



THE MANHATTAN TRANSFER

It's been nearly thirty-five years since Tim Hauser, a former Madison Avenue marketing executive, paid his bills by driving a New York City cab while aspiring to form a harmony vocal quartet *sui generis* that could authentically embrace varied musical styles, and still create something wholly unique in the field of American popular song.

Hauser had been in doo-wop groups, folk groups, and even in a short-lived quintet named The Manhattan Transfer, but as the sounds of jazz, R&B, pop, rock 'n' roll, salsa and swing poured out of brownstones, Hauser now dreamt of four-part harmonies without limits.

In the Fall of 1972, Hauser's taxi fare was an aspiring young singer named Laurel Massé, who was familiar with the sole album by Hauser's earlier Manhattan Transfer combo, and was looking to form a group. A few weeks later, another of Hauser's fares invited him to a party where he met Brooklyn native Janis Siegel; although already in a group, Siegel agreed to help out on some demos and before long she was the third member of The Manhattan Transfer. As Hauser, Massé and Siegel began rehearsing, Massé's then-boyfriend, who was drumming in a Broadway pit band, introduced Hauser and Siegel to Alan Paul, who was co-starring in the original production of *Grease*, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In 1974 the group began performing regularly throughout New York City at Trude Hellers, Mercer Arts Center, Max's Kansas City, Club 82, and other cutting edge cabaret venues. By the end of the year they were the number one live attraction in New York City, prompting Newsweek to send a writer to their show at Reno Sweeney's in Greenwich Village to report on this growing phenomenon.

Signed to Atlantic Records by the legendary head of the label, Ahmet Ertegun, the group released their self-titled debut in 1975; the second single from the album, a remake of the Friendly Brothers gospel classic "Operator," gave the group their first national hit. "Operator" took radio stations by storm, from the opening four-part a cappella intro to Siegel's emotional lead vocal, eventually peaking in the Top 20.

As "Operator" rose up the charts, the group was invited to make guest appearances on various variety shows and television specials. Hollywood took notice; and the band was soon tapped to helm a weekly hour-long summer replacement comedy-variety show. *The Manhattan Transfer* show premiered on August 10, 1975, broadcast in CBS' old Ed Sullivan time slot, Sunday nights at 8:00PM. Despite censors restricting performances of some of their more risqué songs ("Well Well Well, My Cat Fell In The Well"), and some in the writing staff trying to appeal to youngsters who normally watched *The Wonderful World of Disney* at that hour, the band still managed to do some wonderful things including featuring Bob Marley and the Wailers in their first US television appearance.

Their next two albums, *Coming Out* and *Pastiche*, brought them a string of Top 10 hits in Europe and produced a #1 smash in Britain and France with "Chanson d'Amour."

In 1978, Massé was injured in a car accident and during her convalescence, decided not to rejoin the group that had since moved to California. One of many who auditioned for her slot was Cheryl Bentyne, a stunning singer from Mt. Vernon, Washington, and a four-year veteran of The New Deal Rhythm Band. At Bentyne's dazzling audition, the other Manhattan Transfer members immediately felt her impact, invited her to join, and, as Paul puts it, "The Transfer's second phase began."

The first album featuring the now legendary quartet of Hauser, Siegel, Paul & Bentyne was 1979's *Extensions* which earned the band another smash (#1 in New York and #2 in Los Angeles) with "Twilight Zone/Twilight Tone" - their updated take on, and, if you will, extension of, the theme to the Rod Serling hosted program of the same name. The album also featured a vocal remake of the Weather Report classic "Birdland," with lyrics by Jon Hendricks, that would go on to be recognized as the group's anthem, and earn them their first two Grammy Awards for *Best Jazz Fusion Performance, Vocal or Instrumental* and *Best Arrangement For Voices* for Siegel's work on the song.

The group went from strength to strength, when in 1981, they became the first group ever to win Grammy Awards in both Pop and Jazz categories in the same year - *Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal* for "Boy From New York City," and *Best Jazz Performance, Duo or Group* for "Until I Met You (Corner Pocket)," both from their fifth studio long player, *Mecca for Moderns*.

In 1982 and 1983 the group won consecutive Grammy Awards in the *Best Jazz Vocal Performance, Duo or Group* category for, respectively, "Route 66" and "Why Not!"

The critical praise and commercial success of the group's first seven studio albums could hardly have prepared them for the monumental 12 Grammy nominations they received in 1985 for the album *Vocalese*. Those 12 nominations made *Vocalese* the single greatest Grammy nominated album in one year, and cemented the group's status as one of the most important and innovative vocal groups in the history of popular music.

Not willing, or able, to rest on their laurels, the band's next studio album was the ground breaking *Brasil*. Much as the seminal *Getz/Gilberto* album 23 years earlier had introduced American audiences to the talents of Brazilian songwriter Antonio Carlos Jobim, *Brasil* introduced audiences to the next generation of tropical talent - featuring songs by Ivan Lins, Milton Nascimento, Djavan, and Gilberto Gil. The album won the Grammy for *Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal*.

The Manhattan Transfer closed out the decade by completing a ten-year sweep (1980-1990) as the "Best Vocal Group" in both the annual DownBeat and Playboy jazz polls.

In the 1990s, the group's restless creative energy found them writing more original material (*The Offbeat Of Avenues* which earned them yet another Grammy for *Best Contemporary Jazz Performance*), and tackling seasonal standards (*The Christmas Album* arranged by Johnny Mandel, became one of the five best selling Christmas albums on Columbia - the label with the largest Christmas catalogue, and is an annual shopping mall favorite to this day), children's music (*The Manhattan Transfer Meets Tubby The Tuba*), 1950's & 1960's popular music (*Tonin'*), and, foreshadowing the success of "Dancing With The Stars," different genres of swing music (*Swing*).

If one is judged by the company they keep, this decade found the group recording with some impressive company indeed - Tony Bennett, Bette Midler, Smokey Robinson, Laura Nyro, Phil Collins, B.B. King, Chaka Khan, James Taylor, and the original Jersey Boy, Frankie Valli.

Heading into the new millennium, with worldwide sales in the millions, Grammy Awards by the dozen, and as veterans of sold-out world tours, The Manhattan Transfer once again proved their uncanny knack for being ahead of the times by teaming up with the then relatively unknown, but future Grammy Award winning, producer Craig Street to record their tribute to the music of Louis Armstrong (*The Spirit Of St. Louis*).

The Spirit Of St. Louis was followed by 2003's live album *Couldn't Be Hotter* that "finally captured the magic of their live performances on disc" (AllMusic), 2004's *Vibrate*, a second foray into Christmas music (*An Acapella Christmas*), and an album of newly recorded symphonic versions of some of their greatest hits (2006's *The Symphony Sessions*).

The release of *The Definitive Pop Collection*, a 2-disc retrospective of the group's greatest hits, provides not only an opportunity to look back at one of the greatest bodies of work in American popular music, but also the chance to look ahead to 2008, the 35th Anniversary of a group that is restless, adventurous, limitless and, as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* so aptly put it, a group that "still can sound dangerous! "