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Abstract:

following HIS HEART Jazz singer Al Jarreau launched his career at an unlikely time and in an unlikely place BY STAFF MUSIC CRITIC JOHN PITCHER Rock and roll swept across the American cultural landscape of the 1950s and '60s like a tsunami, swamping every other musical style that stood in its way. [...] he's now one of the world's premiere crossover artists, one of the few singers to have won Grammy Awards in jazz, pop and R&B categories.

Full text:

following HIS HEART

Jazz singer Al Jarreau launched his career at an unlikely time and in an unlikely place

BY STAFF MUSIC CRITIC

JOHN PITCHER

Rock and roll swept across the American cultural landscape of the 1950s and '60s like a tsunami, swamping every other musical style that stood in its way.

In such a waterlogged environment, the remarkable vocalist Al Jarreau, who performs Saturday at the Eastman Theatre as part of the Rochester International Jazz Festival, seemed like an island - an oasis of serious musical tradition in a sea of commercial homogeneity.

One could easily imagine a young Jarreau, with his flexible voice and buoyant personality, becoming a pop star. In fact, he's now one of the world's premiere crossover artists, one of the few singers to have won Grammy Awards in jazz, pop and R&B categories.

Amazingly, Jarreau launched his storied career as a jazz singer in the most improbable place at the most unlikely time: San Francisco, 1968.

The place was a mecca for the acid and psychedelic rock bands of the day, a home to the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, Jefferson Airplane and the entire Haight-Ashbury music scene. Jarreau found himself performing in small clubs with another young musician who was destined for great things, pianist and songwriter George Duke.

"I don't think George and I had any choice but to perform jazz," says Jarreau. "I grew up listening to big band music, which is pretty sophisticated stuff that knows how to reach out and touch your emotions. It put jazz in my heart. Then once I heard Bill Evans, there was no way I could ever sing Bill Haley."

Perhaps Jarreau wasn't meant to be a rock star, but he was certainly meant to be a singer. Born in Milwaukee, Wis., on March 12, 1940, he grew up in a musical household. His father, a Seventh-day Adventist minister, was a gifted singer, and his mother was a piano teacher and organist.

Jarreau began singing and harmonizing with his brothers at age 4 and gave his first public concert at 7. By high school, he was singing Broadway songs while listening to every big band and bebop record he could get his hands on.

Then, Jarreau's life and career took an unusual detour. At 18, he enrolled as a psychology major at a small Wisconsin school called Ripon College. After graduation, the future superstar moved to Iowa (of all places!) to earn a master's degree in vocational rehabilitation at the University of Iowa.

"At that point in my life, I was past studying music," Jarreau recalls. "I'd been singing for as long as I could remember, and my voice was my instrument. But if I went to college to study music, then I would have had to start at the beginning and learn an instrument.

"I do have some regrets now," he adds. "I guess if I had studied an instrument, maybe my writing would have been better, maybe I would have been a better composer. But I was too spoiled by my own voice."

Jarreau moved to San Francisco, working as a rehabilitation counselor by day while singing for fun at

night, and he remembers it as "a wonderful life." Eventually, though, the life of a musical dabbler proved to be unfulfilling.

So Jarreau began his own vocational rehabilitation, hitting the California club scene full time. It would be a long apprenticeship. With rock at the apex of its popularity, Jarreau could make little headway with the major recording studios. Consequently, the singer was left with little choice but to perfect his craft.

Over the next seven years, he turned his voice into a virtuoso instrument, one that would earn him the nickname "acrobat of scat." He developed a voice that was so flexible that it could readily imitate a bass, a guitar, indeed an entire jazz rhythm section. In addition to his scat technique, he began writing lyrics for standard jazz instrumental numbers (his version of "Take Five" is nearly as well known as Dave Brubeck's original instrumental rendition). And Jarreau could spin these words and syllables out at breathtaking speeds.

Still, what most seemed to impress the jazz fans who lined up for his club shows was the soulful naturalness of his performances. As far as the listener was concerned, singing seemed as natural for Jarreau as breathing.

"That's how it's supposed to sound, but that's not what's really happening," says Jarreau. "Everything may seem easy and natural, but inside I'm feeling this raging fire that I'm trying to keep in check. Sometimes I can't control it, and I start reaching for notes that I can't possibly hit."

Jarreau's big break came in 1975 after Warner Bros. President Mo Austin heard him at Los Angeles' Troubadour, the same club that launched the American career of an obscure British singer named Elton John five years earlier.

Austin signed Jarreau to a contract, and the vocalist's debut album, *We Got By*, won instant critical acclaim and an Echo Klassik Award (the German Grammy) for Best New International Soloist. Two years later, he earned the first of five American Grammy Awards for Best Jazz Vocal Performance.

In later years, Jarreau branched out (his critics described it as selling out), singing and recording more popular tunes, such as the theme of the 1980s TV show *Moonlighting*.

But criticism of Jarreau tended to overlook his most lasting contribution, securing an arguably permanent niche for jazz singing in a decidedly post-jazz age.

Above all, jazz remains Jarreau's first love, and he says he's concerned about its current state of health. "We need an audience that can support this kind of music and appreciate something other than MTV and radio hype," he says. "All the media consolidation we're seeing now is really frightening, and I think it could hurt jazz. It (consolidation) serves the audience so badly because it produces more and more of the same mediocrity."

Jarreau says he'll counter the rising tide of Muzak by going back to his roots. He plans to record a jazz trio album, and he's even talking about a big-band disc.

"It's the kind of music I'm all about."

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PHOTO CAPTION

Al Jarreau

Photo provided by The Rochester International Jazz Festival

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