

## Singin' and Swingin': The Lambert, Hendricks & Ross Trio

What prompts this episode of One Track Mind was the death on July 22 at age 89 of the British-born actress and singer Annie Ross. A talented singer and actress, she was the soprano voice of the Lambert, Hendrix and Ross (L,H,& R) vocal trio (1958 - 1962), perhaps the best vocal group ever to sing jazz.

The group is unique in two respects: First, they draw their repertoire entirely from jazz compositions, abandoning the American songbook standards that are part of other vocalists' programs. Secondly, the group sings in a style called "vocalese" — the writing and singing of lyrics to instrumental arrangements and solos. This amazing trio captures precisely what the instrumentalists play with superb articulation of their story-telling lyrics at the fastest tempos. Nearly every one of their tunes is exciting and contains an element of humor or fantasy.

Because vocal jazz is sometimes thought of as the poor cousin of instrumental jazz, I want to show right away what kind of musicianship is in store for you in this episode. Therefore, without further delay, I want to invite you all up to the penthouse of the Playboy Club in Chicago where the group was performing for a private party hosted by the bad boy of the 1950s and early-1960s, Hugh Hefner, who commercialized the male libido (until he was underbid by the hippie generation who showed you could have sex for free). Nevertheless, Hefner helped to promote jazz as accessible music during his tenure as an important publisher.

This performance at the Playboy club in October, 1959 will give you an idea of the treats in store for you in the links at the end of this overview. In this performance, the group is accompanied by the Count Basie quartet and joined by Joe Williams, Basie's favorite blues singer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNPHp0RBWYY>

NOTE: Joe Williams sits down for the first chorus but he soon returns.

This is a great example of vocalese: L.H.& R. has written lyrics to, and sings, the instrumental parts of the Basie band's arrangement and its soloists. Later in the tune, they back up Joe Williams's vocals, whose notably matter-of-fact delivery might be called "deadpan" blues singing.

"Vocalese" should not be confused with scat-singing — inventing one's own solos using nonsense syllables, many of which capture the sound of instruments. Vocalese and scat-singing have something important in common, both rely upon the affinity between instruments and the human voice. Instruments in jazz are played with a speech-like, vocal quality and, conversely, the voice often functions as an instrument in the band. In vocalese, the vocalists actually sing the instrumental parts, usually with lyrics that tell a story.

Although I was not a music major (or minor), L., H, & R. was one of the best things I discovered in college! (I had already become an earnest jazz listener in high school.) This group provided me with hours hours of delight and “time-wasting” opportunities while at the University of Rochester (as a philosophy major) during the early ‘60s. Their recordings were stacked on the left side of my record shelf because I listened like I read and wrote, from left to right. I saw the trio only once in person, at the Pithod, a jazz club in downtown Rochester.

It was a memorable night out, but not for the reasons you’d expect. I had an important paper due the next day (for which course, I don’t remember). The writing was behind schedule, as usual. After an hour of agonizing ambivalence, I was still stuck with a dilemma: whether to go hear the group (and succumb to the pleasure principle) or stay in my room to work on my paper (and be able to tell my father that I would probably have a successful life). One of my friends threw his car into the equation, which allowed me to solve it with a compromise -- a little work, a lot of jazz. My three friends piled into the front seat while I stretched out in the back with my Smith-Corona typewriter on my lap, click-clacking all the way to the club. I did the same on the way home. If I had had my wits about me, I’d have focused less on the paper’s content and more on *how* i was writing it, because then I could have invented the laptop.

The vocalese style began with two jazz singers in the 1950s — Eddie Jefferson (1918 – 1979) and King Pleasure (born Clarence Beeks, 1922 - 1981). Both men were contemporaneously writing and singing lyrics to instrumental solos. The style was popularized by a vocalese lyric of a graceful, melodic (alto) saxophone improvisation by James Moody on “I’m in the Mood for Love.” Eddie Jefferson is credited with writing the lyrics to the song, which he entitled “Moody’s Mood for Love” because it was an improvisation on that popular song by James Moody. But it was King Pleasure who put vocalese on the map commercially with his recording of it. Jefferson and King Pleasure (Beeks) saw themselves as colleagues, not rivals, and sometimes recorded together. Listen to King Pleasure’s vocalese version of that tune by following [Link # 1](#) below and then hear Eddie Jefferson’s earliest live recording of it in [Link # 2](#).

By the mid-’50s, the vocalese concept was well known and it attracted the vocalists who became L. H. & R. Annie Ross was a show biz kid, whose parents were a vaudeville team. Born in Surrey, England, her parents sent her at age 3 to live with an aunt in Los Angeles, Ella Logan, who had a blossoming career as a film actress and singer. She got Annie her first movie role at age 8 as part of “Our Gang.” In 1943, Ross played Judy Garland’s little sister in “Presenting Lily Mars.” She moved to New York to study at the Academy of Dramatic Arts, but became enamored with jazz and performed with many of its best players, including drummer Kenny Clarke (best known as part of the Modern Jazz Quartet) with whom she had a son. In the early 1950s she recorded her own lyrics to “Twisted,” based on a 1949 Tenor sax solo by Wardell Gray. It’s a clever, unique tale of Ross’s imagined consultation with a psychoanalyst (See her perform it via [Link 4](#) below). It was a clever song, artfully executed and it brought her widespread attention.

Jon Hendricks had been a jazz vocalist nearly all his life. By his early teens he had been singing on the radio accompanied by the great Art Tatum on piano. Moving to NYC at the suggestion of Charlie Parker, Hendricks met Dave Lambert, who had also been singing jazz in a vocalese style. Ross, Dave Lambert, and Jon Hendricks teamed up in 1957 to record an album of Basie arrangements in vocalese. Their unique recording was the first album of vocalese, and it sold well, launching the band's five year career. It was Ross who dropped out in 1962, when she decided to stay in England to treat her heroin addiction. Lambert and Hendricks tried out several other female singers to complete the group but none had the magic of L. H. & R.

Link 1. "Moody's Mood for Love," lyrics and transcribed solo (of James Moody's sax solo on "I'm in the Mood for Love." ) by Eddie Jefferson.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAe1C6y7IEU>

Link 2. "Moody's Mood for Love" Jefferson's lyrics sung by King Pleasure with Blossom Dearie on the female vocal part.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BAeHpSu24Y>

For the original solo by James Moody (1949) click on: ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0KN4\\_99qEM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0KN4_99qEM)). When James Moody recorded "I'm in the Mood for Love" he simply improvised on the harmonic changes to it, dispensing with the melody and thus gave it a different title which referenced the original song. The precedent for this type of recording -- improvising on the chord changes to a song without playing the song itself -- was set by saxophonist Coleman Hawkins in his celebrated 1939 recording of "Body and Soul." (In this case, Hawkins kept the original song title, even though he never played the copyrighted melody composed by Johnny Green.)

Link #3 "Cloudburst" L. H. & R. (2:18)

This was track 1 on their 1962 eponymously titled album. The lyrics go by at a very rapid tempo. If you need to read them, you can read the lyrics at [https://www.lyricsfreak.com/l/lambert+hendricks+ross/cloudburst\\_20168308.html](https://www.lyricsfreak.com/l/lambert+hendricks+ross/cloudburst_20168308.html) The song was written in 1955 by Leroy Kirkland and Jimmy Harris. I have seen it said that the original solo was by Wardell Gray (just like "Twisted") but I cannot find that solo and I have reason to doubt the attribution. Here is the track and a visual of the original album art.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dx4SECmHI8Y>

Link #4 Annie Ross sings her original lyrics "Twisted." Twisted is a clever, engaging tune that has been covered by many singers, including Joni Mitchell, Bette Midler, and jazz singers Mark Murphy and Jane Monheit. You can hear the original solo by Wardell Gray at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99CJEPIeGml>. Here is the link to Annie Ross's version, filmed at the Hefner mansion in 1959.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6OYSDYuvoA>

Link 5: “Cottontail” by L. H. & R. based on Duke Ellington’s song of the same name and Ben Webster’s solo. A delightful humorous story about a rabbit stealing carrots from a garden, while the farmer patrols it with a shotgun.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddlm7eiZfR4>

If you want to hear Ellington’s original tune in a version with some amazing acrobatic dancers, click on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH1Fru-RttA>

Link #6: Just for fun, and it is fun!, try “Gimme That Wine,” words and music by Jon Hendricks. The tune was covered in the 1970s by Blood, Sweat, & Tears and several other groups.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJnQoi8DSE8>

Link #7 “Airegin” by Sonny Rollins is unusual foray an by the trio into scat-singing with Hendricks replicating Sonny Rollins’s solo at a seemingly impossible tempo. The audio recording of this live set is not very good, but watching Hendricks and Lambert scat sing at this tempo is worth it. If you want to hear a better audio version but mixed with instrumental solos, you can click on the second link.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UI54NWmwLxs> (preferable viewing)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZ-Jb87tMC4> (preferable audio)

There are other L. H. & R. tracks on Youtube, but I will let you explore on your own.

Two bands that are derivative of L. H. & R. ( not to imply their music lacks authenticity) are The double Six of Paris (who were popular in the 1960s) and Manhattan Transfer, which formed in the late 1970s and has recorded well into the 21st Century. If you enjoy vocalese, I invite you to explore these two groups on your music streaming service.