



At Birdland, the Royal Bopsters included the vocalese pioneers (l-r) Andy Bey, Sheila Jordan, Jon Hendricks, Annie Ross and Bob Dorough.

### **Founding Fathers & Mothers of Vocalese in Historic Summit at Birdland (DownBeat.com, 9/22/15)**

Jon Hendricks, the jazz innovator and NEA Master who helped invent the art of vocalese, celebrated his 94th birthday on September 16 by appearing at New York's Birdland before a packed house of friends and die-hard vocal-jazz heads. It was the second night of a week of shows by the new vocalese quartet of soprano Amy London, tenor Darmon Meader, bass Dylan Pramuk & alto Holli Ross, marking the CD release of their first album, *The Royal Bopsters Project (Motéma)*. Hendricks is one of the five "royal bopsters," pioneers of vocalese who appear as guests on the disc.

This night's performance was historic: it reunited Hendricks with fellow trailblazers Annie Ross (his old friend and colleague from Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, the most influential jazz vocal group ever); the tireless NEA Master Sheila Jordan, 86; bop vocalist and songwriter Bob Dorough, 91; and veteran singer Andy Bey, the youngster

of the group at 75, who has recently enjoyed a career resurgence, including two Grammy nominations.

Blowing out the candles on his birthday cake after the show, Hendricks was asked to speak. As he gathered his thoughts, Annie Ross quipped, “You’ve never been at a loss for words before.” That’s an understatement; probably no one in the history of jazz has written more clever, sometimes tongue-twisting lyrics to great jazz instrumental solos. London, Meader, Pramuk & Ross now happily carries on the vocalese tradition, along with groups like Manhattan Transfer and The New York Voices, which also features Meader.

The Bopsters project grew out of London’s friendship with her idol, singer Mark Murphy, 83, who sings on four of the album’s 12 tracks but who was not well enough to appear with the group at Birdland. Bey subbed for him, singing two songs long associated with Murphy: Freddie Hubbard’s “On The Red Clay” and Horace Silver’s “Señor Blues” (with additional lyrics added by London for this project).

The room was already buzzing when Hendricks sparked applause merely by entering the room and sitting down. After the quartet’s opening number, Annie Ross’ song “Let’s Fly,” Holli Ross (no relation) introduced Hendricks, calling him “The James Joyce of Jive,” the sobriquet bestowed on him by Time Magazine. Hendricks, dapper as ever, sported a beige suit and black and white polka-dotted shirt, topped off with a beige straw hat. “As usual, he’s the best dressed man on the stage,” Pramuk commented.

The fine band - Steve Schmidt (piano), Sean Smith (bass), Steve Williams (drums) and Steven Kroon (percussion) - and vocal quartet eased into a number squarely in Hendricks’ comfort zone, Count Basie’s “Rusty Dusty Blues,” which was later sung by Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. Hendricks fully commanded his own ribald lyric, which includes the advice to his girlfriend, “You’re gonna have to lose those champagne tastes,” to which the quartet replied, “I knew you when you drank gin.” It concluded with the exhortation to “Get up, get up, get up off your big fat rusty dusty.”

On the sprightly “Music in the Air” (“Wildwood”) by the saxophonist/composer Gigi Gryce, Hendricks traded fours with the sweet-toned, facile Pramuk. Hendricks’ telegraphing his deep musicality with short bursts of scat. Even if his delivery on this night consisted of more feints than actual punches, he still swung mightily.

Appearing much younger than his 91 years, Bob Dorough is not only still the hippest guy in the house, he might be the sharpest guy as well. Dorough, applied his hepcat

wit to two of his classics, “Baby, You Should Know It,” and “Nothing Like You Has Ever Been Seen Before.” The latter song, written with the famed lyricist Fran Landesman, is famous for being the only track on a Miles Davis record that includes a vocalist (Dorough). His delivery was precise, he got every laugh he intended, and he showed he can still scat like nobody’s business.

Excellent scatting, however, was not in short supply. Ms. Jordan breezed through her two numbers, Leonard Bernstein’s “Lucky To Be Me,” featuring a bravura, extended scat solo; and Horace Silver’s “Peace,” for which her longtime bassist, Cameron Brown, sat in and waxed eloquent in a tuneful solo.

Next up, Andy Bey thrilled the crowd with his luxurious baritone, bringing a blues/gospel authority to the hard-bop “Red Clay,” and breathtaking improvisatory chops to Señor Blues,” and showing that he is still at the very top of his game.

Introducing Annie Ross, London said, “Without her, we wouldn’t know how to do any of this.” Ross, ever the charming actress (she has also appeared in numerous films), talk-sang her way through “Music is Forever,” her elegy to Bird, Diz, and other jazz greats, many of whom were her friends and musical partners. Accompanied by her own pianist, Tardo Hammer, she then assayed Billy Strayhorn’s “Lush Life,” displaying full mastery of the legendarily difficult song.

While, for this set, the quartet was happy to play a supporting role to the parade of jazz vocal legends, their blend was tight and their intonation true, which served to highlight the challenging, inventive arrangements, by London, Pramuk and Meader.

The Bopsters and their younger acolytes all gathered on stage for the finale, “Jazz Jump,” based on Lester Young’s “Up And At ‘Em” (lyrics by King Pleasure). When it was all over, Birdland proprietor Gianni Valenti wheeled out Hendricks’ birthday cake and led the crowd in singing “Happy Birthday.”

“You have a lot of history with us, and we love you,” he said. “This is home,” Hendricks said.