

Jay Clayton – vocals

“More than 20 years after [her debut recording] All Out, Clayton is still the most adventurous singer in jazz, a specialist in wordless improvisation who’s also expert in distending and finding new meanings in the melodies and lyrics of classic popular song”.

Francis Davis, **The Village Voice**, July 14, 2004

Jay Clayton is an internationally acclaimed vocalist, composer, and educator, whose work boldly spans the terrain between jazz and new music. Clayton’s pioneering vocal explorations placed her at the forefront of the free jazz movement and loft scene in the 1970s, where she counted among the first singers to incorporate poetry and electronics into her improvisations. She formed a long-term association with renowned minimalist composer Steve Reich.

With more than 40 recordings to her credit, Clayton has appeared alongside such formidable artists as Muhal Richard Abrams, Kirk Nurock, Stanley Cowell, Lee Konitz, and Fred Hersch, as well as fellow vocalists Jeanne Lee, Norma Winstone, Urszula Dudziak, Judy Niemack, and Bobby McFerrin. Her many accomplishments include grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Meet the Composer, and Chamber Music America (2004). She has worked with thousands of students in the United States and across the globe.

Clayton taught at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, Washington for 20 years. But she recently (2001) packed her bags (as well as many, many boxes) and returned to her spiritual home: New York City. “I was talking a walk and had an epiphany,” she says. “My kids were grown. I could travel and do master classes rather than keep the full professorship. And I really missed the energy of New York.”

Her task for the present is to revive the numerous collaborations on which her career has thrived and create new ones in the offing. Taking her cue from the great saxophonist Eric Dolphy, who recognized the importance of playing with many different musicians, Clayton loves performing in a wide variety of settings. The dialogue created with her talented band mates provides an awesome source of inspiration.

Clayton’s own performance dates appear under the heading the Jay Clayton Project, while she titles her work with other esteemed vocalists Different Voices. She co-leads a trio, Outskirts, with drummer Jerry Granelli and saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom, a fellow trailblazer in the realm of electronics. Her associations with both players have lasted 30 years. Clayton performs in multiple settings with pianist Kirk Nurock, in duos with guitarist Jack Wilkins and pianist Armen Donelian. Her other frequent collaborators include pianists Kirk Nurock, George Cables and Fritz Pauer; saxophonist Gary Thomas, bassist Mike Formanek, trombonist Ed Neumeister, and acclaimed tap dancer Brenda Bufalino. Clayton also revels in the demands of singing adventurous solo concerts.

A second generation Italian American, Jay Clayton was born Judith Colantone in Youngstown, Ohio in 1941. “My mother was a frustrated jazz singer from the big band era,” says Clayton. “She sang professionally when she was young, but there was no model for a married woman with children to have a career.” Young Judy began to pick up the standards she heard around the house and learned the accordion. She soon switched to piano and studied for several years. Her high school director encouraged her to go to music school and she spent the summer after graduation at the St. Louis Institute of Music.

The first in her family to attend college, Clayton enrolled in the music program at Miami University of Oxford, Ohio. She ultimately majored in education, considered a “safe” career for women. Of course, like many schools at the time, the only training available was classical. Behind the scenes, however, Clayton investigated the sounds of John Coltrane and Miles Davis. “We listened seriously to jazz,” she explains. “I saw Coltrane at a tiny bar in Cincinnati. The way he connected every note – taking the melody and changing it ever so slightly, amplifying it or simplifying it – amazed me. And what Miles was doing was singing through the horn—it was the horn players who got inside my soul.”

Although she could not know what lay ahead, Clayton’s training proved fortuitous when she came to New York City in 1963, a time of unprecedented experimentation. While she supported herself with office work by day, Clayton explored this exhilarating new scene at night. She continued to study voice privately; Paul Bain, a folk singer and master of classical technique, worked with her for five years. She also forged a mentoring relationship with saxophonist Steve Lacy. Through him, Clayton began to understand that she need not choose between standards and free music, that she could be influenced by the tradition and yet not bounded by it. Lacy helped connect her with her peers: through his bassist Louis Worell, Clayton met trumpeter Marc Levin and, her future husband, drummer Frank Clayton. (Her earliest recorded improvisations can be heard on Levin’s *Songs, Dances, and Prayers*.)

As the jazz scene in the clubs ebbed with the burgeoning interest in rock’n’roll, lofts became important artist showcases. By 1967, Clayton and husband Frank were presenting Jazz at the Loft in their home on Lispenard Street, one of the first loft concert series. Sam Rivers, Cecil McBee, JoAnne Brackeen, Dave Liebman, Pete Yellin, Hal Galper, Jeanne Lee, Bob Moses, Jiunie Booth, John Gilmore, and Jane Getz were among the featured musicians. Clayton also began to earn her own reputation as an avant-garde singer, developing her personal wordless vocabulary.

In 1971, Clayton began leading her own workshops on vocal improvisation and exploration, as well as sound and movement workshops with Michelle Berne and Jeanne Lee. She performed with Muhal Richard Abrams at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, a project recorded as *Spikumonesty* (Black Saint 1979), with John Fischer’s *Interface*, and Byron Morris’s *Unity*. As an independent artist already used to creating her own events, Clayton acted as the artistic director for the first ever Women in Jazz Festival, produced by Cobi Narita in 1979. She served as a consultant for ABC Cable’s *Women in Jazz*, compiling footage for the series.

The year 1980 saw the release of *All Out*, her first album as a leader, featuring Jane Ira Bloom, Harvie Swartz, Larry Karush, and Frank Clayton.

While her career in jazz began to blossom, Clayton simultaneously emerged on the new music scene. In 1971, minimalist composer Steve Reich was looking for a jazz singer with strong skills reading music. Clayton, whose loft was located conveniently around the corner from Reich's, fit the bill. She would appear on his recordings of several seminal works including *Drumming*, *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, and *Tehillim*. (Many of these recordings have recently been reissued on Nonesuch). Clayton toured with Steve Reich and *Musicians* for more than ten years and continues to appear with the ensemble.

Clayton's versatility would also lead her to make some of the first recordings of composer John Cage's vocal music. Even though Cage was not particularly interested in having his works recorded at the time, he heard Clayton perform *She's Asleep*. She would record it under the auspices of producer Heiner Stadler.

In 1982, Clayton left New York with her family to begin her professorship at Cornish College in Seattle, where she built the vocal jazz program. Although removed from the east coast jazz capital, Clayton found ready collaborators among her new faculty colleagues. With trombonist Julian Priester, bassist Gary Peacock, and drummer Jerry Granelli, she formed *Quartett*. Journalist Paul de Barros wrote of the group: "They push instantaneous group improvisation to the level it has always aspired to—mature, sonorous, interactive and driven by an understanding of form that is both logical and intuitive."

Having trained singers using a capella groups for years in her teaching, Clayton would also envision an ensemble of master vocal improvisers. In 1982, she was invited to a vocal jazz forum in Germany led by noted European producer Joachim-Ernst Berendt, to demonstrate what improvising voices could do. *Vocal Summit*, an international a capella ensemble, evolved from this meeting. At various times, its members included Urszula Dudziak, Michele Hendricks, Jeanne Lee, Bobby McFerrin, Lauren Newton, Norma Winston, and Bob Stoloff. Although the group disbanded, Clayton sees potential for a revival with Dudziak, Hendricks, and Winstone, the personnel on their recording *Conference of the Birds*.

Over the course of her career, Jay Clayton has performed and recorded throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. Since the 1990s, she has released several recordings including *Live at Jazz Alley* (ITM 1995), *Beautiful Love* (Sunnyside 1995), a duo record with renowned pianist Fred Hersch; *Circle Dancing* (Sunnyside 1997), and *Brooklyn 2000* (Sunnyside 2001). She has appeared at such prestigious venues as Lincoln Center, The Kennedy Center, Town Hall, Jazz Alley, The Kitchen, Sweet Rhythm, the Tin Palace, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and at major European jazz festivals including North Sea, Montmartre, and Donaueschingen.

A master teacher, Clayton creates a classroom environment that allows the students to experience musical freedom and gives them the security create their own sound vocabularies. Jay has taught numerous master classes and workshop including New York's City College, the Universität für Musik in Graz, Austria, and the Bud Shank Jazz Workshop. the Banff Center, which she co-taught with fellow vocalist Sheila Jordan. She was on the jazz faculty at Cornish Collage for the Art for 20 years and on the jazz faculty at Peabody Institute in Baltimore for 8 years. She is currently on the jazz faculty at Princeton University.

Her book, [Sing Your Story: A Practical Guide for Learning and Teaching the Art of Jazz Singing](#), was published by Advance Music in 2001.