

The Manhattan Transfer

Since their inception, The Manhattan Transfer has refused to limit themselves to one type of music. "Our signature is clearly four-part harmony," explains Tim Hauser. "We based our voicings on the structure of the sax section of the Count Basie Band; blending soprano, alto, tenor and bass voices."

Now, in their 25th Anniversary Year, contemporary music's premier vocal ensemble - Tim Hause, Cheryl Bentyne, Alan Paul and Janis Siegel - are pushing the envelope once again. Having conquered the vocal intricacies of jazz, R&B, doo-wop, Brazilian and rock-n-roll, the Transfer have now put their unique spin on the classic sound of Swing. Their forthcoming Atlantic album - titled, simply, "SWING" - takes on this diverse and danceable genre in all its forms, from urban hot jazz to rural barnburning stompers.

Due this summer, "SWING" incorporates songs made famous by some of the giants of Big Band jazz and swing: Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Django Reinhardt, Artie Shaw, Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Barnet and Fletcher Henderson, a true "King of Swing" whose arrangements are a foundation for much of the record. To give life to this complex music, the Transfer are joined by a number of today's most renowned interpreters of swing, folks like the western swing group Asleep At The Wheel, jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli, the Belgian gypsy guitar group The Rosenberg Trio and long time Transfer conductor/pianist Yaron Gershovsky.

The Transfer gleefully tackle a bounty of swing favorites, like Henderson's hit, "Sing You Sinners" and the Ella Fitzgerald and Chick Webb classic, "A-Tisket, A-Tasket." The great jazz singer/songwriter Jon Hendricks, a long time Transfer collaborator, has penned new lyrics to a handful of previously-instrumental classics including Jelly Roll Morton's "King Porter Stomp" and Count Basie's "A Study In Brown." "SWING" is capped with a hot rendition of "Choo Choo Ch' Boogie" recorded live in Nashville with an all-star band that includes country superstar Ricky Scaggs and fiddler Mark O'Connor.

In it's formative years, the group developed a strong cult following while playing such New York clubs as Trudy Heller's, Reno Sweeney's and Max's Kansas City. In 1975, they cut their Atlantic debut album, "The Manhattan Transfer" and landed their own highly experimental television show on CBS. They were particularly successful in Europe, where their next two albums, "Coming Out" and "Pastiche," brought them a string of top 10 hits. A live album soon followed.

Singer Laurel Masse left the group to pursue a solo career in '78 following a car accident. Auditions were held to replace her, and a young singer/actress from Mt. Vernon, Washington responded to the call. The group was completely knocked out by her dazzling performance, and Cheryl Bentyne was immediately invited to join the group.

Their next album, "Extensions" earned them their first domestic pop hit: "Twilight Zone/Twilight Zone," penned by Alan Paul and Jay Graydon. The album also featured "Birdland," the piece that has since become The Manhattan Transfer's signature tune. Jon Hendricks wrote the lyrics to Joe Zawinul's stirring jazz fusion instrumental, and Siegel arranged the vocals.

The most-played jazz record of 1980, "Birdland" brought the Transfer their first Grammy award (Best Jazz Fusion Performance, Vocal or Instrumental) and the award for Best Arrangement for Voices, which Janis took home.

In 1981, The Manhattan Transfer made music history by becoming the first group to win Grammys in both the pop and jazz categories in the same year. "Boy From New York City," which broke into the top 10 on the pop charts, garnered them the award for Best Pop Performance by Duo or Group with Vocal, and "Until I Met You (Corner Pocket)" earned them a Grammy for Best Jazz Performance, duo or Group. Both of these appeared on the combo's fifth outing, "Mecca For Moderns."

In 1982, they accepted another Grammy for Best Jazz Vocal Performance, Duo or Group, for their rendition of the classic ode-to-the road, "Route 66." The song appeared on the soundtrack to the Burt Reynolds film, "Sharkey's Machine," and surfaced three years later on their "Bop-Doo-Wop" album. In 1983, prior to "Bop"'s release, they repeated their 1982 Grammy win in the same category for the "Why Not!" cut from "Bodies And Souls."

However, it was the '85 release of "Vocalese," produced by Tim Hauser, that became known as the group's tour-de-force effort. Vocalese is a style of music that sets lyrics to previously-recorded jazz instrumental pieces. Jon Hendricks, the recognized master of this art, composed all the lyrics for the album. "Vocalese" included some highly complex material that ably tested the quartet's capabilities - a challenge which they met magnificently. The album became a critically-acclaimed artistic triumph.

"Vocalese" received 12 Grammy nominations - making it second only to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" as the most nominated single album ever. The Transfer's opus won in two categories: Best Jazz Vocal Performance, Duo or Group, and Best Arrangement for Voices for Cheryl Bentley and Bobby McFerrin.

"Brasil" became one of the group's greatest achievements to date, and one which they remain particularly proud of. It also became their first entire album to win the Grammy for Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal.

In '91 The Manhattan Transfer moved to Columbia Records for a two-album stint. The first "The Offbeat of Avenues," was produced by Tim Hauser and marked the first time the majority of songs were either written or co-written by Transfer members. Other renowned musicians such as Van Dyke Parks, Donald Fagen, Mark Isham, Larry Williams, Marvyn Warren, Richard Elliot, Jeff Lorber, and ethnomusic specialist Chuck Jonkey also made valuable contributions to the album.

They walked away with a Best Contemporary Jazz Performance Grammy for "Sassy," a piece boasting lyrics by Janis Siegel and Cheryl Bentley and music by Siegel and Bill Bodine.

In the winter of '92, the gift that millions of Manhattan transfer fans had eagerly been waiting for finally arrived - "The Christmas Album." Destined to be a holiday classic, this album was co-produced by Tim Hauser and Johnny Mandel, who also did all the orchestrations. The group's soulful harmonies on such traditional favorites as "The Christmas Song" (with Tony Bennett) and "Silent Night," as well as the sweetly touching "Goodnight," resound with sonic purity.

1994 saw the release of an enticing departure for the combo. "The Manhattan Transfer Meets Tubby The Tuba," the group's first children's recording was hailed by USA Today as a "charming rendition" of the '45 Paul Tripp/George Kleinsinger classic. Accompanied by the Naples Philharmonic, the group humanized instruments (such as Peepo and Captain Bugle) to deliver the story's important message: "Be yourself, you can't be anybody else." Commented the Los Angeles Times of the project, "One of the world's great jazz quartets turns a children's classic into a rediscovered treasure."

"Tonin" marked the triumphant return of The Manhattan Transfer to the Atlantic Records fold. A breathtaking collaboration with some of soul, R&B, and pop music's most famous figures, the record stands as a document of the Transfer's impressive scope and tireless talent.

Spanning 20 albums over 25 years, this quartet's eclectic career has consistently set new standards for vocal music, in the process yielding a total of 10 Grammy Awards, with each of the six albums they've released since 1979 winning at least one statue - and worldwide sales in the millions. Veterans of numerous sold-out world tours, they also reigned supreme as the "Best Vocal Group" for an entire decade (1980-1990) in the annual down beat and Playboy jazz polls - winning once again in the Playboy's '92 poll.

As "Swing" makes abundantly clear, times and fashion may change, but the music of The Manhattan Transfer is truly eternal.