



Sachal Vasandani crooning in an age of Auto-Tune

By Mark Wedel



NEW YORK — In the era of Auto-Tune, a jazz singer who can control his voice without digital help seems a throwback to the age when the likes of Sinatra, Bennett and Vaughan were crossing over to the pop charts.

Such a singer, [Sachal Vasandani](#), has been working on his voice for much of his life.

“Even when I was in high school, I thought that I had a little bit of aptitude, but I also really loved it. I felt that it was going to be the most direct way to channel my energy as a force, hopefully for good,” Vasandani said from his home in New York City.

He studied jazz and classical music at the University of Michigan, and was named Collegiate Jazz Vocalist of 1999 by [DownBeat](#). He also studied economics at Ann Arbor. When he arrived in New York, he went to work on Wall Street as an investment banker.

Was that not an energy channel for good?

“Hah! That’s right on,” Vasandani answered. “But, you know, I think sometimes we have to go away from the things we love in order to appreciate them more.”

Vasandani traveled often through Kalamazoo, going between Ann Arbor and his hometown, Chicago. He’ll make his performance debut here for the [Fontana Chamber Arts](#) Summer Festival concert, “Cole Porter and the American Songbook” on Saturday.

Vasandani, with his group, will sing Porter songs and other standards, as well as songs from his three albums. He will be joined by [Sandro Albert](#) (guitar), [Joseph Lepore](#) (bass) and [Quincy Davis](#) (drums).

Vasandani grew up in an Indian-American home where his music-loving parents exposed him to a wide range of jazz and pop, as well as the music of India. At U-M, he knew what he wanted to do, but he also knew he'd need a day job if he were to do it in New York City.

"I had to make some tough choices," he said.

The Wall Street job made things easier as he tried to find work as a singer in an expensive city. Vasandani eventually landed gigs in clubs, then was selected by Wynton Marsalis to sing at Lincoln Center.

He didn't have to work on Wall Street for more than a year.

His early concerts and first albums, "Eyes Wide Open" (Mack Avenue, 2007) and "We Move" (Mack, 2009), got increasingly good reviews.

In a 2010 concert review, the New York Times wrote that Vasandani "has made his case for a limber, pop-literate, semi-confessional strain of modern jazz singing. Within his peer group, he's more like Jamie Cullum than Michael Buble, though his style is more interior than either of theirs and truer to a jazz impulse of melodic elaboration."

Reviewers note that Vasandani has roots in jazz, but shows pop tendencies. The observation begs the question of whether Vasandani could have the kind of crossover appeal Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra enjoyed long ago. Could Vasandani have songs on non-jazz charts?

"I hope so," he said.

But Vasandani said it's less about increased sales and more about having "more people you can touch." Among male jazz vocalists, he said, "there's a lot of aping and caricature of that (mid-century) music, particularly Sinatra."

Nonetheless, Vasandani loves the masters and finds inspiration listening to "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning," Sinatra's most melancholy album.

"I never even knew I had those emotions (until) when listening to this type of record," he said.

Vasandani hopes his listeners have the same response. When a listener reacts with "'Wow! I haven't felt that through any other channel,' then we're doing our jobs as musicians," he said.

Being a jazz singer in the 21st century has its demands, he said.

"(It) just means that you're supposed to just continue to be honest and true," he said. "My personal version includes telling stories that need to be told and improvising while I'm doing it. Share not only the energy of the story, but the energy of the instant we're living in and sharing."

Vasandani is excited about his latest release, "Hi-Fly," which came out in late June on Mack Avenue.

Among the standards and originals on the release (Vasandani is a rarity among jazz vocalists, often writing his own songs) are two duets with a hero, and now friend, Jon Hendricks.

The main lesson Vasandani said he has learned from Hendricks is "how to keep the spirit alive. I've seen him engage in the most spirited and engaging music-making at 89."

Vasandani said he's determined to remember that lesson from Hendricks as he continues in his career.

"There's ups and downs," he said, "but something about Jon's navigation through that, and the pure joy that allows him to do what he does, that's inspiring."