

All That Jazz

Vocalist Dane Vannatter was ready to pack his bags and move to New York. What made him change his mind?



PHOTO: JULIEANNE RING

Indiana-born Dane Vannatter makes his home on the North Shore, and that's the way he likes it. Despite powerful pleas from the New York jazz scene to move to the Big Apple, Vannatter has opted for what he calls a "sane life" singing in his own back yard. Not that the local press isn't delighted. Virtually every radio station that plays jazz...any publication that reports on the club scene...knows Vannatter's name and sings his praises. WGBH's Ron Della Chiesa calls him "an artist who defines the purest aspects of intimate singing." Steve Greenlee of *The Boston Globe* says Dane's voice "has a floating quality that gets in your head and won't leave." Jazz vocalist Carol Sloane calls Dane her "favorite among the new young male singers."

In this exclusive PortFolio interview, Vannatter talks about his love of singing, and of the quirky (and moooving way) he broke into the world of showbiz.

— KATE BROUGHTON

Q. How important was music to you as you were growing up?

A. The music in my family came from my grandmother. Both of my grandparents were Fundamentalist ministers. My grandmother didn't have TV. She played guitar and had a piano, and so a lot of our time was spent singing together. For the first nine years of my life, up until she died, she instilled in me that music was huge. It was huge in our church, too.

Q. How old were you when you decided to make a life and profession of singing?

A. I finally got up the nerve to sing in the church, but I didn't do any solo singing in public until much later. In my fantasy world, I was going to be a singer, but I still had this fear of doing it in front of people. In the shower, or at home, I was awesome. But part of the problem was that I didn't have an outlet. I was convinced the only place you got to do the kind of music I liked – jazz, the old standards – was in a lounge in a Holiday Inn off some forgotten highway, and the thought didn't much appeal to me.

Q. So what finally made you change your mind?

A. When I was about thirty years old, some major life changes happened. My father died, my mother had been long gone, and my best friend in Boston died. On a black humor level I thought, "Gosh, I'm losing my audience before I ever started." And I wondered, "how many more opportunities and people are going to slip by?" Then it just happened, without me consciously going for it. It was Halloween, and a bunch of us had gone to Diamond Jim's at the Lenox Hotel after work to say goodbye to a friend who was moving to Chicago. They were having a costume contest, and I happened to have a cow costume I had worn that day at my job. It was great: it had a head with horns, an udder, and everything. I decided to put on the costume and when I came out of the changing room the restaurant people asked, "What are you going to sing?" I said, "What do you mean, sing?" They told me that since I was at a piano bar, I had to sing to be in the contest. I figured "Well if I stink, I'm already in costume so I can't mess up."

Q. What was the reaction from your friends?

A. They were all laughing because they thought it was a joke; none of them had ever heard me sing. I went to the pianist and said I'd do "Summertime," one of the only songs I knew all the lyrics to completely. He gave me the original key and plunked out a few notes, and we just did it. I let it out with such force, it was almost as if my life depended on it. The reception was huge.

Q. How quickly did your career unfold after that?

A. At the end of the evening, Diamond Jim's manager invited me to their singing competition three weeks from then. This was big stuff, with conservatory students in their tuxedos and sheet music. Long story short, I won. It was a huge treat. And that was the point of no return. Slowly but surely I started looking for workshops and started going to more open mike events, trying to meet musicians. Little by little the career unfolded. I had my first show at Scullers maybe ten years ago.

Q. How much traveling does your work entail?

A. If I wanted to be more on the road, I suppose I would be. But I have chosen to have a life; home is really important to me. Back in 1995, when things were really heating up for me in New York, I would get reviews that would say things, "Let's hope Dane moves here soon so he can realize his true potential." And I'd think, "How presumptuous to believe that I can't fulfill my potential unless I move to New York." Even so, I was close to packing my bags. I had a farewell party, the whole works. Then one day as I was riding the commuter rail to visit a friend in Rockport, we were going by this section by the water, and I thought, "This is home. I don't want to move to New York." It was one of those moments when you face your heart of hearts and realize you have to take a risk and do what you know is really right for you. I wanted to have a career, but I didn't want to up-end my life. And I knew that moving to New York wasn't going to do my soul any good.

Q. What impact did this decision have on your career?

A. Around the time when I made this decision, it seemed that the whole industry changed. The internet just exploded. It's great because it enables you to have a career and live where you want. I can sit around and read my email in my pajamas. I'll get a message from a disc jockey in Djakarta who says he found my web site and wants my CDs. A station in Copenhagen wanted to play my music so I sent something to them. And last week, I got two letters from women in Croatia who are crazy about my music. It's not because I toured, but because the internet is doing my touring for me.

Q. Does this mean you're becoming more of a studio musician than an on-stage performer?

A. Not necessarily, although some people ask me why I don't sing more. For one thing, I don't want to sell myself short. I'll negotiate money with you, but I won't compromise the nature of the performance. I've played in places that would have bar room brawls with people flying through the air, or drunks wanting to come up on stage and sing with me. The same goes for being on the road all the time.

Q. What's your idea of the perfect performance venue?

A. A great sound system is so important. If a place serves food and has a bar, you have tinkling of glassware and blenders going off. If you have the alternative, you're in a concert hall. You're usually up on a stage, physically removed and up higher than the audience so you have to change your stage presence, be a bit bigger. I love Regattabar. It holds about 250-300 people, which is just enough to maintain intimacy. Berklee Performance Center is acoustically primo, and that would definitely be something I'd have my eye on in Boston. The big tragedy these days is that the number of good places to play is few and far between.

Q. Why do you feel the club scene is shrinking?

A. A lot has to do with the fact that there are more options for home entertainment today. I'm just as guilty as everyone else. When you have so many ways to entertain yourself at home, musically or with

movies, you have to have a really good reason for going out. Unfortunately, when you have clubs closing, like House of Blues or the Kendall Café, more musicians are vying for time in the few remaining spots. It's a big shame, and I think the whole area should be ashamed. There's a major music school and two conservatories and we can't support more clubs? They don't have to be jazz clubs. It's sad that you can't play in your own back yard.

Q. Would you describe yourself as a jazz singer, or a cabaret singer?

A. To me, jazz is a lot broader although some people would disagree with me. The thing with cabaret is, the definition has changed so drastically. It used to be associated with small venues, a definite intimacy between performer and audience. Awhile ago I was accepted into a seven-day program called the Cabaret Symposium. We worked with major teachers, pianists, Margaret Whiting, Kay Starr, and others. What they promoted as "cabaret" was a strong emphasis on lyrics, but also stripping down your layers to bring yourself to the song.

Q. Why is cabaret such a target for lampooning?

A. In cabaret, there's the danger of self indulgence. It sometimes attracts the kinds of people who want to use the stage to work through their issues. To them, it's not about music, it's not about intimacy. It's all about them. Cabaret is not a therapy session, but a lot of cabaret people treat it like that. They'll tell

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these long drawn out stories that take more time than the song they're leading up to. To me, no matter what style of music you do, you have to be mindful of what you're doing. If you're singing about love that's lost and someone who's walked out on you, you'd better hope that your audience is feeling that emotion and not "Oh wow, I feel bad for the singer."

Q. You've been praised for the restraint you use in your singing. But these days, it seems that vocal gymnastics are taking the place of subtle phrasing and delivery. Are you tempted to join the crowd?

A. Vocal gymnastics like scatting or hitting wild notes used to be very powerful tools for singers to have at their disposal. The good ones – Sarah Vaughan, Aretha Franklin, Ella Fitzgerald – used them sparingly and precisely. But now it's just the standard. For a great singer to be in the Top Ten, especially a female, it's almost required and has almost nothing to do with the lyrical element. It's too bad, because it has become a substitute for emotion and has taken the place of subtle delivery and attention to phrasing. Somewhere in there is a happy medium where a singer is mindful, knows the music, knows the composition inside and out and delivers the lyrics in a meaningful, personal way. You should be singing to the audience, not at them. Louis Armstrong said you scat only when the emotions dictate, when words can't say what you're feeling. That's my guiding concept, rather than feeling like I have to oversing in order to be carried in the jazz section of a record store.

Q. Who do you like to listen to?

A. I do like Diana Krall, and I think Karrin Allyson,

who's out of Chicago, is fabulous. And the mid-dinosaurs – singers like Natalie Cole, Shirley Horn – are still wonderful. As far as male singers go, there's a cabaret singer in New York named Phillip Officer. He really wraps his voice around lyrics nicely. When it comes to jazz, Freddy Cole – Nat's brother – is just hitting his stride. Overall, though, there's really no one I like as much as some of the older guys. That's what is so great about this style of music. It's not like pole vaulting. You don't have to stop when you're twenty-four.

Q. What about other styles of music?

A. I listen to all kinds of things. Just recently, I saw Rickie Lee Jones at the Somerville Theater and it was one of the best shows I've seen in years. The same goes for Tracy Chapman. They're both past their huge hit-making period, but they seem like stronger singers, and much stronger performers, now. Neither of these performers came across as though they were going through the motions. Rickie Lee did Coolsville from her first album, and it was incredible. The music from her new CD is probably the best stuff she has ever done.

Q. You are so heavily committed to choosing songs with great lyrics. Where are the new lyrics coming from?

A. To me, the classic song writers, Rogers and Hart, Cole Porter, are still the kings. Every now and then a contemporary song will come along that I will file away. But new stuff just isn't being written that com-

pires to the great American songbook. Right after Motown and before disco, the Philadelphia sound came along and produced the Spinners, the Manhattans, Dion Warwick, and others. I do a lot of that music because it's so soulful, but still lyrically rich. The lyricists aren't household names, though. Writers like Tom Bell haven't gone down in the history books the way Cole Porter has.

Q. Do you retrofit songs from other genres?

A. Occasionally. One of the places I find new things to add to my repertoire is folk music. The songs are usually incredibly personal, and equal attention is placed on lyrics and the music. Joni Mitchell and Bonnie Raitt are great examples. Judy Collins's *The Moon's a Harsh Mistress* is an example of a song we adapted. We don't do it all the time, but sometimes we'll pull it out and people are amazed at how well it translates into a jazz presentation.

Q. Your reviews remain terrific, and people would love to see more of you. Is there any chance that you'll eventually get back on the road or push for national visibility?

A. Some wonderful things have happened to me professionally. 1997 was a huge year for me. I was everywhere: San Francisco, cruises, you name it. But I couldn't imagine doing it 365 days a year. For me it's important to have a balanced life. I'd love for more to happen, but I have to keep myself healthy and sane. To me, art and books and music feed each other. Or long walks. I don't know how other performers fuel themselves. To live the life of a touring musician, you usually have to shift into automatic pilot and I can't imagine living – or singing – that way.