

The Pfister Sisters - Times Picayune Article

By Keith Spers
Music writer

LIVING IN HARMONY

'Change in the Weather' suits the Pfister Sisters

MUSIC

In 2004, the Pfister Sisters will mark their 25th anniversary by looking back while looking forward, same as always.

As implied by its title, the Pfister Sisters' new "Change in the Weather" CD reflects a season of change. It is the vocal trio's first recording with Debbie Davis, who joined founders Holley Bendtsen and Yvette Voelker Cuccia four years ago. "Change" is also the first of the three Pfister CDs produced by the Sisters themselves, and the first released on their own label, Mambo Goddess Records.

But once again, their underlying motivation is to celebrate the Boswell Sisters. The three Boswell girls grew up in New Orleans early in the 20th century, absorbing the same varied African and European influences as pioneering jazz instrumentalists. They formed a vocal trio and moved first to the West Coast, then New York. Featured on a national radio show, they helped usher in the swing era, enjoying widespread acclaim until two of the sisters married and the group dissolved in the 1930s. But they left a lasting impression on scores of singers, most notably the Andrews Sisters, of "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" fame, and Ella Fitzgerald.

The Pfister Sisters, Yvette Voelker Cuccia, left, Holley Bendtsen and Debbie Davis, celebrate their new CD, "Change in the Weather," tonight at Soud Harbor.



of them," Bendtsen said. "He got eight or nine of them so tight by listening to the old '30s arrangements and rekindling them. We re-recorded 'I Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)' just to get his rise start in."

A solid supporting cast backs the singers on "Change in the Weather," including longtime collaborator Jim Ball on trumpet, bass, and guitar. All back at Soud Harbor, said Bendtsen, they're all so good and they're all out there making their livings in a zillion different bands.

Intricate three-part harmonies are at the heart of the Pfister's swing, but the band's contributions put a Big Easy spin on the sound and bring the arrangements to life, as evidenced by Miller's tear de force trumpet solo in "Lissom Fairs."

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Times Picayune Lagniappe
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Living In Harmony "Change in the Weather" suits the Pfister Sisters

In 2004, the **Pfister Sisters** will mark their 25th anniversary by looking back, while looking forward, same as always.

As implied by its title, the Pfister Sisters' new "Change in the Weather" CD reflects a season of change. It is the vocal trio's first recording with **Debbie Davis**, who joined founders **Holley Bendtsen** and **Yvette Voelker Cuccia** four years ago. "Change" is also the first of the three Pfister CDs produced by the Sisters themselves, and the first released on their own label, Mambo Goddess Records.

But once again, their underlying motivation is to celebrate the **Boswell Sisters**. The three Boswell girls grew up in New Orleans early in the 20th century, absorbing the same varied African and European influences as pioneering jazz instrumentalists. They formed a vocal trio and moved first to the West Coast, then New York. Featured on a national radio show, they helped usher in the swing era, enjoying widespread acclaim until two of the sisters married and the group dissolved in the 1930s. But they left a lasting impression on scores of singers, most notably the **Andrews Sisters**, of "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" fame, and **Ella Fitzgerald**.

"The **Boswells** were so influential on American music and so successful that nobody realizes that they are indigenous to New Orleans," Bendtsen said. "The whole jazz vocal group thing was started by two groups: The Boswell Sisters and the **Mills Brothers**. And the Boswells recorded first, in 1925, right along with **Jelly Roll Morten** and **Louis Armstrong**."

The Pfister Sisters' previous release, "All's Well That's Boswell," consisted entirely of Boswell Sisters material. This time, they expanded their repertoire to include other pre-World War II favorites influenced by the Boswells. In addition to "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," the Pfisters recorded the Andrews Sisters' first big hit, "Bei Mir Bist du Schon," which bore more than a trace of the Boswells' frenetic swing. "We wanted to show the larger influence," Cuccia said, "that the Boswells had on jazz."

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Bendtsen, a newly converted Boswells fan, first assembled the Pfister Sisters in 1979 for a gig with the **New Leviathan Oriental Foxtrot Orchestra**; the New Leviathan's leader, **George Schmidt**, concocted the Pfister name. They reprised their collaboration at Jazzfest, and have continued on.

The Sisters' future was uncertain after original member **Suzi Malone** moved to Maine in 1999. But Bendtsen and Cuccia recruited Davis to fill the vacancy. Davis then enlisted her husband, **Matt Perrine**, to write horn charts for the group.

"He went back and did charts for things we had already recorded, and improved the hell out of them," Bendtsen said. "He got eight or nine of them so tight by listening to the old '30s arrangements and redoing them. We re-recorded 'It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)' just to get his nice chart in."

A solid supporting cast backs the singers on "Change in the Weather," including longtime collaborator **Amasa Miller** on piano, **Jim Markway** on bass, **Jimmy Ballero** on guitar, **Gerald French** on drums, **Charlie Miller** on trumpet, **Rick Trolsen** on trombone and **Ken "Snakebite" Jacobs** on saxophone, with **Hector Gallardo** guesting on percussion. All but Gallardo are slated to back the Pfister Sisters tonight at Snug Harbor.

"We're so proud to have these musicians work with us," Cuccia said. "They're the working-class musicians of New Orleans – they're not famous, but they're all so good and they're all out there making their livings in a zillion different bands."

Intricate three-part harmonies are at the heart of the Pfisters' swing, but the band's contributions put a Big Easy spin on the sound and bring the arrangements to life, as evidenced by Miller's tour de force trumpet solo in "Laissez Faire."

"It's not easy music to do," Cuccia said. "It takes a willingness to work and rehearse. It's hard to find that, particularly in a city where everybody jams and is very good at fitting in with whatever is going on in the moment. It becomes easy to say, 'We don't need to rehearse, let's just go with it.' You get a lot of wonderful stuff that way, but this particular music needs to be worked on."

"Change in the Weather" opens with "It's the Girl," a typically challenging Boswell number. Tempo changes fly out of nowhere, and the singers stretch and hold notes in unison, then unleash a lickety-split run. **Cole Porter's** "Why Can't You Behave?" is restructured to accommodate three-part harmonies. The recordings of "There'll Be Some Changes Made," "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," and "You Oughta' Be in Pictures" are based on Boswell arrangements. Gallardo refits **Glen Miller's** "Moonlight Serenade" with a subversive bolero rhythm. The Pfisters cooked up their own arrangement of **Louis Prima's** "Sing, Sing, Sing" with a horn chart by Charlie Miller.

"Laissez Faire," the album's lone original composition, is a collaboration between Bendtsen, Amasa Miller and **Phil Parnell**. The lyrics describe the "mambo goddess" that is the namesake of the group's label.

"That's my name for New Orleans," Bendtsen said. "To me, the mambo goddess has a basket on her head, walking through the French Quarter with a certain beat. That beat is in "Laissez Faire."

Recording the overly familiar "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" proved to be an unexpected challenge. "We'd been doing it as a throwaway for 20 years, and we'd never actually spent any time trying to make it tight," Bendtsen said. "When we heard our first take of it, we realized, 'This isn't sounding right.' Finally by the end, it's a smoking cut."

- Keith Spera (New Orleans, LA)

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The Pfister Sisters - Dirty Linen Article

Dirty Linen
Folk, Electric Folk, Traditional and World
Music
Feb/Mar '96

The Pfister Sisters New Orleans Great Southern Records

We know they are not really sisters. But when **Holley Bendtsen**, **Suzie Malone**, and **Yvette Voelker** step into the singers' box as the sophisticated sounding **Pfister Sisters**, mercy, they can tie wit, tradition, subversion (**Marx Brothers** variety), lust, devotion (in both sacred and profane forms), and New Orleans *joie de vivre* into a gyroscopic mirrored ball.

Pianist-arranger-producer **Amasa Miller** brings in Crescent City funky bass star **George Porter**, **John Vidacovich** for drummer, **Ken "Snakebite" Jacobs** on tenor saxophone, **Wendell Brunious** blowing trumpet, and **John Malone** blowing his own lips, and these Mr. Pfisters offer the kind of cutting support one is used to encountering only at the pinnacles of jazz. Underfunded Great Southern Records founder **John Berthelot** is to be commended for persevering at finally getting this mid-1980s slice of vinyl issued on CD. Berthelot took no shortcuts in the process, enlisting **Mark Bingham** and **Don Turnipseed** to digitally gussy up the original tapes, which now separate out the magnificently discrete elements, and bring every lip-licking nuance to the fore.

Nearly half of these 16 songs come from the repertoire of the **Boswell Sisters**, New Orleans' first ladies of song – whose complex overstepping three-part vocalizing got mainstreamed into the mass marketable **Andrews Sisters** and other, later, girl groups. Two bonus tracks recorded in the late 1980s have been added to this CD re-issue. One of them, "Down at the Jazz Fest," is a hot-tot-hot roll call of Orleanian musical cool. . . just wave as your faves go by. **Cole Porter's** "It's Too Darn Hot" fits these Pfisters like a damp, curvaceous glove.

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- Mitch Ritter (Berkeley, CA)

The Pfister Sisters - Gambit Weekly Article

Gambit Weekly, New Orleans
April 11, 2000

Sister to Sister

With their tribute to the Boswell Sisters, the Pfister Sisters have provided a link to the New Orleans' musical past.

As a rule, tribute albums and acts, no matter how well-intentioned, are to be avoided. "A Tribute to **Louis Armstrong**," or **Professor Longhair**, or **Fats Domino** – why bother with them when the original recordings are so well-known and accessible?

What the **Pfister Sisters** have done is another story. It's no exaggeration to say they've hipped thousands of locals to one of the (sadly) most under-recognized of New Orleans groups: the **Boswell Sisters**.

The **Boswells – Martha, Vet and Connie** (also known as **Connee**) – grew up on Camp Street 90 years ago during the last days of Storyville. After extensive classical training, they switched to jazz and recorded their first sides as teens in 1925, a mere two years after **Jelly Roll Morton** and other jazz greats waxed their first cuts. Their earliest influences were **Mamie Smith**, **Bessie Smith**, **Enrico Caruso** and the colossus of early jazz singing, **Louis Armstrong**. From **Satchmo**, they learned how to phrase, attack certain notes, use dynamics and the like. They also borrowed his habit of throwing out the melody altogether and fashioning a simpler, more swinging line.

The sisters hit their stride around 1930, and soon became nationally known through radio and movie shorts. In 1936, they disbanded when Martha and Vet each married. Connee continued for many years as a solo act.

It's possible to think of the Boswells as a conduit between Armstrong's innovations and white pop Americana like the **Andrews Sisters**. In fact, they also influenced the black musicians of their day, such as the **Mills Brothers** and a young **Ella Fitzgerald**, who was unstinting in her praise of Connee Boswell as her main inspiration. The sisters were pioneers in vocal harmony, using arrangements with as many as four or five tempo changes – which somehow always worked. They recorded rumba rhythms 15 years before **Professor Longhair**, and might have been the first New Orleans musicians to record with a clave beat. And they certainly had the Crescent City penchant for pleasure at all costs: their music is out-and-out loony at times, as though delighting themselves was as important as entertaining their listeners.

(Continued on Page 2)

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BY TOM MCDERMOTT



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The Pfister Sisters (Haley Beshtee, Stacy Malone and Yvette Voelker-Cuccia) began the Boswell act about 20 years ago, supplementing their core Boswell repertoire over the years with original tunes and covers of New Orleans rhythm and blues. They disbanded in the '90s before

For their reunion album,
All's Well That's Boswell,
the Pfister Sisters
used only New Orleans
musicians.

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The Pfister Sisters (**Holley Bendtsen, Suzy Malone** and **Yvette Voelker Cuccia**) began their Boswell Act about 20 years ago, supplementing their core Boswell repertoire over the years with original tunes and covers of New Orleans rhythm and blues. They disbanded in the '90s before reuniting for the recently released **All's Well That's Boswell** on Audiophile Records. Whereas the Boswells employed sidemen from the **Dorsey Brothers'** orchestras, the Pfisters are pushing this as the first CD of Boswell material recorded exclusively with New Orleans musicians. Trumpeter **Charlie Miller** captures sideman honors here, tastefully tooting away like a refugee from a **Raymond Scott** session.

The Pfisters' vocal blend is a pleasing one, and for the most part they nail the hairpin curves of the treacherous original arrangements. Since the recording, Suzy Malone has left the group to be replaced by **Debbie Davis**, best know locally for her work with **Guitar Vic & the Slicktones**. "Debbie is fitting in astonishingly well," says Bendtsen, "and it's a wonderful feeling to start up again and keep the Boswells' music alive." This listener, for one, has the Pfisters to thank for exposure to some of the most charming music to ever come out of New Orleans.

- Tom McDermott (New Orleans, LA)



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The Pfister Sisters
9 p.m. and 11 p.m. Sunday, April 13
Snug Harbor, 626 Frenchmen St.,
949-0696

Since their 1930s heyday, few vocal groups have dared to emulate New Orleans' world-famous Boswell Sisters, but the Pfister Sisters have been doing it since the late '70s. Like the Boswells, the Pfister Sisters pull off astonishing feats of vocal acrobatics, performing songs with close harmonies and varying tempos, swinging numbers that take you back to the days when jazz was new. Just after the release of 2000's *All's Well That's Boswell*, the Sisters' middle-part singer Suzy Malone left town and local siren Debbie Davis stepped up to the challenge. With original members Yvette Voelker Cuccia and Holley Bendtsen holding fast, the trio is currently in the studio again, recording with such revered musicians as trumpeter Charlie Miller, percussionist Hector Gallardo and the group's longtime pianist Armasa

Miller. "It's like a home says Voelker. Performing Sisters dash off new ori from Glenn Miller, Louis f Boswell Sisters. Admissi

Hot Seven
Gambit Weekly

BEST of the FEST
LAGNIAPPE PULLOUT GUIDE
HOTTEST SOUNDS AT THE FAIR GROUND
crowd pleasers TODAY don't miss

The Pfister Sisters
Today, 12P-2:30
Lagniappe and Jazz

The Pfister Sisters draw their inspiration and much of their repertoire from the Boswell Sisters, the New Orleans vocal jazz combo of the 1930s that supplied the blueprint for the Andrews Sisters and many others. The three "sisters" — Yvette Voelker, Holley Bendtsen and Debbie Davis — are backed by a swinging band that includes Armasa Miller on piano, Charlie Miller on trumpet, Shambhoo Jenkins on sax and Rick Trolson on trombone. In addition to Boswell and Andrews favorites, they do a hot version Louis Prima's "Sing Sing Sing."

Jon Cleary & The Absolute Monster Gentlemen
Today, 7:00-9:00
Lagniappe and Jazz

The likes of Bonnie Barr, Fain Adams and T.G. Maral have called on the skills of Jon Cleary.

Duke Robillard Blues Band
Today, 4:00-5:29
Pierres Blues

Galactic
Today, 5:00-7
Louisiana Heritage Stage

Best Of The Fest
Times Picayune Jazz Fest Issue