



A Brief History of Jazz Singing

by Scott Yanow

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Jazz singing prior to the first jazz recordings in 1917, as with the history of jazz itself, is largely lost to history, shrouded in legend without much documentation. Jazz singing can be traced to the field hollers and work songs of African-American slaves and the singing of spirituals in churches (many jazz singers, even today, recall that their first important singing was in church), minstrel shows, and vaudeville. Ma Rainey sang blues in tent shows as early as 1902, and many of the classic blues singers, including Bessie Smith, gained much of their early experience and livelihood performing in traveling revues. While singers were not part of New Orleans brass bands, and were not all that major in New Orleans jazz groups prior to 1920, they were part of the music scene, particularly such singing jazz pianists as Jelly Roll Morton and Tony Jackson.

Vaudeville and live musical productions were two of the key ways that new songs were introduced. When a performer on the level of an Al Jolson or a Sophie Tucker adopted a song, there was a good chance that it would catch on.

In the pre-microphone days, it was important for singers to be able to both sing clearly and at a loud volume in live performances. However, singing at a loud volume was not as necessary in making records. Two of the most listenable pre-1917 male singers, Billy Murray and Gene Greene, were not belters. Murray was very popular due to his enthusiasm and accessible voice. Gene Greene, who was billed as "The Ragtime King," was the first singer to ever scat on records, recording "King Of The Bungaloes" several times and as early as 1911. He was one of several singers who sought to emulate ragtime rhythms in some of his hoXer vocals, taking worked-out double-time breaks that were full of syncopation, and sometimes imitating military drums.

The first singer to record jazz was Marian Harris. She recorded "I Ain't Got NobodyMuch" (which soon became better known as "I Ain't Got Nobody") and "I'm Gonna Make Hay While The Sun Shines In

Virginia" in 1916, before the Original Dixieland Jazz Band made the first official jazz records. Whether or not her first two performances are technically jazz, they were certainly ahead of their time, with Harris displaying a relaxed phrasing that would not catch on until over a decade later. Her recordings of the next few years swung, and although she never became a huge name, she set the stage for what was to come.

The next vocal milestone was Mamie Smith's recording of "Crazy Blues" in 1920, the first time a black female singer was documented singing a blues song. The surprise success of this record woke up many in the record industry toward the potential of marketing record to black audiences. The "blues craze" of 1921 to 1924 found many singers, mostly black and female, being taken to the studios and recorded in hopes of duplicating the hit. During this period, Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith were among those making their recording debuts.

With the exception of the classic blues singers and the major stars (such as Al Jolson), who were usually accompanied by unidentified studio orchestras, singers up until the late 1920s were mostly treated by musicians as necessary evils, tools of the record companies who were used to help sell songs. White bands in particular were often saddled with unsuitable vocalists, but there were exceptions. Cliff Edwards, best known as "Ukulele Ike," was among the first male jazz singers on records, scatting, singing rhythmically, and often holding his own with top jazz musicians. Carleton Coon and Joe Sanders, co-leaders of the Coon-Sanders Nighthawks, were also both skilled jazz singers.

However, it was up to Louis Armstrong to show the jazz and pop worlds how jazz phrasing and improvising could be used in singing, making every note and pause count, while no longer treating sheet music as if each note and word was sacred and unchangeable. He was not the first jazz singer, nor the first scat singer, but he popularized both, and moved the art of singing jazz a decade ahead. Bing Crosby listened closely, and with his rise to prominence, both with the Rhythm Boys and as a soloist, he brought the feeling of jazz into pop singing.

On the female side, Ethel Waters proved to be the most flexible of the classic blues singers, moving into classic jazz, pop, and swing by the late 1920s. She influenced Mildred Bailey, who was herself an influence on Lee Wiley. The Boswell Sisters became one of the best jazz vocal groups ever, featuring exciting arrangements full tempo, and mood changes, along with heated scatting. Annette Hanshaw had a real feeling for jazz, while Ruth Etting became a female equivalent for Bing Crosby, bridging the gap between jazz and pop.

In the 1930s with the rise of swinging big bands, many orchestras featured both male and female singers. The most significant graduates from the big bands were Ella Fitzgerald (who was with Chick Webb), Frank Sinatra (Tommy Dorsey), Jimmy Rushing (Count Basie), Helen Humes (Count Basie), Billy Eckstine (Earl Hines), Anita O'Day (Gene Krupa), Peggy Lee (Benny Goodman), Doris Day (Les Brown), and Sarah Vaughan (Billy Eckstine), not to mention Cab Calloway, who led his own orchestra. Billie Holiday's laid-back phrasing and dramatic life made her an unclassifiable icon, Fats Waller evoked pure joy in his small-group recordings, and Nat King Cole evolved from being a swing pianist to an influential crooner.

By the beginning years of the bebop era, female jazz singing was dominated by Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and Billie Holiday, with the newcomer Dinah Washington being the top up-and-comer. No longer connected with big bands, these four, and many others, were involved in busy solo careers. The rise of the jive singing of Slim Gaillard and Leo Watson was an outgrowth of Cab Calloway and helped lead to the bebop-oriented singing of Babs Gonzalez. Vocalese, the writing of lyrics set to the notes of recorded solos, had been pioneered by Bee Palmer (1929) and Marian Harris (1934), but was really birthed in the late 1940s by Eddie Jefferson, who was soon followed by King Pleasure, Dave Lambert, Jon Hendricks, and Annie Ross. Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross in the late 1950s became the greatest of all vocalese groups, and their legacy is partly kept alive today by Manhattan Transfer, a very eclectic vocal ensemble.

The 1950s featured a variety of cool-toned female singers (Peggy Lee, June Christy, Chris Connor, Helen Merrill, and Julie London), the improbable rise of Chet Baker, major new names in Carmen McRae, Joe Williams, and Ray Charles (who brought the passion of gospel music into the new soul music), a continuation of the blues/jazz tradition with Big Joe Turner and Jimmy Witherspoon, and the dominance of Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan.

By the 1960s, jazz singers were grappling with the rise of rock, and many were either recording commercial albums or spending years being absent from records altogether. Among the exceptions were the country blues/bebop philosopher Mose Allison, the passionate and political Abbey Lincoln, the first bossa nova queen Astrud Gilberto, and a few brave avant-garde pioneers, including Patty Waters. Fusion of the late 1960s/early 1970s mostly left little room for singers, although Flora Purim's brand of Brazilian fusion made her a star.

But with the renewed popularity of acoustic jazz from the mid 1970s on, and the realization that there was nothing wrong with exploring older styles creatively, jazz singing (just as is true of jazz in general) has headed in many directions at once. Susannah McCorkle became one of the first major young singers of the generation born after World War II to be exploring older standards, starting a movement that has since included such individualists as Banu Gibson, Rebecca Kilgore, Diana Krall (the most famous living jazz singer today), and Jane Monheit.

Sheila Jordan and Shirley Horn were two of the many slightly older singers who returned to records and carved out productive careers. The jazz singer/songwriter tradition founded by Hoagy Carmichael was revitalized by the work of Dave Frishberg, Bob Dorough and Blossom Dearie. Betty Carter and Mark Murphy, while often singing standards, stretched the bebop tradition way beyond the breaking point in their always-fascinating improvisations. While Al Jarreau and Bobby McFerrin displayed remarkable voices while contributing less to jazz than one would have expected given their unlimited potential, Kurt

Elling has become the leading male jazz singer of the past decade (along with Mark Murphy).

While the shortage of male jazz singers has been worrisome, there are a remarkable number of talented female jazz singers on the scene today. In addition to the ones mentioned, no list would be complete without including Dianne Reeves, Cassandra Wilson, DeeDee Bridgewater, Diane Schuur, Nnenna Freelon, Roseanna Vitro, Karrin Allyson, Kendra Shank, Adi Braun, and Roberta Gambarini, with many more sure to become prominent during the next few years.

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