



What Is a Jazz Singer?

by Scott Yanow

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This is one of the most difficult questions asked in jazz, and one that has yet to be agreed upon because the music keeps on evolving and changing.

Here is what I have come up with: A jazz singer is a vocalist who improvises at least in subtle ways through notes, words, sounds and/or phrasing. In order to be a jazz singer it is not necessary to scat (witness Billie Holiday), or to swing, or even to be any good. But it is important that a singer not put on the exact same performance night after night, year after year. Some vocalists, such as Betty Carter and Mark Murphy, proved to be radically different from night to night while others, including Lady Day and Oscar Brown Jr., changed their shows gradually over time. Cabaret singers and middle-of-the-road crooners tend to keep things the same once they are worked out and often prefer that their sidemen also play set solos.

Of course there are many singers who are borderline or cross over the artificial boundary lines altogether. Practically every jazz singer has sung music that would be considered outside of jazz at one time or another, including Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Mel Tormé. And an awful lot of vocalists from other fields have occasionally sung (or tried to sing) jazz. I have not included all of them in this book, preferring to concentrate on the ones who took jazz most seriously and worked at it. For one does not simply wake up one day and decide to sing jazz. As with playing an instrument, it takes dedication, research and a real feeling for the music. Any singers from any field can sing the words of a blues

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song, but can they make the audience believe in the words they are interpreting?