

Where The Girls Are: Big Band Mojo with the Ladies of SWOJO

BY TODD MATTHEWS

When Barbara Hubers-Drake recalls the impetus to form the Seattle Women's Jazz Orchestra (SWOJO), one particular story comes to mind. While touring high schools with her daughter, Hubers-Drake visited the music section of one notable, area school. "I noticed there were a bunch of kids jamming," she recalls. "I also noticed all the kids were boys." When Hubers-Drake's daughter commented that it appeared music was just for boys, the Seattle resident was unnerved. "I sort of freaked out," she adds. "It made me kind of sad. The only way to counteract that feeling was to do something about it."

Though she had not picked up a musical instrument in twenty-five years (she had played piano, guitar, accordion and bassoon earlier in life), Hubers-Drake contacted her friend Ellen Finn and the pair attended music classes: Hubers-Drake learned to play tenor saxophone; Finn picked up the bass. Shortly thereafter, the pair decided to form a big band, recruiting area female musicians. In April 2000, SWOJO was born.

This month the group will perform at Jazz Alley (with vocalist Greta Matassa, Sue Orfield on tenor saxophone, and Susan Pascal on vibraphone) before heading to Peru in April to perform at the Lima Jazz Festival.

That the group exists — let alone headline at popular jazz venues such as Tula's and Red Kelly's in Tacoma — is an anomaly of sorts. Local representation of female jazz musicians is embarrassingly slim. *Quick! How many female-led combos in Seattle can you name?* Yet, SWOJO has managed to pull some of the finest local talent into its fold. Lead Trombonist Carolyn Caster is active in the local big band scene, performing in Brian Kirk's Jazz Orchestra, ConEd Art Ensemble, Jazz Police, Jay Thomas's Friendly Fire, Kings of Swing, Route 66, Portage Bay Big Band, and others. Trumpeter Marge Rosen has performed for over twenty-five years, appearing in the United States Navy Band (she performed for President Clinton, numerous foreign dignitaries, and at the 1994 World Cup) and at Carnegie Hall and Benaroya Hall. Saxophonist Sheryl Clark is actively involved in the Swing Reunion Orchestra, Tacoma Concert Band, Gig Harbor Dixieland Band — and she was named the 1997 Tacoma

Summy "Blues Woman of the Year." These three women represent only a short-list of the group's remarkable talent. Couple the stellar personnel with its accomplished musical director, Dr. Daniel Barry, and it is no surprise that SWOJO has made a notable impact on the Pacific Northwest big band scene.

"I was really a supporter as soon as they formed," comments Barry. Over tea and espresso at a Wallingford coffee shop with Hubers-Drake and me, the composer raves about SWOJO. "I thought at the time, 'What a great idea. This is perfect.' I have three young daughters at home. They all study piano. The idea of role models — women playing jazz, having fun, being on stage, and performing well. It's totally appealing to me."

SWOJO started out rehearsing at Queen Anne Manor, a nursing home located in a suburb of Seattle. A 16-piece big band rehearsing in the basement of a nursing home? The pairing was odd. Nevertheless, the arrangement has proved fruitful for both parties (three years later, the band still rehearses there). "They opened their doors to us because they thought we would be of benefit to the people who live there," comments Hubers-Drake. "We have had some people who come every rehearsal and really look forward to it." Early on, one resident (a dancing enthusiast, no doubt) commented, 'Listening to your music makes my feet burn.'

"I thought that was a great compliment," recalls Hubers-Drake.

While the musicians continued rehearsing (performing occasional gigs), they actively sought a Musical Director. Barry's name was mentioned at the outset. "Ellen was familiar with his music," recalls Hubers-Drake. "She said, 'We've got to play some of it right away.' In fact, from the time we started, Ellen kept saying, 'We have to get Daniel. We have to figure out a way to get Daniel.'"

Barry smiles, adding, "There was a turning point when I was invited to a rehearsal.



From left to right, front row: Ellen Finn (bass), Denise Cline (trumpet), Marge Rosen (trumpet), Cynthia McGowan (trombone). Second row: Ann Reynolds (piano), Lisa Gordanier (alto sax, lead), Mariah Ralston (trombone), Angie Smith (trumpet), Linnea Cookson (saxophone) Third row: Scott Fry (drums), Carolyn Caster (trombone), Ann Babb (bari sax), Sheryl Clark (tenor sax), Barbara Hubers-Drake (alto sax and Exec. Director) Not pictured: Daniel Barry, Music Director; Shelly Devlin (trumpet), Kellyn Haley (bass trombone)

I came in without any agenda. There was no sort of premonition of what the future may hold. That seemed to be fine. I introduced myself to everybody. It was a good rehearsal. We talked further." Then and now, Barry's plate is always full. Many of the projects he was working on at the time are still actively in production today. He is involved in Jazz Police (a contemporary big band), Red Fish Blue Fish (an 8-piece Latin jazz ensemble), and the Daniel Barry Music Group (a chamber music collective). He is also directing the Jazz Combo at MusicWorks Northwest, and is a Master Artist and Mentor for the Artist Apprenticeship and Young Jazz Composers program at Seattle's Experience Music Project. Moreover, he is the owner/operator of Marina Music Service and Daniel Barry Publications.

Still, working with SWOJO was important to Barry. "I do a lot of work with music education," he explains. "I'm in the schools conducting clinics and workshops — there's a real need for female musicians to get plugged into the jazz programs. They are there, but not to the same degree as the males coming through."

Though he was initially hesitant to put too many of his original compositions in front of the band, Barry has been encouraged to bring in more material. The group has also performed original compositions by Pacific Northwest composers such as

Carmen Staaf, Nelda Swiggett, and Al Farlow. The long-term vision, according to Hubers-Drake, is to encourage female composers by way of the band.

An all-female jazz orchestra with a male musical director? It is an interesting combination. Scott Fry, the group's male drummer, also raises some eyebrows. Moreover, the band performs compositions written by men *and* women. Is SWOJO about promoting women in jazz? Or is SWOJO about playing music well, regardless of gender?

"I think it's both of those things," says Hubers-Drake. "I would hate to have kind of an all-girls club. The idea behind music is getting it out there. We are always going to be predominantly female. That's our role. But if it benefits the orchestra to have a male or two . . ."

Barry points out that the group's female predominance is positively evidenced during each rehearsal and performance. "The whole big band in-your-face kind of thing is not what I am about," he says. "This band [performs] a more artful, sensitive and appealing music. You want to balance it all, and have another side to the music that is intimate. We have the capability of doing that to a very high level. A certain aesthetic that we get just dynamically may be different from your average big band. We communicate perhaps the intimate side of repertoire literature in a more powerful way than the in your face, show-time entertainment part of it."

SWOJO will present that unique and intimate side of big band jazz at the Lima Jazz Festival this spring. Has the band traveled and performed internationally? "We've been to Tacoma," says Hubers-Drake, laughing. "It's the first international performance [for SWOJO]." The opportunity excites her on so many levels: performing with musicians from Latin America . . . playing consistently for a week ("It will be like being at a jazz camp," she says) . . . sharing the groups music with an international audience.

Barry plans to present original compositions from a pool of Northwest writers, as well as a mix of "bread and butter" repertoire: a number of Ellington tunes, as well as some Mingus Big Band numbers. "We will stay away from Peruvian jazz," Barry says, laughing. "We'll let them take care of that."

The experience will surely prove to be a milestone for SWOJO. "One of the major strengths of jazz is that it's an inclusive music," says Barry. "It's always invited other genres into it. Whether it's Tin Pan Alley,

Broadway, or Cuban musicians — it's always been this melting pot. That's the most interesting aspect of jazz — how it brings people and cultures together. We'll come back a different orchestra. We will have heard all different kinds of stuff. It's just an exchange that's very healthy. We'll take down what we do best and move from there."

The Seattle Women's Jazz Orchestra (SWOJO) will be performing live at Dimitriou's Jazz Alley on Monday, February 10, 2003 at 8:00 p.m. To learn more about SWOJO, visit the group online at www.swojo.com.

Upcoming performances of the Seattle Women's Jazz Orchestra

Feb. 10 - Jazz Alley - 8 p.m. (This one you know)

March 9 - 3 p.m. - Tula's as guests of Jazz Police

March 12 - 7:30 p.m. - Tula's

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