



NEW YORK VOICES

Biography

“It’s certainly not something that occurred to us when we were thinking about starting a band in 1988,” says **Darmon Meader**, musical director and tenor singer of **New York Voices**, about the seminal vocal ensemble’s 30th anniversary. “But the band has a momentum of its own—it has a life now.” Indeed, that momentum and life force has a firm grip on Meader and his bandmates, baritone **Peter Eldridge** and dual sopranos **Lauren Kinhan** and **Kim Nazarian**. Each has a separate and busy career of his or her own, working as a soloist and educator in the jazz vocal world, but each makes New York Voices their top priority.

“We’re like a four-headed old married couple—we’re just a big family at this point,” Meader says.

Life also bursts forth from every corner of *Reminiscing in Tempo*, the quartet’s anniversary release (although the 30-year mark was technically 2018) and one of the most ambitious, accomplished undertakings in their entire catalog. Working with revered producer and longtime friend **Elliot Scheiner**, NYV takes a deep dive into the jazz canon, surfacing with standards by Cole Porter and Al Jolson and gems from the catalogues of Chick Corea, Fred Hersch, and Duke Ellington, along with an Al Jarreau-penned lyrical treatment of Dave Brubeck. As always, however, the band looks beyond the jazz repertoire as well, rendering two inventive originals, classics by the Beatles and Ivan Lins, and even a pair of settings for the Cuban classical composer Ignacio Cervantes.

“It is quite a span to cover,” says Nazarian, brimming with enthusiasm. “Honoring the composers, as we do with Cervantes, and some of our jazz icons that we have not honored in the past, like Fred Hersch—I think that’s really, really special. There are still some firsts on this record for New York Voices, and after 31 years, I think that’s pretty amazing!”

Adventurous though they may still be, *Reminiscing in Tempo* also finds the band having settled into a mature, confident phase. They are aware of their achievements, but don’t feel the need to harp on them. “I think we’re more comfortable in our own skin now,” Eldridge says. “I think initially we were out to impress. Flashy is fine, but when you’re in it for the long haul, you realize how empty that can be. The music’s supposed to feel good, too. So we’ve settled into a nice combination of the sweet and the splashy.”

It’s a combination that has long characterized their thoughtfully programmed recordings and concert performances over the years, with age as the refining element to their ever-evolving story. With the exception of their 2013 holiday collection *Let It Snow*, the new album is New York Voices’ first in their own right in more than a decade. Their other releases in the 2010s have been opulent collaborations with esteemed large ensembles, namely the WDR Big Band (on 2013’s *Live*), and the Bob Mintzer Big Band (2018’s *Meeting of Minds*). Outside of the studio they’ve also worked with Germany’s SWR Big Band, the U.S. Air Force’s Airmen of Note, and the U.S. Army’s Jazz Ambassadors.

Still, if *Reminiscing in Tempo* places the singing foursome at the forefront rather than making them a section of a larger ensemble, it goes to show how important that idiom is to them and how much the big band community has welcomed them throughout their career. “We are a little big band,” Kinhan asserts. “We work with arrangements, we have parts and sections. I think that we’re recognized as such, and likewise I think there’s been some wonderful mutual respect that’s come across from the big bands out there.”

Although everyone contributes ideas to those little-big-band arrangements—especially to their own compositions—Meader, as musical director, does the bulk of the work. In the process, he’s become one of the most important arrangers in the world of vocal and choral jazz. “Our group is a democracy, and I think we all feel equally invested—but Darmon is definitely the go-to guy,” says Nazarian. “He’s the mast of the ship.”

“I’m definitely the nuts-and-bolts guy,” Meader confirms with a laugh. “I’ve also developed my skill sets in terms of doing notation in a computer, being able to arrange for big bands, and able to work on editing and mixing the music in digital audio. I think it was built into my personality: I’m a Virgo, a dot-all-the-I’s-and-cross-all-the-T’s kind of a guy.”

His virtuosity—and that of all the New York Voices—speaks for itself from the album-opening “**Round, Round, Round (Blue Rondo à la Turk)**.” The lyric, of course, is Al Jarreau’s Grammy-winning addition to the classic Dave Brubeck composition. The central vocalese section is new: Meader transcribed segments of both Brubeck’s and Paul Desmond’s solos from the original recording and Kinhan wrote the words. “It’s my supposition about what Dave Brubeck might have felt like when he first heard that time signature in Turkey, and the excitement it inspired in him to write this tour de force,” she explains.

Chick Corea never recorded his composition “**Open Your Eyes, You Can Fly**”; he gave it to vocalist Flora Purim (with the Neville Potter lyrics that NYV also sings). Nevertheless, the band covered it as a nod to its creator, with **Andy Ezrin**’s Fender Rhodes and **Jesse Lewis**’s incisive guitar solo evoking favorite Corea textures. The song’s A strain is set in 7/4—partly to let the band put a distinctive stamp on it, but mostly just for fun.

“**Answered Prayers (É De Deus)**,” which has been in the band’s concert book for many years, is their tribute to Brazilian singer-songwriter Ivan Lins, who is a source of inspiration for NYV (whose rapport stems partly from a shared love of Brazilian music) as well as a dear friend. Their interpretation features a lead vocal by Nazarian, with English lyrics—roughly translated from the original—by Eldridge.

Like Corea’s, Fred Hersch’s compositional output—specifically, the gorgeous “**A Dance for Me**”—represents new ground for the Voices to investigate. With lyrics by the multifaceted flutist Cheryl Pyle, the song is one of the band’s newest arrangements (cowritten by Meader and Eldridge), and one of its simplest: They let the tune’s inherent lushness do its heavy lifting.

“**Los Tres Golpes**” and “**Invitación**” are both pieces by the 19th-century Cuban classical composer Ignacio Cervantes. **Alon Yavnai**, one of their regular pianists, introduced the Voices to Cervantes when he played his ragtime-like “Invitación” (from his *Danzas Cubanas*) during a soundcheck. Fittingly, he plays the piano solo on that piece; “Los Tres Golpes,” another of the *Danzas*, is an a cappella showpiece for the full quartet.

Meader’s “**Moments in a Mirror**” also has certain classical flourishes, and is also done a cappella—though the latter is easy to overlook, since it features the crisp vocal and body percussion of special guest Gabriel Hahn (who more commonly serves as their touring drummer). In addition, Nazarian and Kinhan each briefly take the spotlight for scintillating scat solos.

Recording Darmon’s arrangement of Cole Porter’s “**It’s All Right with Me**,” they tapped ringers to double up on their parts to squeeze in one big band number for the album. “I was just suddenly antsy, like, ‘We need another big fat swinger!’” says Meader, the voice behind the tune’s the scat solo. It’s hard to add much to that apt and colorful descriptor—big fat swing is what the band puts down.

His first long-form composition, “**Reminiscing in Tempo**” was a benchmark in Duke Ellington’s career, but remains an obscurity—Mel Tormé’s lyrical treatment even more so. That made it a prime specimen for New York Voices. “What we *really* like to do is dig around in the songbook,” says Kinhan, “and find

some gems to ask our listeners to walk down the garden path with us.” Nazarian, who found the Tormé recording, sings the lead on NYV’s rendition.

“**The Forecast is Sunny**” is Lauren Kinhan’s paean to her daughter, who is about to go off to college. More specifically, she says, the song is “about how wonderful it is to be the recipient of the love of a child. It felt like a nice nostalgic piece to have on this record, capturing a moment in time in my life. Peter came in and wrote the bridge with me, and then we wrote the vocal arrangement with Darmon.”

Another long-lived piece in the band’s book (and another dip into their big band charts), “**Avalon**” is the album’s only non-original arrangement. Eldridge found a YouTube clip of Perry Como, Ella Fitzgerald, and Caterina Valente performing the Al Jolson tune on Como’s TV show. Meader adapted that arrangement, by Ray Charles (the Hollywood music maestro, not the R&B legend), adding a fourth voice.

Sung a cappella, the Beatles classic “**In My Life**” ends the album on a sentimental note, perhaps appropriate to a 30th-anniversary commemoration. This bittersweet interpretation is a favorite encore for the band’s concerts. “I can’t tell you how many times after a show people have come up to us and said, ‘Which CD is ‘In My Life’ on?’ And we had to say, ‘none of them,’” says Meader. “Now we can finally say, ‘This one!’”

New York Voices was born in the mid-1980s at upstate New York’s Ithaca College. **Peter Eldridge**, an aspiring jazz pianist who came late to singing; **Kim Nazarian**, who dreamed of a life on Broadway; and **Darmon Meader**, a saxophonist and self-described “choral geek,” came together in the school’s vocal jazz ensemble. Director Dave Reilly included all three of them, as well as **Caprice Fox**, in an ensemble he’d been invited to bring on a tour of European jazz festivals. “It seemed to go over so well that Darmon and I decided to keep it going, try to make something happen professionally,” Eldridge recalls. “Kim and Caprice were part of that original band, and we slowly but surely made the transition to New York City in 1988.” There they met **Sara Krieger**, who became the fifth member of the band Reilly had named “New York Voices.”

One of their debut performances as a quintet was at Preacher’s, a Greenwich Village club, which launched the beginning of a sizable following and noise enough to start attracting the interest of record labels. They signed with GRP in 1989 and quickly made their first recording, ***New York Voices***, a mix of acoustic and electric, traditional and crossover jazz. They then hit the road, touring America in a motor home and making their first international excursions as they worked to build a worldwide audience.

Krieger left the band after their second album (1991’s ***Hearts of Fire***), which began a long, arduous search for a new fifth voice. While that process was underway, Eldridge had what was intended as a one-off songwriting session with **Lauren Kinhan**; impressed with her soprano vocal, he suggested she audition. “We’d heard maybe 70 auditions and hadn’t found the right fit,” says Eldridge. “Lauren came in and sang ‘God Bless the Child’ for us, and I remember looking at Darmon and going, ‘Oh. Okay.’”

After two more years as a quintet, Fox moved on to other things in 1994. The band had hoped that featuring five voices would stave off comparisons to vocal-jazz powerhouse Manhattan Transfer (it didn’t), but their increasing self-confidence—and their difficulty in finding Kinhan—led them to decide to continue on as a foursome. They declared their new identity with 1997’s ***New York Voices Sing the Songs of Paul Simon***.

With the dawn of the 21st century, NYV increased its currency in the jazz world via collaborations with institutions such as the **Count Basie Orchestra**, **Paquito d’Rivera**, and the **Dizzy Gillespie All-Star Big Band**. They also launched a jazz education initiative, inaugurating its Vocal Jazz Camp for aspiring jazz singers in 2008. (A European version of the Camp began in 2017). Each of its members has also established a career as an educator: Eldridge is a voice professor at Berklee College of Music; Nazarian vocal jazz instructor at Ithaca College and artist-in-residence at both Bowling Green State University and Tri-C Community College in Cleveland; Kinhan is an adjunct faculty member at the New School; and Meader is an artist-in-residence at Indiana University.

The geographical distance that these jobs require, along with each member’s active solo pursuits, is partly responsible for the long gap between New York Voices albums. Yet ***Reminiscing in Tempo*** finds both their individual chops and their collective chemistry to be as powerful as ever—and kicks off what NYV hopes will be another long stretch of work together. “The things that I’m really proud of are our longevity,

which just surprises and shocks all of us; the fact that our music has grown and gotten better; and the fact that we all still want to make music together,” says Nazarian. “We’re not done. We all have a little something more to say together.” •

New York Voices: *Reminiscing in Tempo*

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