

Pop Talk: Andy Bey explains the force that drives his jazz

by *George_Varga*

Andy Bey doesn't promise his audiences musical transcendence each time he performs. But if the spirits are willing - his own and his music's - this remarkable singer can transport his listeners to an exalted state with just his luminous voice and graceful piano playing.

ANDY BEY - Acclaimed jazz singer Andy Bey strives to impart his music with deeper meaning. 'You have to get past white and black, and good and bad,' he says, 'and deal with things on a spiritual level.' CNS Photo courtesy of Todd Beobel. Let the spirit move you

Like few other vocal greats in or out of jazz, Andy Bey is able to put his indelible stamp on each song he performs. Here's a look at three classics by other artists that he has made his own, along with Bey's comments:

Song: "In a Mist"

Original artist: Bix Beiderbecke

Appears on: Andy Bey's "Tuesdays in Chinatown" (2001, 12th Street Records)

Back story: Beiderbecke, one of the top jazz cornetists of the 1920s, wrote and recorded this sublime piano instrumental in 1926, when he was briefly a member of Frankie Trumbauer's Orchestra. He drank himself to death five years later, at the age of 28.

Bey: "I always loved the melody and was trying to figure how I could sing it. Somebody had written lyrics, but they weren't that hot, so I figured I'd do it wordlessly. I tried to give something personal to it, without destroying the natural intent, because the melody is really strong and not that easy to sing."

Song: "Fragile"

Original artist: Sting

Appears on: Andy Bey's "Tuesdays in Chinatown"

Back story: Sting wrote and recorded this haunting ballad for his 1987 solo album, "Nothing Like the Sun." It was reportedly inspired by an American Peace Corps volunteer who was shot to death in Nicaragua. Bey transforms the folk-tinged song by changing its melody, assuming a much darker tone, speeding up the tempo and adding a percolating Brazilian rhythmic thrust.

Bey: "I was aware of Sting but had never done any of his material. I liked the tune, so it was a matter of getting the melody together the way I wanted to sing it, sitting at the piano, although I didn't play piano on it."

Song: "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"

Original artist: Bing Crosby

Appears on: Andy Bey's "Ain't Necessarily So" (2001)

Back story: Written by Yip Harburg and Jay Gorney for the 1932 Broadway musical "Americana," this Great Depression-era lament was originally sung on stage by Rex Weber. Subsequent versions were recorded by Crosby, Rudy Vallee and, years later, Barbra Streisand and George Michael. Bey speeds it up and adds a righteous sense of self-determination and human resilience, punctuated by some bravura scat vocals.

Bey: "It was originally done as a slow vaudevillian tune. I wanted to do something different, without changing the melody, to give it another twist. The main thing is to bring a sense of life force to it, something personal. Because if you're not living what you're singing, it won't come out. Your intellect and vocal technique are just a tool for conveying your emotions." "Connecting to the spirit is very important, because that's what keeps me in the music," said Bey, a veteran solo artist who counts such diverse jazz luminaries as Horace Silver, Max Roach and Stanley Clarke among his past collaborators.

"When I look at it from a point beyond me, it's about getting my human self out of the way. It's like dying while you're living, letting the spirit take over and letting it guide you."

Justly hailed as one of the finest jazz singers of the past 50 years, Bey was a favorite of the late John Coltrane and Nina Simone. He has also been cited as a key influence by such esteemed fellow vocal stars as Mark Murphy, Kurt Elling and Kevin Mahogany, none of whom can quite match him when it comes to making captivating music.

His artistic eloquence and stylistic diversity have enabled Bey to shine alongside such artists as trumpeter Howard McGhee, pianists McCoy Tyner and Cecil Taylor, and saxophonists Sonny Rollins and Gary Bartz.

Whether performing solo, in a duo or trio setting, or with a big band, he is unmistakable in any context. This

can be credited both to Bey's masterful vocal command and to his voice itself - an unusually rich and supple bass-baritone that glides up to a high tenor and back again.

But there is nothing flashy or fussy about his performances, which is a key reason his music is so satisfying.

Rather than show off, he digs deep into each song for maximum emotional impact, savoring the nuances in (and between) each note he sings. Like few others, his singing captures the joy, mystery and pathos of the human condition.

"I want to communicate something," Bey stressed. "It's not about entertaining. I mean, entertaining is a form of communicating, but communication is the highest form. And I think of entertaining as giving people something. We all have our little things that we do to maybe create some kind of excitement. But, at the same time, it's beyond that.

"It has to be some kind of real communication for you as an artist to feel like you've done something. It's like saying: 'Take it or leave it,' but not in a way that's forcing somebody to like you, or challenging them that they've got to like this or they are not 'cool.' You put yourself out on the line; if you can grab a few people, that's cool. And if others don't dig it, that's also cool."

Were he better known, Bey's life story would surely qualify him for feature film treatment, a la Ray Charles or Johnny Cash. A child prodigy who was not yet a teenager when he was opening concerts for Louis Jordan and Dinah Washington at Harlem's Apollo Theater, the Newark, N.J.,-born Bey was featured alongside a similarly young Connie Francis on the weekly NBC show "Startime Kids."

At 12, he made his first recordings for the Jubilee label. At 18, he began touring with his siblings Geraldine and Salome as Andy and The Bey Sisters. Their London debut concert a few years later led to an album contract, rave reviews and an extended nightclub residency in Paris, where Marlene Dietrich, Juliette Greco and Marlon Brando were among the Beys' fans.

"Americans take a lot for granted, in part because we're still divided by heavy racism," Bey said. "Europeans have more appreciation for this music, a more sensitive feeling, perhaps because the music didn't come from there."

At 68, his wealth of talent is undiminished by the passing of time or by his having been diagnosed HIV-positive in 1994. Now, as then, keeping in the spirit of his music - and the life it reflects - is vital for Bey.

"I used to do yoga and all that stuff," he said. "But without spiritual health, you don't have anything. Without spiritual health, people commit tragedies and kill spirits. Anybody can learn to do something physical or technical, but your spirit keeps you pure."

"You can walk away from a spirit, but you can never change it. You either connect or you don't. That's what is important to me and keeps me going and makes me feel good - when I can play music through the spirit and talk through the spirit. The truth can't come from you; the truth comes through you."

A wise old sage with the zest of a young man, Bey accepts the fact that he continues to be held in higher esteem by his peers than by the general public. This can be attributed largely to a lack of promotion, poor timing and record company politics that have too long governed much of the imploding music industry.

That illogic is the most likely reason Bey was not able to make any solo albums between 1970's superb jazz-funk opus, "Experience and Judgment," and 1991's "As Time Goes By," which was recorded live in the Croatian capital of Zagreb.

It would be another five years before his U.S. "comeback" album, "Ballads, Blues & Bey," was released in 1996 by 12th Street Records. He has since made four more albums for the same label, including 2001's terrific "Tuesdays in Chinatown" and 2007's equally fetching "Ain't Necessarily So."

"As you get older, your worst experience is your best teacher," said Bey, who spent time during his recording drought teaching jazz at a university in Graz, Austria.

"I may have been a little angry, but an awareness of anger is different from being angry. And I don't regret that, because it was like on-the-job training. Plus, at that time I still had a vision of singing a certain way, a more intimate way. I didn't want to be known for just how I sang with Gary Bartz, or Horace Silver, or Stanley Clarke."

Bey's solo albums over the past decade attest to his success at re-establishing himself as a great singer. An avowed foe of fast-food aesthetics, he continues to make music that nourishes the soul.

"You can have all the success in the world," he said. "But if you believe that will make you happy - your cars and fur coats and big record sales - then you can learn a lot from Britney Spears. Who's more 'successful' than her?"

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