

NICHOLAS, GLOVER &amp; WRAY

# They Blend Like A Perfect Martini

BY CALVIN AHLGREN

**T**hough they share the stage with the orchestrated nonchalance of professionals, there is something fresh about the three shimmering young women in designer evening suits (warmly curved silvery blonde, tall wheatstraw blonde, gamine sparkly-eyed brunette), singing marvelously athletic three-part harmony.

Experience is obvious in the polish of their delivery, and they cover the professional parameters thoroughly, but the three convey that they are enjoying this intimately rehearsed stuff almost too well: jazz, ballads, '60's pop tunes, original material that combines elements of both of those with something else.

They go by the name of Nicholas, Glover and Wray, and they have been making a name locally in cabaret circles over the past five years. But the monicker that sounds so like a Dickensian butcher-shop marquee tells nothing of their talents and/or ambition.

Their ages cluster on the watershed of 30 ("pardon us for aging," says Sheilah Glover, the tall blonde, one hand draped at her throat), and the group manages to combine the gee-whiz of the previous decade with the presumed *savoir faire* of the ensuing one. Sophistication, often writ with a moving stylus, has been scribbled ambiguously here.

At a later date, all three gather for

an interview at a hillside house near McNear's Beach in Marin County. Quail bob across the macadam, delicate gray doves flutter just above the ground. A grass snake slithers across the hot pavement, a pair of dogs sets up a ferocious greeting for reporter and photographer.

The three singers appear in casual dress to pump their appearance this Friday at the Great American Music Hall, prior to taking the next perceived step in their collective career; the move to New York.

NG&W apparently have the instruments (voice), the moves (vocal and stage chops), the taste in material to go the distance, but they suffer the usual local-band stigma of too-frequent exposure, plus a non-standard approach to the business.

They blend like the perfect martini, yet each of the three performers is a distinctive solo voice, with style and presence such that it would seem she was only waiting for that Big Break to start up her own wagon train. But not so.

Willow, niece of King Kong's favorite plaything, actress Fay Wray: "I don't WANT to be a solo singer, this whole thing's about cooperation, learning to work together. It's an ongoing process in our lives, jealousy doesn't work here."

Since the group was formed in 1979, NG&W has won three Cabaret Gold Awards

and two Cable Car awards (outstanding vocal performance), but now wants to expand recognition beyond the level of the *boite*. Their recent appearance at the Jazz in the City showcase mini-festival felt like a boost on the ladder, they said.

Sheilah: "I feel like what's happening to us over the past five years is, we've been basically lucky (except for finding a manager/booking agent). We realized at a certain point that if things were going to happen, we'd have to make them happen ourselves." One result of that decision was the LP, "Nicholas, Glover & Wray," issued last fall. Through the making of it, they were forced to take stock of the ins and outs of the music business.

**W**illow: "We read Diane Rapaport's 'How to Make A Record' verbatim!" Sheilah: "The record itself is kinda like marketing research: we put a little splat of everything we can do on it, and got a lotta feedback."

Sometimes the action on stage will seem to be led by Glover, sometimes by Wray, who is talented as a mimic as well as singer (she does kids and various thumbnail-sketch characters, displaying the instinct of the stand-up comic). Julie Nicholas, the one with the Brenda Starr smile and the dewy eyes, speaks the least; she does the booking, listens to the others and pops in, at the judicious moment, a telling observation. Though each voice has its place in the musical hierarchy of the trio — Julie sings harmony, Sheilah takes the high parts, Willow carries the melody — all three take solo sets with apparent equal aplomb.

Nicholas and Wray started out together as a street duo. Glover, with a degree in music therapy from Antioch West, met her

future partners at a Bread and Roses concert. From those times, much rehearsal and performing pointed their path down the way of the night club.

Willow: "One of the first experiences trying to get into a club (as a performer) was being asked, "Do you wear a dress? and 'Do you sound like Joni Mitchell?'"

The trio works with three basic sets: jazz, '60s pop and the intricate stylings of the Boswell Sisters, the '20s-'30s trio who pioneered much of what women vocal ensembles have to work with as interesting standards today.

"It's one of the things we became popular for in the Bay Area," Willow acknowledges. "We pretty much have that old three-part harmony down. The harmony thing is the thread for us; it's what holds us together." There are other facets to the ensemble as well. Willow and Sheilah write the original material which runs to imaginative rather than standards approaches: Songs from the LP include "Fat Girls" about growing up overweight, and "Three Old Ladies," about bag ladies in the Big City. And at various points, two of the three women take up instruments to accompany a given song — flute, piano, saxophone, (For Friday's show, NG&W will be backed by the Joyce Imbesi Trio, with guest Jules Broussard on reeds.)

The act sometimes includes video accompaniment in the form of 16mm film and sometimes Willow the mimic does a full-fledged Connie Francis routine, complete with 50's wig and sentimental quaverings, backed harmonically by her cohorts. It's all part of a versatility that while it makes NG&W difficult to pigeon-hole, assures the group of staying well wide of the trap of musical boredom.