Cologne* (Palmetto), their first full-length live album, the Voices—Darmon Meader, Peter Eldridge, Kim Nazarian and Lauren Kinhan—shine as soloists and in luscious four-part harmonies, in which they function as an additional "section" of veteran arranger/conductor Michael Abene's first-rate big band. The set was recorded in Cologne, Germany, in 2008.

"For this show, we picked songs that represent our history and mixed in a few new tunes as well," said Meader, NYV founding member, musical director and tenor saxophonist. "Michael's charts are insane, so they give the older tunes a fresh take.

"We also transitioned many years ago from a quintet to a quartet. In the process, our old charts never got re-voiced in a way that works well for four singers. So we decided to revisit those arrangements." One example is a moody reading of Oliver Nelson's classic "Stolen Moments," which the group hadn't performed in years. "We dropped the key down a step and voiced it out for four," Meader said, "so that it works for us now."

Other standout tracks include a hard-swinging "Darn That Dream"; unorthodox versions of two Paul Simon songs, "Baby Driver" and "I Do It For Your Love"; a jazz treatment of Annie Lennox's song "Cold"; and compelling NYV originals, including the lilting, Brazilian-inflected "The World Keeps You Waiting," written by Kinhan and Eldridge.

NYV's members lead busy lives. As a group, they gig regularly at clubs and festivals all over the world. They have collaborated with vocalist Bobby McFerrin, reedist Paquito D'Rivera, guitarist Jim Hall and the Count Basie



Orchestra. They frequently perform at symphonic concerts with the Boston Pops and other major orchestras. They are finishing up a holiday album, to be released later this year.

Meader, Eldridge and Kinhan have issued solo albums, and all the members compose, arrange and teach, including an annual vocal jazz camp the group leads each August at Ohio's Bowling Green University.

"It's challenging at times to balance all this, but it's one of the reasons the group has lasted 25 years," Meader said. "We've had slow and steady growth. In a typical year we do 60 or 70 concerts. That way, we're not getting burnt out on [Voices] ... and the solo projects help keep us musically stimulated, which brings fresh energy back to the group."

Their schedule this year includes several joint appearances with Manhattan Transfer, a group they once idolized. "As one of the closers we sing an eight-voice version of 'Birdland,'" Meader said. "Even as long as they've been in the business, when we're together, we kick each other in the ass a little bit. Everybody wants to be on their game, in a really good way. It's such a gas to be singing one of the tunes that influenced us greatly."

—Allen Morrison