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Montreal Jazz Vocalists: The Relationship Between Their Status and Improvisation,  
and the Canons of Jazz

by

© Rachel Chantal Beausoleil-Morrison

Presented to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Music (M.Mus)

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with jazz singing as it is experienced in Montreal. It examines the interplay between social and musical aspects of vocal jazz.

The first chapter deals with the canons of jazz, that is, the established standards within or against which jazz singers construct their vision of vocal jazz. The second chapter examines the status of singers within the larger jazz community, and that of the voice within the jazz ensemble. The third chapter deals with the musical practices of vocalists and techniques in vocal improvisation.

This thesis shows how the status of jazz vocalists is inextricably tied to issues of gender and race, and is therefore embroiled in the politics of representation of the jazz world. It also shows that jazz vocalists have been largely dismissed in these politics, and in the process, the specificity of their contribution and means of transmission have hardly been documented. The focus of this study on vocal jazz in Montreal aims to fill this gap in the literature. It also aims to promote the recognition and appreciation of the complexities and subtleties of jazz singing.

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## INTRODUCTION

In most publications, jazz is treated as an instrumental genre.<sup>1</sup> However, there is evidence of the vast contribution singers have made to the jazz idiom.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, there exists a long-standing myth, stemming from the Big Band era of the 1920s through the 1940s, that singers are a necessary evil in jazz (Brackett 1995; O'Brien 1996; Levey 1983). While they have been credited with boosting the popularity of the genre, they have been historically, as a rule, paid less than instrumentalists, and treated as little more than ornaments for the band, often referred to as, among others, 'chirpers,' 'warblers' or 'canaries' (Dahl 1989; Gossett 1980). As a jazz singer, it is my experience that this myth persists and can be felt in the jazz community today.<sup>3</sup>

This study, based on an in-depth ethnography, focusses on four of the top jazz vocalists in Montreal, as well as two instrumentalists who have worked extensively with singers. Jeri Brown, Ranee Lee and Karen Young are three of Canada's most widely recognized and accomplished jazz vocalists. Brown and Lee are natives of the

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see Hodeir (1975), Coker (1980), Gridley (1985), Dean (1992), and Gioia (1997).

<sup>2</sup> For more information, please see Harrison (1988), Dahl (1992 and 1996), Berliner (1994), Antelyes (1994), O'Brien (1996), and Lees (1998).

<sup>3</sup> By the jazz community, I mean anyone who is involved in jazz, from the musicians (including singers) to the critics, scholars, industry people, and audiences.

United States who immigrated to Canada in 1989 and 1970 respectively. Lee now makes her home in Brossard (a city near Montreal), while Brown maintains residences in Halifax, Montreal and Paris. Young is a native of Montreal and now lives in Hudson (also a city near Montreal), where she grew up. In his own right, Ernie Nelson is highly regarded by the Montreal jazz community for his long experience as a jazz singer and keyboard player in both his native United States and in Montreal, where he immigrated in 1968. He is best known for his work with guitarist Sonny Greenwich, and is esteemed for his dedication to jazz pedagogy. Guitarist Rod Ellias and pianist Lorraine Desmarais are two of Canada's top jazz musicians, both born in the province of Québec.

Apart from being considered an instrumental form since its beginnings, jazz music has generally been considered by the jazz community to be a masculine genre (Hodeir 1975; Gossett 1980; Placksin 1988; Miller 1991; Dahl 1996). The many histories of jazz that focus overwhelmingly on the contributions of male jazz musicians are testimony to that (for example: Tirro 1977; Collier 1978; Megill and Demory 1984; Gridley 1985; Gioia 1997).

However, from the time blues singers emerge on the American music scene in the 1920s, women have occupied a major role in vocal jazz. Although men such as Louis Armstrong, Joe Williams, Mel Torme and Frank Sinatra have had great commercial success with jazz vocals, there is little doubt that women, from Bessie Smith to Diana Krall, have dominated that particular segment of the jazz world. The *Mercury Records Songbook* (1995) compact disc collection, for instance, features seventeen vocalists. Fourteen of them are women, and they perform ninety-one of the one hundred-and-one songs included in the collection. In fact, most women in jazz have traditionally tended to be singers, although this does appear to be changing gradually.

To address the apparent division between male instrumentalists and female vocalists in the jazz scene, this study will explore the following questions: What are the forces determining the canons to which jazz vocalists must seemingly comply? What are the various definitions of a jazz singer? What role do they play in bands? How would they characterize their interactions with instrumentalists? How do their musical practices differ from those of instrumentalists? Why are most jazzwomen singers?

This study focuses on vocal jazz. The goal is to show how vocalists' status, self-definition, musical practices and learning strategies are shaped in relationship with the canons of jazz, whether in the form of compliance or outright rejection; to show how such canons discriminate in tandem with issues of gender and race; and to explain the lack of documentation.

In an attempt to fill this gap in the literature, I will examine the musical practices of jazz singers to introduce some of the musical values of vocal jazz, as articulated by the artists themselves, both singers and non-singers. I will then show how these values are being transmitted to up-and-coming jazz vocalists.

### The Interpretive Framework

Gary Tomlinson, in his article "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies" (1991), argues that the jazz community has repeated the mistakes of European "art music" by attempting to draw a border between what is and is not "real" jazz, based on the German canon of Western classical music. While Tomlinson's arguments are made within the boundaries of instrumental jazz, I intend to extend them to include vocal jazz.

In the discussion of musical canons, I owe much to the work of Susan McClary (1991), Philip Brett (1994) and Susan Cook (1992). Each have, in the respective

domains of gender relations, sexuality and race relations, stated what is best articulated by Brett: "It is not the evidence, but the right to interpret it, to which we have to lay claim" (1994, 23). As I share the position of these and other authors on the topic of canons, I will attempt to promote the recognition of difference as an integral component of jazz.

Several authors have written about the ways in which jazz singers have chosen or felt obliged to "reinvent" themselves in reaction to the conventions that were being imposed on them (for example: Moore 1989; Antelyes 1994; Brackett 1995; O'Brien 1996). For instance, in the 1940s, Anita O'Day fought for the right to wear a band uniform instead of the customary formal gown. Her goal was to be treated as any other musician, but "for many years she was considered to be a 'mannish' lesbian, because she refused to be [a] mere bandstand decoration" (O'Brien 1996, 76).

In fact, self-reinvention was not exclusive to vocalists. Billy Tipton is an extreme example of a jazz instrumentalist (a pianist) who reinvented herself by living out her life as a man in order to practice her art without the restrictions imposed on her by gender norms (Sarandon, 1997).

Aside from newspaper clippings on various artists and important events, notably the Montreal International Jazz Festival, very little has been written on the Montreal jazz scene. One exception is John Gilmore's *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montreal* (1988). By the author's own admission, however, this book excludes any mention of vocal jazz, stating that "few, if any, Montreal singers during the period under study [early 1900s to early 1970s] regarded themselves as jazz musicians, participated in jam sessions, or improvised at any length" (p.15).

Mark Miller is incontestably the most prolific writer on Canadian jazz. In his book *Jazz in Canada: Fourteen Lives* (1982), Miller focusses on fourteen male instrumentalists. In *Boogie, Pete and the Senator: Canadian Musicians in Jazz: The*

*Eighties* (1987), he allocates only one chapter to a woman, namely, Karen Young. Otherwise, like most other writers on jazz, Miller focusses almost exclusively on male musicians (e.g. *Cool Blues: Charlie Parker in Canada, 1953* (1989), and *Such Melodious Racket: The Lost History of Jazz in Canada: 1914-1949* (1997)). More specifically, on instrumental jazz to the quasi-total exclusion of vocals.

In short, there is little scholarly writing on jazz vocalists in Canada, let alone Montreal. It is one of the goals of this study to begin to fill this gap.

In the exploration of vocal jazz musical practices, I will rely heavily on Henry Louis Gates's theory of signifying, as outlined in his influential book *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* (1988). This theory provides a useful way of interpreting meaning, and, even though it was conceived primarily in relation to African American literature, such a theory can fruitfully be applied to the study of jazz. I use it here to show some of the ways by and through which jazz singers make their musical statements.

### The Methodological Framework

The foregoing discussion on the musical canons that govern the world of jazz is based mainly on an in-depth study of the current scholarly literature on jazz. To further inform this examination, I make use of some of the lessons learned in other domains, such as popular music studies, feminist musicology and gay and lesbian musicology, which deal with the issue of canons.

The status and self-definition of jazz vocalists are studied from two points of view: historical and current. The historical point of view is treated through a critical survey of existing documentation, both scholarly and popular. The points of view of present day artists are reviewed through a detailed ethnography, which is produced through a series of personal interviews with selected artists in Montreal. The two

different vantage points appear in alternation in order to show how they are interwoven.

To address the musical practices and learning strategies of vocal jazz artists I have relied on participant observation and interviews. To discuss the musical values embodied in vocal jazz in Montreal today, I have analysed in the course of my ethnographic research selected performances.

### Interviews

This study heavily relies on information gathered in formal and informal interviews. Each formal interview lasted between one and four hours. The selected vocalists were interviewed formally one to three times, depending on the need, while each instrumentalist was visited once. All formal interviews were recorded on cassette, a procedure which was not only accepted, but encouraged by the informants. These were then transcribed and used as a means to providing *ad verbatim* responses of the informants where insight could be gained from the particular ways in which they verbalized their experiences.

Informal interviews were conducted on an as-needed basis, for clarifications or specifications. They were therefore shorter than the formal ones and, at times, conducted by telephone.

### Participant observation

For the 1998-1999 academic year, I engaged myself as a student of vocal jazz improvisation with Jeri Brown, at Concordia University. Together with my short experience (five years) as a jazz vocalist, this sensitized me to both social and musical issues, and how they are intertwined.

In July of 1998, I spent two weeks at the Montreal International Jazz Festival to

get immersed in the culture of the event. This gave me the opportunity to hear many of the instrumentalists with whom my informants have performed, and to whom they referred during our interviews. It also allowed me to hear some other Montreal-based vocalists whom I did not interview.

I also attended several concerts given by my informants, either in the Ottawa region or in Montreal. One notable presentation was on July 10, 1999, when three of the four vocalists interviewed—Brown, Lee and Young—were featured on the same stage on the closing night of the jazz festival. This allowed me to observe how the information gleaned from the interviews was put into practice.

### A personal perspective

Besides being a jazz vocalist myself, I am a French-Canadian woman with "white" skin. As I reflect on all of these factors, it becomes clear that I am both an insider and an outsider to the group I have studied. While it is certain that I share with other jazz singers of any other language and race some aspects of the musical language used in vocal jazz, the extent to which such a language is enriched by all our various backgrounds becomes a complex issue. Do I have more in common with an African-American female jazz vocalist than I do with an English-Canadian male one with pale skin? Which element of my identity speaks most loudly about who I am? Which element of difference is most significant? How do the differences help or hinder my approach to the subject?

There are no simple answers. All I can say is that I have struggled with the questions, and I embark upon this study by acknowledging from the start the myriad experiences of those who have helped realize this study. I therefore set about my work with as much respect and intellectual honesty as I can.

### Criteria for selecting informants

In order to choose the vocalists for the ethnographic portion of this study, I first went to the jazz festival organizer from Ottawa, Jacques Emond, who gave me the names of some of the most high-profile vocal jazz artists in the Montreal area and ways to contact them. I also sought the advice of Rod Ellias, one of Canada's top jazz guitarists who teaches at Concordia University in Montreal but resides in Ottawa. He in turn referred me to Charles Ellison, a prominent trumpet player in Montreal and also a teacher at Concordia University. Ellison gave me a list of names of people he thought I should interview. The names that matched with some of the ones given to me by Jacques Emond were Ranee Lee, Karen Young and Jeri Brown. I therefore set out to contact them individually.

Brown offered her own list of people to consult. Ranee Lee and Karen Young were at the top of her list, which further confirmed their importance to this study. I wanted to include the participation of a male singer in the study, in order to get as many different points of view as possible. Brown recommended Ernie Nelson, who had also been mentioned by Ellison. Both Brown and Ellison felt that Ernie Nelson, with his long experience as a jazz improviser, would contribute greatly to the project. The final list of vocalists selected for the study was therefore Jeri Brown, Ranee Lee, Ernie Nelson and Karen Young, who all graciously accepted my invitation to participate in the ethnography.

Also to ensure that the study was well informed, I wanted to interview two instrumentalists, one female and one male. This would provide a basis for comparison with the information offered by the vocalists, and allow me to respect a certain degree of gender representation. Ellison recommended I speak to instrumentalists who have worked extensively with singers. Rod Ellias and pianist Lorraine Desmarais both kindly indulged my request for an interview.

The seemingly arbitrary number of informants—four vocalists and two instrumentalists—was arrived at both to ensure the feasibility of the study and to provide an adequate balance of gender representation. While race emerged as a topic of discussion during interviews with informants, and as a prominent subject in jazz texts, it was not a criteria for the selection of informants. My aim was to contact the most prominent artists in the Montreal area who were performing improvisational jazz.

### A Brief Summary of the Chapters

In the first chapter, I examine the notion of the canon as it applies to jazz. Just as the canons of Western classical music are based on a select few composers (Bach to Schoenberg), so are the canons of jazz based on only a few players (Armstrong to Coleman). It should be stressed that by "canon," I mean not only a set of norms represented by a few individuals but the norms themselves. Hence, I present some of the most powerful canons that are manifested in jazz. My goal here is to set the stage for the following chapters which look at the place (both social and musical) that jazz vocalists occupy within the jazz framework outlined in Chapter One.

In the second chapter, I discuss the status and self-definition of jazz singers. Because jazz singers define themselves partly in response to what is expected of them and the norms set by previous generations of jazz singers, one must first broach the question of "What is a jazz singer?" that has been discussed by many a jazz writer. We can then address how singers go about creating their own vision of what a jazz singer is in the present day. I then broach two themes that have a major impact on how singers are defined: the voice as an instrument, and the issue of representation in the jazz music scene.

The third chapter looks at the musical practices of jazz vocalists. Apart from



the physically possible melodic range and variety of the production of timbres, another major difference between instrumental and vocal improvisation is the use of words. Even the nonsense syllables used in scat singing have to be learned and used appropriately. This added dimension requires a distinct approach to the vocal improvisation process itself, to learning and teaching methods and analysis appropriate to it. This is what this study aims to examine.

The chapter is divided into two parts, with the first part focussing on the specificity of jazz singing, by highlighting the elements that the vocalist adds to the ensemble sound. The second gives an overview of some techniques for vocal improvisation.

### On Recorded Musical Examples

Please note:

I have produced an accompanying cassette, that includes recordings of most of the musical examples in the order in which they appear in this study. The reader will be invited to listen to the excerpts every time the following symbol appears in the text: (♩). In order to respect copyright, the recording contains strictly those measures that are excerpts in this text.

Please also note that all musical examples are transcribed in 4/4 time (as opposed to 12/8), in accordance with the standard notation for jazz. Triplet feel is therefore implied. For instance, it is understood that  sounds like .

Finally, where excerpts of original music are used in the text as a basis of comparison in Chapter Three, these have been transposed into the key chosen by the vocalist in question.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### Jazz and its Canons

In the opening of her book *Stormy Weather* Linda Dahl states the following:

... arguably, even more than other art forms, the music we call jazz depends on its community, for the young jazz musician is trained on the job, really; the apprentice learns from the leader, the members of the group, the gig itself.  
(1996, ix)

Jazz music is governed by a set of canons which, for better or worse, are passed on from one generation to the next. Canons are the vehicle for the transmission of traditions that make up jazz music. Just as is the case with Western classical music, the jazz community relies heavily on its canons to give credence to its teachings and

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<sup>1</sup> First appeared in Arnaud Merlin, "L'école de musique à l'école du jazz," *Jazzman* 47 (May, 1999): 40-1.

to obtain a sense of continuity within the jazz tradition. As Phillip Brett writes: "The acquisition of skill is dependent on the tacit understanding of the superiority of this repertory..." (1994, 14). Although his comments refer specifically to the German canon of classical music (i.e. Bach to Schoenberg), they can be readily transferred to the canons of jazz (i.e. Louis Armstrong to Ornette Coleman).

The word "canon" can be used, as by Brett for instance, to refer to a group of composers who have become recognized as icons of a particular tradition. There is also a more general meaning given to the word in Webster's dictionary as "a body of rules, principles, criteria, etc." In its figurative manifestation, the composers, say, used to identify a given canon become representatives or "ideal types," to borrow Carl Dahlhaus's term, for the actual music they make.

Alternatively, the term "canon" can be applied to music in a more restricted sense, that is, as "an established or basic rule or principle; a standard to judge by, a criterion." In this sense, the canon of great jazz musicians (again, Armstrong to Coleman) can include many principles, standards and criteria which can themselves be seen as canons. They are the underlying norms that pervade, explicitly or implicitly, jazz texts and texts on jazz. By jazz texts, I mean those books that fall into the category of histories of jazz and the like<sup>2</sup>, i.e. books that are seen as "definitive". Texts on jazz in turn include either articles about certain aspects of jazz or books that address problems or particular questions on jazz<sup>3</sup>. Some texts fit into both categories and this should be seen as but a loose-fitting categorization.

The canons that will be explored in this chapter are the following: jazz as an

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<sup>2</sup> Collier, 1978; Gridley, 1985; Megill, and Demory, 1984; Schuller, 1986; Schuller, 1989; Tirro, 1977, to name only a few.

<sup>3</sup> Among others, Antelyes, 1994; Brackett, 1995; Cook, 1992; Gossett and Johnson, 1980.

instrumental genre, jazz as a male idiom, jazz as "un-pop,"<sup>4</sup> jazz as improvised music, jazz as black music, jazz as American music and jazz as concert music (as opposed to dance music). Further analysis would surely reveal other canons of this type to add to the list. To be sure, this is but one set of interpretations, among many possible alternatives. I will begin by discussing further the idea of canons as they can apply to jazz.

In his article entitled "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies" (1991), Gary Tomlinson argues that jazz has fallen into some of the same traps as the Western Classical tradition. He says that many of the authors of key textbooks on jazz emphasize listening as the most important component of learning about jazz, as opposed to reading about it. While an emphasis on listening seems admirable on the surface, Tomlinson posits that it effectively creates a detachment between the music and its socio-historical context, as if the music contained some transcendental quality contained in the notes themselves (1991, 247). In contrast, Tomlinson proposes a model where the essence of jazz is to be found in the "makers of jazz ... saving the music... for last, construing it in light of them and resisting the aestheticizing tendency to exaggerate its differences from other manifestations of expressive culture"(ibid, 247).

Tomlinson also examines how jazz critics and historians produce and reproduce a jazz canon which has attempted to exclude, for instance, Miles Davis's fusion style from the category of 'real jazz.' He emphasizes the fact that canons are, in reality, a set of personal choices, and how those personal choices, when united to

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<sup>4</sup> This term was used by composer Harry Somers when I spoke to him about the performance of his Piano Concerto No. 3 at the National Arts Centre on January 4, 1997. He was referring to the fact that his music does not have wide commercial appeal. I use it here to refer to jazz as, arguably, a non-commercial music—a definition used by many musicians to distance themselves from commercialism in the same way as musicians of classical music do.

others of similar tastes, become institutionalized (ibid, 242). A case in point is that several key jazz historians have based their texts on Martin Williams's anthology, the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*. According to Tomlinson, they have done so partly because they must base their texts on material that is readily available and accessible to students. As he states:

... the effect of this surrender to convenience is to monumentalize Williams's choices, to magnify into a statement of transcendent artistic worth the personal canon of one insightful (but conservative) critic, constructed itself in a given time and place according to particular formative rules and limiting contingencies (ibid, 246).

He argues that, while Miles Davis was chastised by many critics for developing the "anti-jazz" style of jazz-rock fusion, he was actually implementing an aesthetic principle which could be seen as definitive of jazz: that is, what Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s describes as 'signifyin(g)' in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988). By blending elements from different worlds—jazz, rock, black, white, middle-class, lower-class—Davis was engaging in a dialogue between past and future styles, and finding new meanings in the jazz idiom. I will return to the topic of signifyin(g) in Chapter Three, where I will discuss at length some of the musical values of vocal jazz.

In his article entitled "The Problem of Miles Davis," Robert Walser agrees with Tomlinson, that Miles Davis presents a challenge "because he cannot be denied a place in the canon of great jazz musicians, yet the accepted criteria for greatness do not fit him well" (1993, 345). He, too, ascribes Davis's greatness to his uncanny capacity to signify in the sense employed by Gates. Rather than focussing on Davis's style as a whole, Walser calls attention to the instrumental techniques used by Davis to signify against other versions of a given song in order to prove Davis's greatness. It could be argued that, by doing so, his comments seem to lobby for Davis's induction

into the existing canons, instead of challenging them. In my view, debunking the canon as a measure of success or greatness would be more effective than widening the scope of members who can qualify for it.

Interestingly, Walser criticizes some of the same jazz historians<sup>5</sup> as Tomlinson, but for different reasons. He accuses most of them of underemphasizing the different kinds of greatness, as manifested by a Miles Davis, in contrast to a Duke Ellington or a Charlie Parker (ibid, 344-45). I share Walser and Tomlinson's disappointment with the state of the histories written on jazz. The problem with the label "history" is that it tends to invoke a certain level of objectivity on the part of its creator. We must remember that every so-called history is in fact a story, one person's interpretation of data, rather than empirical truth. By attempting to reify their own version of the important events and people in jazz, most of the authors of such histories have served to perpetuate not only the global canon of great jazz musicians, but also other, more specific canons, to which I will now turn.

### Jazz as an instrumental genre

More often than not, the term 'jazz' is presumed to mean instrumental jazz. As Joseph Levey states: "... jazz, unlike rock or pop or country music, places emphasis on instrumental performance, and singing is of secondary importance in the hierarchy of jazz" (1983, p. 2). Gary Giddins displays the same opinion.

Never was America more vulnerable to the intoxicating qualities of cheap music. The divas of the era sang *I don't Want To Walk Without You*, *Accentuate the Positive*, *Mairzy Doats* ... Yet Parker and his compatriots in jazz, not all of them members of the bop movement, cut through the sentimentality, the dreamy evasions, the paralysing fear (1990, p. 37).

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<sup>5</sup> Tirro (1977), Megill and Demory (1984), Gridley (1985), among others.

This particular quote betrays the close connection that is often made between vocal jazz and popular music. I will explore this point further in my discussion of jazz as "un-pop." Derek Bailey maintains the same position when he says: "... at its best, instrumental improvisation can achieve the highest levels of musical expression" (1980, p. 64). This brings to mind the age-old battle between "absolute" and program or vocal music, a debate which is based on the assumption that words somehow detract from the sound of instruments. As Brett points out: "From [E. T. A.] Hoffmann and his generation stems the notion of the superiority of instrumental music, which depends precisely on a lack of specificity..." (1994, 13). Hoffmann, the oft-quoted late-18th, early-19th century music critic, could easily be reincarnated as a jazz critic of the 20th century.

There are other jazz writers whose choices implicitly reveal their stance. For example, in Chapter Two of *The Swing Era* (1989), Gunther Schuller analyses saxophone, trombone, bass lines, etc., but treats the vocal parts solely on the basis of their lyrical content. Out of 62 musical examples and 12 figures on formal structure, none of them focus on vocal lines. One unnumbered example appears to highlight a difficult vocal line from the song. While most of the other examples used in that chapter of the book serve to illustrate the skill of the performer, the one example focussing on the vocal line aims to highlight Duke Ellington's compositional prowess. The vocal skill required to produce it is obscured, with no particular performer singled out as having done so. This is significant because in his analyses of the instrumental solos or lines, Schuller never fails to mention the musician's name.

André Hodeir speaks of jazz, throughout both *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence* (1975) and *Toward Jazz* (1986), as though it is exclusively instrumental genre. All the names mentioned in *Toward Jazz*, for instance, from Jelly Roll Morton to Ornette Coleman, are those of instrumentalists. Paradoxically, in the appendices of *Toward*

*Jazz*, he includes five focussed analyses of improvised solos, two of which are vocal. In those two, he considers melodic contour and rhythmic feel. It could be argued that he is only exploring the aspects of these vocal solos that are instrumental. He does not, for instance, talk about vocal timbre, inflection, or lyrical expression. However, he did choose Sarah Vaughan in one case, and Billie Holiday and Lester Young in another, suggesting that Vaughan and Holiday have a place in his view of the canon of great jazz musicians. Hodeir links Billie Holiday's solo style to that of Lester Young. He portrays the musical relationship between the two artists as mutually influential. Given the fact that the main body of the work deals exclusively with instrumentalists, the inclusion of the two vocalists—Vaughan and Holiday—in appendix has the effect of "elevating" their status to that of the instrumentalists, while at the same time marginalising their contributions to the genre.

Although many writers on jazz have done so, there is a danger in treating instrumental and vocal jazz as mutually exclusive. Speaking of instrumental jazz as though it is completely independent of—or worse, superior to—vocal jazz does violence to the contributions of the many vocalists who have propelled jazz music, either by making it more popular, or by developing the music itself. Vocal and instrumental jazz have developed, and continue to develop to this day, not only simultaneously but in intimately related ways. Acknowledging the difference between the vocal and instrumental forms of the idiom does not preclude the appreciation of their many shared characteristics. Unfortunately, many authors have a tendency to downplay the role of the vocalist *vis-à-vis* jazz in general. For example, Levey states:

In scat song the singer uses nonsense syllables and vocal sounds, often in imitation of instrumental jazz lines. The effect is that of instrumental statements being sung, with the voice imitating the saxophone or trumpet (1983, 7).

Many musicians I have interviewed would agree with Levey. In fact, many singers

strive to achieve an "instrumental sound," going so far as to listen exclusively to instrumentalists to avoid being influenced by another singer. What this position often ignores, however, is the invaluable influence vocals have had on instrumental playing. Berliner expresses, in my opinion, a more balanced view when he states:

Within the jazz tradition, instrumentalists and vocalists continue to influence one another. A reflection of this is instrumentalists' predilection for copying the pitch colorations and inflections of blues and jazz singers and their phrasing of song texts (1994, 69).

By acknowledging, in this way, the profound impact the voice has had on the jazz idiom as a whole, Berliner has begun to break down the traditional assumption of jazz as an instrumental music.

#### Jazz as a male idiom

Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Count Bassie, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman. This is a partial, yet typical list of names that come up in jazz texts and in texts on jazz. It demonstrates the dominant role male instrumentalists have played in jazz histories. This has meant a marginalization of female instrumentalists as well as female vocalists. In such jazz histories as have been written by Tirro (1977), Megill and Demory (1984), Gridley (1985), and others, the women who are covered are in large majority singers. And of those, even famous singers like Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald receive, if they are lucky, half the coverage that is accorded to their male instrumentalist counterparts. For example, Mary Lou Williams, an influential female jazz pianist, composer and arranger who became prominent in the 1930s, is mentioned not in the body of the text but only in two lists that are inserted in Gridley's textbook *Jazz Styles* (1985). These lists include the names of prominent jazz artists. Just as Hodeir did,

Gridley marginalizes some of the most important female jazz musicians<sup>6</sup> while seemingly giving them a token of recognition by placing some of them on the prestigious lists, alongside their male counterparts.

Furthermore, the pervasive use of the terms like "jazzmen" and "sidemen," gives an indication of how jazz is conceived. That is, as a male-dominated musical practice. Such terms become the vehicles by and through which the male canon of jazz is produced and reproduced in texts.

More recently, Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz* (1997) gives slightly more coverage to female artists and their contributions to the development of jazz. But still, a quick glance at the index reveals a wide gap between the attention paid to male players and that accorded to female musicians. Sadly, it may be that this is in large part due to the lack of recorded information about the artists in question, which is itself a symptom of long-standing phallocentrism<sup>7</sup>, not only in jazz but in music in general. This is an otherwise very insightful history of jazz, giving much more information about the socio-political context of the music than any of its predecessors. However, it does fall short of dispelling the male canon of jazz.

It could be argued that these and other books simply reflect the chauvinism that prevails in the jazz community itself. I would posit that they are part and parcel of that community whose writings perpetuate inequalities. As Dahl explains: "The assumption about women in jazz was that there weren't any, because jazz was by definition a male music" (1996, xi). Dahl discusses several social factors—similar to

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<sup>6</sup> I include both instrumentalists and vocalists in my use of the term "musician."

<sup>7</sup> A term used by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his discussion of African American literature, which I find very eloquent and useful.

those raised in Tricia Rose's account of the same phenomenon in rap music<sup>8</sup>—which discouraged women from participating as jazz musicians, and thereby kept the male canon of jazz alive.

Clearly, the qualities needed to get ahead in the jazz world were held to be "masculine" prerogatives: aggressive self-confidence on the bandstand, displaying one's "chops," or sheer blowing power; a single-minded attention to career moves, including frequent absences from home and family (ibid, x).

A woman musician... often paid penalties designed to put her in her place—the loss of their respectability being high on the list, as well as disapproval, ridicule and sometimes ostracism (ibid, x).

### Jazz as "un-pop"

Jazz, particularly vocal jazz, has had a strong connection with popular music since its beginnings. However, in the Swing era, this connection was accentuated, as "jazz was synonymous with America's popular music, its social dances and its musical entertainment" (Schuller 1989, 4). This coincides with a time when singers were the frontispiece of the big band. So-called "canaries," "warblers" and "girl singers" converted Tin Pan Alley songs into jazz. This is seen by some to be a cheapening of jazz. As Joseph Levey states:

What is it that jazz singers do? They present American pop songs in a jazzy (jazz-like) manner, meaning that they sing the song with a syncopated, swinging style (1983, 6).

Levey's gross oversimplification of the vocalist's musical role in jazz reflects an prevalent ideology that pits jazz against popular music. Many authors manifest this

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<sup>8</sup> Tricia Rose. "'All Aboard the Night Train:' Flow, Layering, and Rupture in Postindustrial New York," in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 21-61. In this chapter, Rose discusses the pejorative stereotypes that confront female rap artists, such as their perceived inability to deal with technology, sexual promiscuity and generally "unfeminine" image.

ideology in their attempt to bring jazz closer to the European tradition of art music. Gary Giddins juxtaposes jazz against "blues, rags, dixie, swing, bop, the new thing, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, disco, and rap," stating:

But unlike most of those terms, which often signify musical fashions dependent on the marketplace, jazz... has behaved like a classical music, even though it briefly enjoyed—as European classical music briefly enjoyed—the advantages of popular acclamation (1990, 35).

André Hodeir, although advocating the study of jazz on its own terms rather than applying to it aesthetics borrowed from the European art music tradition, nevertheless betrays a common assumption that popularity brings a decline in artistic value.

This does not necessarily force us to judge jazz in the perspective of European art; instead, it invites us to broaden our view in order to make room for the *only popularly inspired music of our time which is universal and has not become lost in vulgarity* (1975, 11, emphasis mine).

Like Hodeir, Ted Gioia tries to distance jazz from popular song: "... jazz, like the mythological pheonix, died as popular entertainment only to be reborn as serious art" (1988, 18).

As Walser aptly points out, the attempt to elevate jazz to the level of classical music may lend it some respectability,

But the price of classicism is always loss of specificity, just as it has been the price of the canonic coherence of European concert music (the disparate sounds of many centuries, many peoples, many functions, many meanings all homogenized and made interchangeably "great" (1993, 347).

I would add to that price the fact that the connection between the music and the "ritual of performance," to borrow Paul Gilroy's expression (1993, 101), becomes obscured, since in the realm of classical music, the composer is valued as distinct from and more important than the performer.

## Jazz as improvised music

Improvisation is a canon, insofar as it answers the second definition of canons provided at the beginning of this chapter; that is, a criterion or standard by which to judge, a norm. Improvisation in jazz not only answers to this definition of canon, it goes one step further to actually qualify what jazz is. For many, if a music does not contain some form of improvisation it simply does not qualify as jazz. As Levey states: "Improvisation is the paramount factor that separates jazz from other musical activities" (1983, 101). This view is echoed by Roddy Elias, a prominent Canadian guitarist, who states: "I think when that [improvisation] goes [meaning, is not included], it becomes more like classical music" (personal interview, June 19, 1998).

The view that jazz and improvisation are inseparable is commonly expressed by equating jazz performance with composition. Mark Gridley's first answer to the question "What is jazz?" is "Improvisation." He goes on to explain: "To improvise is to compose and perform simultaneously" (1985, 4). Gioia speaks of jazz's "defiance of Western music's traditional distinction between composition and performance, in fact, its persistent disdain for any musical division of labor, the jazz musician being both creator and interpreter..." (1988, 15-16). The very title of Paul Berliner's landmark book *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (1994) gives an indication of the importance of improvisation in jazz.

There are, of course, other key defining elements in jazz. For instance, a characteristic rhythmic "feel" distinguishes jazz from other musics. There is no real consensus on what this "feel" can be called. Hodeir calls this rhythmic freedom "vital drive" (1975, 208). Others describe it as "groove" or "swing." Although it can easily be confused with a particular style period in jazz history—the 1930s and 1940s—by the same name, "swing" is the term I have adopted because it seems to be the only such term which is unmistakably connected to jazz. To distinguish it from

the Swing era, I will always refer to the latter with a capital 'S'.

Charles Keil's designation of "participatory discrepancies" (1987) is one of the best explanations of this phenomenon that I have encountered so far. To paraphrase Keil, it is the slight variation applied by each individual musician to the work being performed. It can apply to intonation as well as rhythm or timbre or any other element of any type of music. For our purposes, I draw on this concept to help describe one of the elements that makes the style recognizable as jazz, although not exclusive to it. I refer here to the striking of notes either slightly before or slightly after the beat. How long before or after is precisely that which makes each musician's swing distinctive. As Berliner elucidates:

The achievement of swing ultimately depends on the interplay of numerous factors... ranging from the sheer variety of the artists' rhythmic conceptions to the stylistic manner in which they articulate and phrase them, imbuing them with qualities of syncopation and forward motion (1994, 244).

According to Keil, swing feel is not written down before the fact, nor is it planned in any way. It just "happens." Within this perspective, swing can be seen as a form of improvisation, albeit subtle.

As Berliner shows, "Typically, they [artists who use improvisation as a verb] reserve the term for real-time composing—instantaneous decision making in applying and altering musical materials and conceiving new ideas" (1994, 222). This would seem to exclude other elements of jazz, such as solos that are "worked out" in rehearsal. While they are improvised, performed, created in rehearsal, by the time the performer actually displays his or her work to an audience, it has been perfected and memorized to a point where it is no longer improvised. Berliner calls this process "precomposition" (1994, 221). Many famous jazz musicians have been known to engage in it, renowned Canadian jazz pianist Oscar Peterson among them. The

degree to which this practice is implemented varies from one performer to another and from one performance to another.

There is also a *cappella* jazz, which may or may not include improvised solos. Groups such as New York Voices and Manhattan Transfer may not be considered jazz groups by some purists, but the fact remains that they perform jazz standards with a swing feel and cannot be completely excluded from the jazz tradition. Their existence would seem to contradict the essence of jazz as a form based on improvisation. However, like Tricia Rose's and Christopher Waterman's embracing of the contradictions inherent in rap and jùjú musics respectively, I would accept this inconsistency as an integral part of the jazz tradition.

Given the infinite number of ways one can improvise in jazz, from a complete rhythmic and melodic reworking of a song—à la Sarah Vaughan—to subtle shadings and phrasing modifications—as in Nat "King" Cole—I believe that a narrow definition of improvisation is misleading. We must recognize that a jazz piece can contain a very small percentage of improvised material or be completely improvised—as in free jazz—plus every possible variation between these two extremes.

### Jazz as black music

Derek Bailey writes: "... all the really significant figures in jazz are black" (1980, 66). Further on he writes: "In recent years there has been a movement towards a new conception of jazz as 'black classical music'" (ibid, 74). Joseph Levey agrees: "In the jazz idiom the majority of inventors and innovators have historically been and continue to be black American musicians. ... It is difficult to say, however, that jazz is exclusively black music" (1983, 5). He also adds: "... many elements of jazz structure are drawn from the black American experience. Some of these elements are the blues form, the blues scale, call and response, [etc.]" (ibid, 13). Berliner

describes the participants of his lengthy study *Thinking in Jazz*: "Although most of the participants are African American, members of other ethnic groups are included as well..." (1994, 7). Even when other racial or ethnic groups are included in the jazz practice, as Berliner has done, it seems that the main elements that define jazz, namely improvisation and swing feel—among others—are associated with black people.

Even though Red Rodney and his white peers played in swing bands in high school, they thought that improvising was something special that only the "black guys" did well. In contrast the white players were the good readers, the good section players (Berliner 1994, 31).

None of these authors are suggesting that only black people can play jazz, but they do seem to support a view that jazz is a music essentially emblematic of African Americans.

Other authors, such as Gunther Schuller, describe jazz as a mixture of African American and European elements.

This new music developed from a multi-colored variety of musical traditions brought to the new world in part from Africa, in part from Europe. It seems in retrospect almost inevitable that America, the great ethnic melting pot, would procreate a music compounded of African rhythmic, formal, sonoric, and expressive elements and European rhythmic and harmonic practices (1986, 3).

We must bear in mind that Gunther Schuller is a composer in the European classical tradition who frequently incorporates jazz elements into his works. He is one writer who could be said to have contributed to the attempt to "classicize" jazz, thereby "elevating" it to the level of artistry of European art music.

Seen from another perspective, Schuller's emphasis on the European elements involved in the genesis of jazz could be seen as yet another attempt by whites to appropriate and control black musical contributions. The hegemonic power of white mainstream Western society is such that many musics associated with African

Americans have undergone this process of reappropriation by whites—rock and roll being but one example.

It must be recognized that there have been many talented white—not to mention some "yellow" or "red"—jazz artists. Linda Dahl specifically mentions:

Helen Forrest, Helen O'Connell, Mildred Bailey, Peggy Lee, Anita O'Day—talented white band singers who became stars in their own right. And many, many more. Brazilian, Swedish, British, Japanese (1996, xi).

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to subsume the black artists who created the jazz idiom in a utopian view of a global music. The fact is, from its beginnings with Bessie Smith, Jelly Roll Morton, Lil Hardin Armstrong, Louis Armstrong—to name only a few—jazz has been undeniably entrenched in the African-American experience.

Equally misleading are those who would judge jazz without an understanding of African-American aesthetics. Take for instance André Hodeir's statement:

As we know, these blue notes resulted from the difficulty experienced by the Negro when the hymns taught him by the missionaries made him sing the third and seventh degrees of the scale used in European music, since these degrees do not occur in the primitive five-tone scale (1975, 42).

He describes African music in terms of what it lacks in comparison to European music, a common pitfall for someone critiquing a music belonging to a tradition not their own.

In authentic Negro music, there are no cadences or chords or tonal functions. The spirit and rules of its polyphony are very different from those governing New Orleans music. Its melodic turns are infinitely simpler. The same intervals are repeated untiringly, without any attempt to look for new effects. Even when based on the blue note, a seventh is a horrible modernism in the perspective of African music (ibid., 42).

Hodeir does not offer any explanation of how he came to understand this "perspective

of African music." Unfortunately, it is not unusual for musics associated with African Americans to be misrepresented in this way.

The flip side of this misconception is a tendency to romanticize the image of the "primitive black musician" who achieves a trance-like state in performance, but who does not truly understand what she or he is doing. Ted Gioia calls this the "Primitivist Myth" (1988, 31). As Robert Walser demonstrates in his article "Out of Notes: Signification, Interpretation, and the Problem of Miles Davis," (1993) an appreciation of black aesthetics—such as signifying in the senses coined by Gates—is crucial to understanding jazz.

### Jazz as American music

Derek Bailey writes: "... from a playing point of view jazz has been unshakeably American. Europe ... could produce only Django Reinhardt as a possible exception to the rule that *all great jazz musicians are American*" (1980, 66, emphasis mine). Perhaps Bailey, being from Britain, had never heard of Canadians Oscar Peterson, Moe Koffman or Rob McConnell and the Boss Brass at the time he wrote this. Or, perhaps he uses the term American to mean North American. Either way, the statement could be said to be under considerable pressure.

Joseph Levey opens the first chapter of his book *The Jazz Experience* with the statement: "Jazz is a uniquely American music..." (1983, 1). He later explains: "Jazz is a musical reflection of twentieth-century American attitudes..." He qualifies these attitudes as the "melting-pot" mentality, innovation, trendiness, competitiveness, aggressiveness, confidence, lack of sentimentality and marketplace driven (ibid., 12-13). Many of these values may be manifested in American society, but equating them with the musical values of jazz becomes problematic. Here I would like to apply

Jocelyne Guilbault's analysis of structural homology<sup>9</sup> to the study of jazz. For one, the American attitudes described by Levey could easily be perceived in many other musics, not all of which would be created in the United States. Secondly, the relationship between music and the society in which it is conceived flows in more than one direction. In other words, the music not only reflects, but contributes to societal values. And finally, the values that are contained in jazz—or any other music—are not fixed, as Levey's description would suggest, but rather alter depending on the time, space, and most of all the human factor—in other words who is playing or listening.

Gary Giddins, in his turn, reflects:

How astonishing that the art most neglected by our unofficial ministries of culture, not to mention private enterprise, is one in which *American dominance is absolute and unrivalled*" (1990, 41, emphasis mine).

Robert Walser comments on this type of prevailing popular wisdom by saying:

But characterizing jazz in this way [jazz as an all-American art form, embodying the value of individual freedom, among others] effaces both its complex cultural history, including the myriad effects of racism and elitism on the music and the people who have made it, and the dialogue that is at the very heart of the music (1993, 348).

There is no doubt that jazz originated in the United States and this fact must be recognized. What must also be recognized, however, is the strategic purposes behind using nationalistic arguments in connection with jazz. Giddins, for instance, is using jazz as an all-American form to shore up more financial support for this music from the American government. He is appealing to nationalistic sentiment as a means to

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<sup>9</sup> Jocelyne Guilbault, "Interpreting World Music: A Challenge in Theory and Practice," *Popular Music* 16, no. 1 (1997): 31-44. Structural homology refers to the unidirectional relationship between a musical structure and an extra-musical value. It implies fixity across time and space, and it obscures the specificity of the musical practice in question as well as its potential agency.

further this cause—a strategy that he hopes may benefit, or arguably has benefitted American jazz musicians.

It would seem, however, that speaking about jazz as a thoroughly American music has the effect of obscuring the African-American elements in this music by subsuming it into the white American mainstream. As Amiri Baraka forcefully explains:

... the first serious white jazz musicians (Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Bix [Beiderbecke], etc.) sought not only to understand the phenomenon of Negro music but to appropriate it as a means of expression which they themselves might utilize. *The success of this "appropriation" signalled the existence of an American music, where before there was a Negro music*" (1998, 13, emphasis mine).

Rose echoes this opinion: "... many black musics before rap (e.g., the blues, jazz, early rock'n'roll) have also become American popular musics precisely because of extensive white participation; white America has always had an intense interest in black culture" (1994, 5).

Perhaps critics who write about jazz as American music view themselves as "colour-blind" and, by doing so, aim to be more inclusive in their writing. The problem is that this ignores the history of power relations in the making of jazz and other African-American musics.

### Jazz as concert music

Despite the current trend for Swing nights at dance bars and clubs, jazz remains primarily a music intended for listeners, rather than dancers. During the Swing era—coincidentally the time in which jazz was at the zenith of its popularity—jazz music and dancing went hand in hand, so to speak. The famous Savoy ballroom, which opened in 1926, had a huge dance floor and two band stands (Gioia

1997, 124). "The linkages between black dance, jazz music, and popular culture were furthered in the 1920s with the popularity of the Charleston, the shimmy, and the Black Bottom" (ibid., 124). Gioia describes a double-binding situation where black musicians would perform for all-white audiences and dancers in Harlem (ibid., 125). It may have provided welcome work opportunities for black musicians but, it could be suggested, it subjugated them in the process.

According to Linda Dahl, the craze "peaked during the Second World War, spawning ever more athletic routines like the jitterbug" (1996, 121). Gioia attributes the decline in the connection between jazz and dance—and by extension between jazz and popular music—to the rising costs of maintaining big bands, and in particular to a tax on dance halls instituted in 1944 which raised the entrance price by 30 percent. Patrons then became more interested in small combos (1997, 258). It would appear that smaller combos achieved a certain rhythmic freedom which had been impossible in a big band situation. In small combos, the leader can choose to change the tempo of the song at will—a move which would confound and frustrate even the most adept dancers. For instance, Kenny Washington explains:

Betty Carter had different ways she'd want you to play in terms of the tempo.... You had to watch her on the bandstand, her hands and her movements. She would bring her arm down a certain way to establish the beat. There would be no counting off, like 'one, two, three, four.' The secret was being able to figure out the tempo from the way she brought her hand down (cited in Berliner 1994, 311).

Another reason why small combos may have coincided with the decline in dancing to jazz is the emphasis on solos which encourages a more attentive kind of listening than is possible while dancing. Also, the length of solos being in large part up to the improviser means that songs can last much longer than danceable songs which generally last under five minutes. Jazz tunes commonly last ten or fifteen minutes, or longer.

In *The Imperfect Art*, Gioia describes how, in his view, this shift away from dance music was good for jazz.

... such music [popular music], if it is to remain popular, must stay true to dance rhythms. With jazz, an opposed sensibility prevailed: far from atrophying, the music was liberated in an important way by the gradual elimination of dance rhythms from its vocabulary (1988, 7).

Joseph Levey would agree, although he refers here to a style of dance typified by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers:

Both the jazz singer and the jazz dancer are dependent to some extent on instrumental music for support and inspiration. This does not diminish their accomplishments, but it does indicate that neither is an essential, indispensable ingredient of jazz (1983, 7).

For better or worse, this divergence of jazz away from dance could be seen as a move away from its black roots, since African cultures connect music and dance very strongly. According to Paul Gilroy, music and gesture are inseparable; so much so that he calls for the application of kinesics—the study of bodily movements as communication—to musics of black diaspora (1993, 75).

## Conclusion

"Like the canon of European music, the jazz canon is a strategy for exclusion, a closed and elite collection of "classic" works that together define what is and isn't jazz" (Tomlinson 1991, 245). While Tomlinson refers to the jazz canon in the singular—meaning the body of works against which all others are measured—his statement can be applied to the canons—in the plural—that have been discussed in this chapter. The key to the canons can be found in what and whom they exclude as much as in what and whom they include.

Far from being fixed, though, canons are regularly challenged and redefined. Jazz, which was, in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, essentially dance music, is now

primarily concert music. What was once a popular music is now in far less commercial demand than it was 30 or 40 years ago. The roots of jazz as a black music are often diluted in accounts by white jazz writers. And more and more, women are making their musical mark in the male dominated field of jazz, both as instrumentalists and as vocalists (gleaned from personal interviews with Ernie Nelson, July 7, 1998 and Lorraine Desmarais, August 16, 1998).

Miles Davis's innovations in jazz fusion, as Tomlinson tells us, were once perceived to be something less than jazz (1991, 249-51); his mixing of black and white musicians raised quite a few eyebrows in the black jazz community (ibid, 253-255). Nevertheless, Miles Davis has been firmly inducted into the canon of great jazz musicians. As Walser states unequivocally, "... he [Davis] cannot be denied a place in the canon of great jazz musicians..." (1993, 345). There is ample evidence to support the fact that canons change over time and space. The question is: what are the forces that effect or prevent this change?

Tomlinson addresses the question: "... who are the self-appointed guardians of the borderlines setting off jazz from such musics [referring to popular balladry, crooners' song styles, rhythm and blues styles, motown, funk, etc.] ?" (ibid, 246). Part of his answer reads as follows: "Certainly not most jazz musicians themselves, who from Louis Armstrong on have more often than not been remarkably open to interaction with the varied musical environment around them" (ibid, 246). I find this response very telling about the effectiveness of the canons. Here is an author who is attempting to challenge the notion of traditional canons, yet in his arguments, he has recourse to the very names that form the jazz canon of great musicians. In other words, he appears to be caught in a double-bind himself, because his statement would have less weight if he chose lesser-known artists to back up his claim.

According to Tomlinson (1991, 246), the canon of great jazz musicians is created and promulgated by the writers of jazz histories, such as Tirro (1977), Gridley (1985), Megill and Demory (1989), among others. To be sure, the literature plays a major role in the maintenance of this and other canons. However, I believe that other forces also contribute, including the musicians themselves. They are part and parcel of a whole community that, as described at the opening of this chapter, passes on the tradition through mentoring, from one generation to the next. In fact, Louis Armstrong is reported as one of those who vehemently resisted the innovations of the bebop generation: "... all them weird chords which don't mean nothing... you got no melody to remember and no beat to dance to" (quoted in Gioia 1997, 217).

As will be examined in Chapter Two, vocalists routinely have to overcome the canon of jazz as instrumental music that is enforced by many instrumentalists. Gender stereotypes, racism and the issue of commercialism, to name only a few, are all factors that contribute to the formation and upholding of canons by musicians, writers, music industry people and audiences alike. It is important to remember that canons do not have a life of their own. People create them, perpetuate them, even protect them, but they can also defy and reverse them.

There are very close connections between the various canons of jazz discussed here. It is difficult to separate instrumental jazz from jazz as a male genre, for instance, since they refer in great majority to the same artists. For that matter, by excluding vocal jazz, the guardians of the canon of jazz as instrumental music also exclude women to a large degree. And given the strong correlation between vocal jazz and popular music, they also distance themselves from jazz as a popular music. This, in turn, implies a relationship between jazzmen and the "classicization" of jazz.

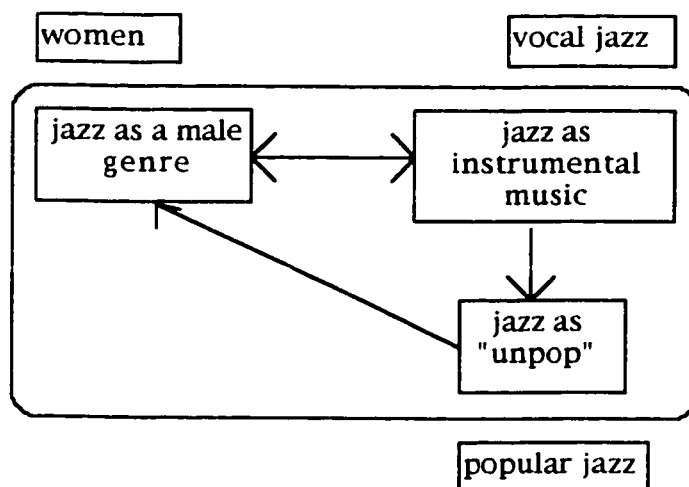


Figure 1.1. Canons as they relate to each other and elements they exclude

Similarly, jazz as black music can be linked to jazz as improvised music, as well as dance music, implying that jazz as concert music can be attributed to mainstream white American cultural elements.

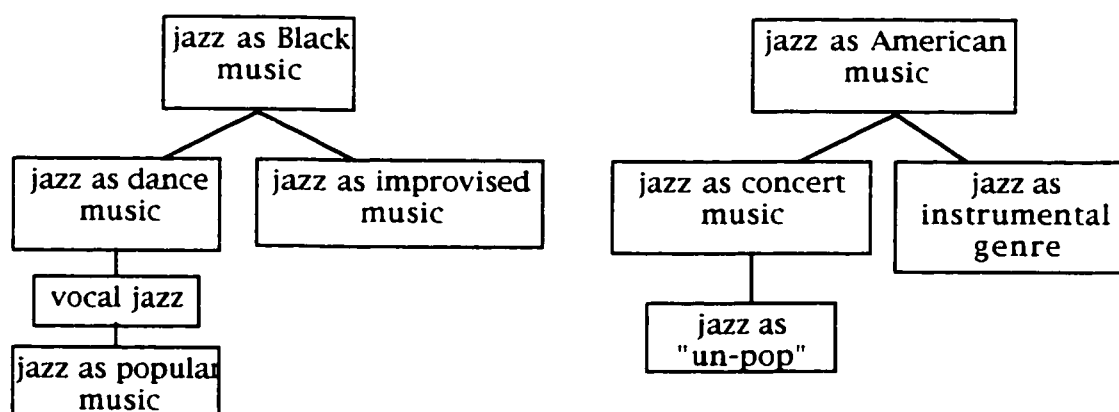


Figure 1.2. Canons that engender other canons

As we can see, some of the canons discussed here have a tendency to engender others. By doing so, they build in strength and tenacity, with the effect of institutionalizing what are, in reality, personal versions of how the jazz world is and should be.

What also becomes clear in looking at the canons in this way is that power relations play a paramount role in their production and reproduction. As stated earlier, black musics such as jazz often get subsumed by the dominant white American mainstream. In the same way, male musicians often relegate female musicians to an inferior status in order to maintain their dominance in the field.

Ambiguities begin to surface, however, when elements associated with African-American musical values, such as improvisation, meet concert music, or when vocal improvisation becomes less danceable or popular. While the purpose of canons is to exclude, they cannot do so absolutely. This has the effect of putting into question the canons' supposed verity and validity.

What is needed is wider acceptance and recognition of musicians who do not conform to the traditional canons of jazz, as well as those who do. We should accord less credence to set criteria and more attention to the politics that allow certain artists to be highlighted to the exclusion of others, and some music to be heard, and some not. To do so, we must first recognize that the canons' very existence depends on a particular group's ability to claim authority over a certain genre and over what is and is not "real jazz."

The following chapter will focus on jazz vocalists and their status and self-definition in light of the discussion on canons in this chapter. I will show how selected vocalists in the Montreal area have manifested or reacted to these canons.

*"How do you know when a singer is at the door?" Answer: "She doesn't know when to come in." - popular joke*

*"Les musiciens disent toujours que dans un band ya des musiciens, le batteur et la chanteuse." - Jean Lacasse, personal interview, June 3, 1998*

*"Talk to her, she's a real jazz singer." - consultant*

## CHAPTER TWO

### "No canary, thank you:" the Status and Self-definition of Montreal Jazz Vocalists

As discussed in Chapter One, the canons of jazz lead to the marginalization of any element that does not fit their definitions comfortably. The result is obviously a hierarchy, with African-American male bebop instrumentalists at the top, and white non-American female singers of popular (Tin Pan Alley type) tunes at the bottom. It must be clear that I am referring here solely to criteria for greatness in the jazz community, not a generalized societal trend. Most jazz musicians would fall somewhere between these two extremes. For instance, female instrumentalists would occupy a ranking higher than female singers, but lower than male instrumentalists—to take only two factors (gender and instrument) into account. The matter becomes even more complicated as we add factors such as race, pop versus "unpop," etc.

Since the focus of this thesis is on Montreal jazz vocalists, this chapter will specifically address their particular status within this overall hierarchy of conferred relative greatness. I say "conferred" because status often has little or no bearing on the actual quality of the music or talent of the individual.

If we narrow the field from the whole jazz community to vocal jazz in particular, as our frame of reference, then the hierarchy looks quite different. In this case, black female vocalists are at the top, and white male ones at the bottom. This is here problematized in reference to the four vocalists who participated in this study. It is in reaction to the hierarchies described above that vocalists tend to position themselves, creating and cultivating an image that places them as close to the top as possible.

In this chapter, I will examine the positioning of jazz singers in relation to the issues that have emerged most often in publications and interviews. These issues have been articulated from several perspectives, including not only the published, institutionalized versions from both academic and non-academic sources, but also from the singers' themselves and some instrumentalists who work with them.

Vocalists' status and self-definition are in constant interaction not only with other musicians, but also with the published versions of what they are supposed to be and what they are reported to be doing. Their status, then, is not fixed, but rather is a result of constant negotiating and renegotiating between their self-image and the images of jazz singers that are constructed in publications. For that reason, musicians' comments will appear in this chapter to be in dialogue with those of critics and journalists. The status of singers will be discussed in relation to the following themes that dominate either the literature or the discourse of Montreal jazz vocalists: what and who is a jazz singer; the voice as an instrument; and gender and race issues in vocal jazz.

## The Label "Jazz singer"

In this section, we will examine the various perspectives used to define or prescribe what a singer is or is supposed to be, as seen through the literature on vocal jazz, as well as by Montreal jazz vocalists and their instrumentalist colleagues.

Some authors are very overt in their attempt to define jazz singers. For instance, Humphrey Lyttelton tells us that Bessie Smith was the first to epitomize the common interpretation of the jazz singer. In his words: "[T]he jazz singers to us [jazz critics] are those who, like the musicians, have enhanced their chosen themes with a blend of insight, blues feeling, and creative variation, whether improvised or not" (1996, 928). Henry Pleasants, on the other hand, emphasizes improvisation as essential to jazz: "I am using "jazz singer" here in the sense that jazz musicians use it, referring to a singer who works—or can work—in a jazz musicians' instrumental style, improvising as a jazz musician improvises" (1996, 983). Despite the assumption that a singer must think like an instrumentalist in order to deserve the title of "jazz singer", both Lyttelton and Pleasants display the common belief that a singer is distinct from a musician. I will speak more about this in the section "The voice in jazz: horn or vocal instrument?"

Another author who pinpoints improvisation as the key feature that separates jazz singers from other kinds of singers is Gunther Schuller who writes: "Sarah Vaughan is a composing singer, a singing composer, if you will, an improvising singer, one who never—at least in the last twenty-five years or so—has sung a song the same way twice: as I said a *creative* singer, a jazz singer" (1996, 987). He further reinforces: "We say of a true jazz singer that they improvise." (1996, 987). This is indicative of the dominant school of thought regarding jazz, although, as we can see from Lyttelton's comments mentioned above, there are certainly varying opinions on whether a jazz singer must improvise in order to be entitled to that label.

Will Friedwald struggles with the issues of defining the jazz singer in the preface to his book *Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond* (1990). He says that with each new generation of jazz singers, from Bessie Smith to Bobby McFerrin, the term has taken on new meanings and interpretations that can scarcely lead to a consensus on what a jazz singer is or is not (1990, xi). He concludes that the term "jazz singer" can be seen as a "gift word" (1990, xi). In other words, it can never be applied to oneself. In this interpretation, "jazz singer" becomes a complimentary term that is strictly in the eye—or should I say "ear"—of the beholder.

In many cases, people avoid any overt attempts to define jazz singing as such. However, a person's definition of a jazz singer is often manifested in the individuals they choose as the epitome of the category. Bessie Smith, for instance, is often mentioned as the first name in the history of jazz singing. Although she was thoroughly steeped in the blues tradition, many believe she had a tremendous influence on future jazz singers, as well as being one of those responsible for the birth of vocal jazz through the blending of the blues with popular song (Friedwald 1990; Gioia 1997). Linda Dahl offers: "Especially through her [Bessie Smith's] mastery of time, *so essential to an effective jazz performance*, she succeeded in conveying deep intensity of feeling and multiple meanings in her material" (1996, 99, emphasis mine). Indirectly, this statement lets us know at least in part how she defines what a jazz singer is or does. Similarly, Bruce Crowther and Mike Pinfeld give an indication of what a jazz singer's role is to them:

If the blues was the major factor in [Bessie] Smith's career, also important were vaudeville songs and popular material. Many of her records of these songs are equally magnificent examples of her work, filled as they are with imaginative vitality and raw swing. They are *true jazz performances*. (1997, 30, emphasis mine)

As we can see, to answer the question "what is a jazz singer?" we must address the question "who is a jazz singer?" A case in point can be observed in Dahl's chapter entitled "The Jazz Singers" (1996). She goes to the trouble of separating the jazz singers over which there is little dispute—such as Billie Holiday, Betty Carter, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald—from those who "though they did not make their mark as jazz stylists, they deserve mention as good popular singers and active contributors to the music of the big-band era" (1995, 149). In her opinion, those singers include Helen Forrest, Helen O'Connell, Kay Starr and Maxine Sullivan.

Along the same lines, Will Friedwald says: "... there are many completely *jazzless* (emphasis mine) singers who have more to say *to jazz* as a whole than most jazz singers, such as Mabel Mercer and Edith Piaf" (1990, xii). Friedwald attributes the controversy over who is or is not a jazz singer to the very close relationship between jazz singing and popular song. A great many jazz singers have combined the singing of Tin Pan Alley songs with a jazz feel or have improvised within the framework of those songs (Moore 1989; Dahl 1996; Gioia 1997). I would add that the reason this relationship is problematic for some is that it goes against the grain of those who would prefer to think of jazz as a non-commercial art akin to an idealistic view of classical music—harkening back to our canon of jazz as "unpop".

It could be said that the group of singers over whom confusion does not loom (Holiday, Carter, Vaughan, Fitzgerald, Armstrong, etc.) represents a canon in itself—the canon of great jazz vocalists. This is not to say that there is no controversy over who would be admitted to this canon of vocal jazz. For instance, although Frank Sinatra never considered himself a jazz singer (Lees 1998, 101), he is often one of the first names cited in discussions on vocal jazz. Ranee Lee's characterization of a jazz singer comes through in her description of Sinatra's style: "... the traditional music of my youth was standards, which are jazz songs today. That's the music that Count

Basie and Sarah Vaughan, Frank Sinatra, *who's not really a jazz*er, but his music was presented and sung by others a great deal..." (personal interview, June 30, 1998, emphasis mine.) She further explains:

Frank Sinatra had wonderful phrasing, impeccable intonation. He just knew what to do with the tune. But he was a pop idol. His arrangements and his vocal movements are all directed in the pop idiom, the standard idiom. Whereas jazzers take a few more liberties with the melodies. (Although he did too. But not to the extent that, say, Sarah Vaughan would have, or Carmen McRae even more.)

Even Tony Bennett, who's borderline. I mean I don't even know what category you could identify them with, but to call them jazz musicians or jazz vocalists is not a title I would say would fit them. I think they're more universal than that.

Jazz vocalising or jazz music is dependent on the construction of a chord and the notes that are used within that chord and the paraphrasing of the melody, and just the whole interpretation, apart from the written understanding of what the original melody was about. (personal interview, June 30, 1998)

In the same vein, artists who are conferred the title of "jazz singer" in Montreal can also be subject to controversy. Karen Young is referred to as a jazz singer by countless journalists, despite her resistance to the label. Mark Miller included her in his collection on Canadian jazz musicians entitled *Boogie, Pete and the Senator* (1987, 297-301), as well as in his entry on jazz in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* (1992, 648). Young, however, has always defied categorization, preferring to experiment with different styles of music rather than labelling herself a "jazz singer." In 1993 for instance, Young created her own music festival at the Théâtre Quat'sous in Montreal, which featured five nights (*Les cinq soirs*) of Karen Young performances, each focussing on a different style of music: classical, jazz, world beat, country, and rock and roll. The total repertoire for the festival amounted to over one hundred songs, in eighteen different languages. She says with a laugh: "... You know what you call a *variété*? That took the word seriously." (personal

interview, June 3, 1998) She did the show in its entirety in Montreal and in Québec City. She then toured throughout Québec and did a scaled-down version of the festival in two nights, with a reduced complement of musicians—six as opposed the twenty-five who participated in the *Cinq soirs*. Finally, Young produced an album—*Good News On The Crumbling Walls* (1993)—which was made up of a selection of songs from all five nights (and styles) of the festival.

Most likely, the labelling of Young as a jazz singer is due to the vast media coverage her jazz duo with bassist Michel Donato received during the 1980's. Although she did not play jazz exclusively, even during that period, she states:

That's [the Young and Donato duo] the only thing that the media covered. But [the band] All Smiles was there, 'cause that was my tendency toward vocal harmony which I've never lost. And at the same time I was singing in a church choir and learning early music and classical singing,... I had an early music group... I became a complete medieval music freak... (this was happening in the '80s). Plus, I got into... Latin music... we [Young and pianist Tim Jackson] had [a group called] the Young Latins... (personal interview, June 3, 1998).

Young's latest release, *Nice Work If You Can Get It* (1998), is almost completely made up of her own arrangements, with only one exception. She is responsible for composing over half of the music and almost all of the lyrics. Although Young has always defied categorization, this particular album, with its emphasis on jazz improvisation and a complement of jazz musicians such as Charles Papasoff and Bill Mahar, falls quite nicely under the jazz label. With a wry smile, she admits: "I'm always surprised when I hear that I'm a jazz singer. Although this last album, I kind of realized, yeah..." (personal interview, June 3, 1998). At this comment, Young's partner Jean Lacasse jokingly asked me to give him back Young's press kit, saying that it was now obsolete since it contains many articles that show her resisting the label "jazz singer."

The controversy over who qualifies as a jazz singer seems to hinge on the matter of improvisation. Crowther and Pinfold sum it up in the following way:

Consider those singers who, like [Mark] Murphy, wholeheartedly immerse themselves in improvisation, modal concept, chord changes and trading fours with the guys in the band; there is no confusion as to what *they* do. But what about singers who do not so readily delve into the realms of improvisation, preferring to concentrate more on tone, nuance, inflection and subtle interpretation? Are they to be excluded [from the category of jazz singers]? (1997, 15)<sup>1</sup>

As stated earlier, the answer may lie in the way improvisation itself is interpreted, particularly vocal improvisation. As seen in the discussion on the canon of jazz as improvised music in Chapter One, improvisation can be understood as a broader range of musical freedom than traditionally thought. Most of the time, however, it is unclear what authors mean by the word 'improvisation.' For some, vocal improvising means scatting<sup>2</sup>, while for others it simply means singing a melody freely, whether it be with or without the use of words. I will explore this further in Chapter Three. For now, suffice it to say that the term 'improvisation' can be understood in many ways which most authors do not make explicit.

One of Canada's top jazz guitarists, Rod Ellias, has taught jazz improvisation for about ten years at various universities. He makes the distinction between scatting and improvising, when he explains:

When I first started teaching jazz improv' and there were vocalists in the class, my philosophy was, well, jazz singing is scat singing. [It] was improvising. ...  
[I]f you think of all the great jazz singers, for how many of them was [scatting] the focus, or even more than five percent?... [M]y favourite jazz singer for years was

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<sup>1</sup> "Trading fours" is an expression which refers to the practice of sharing a 32-bar solo, in portions of four bars, amongst the members of a jazz combo.

<sup>2</sup> Scat singing is the practice of singing nonverbal syllables rather than words.

Nancy Wilson. ... I never heard her scat. I don't think she does. But she really improvises with the phrasing and twisting the melody and the pitch, bending the pitch,...

[W]hen I had singers in my class, I'd sort of expect them to scat solos as musicians did. And less and less now, I find it less and less important. (personal interview, June 19, 1998)

All distinctions between types of improvisation aside, improvisation itself does appear to be as essential to vocal jazz as it is to instrumental jazz. There seems to be a widespread consensus that a jazz singer is one who is able to improvise in some way, whether it be through scatting or otherwise. Chapter Three will explore methods of vocal improvisation in more detail.

#### The voice in jazz: horn or vocal instrument?

One of the most widespread themes that recurs in the literature on vocal jazz and in the discourse of both jazz singers and instrumentalists is "the voice as an instrument." Those who speak of the voice as an instrument would seem to fall into two camps. The first camp comprises of those who highlight the voice's ability to mimic either the sound or the style of other instruments, often emphasizing similarities between the voice and horn instruments. For instance, Sarah Vaughan is quoted as saying: "Horns always influenced me more than voices... as soon as I hear an arrangement, I get ideas, kind of like blowing a horn" (Dahl 1996, 140). Ernie Nelson proudly reflects: " The mouth can produce any sound the synthesizer can produce. I've tried it" (personal interview, July 7, 1998). He articulates the voice as instrument analogy in the midst of a discussion about teaching students to scat:

... if they want to scat, I might just say to them 'well what's you're favourite instrument?' And so the person might think, 'o.k., saxophone. I like saxophone.' 'So, o.k. just go over your lines and try to get the sound of the saxophone. Don't say any words. Just try to get the language of that saxophone.' (personal interview, July 7, 1998)

This philosophy was manifested to me in 1994, when I took René Lavoie's jazz improvisation class at the University of Ottawa. I was asked to transcribe a horn solo, rather than a vocal one, when all the instrumentalists in the class were transcribing a solo performed by the same instrument that they played. I, as a vocalist, was expected to learn to phrase like a horn player does.

In the second camp are those who describe the voice as one instrument among many, with all its idiosyncracies, quite apart, separate and, most importantly, equal to any other instrument. They speak of the voice as an instrument, but rather than imitating one in particular, they value its distinctness from other instruments. For example, Jeri Brown states: "... [Y]ou tend to know your voice. The more you sing, the more you use the instrument, the more you approach it as an instrument" (personal interview, June 12, 1998). On many occasions, Brown has clarified during my lessons with her that we are not trying to *sound like* an instrument, which is distinct from *treating the voice like* an instrument. Treating the voice like an instrument, in this case, means working on one's sound like any other musician would, perfecting a technique, using the voice in a deliberate fashion, but not necessarily trying to emulate a horn or any other instrument.

In either case, the use of the analogy of the voice as an instrument appears to be a way to diffuse a prevailing stereotype which characterizes singers as less than competent musicians—to put it politely. Popular jokes about singers who cannot count beats in a measure are only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. More often than not, singers are excluded from the term "musician" altogether. People tend to assume that a singer can sing by some sort of accidental gift, whereas instrumentalists are recognized for their discipline in practicing long and arduous hours and for their *musicianship*. At a personal level, I can say that I have toiled many long hours to

hone my vocal skills and continue to do so. I must confess that I feel quite defensive at any suggestion that I am anything less than a musician.

In general parlance, the voice is often distinguished from other instruments to the point where it is not considered an instrument at all. We see it manifested in musical discourse all the time. Even the term "singer" is based on the action "to sing," whereas the word "pianist," for instance, is made up of the name of the instrument (piano) and a suffix (-ist). That, I believe, is why many singers have chosen to label themselves "vocalists," to emphasize their intentional use of the "vocal instrument" on which they were trained.

We almost never refer to what a singer does as *playing* music. Singers sing. *Musicians* play. Not that people intend to exclude singers from the category of musician, but it is simply a common assumption that musicians play *instruments*, and instruments are understood as something you can hold in your hands and push buttons or blow through to produce sound.

The term "instrumentalist," which refers to someone other than a vocalist, implies that the voice is something other than an instrument. Logically, the voice should be analogous to a violin, a flute, a guitar, etc. However, in practice, the voice is seen (or should I say, heard), by and large, as a separate category from other instruments, as the counterpart to all other instruments as a whole.

The analogy of the "voice as an instrument" may be motivated by a need for singers to create a *rapprochement* between themselves and instrumentalists, thereby gaining entry into a musical field that is by and large considered instrumental. In this way, they elevate their status to that of instrumentalists within the canons of jazz. For instance, Lee states: "I just fit in as a musician, you know, as the instrumentalist within the confines of the ensemble." (personal interview, June 30,

1998) Karen Young offers: "I loved making my voice like an instrument. That was the thing that first attracted me to jazz." (personal interview, June 3, 1998)

Instruments would appear to be the baseline against which the voice is measured; a principle that is manifested in statements such as: "'On The Sunny Side of the Street,'... demonstrates the *instrumental nature* of her [Billie Holiday's] thought" (Green 1996, 951, emphasis mine). This statement is substantiated through a comparison to Lester Young's playing of the same song. The question remains: what exactly is "instrumental nature?" It is interesting that Lester Young, the man reputed to "sing" with his saxophone, is used as a reference point for Billie Holiday's "instrumental" singing.

More comparisons of the voice to other instruments can be found in the following statements: "... one or more instrumental soloists step forward to join her [Ella Fitzgerald] in a round of "taking fours," with Ella's voice assuming the character and color of a variety of instruments as she plunges exuberantly into chorus after chorus of syllabic improvisation (scatting)" (Pleasants 1996, 982). Or else, as Gunther Schuller ponders Sarah Vaughan's use of vibrato:

... I think Sarah learned her lessons not from a voice teacher, but from the great jazz musicians that preceded her. For among great jazz instrumentalists the vibrato is not something sort of slapped onto the tone to make it sing, but rather a compositional, a structural, an expressive element elevated to a very high place in the hierarchy of musical tools which they employ (1996, 989).

Note Schuller's assumption that only an instrumentalist is capable of teaching a vibrato worthy of a "very high place in the hierarchy of musical tools," whereas voice teachers, by implication, gratuitously "*slap* it onto the tone to make it sing." Also note, once again, the implication that a musician is equal to an instrumentalist, to the exclusion of the vocalist.

While these typical comments may seem like high praise on the surface, they imply that the voice must somehow strive to be something other than what it is. In opposing vocal qualities to instrumental qualities—which most often remain undefined and therefore tenuous—authors establish a hierarchy between them, a kind of battle that must be won by either side.

One exceptional book is the award-winning volume entitled *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (1994), by ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner. His exhaustive study of the processes and traditions of jazz performance can and should be a model of scholarship for all who write about jazz. Berliner has used a combination of ethnographic work and musical analysis in order to document the language of jazz music and how it is acquired. His research on jazz was conducted with unprecedented diligence.

Interestingly, Berliner treats vocal jazz under the same rubric as instrumental jazz. Many of his examples come from vocal jazz and they are intertwined among the instrumental. For instance, he speaks about idiosyncracies of drumming and the particular considerations of its practitioners (p. 134). Later on he comments on the musical considerations of wind players: "Sound, melodic range, and performance technique may be inextricably linked for wind players..." (p. 135). He also devotes some attention to scat singing, a factor unique to vocalists (p. 125-6). In other words, he gives equal consideration to all instruments, voice included, in this study. This has the effect of recasting the voice as an integral component of jazz, rather than buttressing the traditional canon of jazz as an instrumental genre.

The relationship between vocalists and instrumentalists is often treated as a taboo. Many singers do not want to exacerbate the problem by putting

instrumentalists on the defensive, and many instrumentalists simply prefer not to talk about it, at least not in the presence of singers. However, there is no avoiding the many grievances instrumentalists have against vocalists on the whole. Many even refuse to play with singers. Rod Ellias admits: "Well, singers don't have a good reputation with instrumentalists. At least they didn't used to. I mean, I've worked with people that hate singers, that won't work with them" (personal interview, June 19, 1998). As a jazz singer, I was at a jam session recently where a piano player was invited to play a song with me. He refused, saying: "I don't like playing with singers." Interestingly, after he heard me sing, he asked me for my phone number in case he gets a gig where he needs a singer. Refusing to play with singers is perhaps an extreme, but not uncommon position. Raneé Lee says:

... I don't know about females in particular, but I know a number of musicians—male-wise—who feel that they only want to be instrumentalists, and they don't want ... to have to play an accompanying role, because at one point singers just thought of themselves as just that: singers, with no more contribution than that.

.. And it ... sort of pushed the musician aside for the benefit of exploring what the vocalist had to say, that being female. You know, because of the way she looked or the way she interpreted the song, and then you just sort of forgot about the musician, the instrumentalist, the side-man.

And that [side-man] could become a dirty word in some cases, because we all have something to say, whether it's a voice or an instrument. And a lot of time, the voice, even if it's not up to par, ... still covers the issue of the musician, that 'I'm here to be heard as well.' And I've always respected that in musicians. ... [N]o matter what, I always try to encourage the fact that I'm on stage with other people. I'm not here by myself. And whatever I'm doing, I'm not doing it alone (personal interview, June 30, 1998).

Since the vast majority of instrumentalists in jazz are men and majority of jazz singers are women, the relationship between instrumentalists and vocalists is bound up with gender issues, to which I will return later in this chapter. For now, I would

like to highlight the tension—which Lee has obviously overcome—between singers and instrumentalists that surfaces in the discourse on vocal jazz .

Ernie Nelson describes a situation where young singers have trouble getting a fair dose of respect in a band: "... number one, it's the musicians, you know. The vocalist has to get the musicians' respect." He explains:

I always have to tell my students, 'cause the students come with the stories like: 'I don't have any say in the band!' So, I always tell them: 'You have to make them, you have to take a stand. And so you've got to first of all be good at what you're doing so that you can explain it to them. So if you don't like what they're playing, tell them: 'Play it like this. Try this.' But if you don't ever learn this, if you don't take a stand, you're never going to have any say in this band.  
(personal interview, July 7, 1998)

There is clearly a pattern of the singers having to vie for the respect of instrumentalists—and not the other way around—and for their rightful recognition as musicians themselves. Karen Young's story of her dealings with the Musicians Guild in Montreal is very *à propos*.

I'll tell you a story. I always used to belong to the musicians' guild and I didn't know that they don't consider singers musicians. So I go in and the guy says: 'Oh, yeah, we're giving grants to go around to schools and stuff like that.' So I said: 'Oh I know what I'll do, I'll do my vocal jazz and the history of vocal jazz and all that.' He says: 'Vocal? Singers aren't musicians.' He said that to me. I'd been paying my union dues for 10 years! And so then, I used to use it every time I went on TV. I'd play a shaker. That's why I'm such a good shaker player. I would play the shaker or the snare or something like that. And then they'd consider me a musician, see? (personal interview, July 16, 1998)

Jeri Brown, in her turn, describes how vocalists are a "misunderstood entity" (personal interview, June 12, 1998).

They [instrumentalists] don't understand anything about the instrument [the voice]. So they typically, (this is a very stereotypical comment, but it does represent a large population)... they don't make it a part of their mission to know any more about that voice, except to say, 'well, if you

sound o.k. and you can do all these things that my instrumentalists can do, then you must be great. Whereas we, as vocalists, we spend our whole lives trying to get closer to these instruments! If you understand what I mean.

A vocal teacher is very cognizant of the important role that the accompanist plays. ... But it doesn't always work the other way, where the instrumentalists are that concerned about what's going on for the vocalist. As long as she doesn't lose the beat, sing flat, or screw up in some way, as they would deem it [laughter]. (personal interview, June 12, 1998)

The question remains: where does the tension between instrumentalists and vocalists come from and why does it exist? There are many reasons, not the least of which, I would like to argue, is a battle of the sexes. (I will return to this in the section on gender and race, further in this chapter.) As Lee highlighted earlier, other reasons include the fact that often the singer is the focus of the audience's attention, often to the exclusion of the rest of the band. Roy Haynes would seem to agree:

You know people are always asking me how it was to play with Sarah [Vaughan]. They figure it must have been a drag, you know, playing behind a singer, *and never really getting a chance to stretch out*. But that's not the way it was. I thought it was a gas. Sarah's not just a singer. I mean she's fantastic, and playing with her was a ball for me. She's so great. And I always got a chance to solo. (quoted in Baraka 1998, 45, emphasis mine)

The comment "She's not just a singer" alludes clearly to the low esteem in which singers are held generally, and against which Sarah Vaughan obviously shone.

Ernie Nelson echoed the view that instrumentalists often resentfully expect to receive less than their fair share of the limelight when playing with singers. When I asked him to what he would attribute the competition between vocalists and instrumentalists, he paused and then answered:

I think it's rooted in ego. Musicians are notorious for thinking they're better than they are. And they wear that as a garment. I think it's something like 'the vocalist is going to get more praise (or something) than we are as musicians. The vocalist is going to get more recognition.'

But I think they need to rethink that idea. Because every musician has to, I think, learn how to accompany, and become really good at it; to learn how to accompany a vocalist or another musician.

So if and when the person becomes good at that, then that competition ceases. Because when you get good at that, then you're an entity unto yourself. And that's why people hire you, because you have this ability. (personal interview, July 7, 1998)

The internationally-known jazz pianist Lorraine Desmarais would agree with Nelson. She states: "[M]oi, je pense que tout musicien doit pouvoir être accompagnateur et soliste, autant. D'avoir les dimensions" (personal interview, August 16, 1998). She says that when she plays with singers, she modifies the way she plays her instrument. For instance, while the vocalist is singing lyrics, Desmarais tends to play more softly, so as not to interfere with the words of the song. She adds that just as she plays more in the mid-range of her instrument to advantage bass and saxophone players, so does she adjust her playing style to accommodate vocalists. She says: "Le bût dans tout ça c'est qu'on fait *la musique*; comment on va arriver à faire la musique avec l'effectif qu'on a" (personal interview, August, 1998). When I asked her if she feels any resentment when the singer is in the spotlight, she answered enthusiastically:

Non! Mais pas du tout! Mais c'est ça qui est le *fun*. [Ça] dépend des tempéraments. T'as des tempéraments de musiciens, eux-autres, oublie ça, c'est *Prima Donna*, star en avant, ... c'est des vedettes. Y en a comme ça. ... Puis ils sont biens, ils le font très bien... Tu peux pas les changer, ils sont nés comme ça puis ils veulent faire ça [être soliste].

Puis t'en as d'autre qui veulent pas faire ça du tout. C'est des gens très en retrait qui [disent]: 'moi, j'accompagne. Je veux pas être soliste.' Ça va. Il faut respecter les tempéraments des personnes.

Moi, j'aime accompagner. J'aime être soliste. C'est dans mon tempérament aussi. J'aime ça foncer, puis j'suis en avant aussi. Mais quand c'est le temps d'être en arrière, je suis en arrière puis je dérange pas. [laughing]. Puis ça me dérange pas, puis ça me fait plaisir, puis c'est comme: LA MUSIQUE! (personal interview, August 16, 1998)

Rod Ellias offers this possible explanation as to why many instrumentalists resent vocalists :

... [I]n the older days especially, there used to be a lot of (maybe there still are) people that call themselves singers that wanted to sit in, but they hadn't really put in enough time on their instrument, on their voice or with the music.

Well, I mean, let's face it, most people can... carry a tune... And it's very easy for someone to say: 'I'm a jazz singer.' All they have to do is sing 'How High The Moon' or something, and they're a jazz singer. But there's things that they haven't put time in with, and it's frustrating for a musician if they can't communicate with a singer, or if the singer comes up and misses a beat or leaves a bar out, or changes key in the middle of the thing without realizing it. In other words, doesn't really have it down, you know what I'm saying?

It's an easy thing to abuse being a singer. You can't, with the same ease, say 'I'm a saxophone player' and go up and sit in, because you have to put some time in on it (personal interview, June 19, 1998).

Using the analogy of the "voice as instrument," in either of the senses described earlier, appears to be a way of distancing singers who have achieved a certain level of competency, from those who, as Rod Ellias so eloquently pinpointed, do not "really have it down."

Dahl describes the relationship between the voice and other instruments as intimate, attributing it to jazz's African-American roots, which has carried over the African musical value of the voice as the first instrument (1996, 97). She states: "To say that a singer wails like a horn or that a player sings on the horn is a mark of high praise in jazz" (1996, 98). While this may sound like an idyllic, two-way relationship, I would argue that the voice-instrument connection in jazz is often more adversarial than intimate, for the reasons examined above. It has become, in essence, a turf war between the predominantly female singers on the one hand, and the predominantly male instrumentalists on the other. For that matter, it could be argued that the battle to make jazz an instrumental genre is a move away from its

African-American roots and closer to the white model of European-style classical music. I will return to this in the following section on gender and race.

### From "girl-singer" to diva: gender and race issues in vocal jazz

Gender and race are treated here together because, as it has been noted by many feminist writers, gender and race are factors which intersect and cannot be treated fairly if separated (Duclos 1992; Stanford Friedman 1995; Jhappan 1996). By placing gender first, I am not intentionally commenting on its priority over race in a generalized hierarchy of modes of oppression. I respectfully acknowledge the criticisms that many feminists of colour have levelled against white feminists who—they contend—universalize women's experiences without due consideration of the differences between them. As Radha Jhappan points out:

White feminists have exposed male essentialism, only to replace it with another essentialism based on the notion of an essential woman. However, as it turns out, this generic "woman" is not only white, but middle class, and also able-bodied, heterosexual, and in Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand at least, usually Anglophone (1996, 22).

On the other hand, there exists another view which maintains, as Paul Gilroy does, that "gender is the modality in which race is lived" (1993, 85). Though gender, in this line of reasoning, comes before race, it does not suggest that gender issues are universal. As I understand it, it simply means that no matter what a person's racial background, they will have to contend with gender issues.

If there is a reason for gender coming first in this analysis, it is rooted in the fact that the main informants of this study—jazz vocalists in Montreal—tended to bring up gender as an issue more readily than race. While this could be attributed to the fact that I am white and the three non-white informants (Brown, Lee and Nelson) may have felt uncomfortable discussing race with me, their responses to my

inquiries would seem to indicate that this is not the case. In addition, Gilroy's understanding of the relationship between gender and race is the point of view that is most often reflected in the literature on vocal jazz. Furthermore, for jazz vocalists working currently, gender—while not more important than race in shaping their identity—appears to be the prime consideration in establishing their status in the jazz world.

Other factors, such as class, able-bodiedness, linguistic background, to name only a few, come into play, of course. However, in the interests of both feasibility and space, I will focus mainly on gender and race, as they appear to be far more prominent in both the literature and the discourse of the informants.

As seen in Chapter One, the jazz world has always been, and continues to be—although perhaps to a lesser extent—a highly phallogentric culture. On the other hand, vocal jazz has been largely the province of women, ever since the early 1920s—when singers like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Mildred Bailey and Connie Boswell reigned. It is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about vocal jazz without referring to the gendered role it represents. The statistics one can observe on the *Mercury Records Songbook* (1995) compact disc collection, for instance, give an indication of the predominance of women in the vocal field of jazz. The collection features 17 vocalists, 14 of whom are women, who perform 90 percent of the songs included in the set of 4 compact discs.

It has been noted by many authors that vocals are the one area of jazz where women form the vast majority of the artists (Gossett and Johnson 1980, Dahl 1996, McCord 1985, Lewis 1986, Friedwald 1990, Miller 1991). Few, however, have actually considered the coincidence between the gendering roles assigned to different instruments—in particular, the voice as a female instrument—and the low status

accorded to vocalists in the jazz community. Of all the authors studied here, David Brackett comes the closest to making this connection, albeit implicit. He broaches the topic of the status accorded to the jazz vocalists, particularly during the big band era of the 1930s and 1940s.

A further point about the role of women in popular music during the thirties and forties is that female singers in bands were viewed as a necessary evil, an accouterment necessary for the visual pleasure of the males in the audience, but not necessarily for the aural pleasure of either audience or bands. Writers denigrated the female singers' musical abilities as routinely as they praised their visual attributes. At the same time, writers often attributed the singers' success solely to their appearance, implying that success was achieved despite their meager talents. (1995, 42)

The term "jazzwoman" is now a commonly used label which serves to include women in the musical field of jazz by borrowing from the more traditional appellation "jazzman." It would be inappropriate to speak about jazzwomen without giving due recognition to the fact that a great majority of them are vocalists. Just as in the European classical tradition, the voice, and to a lesser degree the piano, have generally been deemed to be the most acceptable outlets for women in jazz (Gossett and Johnson 1980; Miller 1991; Dahl 1996; Cook 1992; O'Brien 1996). Because of this, jazzwomen are more often than not assumed to be singers, despite the increasing number of female instrumentalists in jazz. The very existence of collections such as *Satin Dolls: The Women of Jazz* (1994), which is an album and booklet set of all-female, all-vocal jazz bears witness to this fact. Its title alone is very telling about the way women in jazz have been type-cast.

Some authors have chosen a feminist approach to the study of jazz. One such author is Linda Dahl, who, in her book entitled *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (1996), chronicles the major female figures of jazz history. She dedicates a whole section, that is about one quarter, of this book to female jazz

vocalists. Her perspective as a feminist is most readily apparent in her choices of issues to discuss, such as the gendering of instruments and the sexism encountered by the artists in question. Although this book can easily be criticized for being little more than a glorified list of artists, their dates and instruments, I think it serves a much needed and belated purpose of highlighting female jazz artists in general and vocalists in particular.

Sally Placksin's book *Jazzwomen, 1900 to the Present: Their Words, Lives and Music* (1985) takes a similar tack, only she proceeds in a more encyclopedic fashion based on individual female jazz musicians. A further distinction between the two works is that Placksin intersperses vocalists with instrumentalists rather than giving them a separate section.

Many articles have also been written applying the feminist perspective to jazz as a whole, for instance Hattie Gossett and Carolyn Johnson's "Jazzwomen: They're Mostly Singers and Piano Players, Only A Horn Player or Two, Hardly Any Drummers" (1980), and Susanna Miller's "A History of Women In Jazz" (1991). Most of these treat vocal jazz as one element within the study of jazzwomen in general, which is consistent with the model chosen by Paul Berliner.

Although men like Louis Armstrong and Bing Crosby are credited with pioneering jazz singing and crooning respectively (Friedwald 1990; Crowther and Pinfold 1997), there is little doubt that women have created a niche in vocal jazz. Will Friedwald describes Armstrong and Crosby as "the two most important figures in jazz-derived popular singing" (1990, 25). It is worth noting that the contribution of these men remains unobscured to this day, often overshadowing that of female pioneers in jazz singing.

Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters and others pre-dated Armstrong, certainly as far as recordings are concerned. But whereas Smith is identified as *the* great blues singer and Waters as

establishing the basis of modern, jazz- and blues-  
*influenced* popular singing, Armstrong was pure jazz gold.  
 (Crowther and Pinfold, 1997, 31, emphasis in original)

The female vocalists are often conceived of in this way that is, being less "pure jazz" than their male counterparts. I believe this is in large part because jazzmen, even those who sing, are more often than not instrumentalists, which—as I have said before—automatically raises their status in jazz circles. The vocalists studied here happen to bear out these genderized roles. Jeri Brown, Ranee Lee, and Karen Young define themselves fairly exclusively as vocalists, while Ernie Nelson describes himself as a vocalist and a pianist. Interestingly, Brown, Lee and Young are all skilled at playing other instruments, as well as the voice.

At age 9, Jeri Brown began attending a performing arts school on Saturdays, in her home town of St. Louis, Missouri. There, she learned to play the violin, viola, cello, percussion, piano and flute. Of these instruments she focussed mainly on what she calls "the dreaded piano lessons" (personal interview, June 11, 1998). She had occasion to use this skill professionally in the late 1980s, while she was doing an apprenticeship at the Sutton Artists booking agency in New York. The agency ensured that she was introduced to numerous artists and clubs, where she performed on vocals and piano, both solo and in various combos. She describes how she met the challenge of singing and playing at the same time:

I had not a good sense of that [playing and singing simultaneously]. We did things like "The Way We Were," and I would just basically play a pedal line, a bass line, with a nice arpeggio. It was not jazz, but it was enough to get me a performance. Actually, I worked in supper clubs in New York, singing and playing the piano. I only did it for maybe 6 months, but I did it. ... But I did it! (personal interview, June 11, 1998)

When Ranee Lee was a child in boroughs of Manhattan, she ran and hid from her piano teacher when he came to her house for her lesson. Although she now

regrets not having taken advantage of the piano lessons, she eventually taught herself to play the drums, saxophone and electric bass while working with various groups in the late 1960s.

[A]t this point now in my life [in 1969], I [had] started playing drums and a little bass. Because I'd already been in various other groups and picked up different instruments. So not only was I dancing and "killing myself" and kicking and singing and playing drums, I was playing saxophone [and] bass. (personal interview, June 30, 1998)

Until she moved to Montreal in 1970, Lee's musical interests were an eclectic mix of musical theatre songs, Top 40, R&B, rock and country and western. Shortly after moving to Montreal though, Lee decided it would be appropriate to choose one musical style to perfect. As she puts it: "... it was time to focus" (personal interview, June 30, 1998). With the guidance of her husband, guitarist, Richard Ring, she gradually placed more and more of her energies on jazz singing, leaving behind the playing of other instruments in the process. She kept doing what she calls "show tunes"—songs in the style of Barbara Streisand and Shirley Bassey, etc.—until the mid-eighties, when she settled exclusively on jazz.

Karen Young learned to play the piano at age four in her home town of Hudson (a city near Montreal). Her talent was recognized by her mother when she played by ear a piece that her sister had been practicing. She recalls: "... I started playing her piece and pretending I was reading it but I was playing it in the wrong key. 'Look Mom, I can play too!' And so she started me on lessons..." (personal interview, June 3, 1998). She continued to take classical piano lessons until she was in high school, at which time she decided it was not for her. Although she plays guitar, any kind of keyboard instrument, percussion and electric bass—for composition purposes as well as live and recorded performances—she down-plays her skills as an instrumentalist. As she says:

I've never considered myself an instrumentalist. I knew that just from the moment when, in elementary school, I'd go to those *concours* and I'd be slipping all over the piano because they [her hands] were sweating so much. (personal interview, June 3, 1998)

By contrast to the three female singers interviewed, Ernie Nelson is known as a singer-pianist, having dedicated much of his professional music making career to both instruments. Like Young, Nelson began playing the piano at age four, in his home town of West Chester, Pennsylvania<sup>3</sup>. He recalls: "Just playing what I heard in my head. It was just a search. Like, what you hear, and you try to play it. It was just a lot of fun. When you're that age though, music is really big. Notes are huge!" (personal interview, July 7, 1998) At the age of nine, his parents started him on piano lessons, which he did not enjoy. He explains:

Because, they started me on classical music and it was just too heavy, because the things I was practicing [and] searching for was very light, like the pentatonic scale. I was working that. That made a lot of sense to me at that time. So all of a sudden I found myself having to go 'da, dah, dah, dah' [Nelson sings the opening line of Beethoven's Fifth symphony, laughing] (personal interview, July 7, 1998).

He continued to take piano lessons for about four or five years, at which time, he says, he was more interested in football and baseball than music. When he reached nineteen years of age, he bought himself a guitar and taught himself to play it by reading method books and learning the chords. He had owned the guitar for three days or so, when a neighbour heard him practicing on the back stairs of his house. He recounts:

And the guy came and says: 'We want you in our band [The Dukes of Rhythm].' I said: 'I just got this guitar. I only know two chords, or three chords.' [pause] 'We don't care. We'll teach you.' ... So the next thing, that Friday night I was on the band stand. It was unbelievable, what two or

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<sup>3</sup> A suburb of Philadelphia.

three chords can do [laughter] (personal interview, July 7, 1998).

In 1968, Nelson came to Montreal for the first time to hear a friend of his playing in the Bonaventure hotel. He met the friend's agent who offered him a gig. Nelson says: "Next day I was working at Sir Winston Churchill Pub" (personal interview, July 7, 1998). He played piano and sang solo at that pub for about a year before forming a trio consisting of guitar, conga drums and Nelson himself on keyboards and vocals. At that time, the Ernie Nelson trio played some jazz, but mostly focussed on R&B.

While he was accustomed to singing and playing at the same time, Nelson had been emphasizing keyboards and guitar more than the voice. As he says: " [A]t that time [late 1960s], I was singing, but not singing, you know? Not a vocalist. In other words, I was singing and playing" (personal interview, July 7, 1998). It was with Billy Martin in the early 1970s that Nelson took on the role of singer without accompanying himself on keyboards. He has since done vocal work with guitarist Sonny Greenwich, among others. He also continues to practice and teach both keyboards and voice. When I asked him what he considers to be his primary instrument at this point, he replied: "Well, I'm strongest in the vocal end of it. I'm really strong vocally. So I'm able to accompany myself and accompany other people" (personal interview, July 7, 1998).

It would appear that this sampling of Montreal jazz vocalists embodies the gendered roles of jazz, as reflected in Will Friedwald's question: "How, then, did it get to the point where it is now—where singing has become women's work almost exclusively, where female musicians are inevitably asked if they sing and male singers are expected to also play an instrument?" (1990, 69) This question is posed

after Friedwald's reflection that the "double onslaught of Crosby and Armstrong had pushed women aside" in the jazz scene of the early 1930's (1990, 69).

It is possible to think of the Armstrong-Crosby blip in the gendered history of vocal jazz as an attempt by the male jazz establishment to prevent women from having any place at all in the jazz domain. By building up this pair, that is, Armstrong and Crosby, the jazz community might have hoped to obscure both female blues singers and torch singers who were beginning to create a form of music—vocal jazz—that was a threat to the male canon of jazz.

Armstrong, in particular, had the advantage of conforming to several canons of jazz. Being an African-American male instrumentalist granted him access to the highest status in the hierarchy of the jazz world. The only thing that brought him down from the highest position was the fact that he began playing popular songs in the 1930s in order to achieve better commercial success. As Crowther and Pinfold point out: "Many jazz purists have suggested this was a disaster for jazz, contaminating the form and destroying Armstrong's validity as a jazz artist..." (1997, 33).

Crosby, on the other hand, embodied many of the elements that run counter to the canons of jazz discussed in Chapter One. He was a white American male singer who did not play another instrument, and sang popular tunes in a crooning style not associated with improvisation. Why, then, would his position in the canon of vocal jazz be so unshakable? And why would he, as Friedwald insists, be one of "*the* two most important figures in jazz-derived popular singing," (1990, 25, emphasis mine) to the exclusion of someone like Ethel Waters, Bessie Smith, Mildred Bailey, or any number of the highly influential female singers of the day?

Before answering these questions, we need to look at how gender and race have been articulated on two distinct levels in the literature on vocal jazz. First,

there is the reporting of prejudicial practices and tendencies that have existed in the jazz community from its inception. At this level, there is an emphasis on the earlier decades of this century, as well as the later decades of the last century. Few writings on vocal jazz address sexism or racism in reference to jazz musical practice of more recent years. It is as though distancing these problems in time can distance them from current consciousness.

Prejudice related to gender and race issues can be traced in the writings themselves, either by down-playing certain factors of oppression, or through the use of language that betrays the writer's own reliance on stereotypes. These writings then become sites of construction and reproduction for those stereotypes.

Vocal jazz grew out of two styles of singing, namely blues and the torch song, both in existence in the 1920s. While the blues were performed by both men and women, torch singers were exclusively female. As John Moore reports, the performers and audiences for these two styles were divided along parallel racial and class lines.

Female blues singers were black, and their material was composed by and for Afro-Americans. In contrast, torch singers were white, and their material was composed by Tin Pan Alley songwriters for a particular stratum of white society. (Moore 1989, 32)

In his article entitled "Red Hot Mamas: Bessie Smith, Sophie Tucker, and the Ethnic Maternal Voice in American Popular Song," (1994)<sup>4</sup> Peter Antelyes discusses how these women represented the embodiment of an intermingling of gender and racial stereotypes.

On the level of gender, the mama's music was advertised through a variety of female stereotypes, including the weeping mama, the vengeful Hottentot, and the red hot mama. Their personae were represented as racially other

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<sup>4</sup> Red hot mamas were female country blues singers.

and their records as "racy," that is, as expressions of black female sexuality. (1994, 215)

Although she was white, Sophie Tucker was also included in the red hot mama category. Indeed, she was the self-proclaimed "Last of the Red Hot Mamas" (Antelyes 1994, 213). Tucker was admitted to this category by virtue of her sufficient otherness as a Jewess, and her image could therefore be constructed on an analogous set of stereotypes.

As the second generation daughters entered the work force, images of the Jewess as worker and temptress appeared. At the same time, as the first generation mothers retired to the home, the archetypal "Jewish mother" began to emerge... (Antelyes 1994, 221)

As Antelyes notes, the main feature of the red hot mama, no matter what her skin colour, was her physical presence and therefore "embodiment" of the respective stereotypes.

On the one hand, then, the mama's size, including the volume not only of her physical girth but deepness and loudness of tone, and broadness of style, signified particular racial, ethnic, and gendered identities; on the other hand, by containing the uncontainable—the maternal and the sexual—and exposing the contradictions of the oedipal fantasy, the mama's size signified her ability to transgress those boundaries. (ibid, 217)

By contrast to blues singers the torch singer was played up to be sexually desirable, but oblivious to that very quality and innocent in her quest for true love (Moore 1989, 46). Her desirability was constructed by making use of exoticisms and racial stereotypes. As Moore demonstrates, torch singers were often represented as darker-skinned or with almond-shaped eyes, for instance, in order to appear more exotic. Moore uses the example of Helen Morgan, who

came from Irish-American stock, but was brought up in Canada, and started singing French-Canadian folksongs in the French quarter of Toronto at the age of twelve. Perhaps this Gallic connection accounts for her exoticism. But, anyway, she was often thought to be a mulatto, a mistaken

identification that no doubt contributed to her landing the role of Julie in *Showboat*, the innovative stage musical which tackled the theme of miscegenation. (1989, 33)

In other words, she was able to gain access to privileges that accompanied her status as white—such as the landing of top roles in musicals—while at the same time capitalizing on the image of the 'Other.' A similar impression can be gleaned from comments by vocalist Sylvia Syms regarding her public image. "It was O.K. to be fat if you were exotic. ...People didn't know what to make of me, and because of my dark complexion they started asking me if I was black" (quoted in Balliett 1988, 85).

This racial ambiguity also contributed to the commercial success of lighter-skinned African-American women. As reported by Lucy O'Brien: "Black female artists hardly skimmed these charts [Top Forty charts] unless, like Lena Horne or Eartha Kitt, they were lighter-skinned" (1996, 79). Or again,

Not white enough to be a mainstream commercial act, yet not black enough to slot into the emerging soul movement of the black community, Kitt fell between pedestals, fashioning a bizarre act that was half Cat-woman, half sultry striptease and with brilliantly humorous styling. (O'Brien 1996, 80)

I would argue that Kitt did not fall between pedestals, but rather straddled both, "benefiting"<sup>5</sup> doubly from the privileges of light skin and the exoticism of dark skin.

It should be noted here that the stereotype which fed the exotic image of both darker-skinned white vocalists and their light-skinned black counterparts was the prevailing image of the black woman as sexually promiscuous. "Black girls could only be bad and make it sexy: Doris Day had to have a shadow, and [Eartha] Kitt was it—fulfilling the potent myth of black women as morally dubious and sexually adventurous" (ibid, 81).

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<sup>5</sup> I use quotations marks here because it is not clear whether Kitt was profiting personally from her image, or if she was herself exploited.

In a similar reflection, Susan Cook eloquently remarks in her article entitled "Listening to Billie Holiday: Intersections of Race and Gender:"

...the patriarchal construction of the "true woman" who was pure and passionless depended on her opposite, the woman who was carnal and promiscuous. Carnality and sexual promiscuity have been defined again in our society by race—the black slave as animal. And so while white women were supposed to be "good" but could fall and become "bad," black women, whose bodies were defined by slavery as sexually available, were viewed as anything but passionless (1992, 95).

In his article entitled "Family Values in Music? Billie Holiday's and Bing Crosby's 'I'll Be Seeing You,'" David Brackett compares the musical treatment and reception of the said song by two artists who recorded it in the same year—1944. His selection of artists provides an opportunity to show how race and gender collide and can determine the success or failure of individual artists.

Billie Holiday's lack of [commercial] success [on "I'll Be Seeing You"] is explained by her commitment to emotional truth, her refusal to compromise, and — by virtue of her skin color — her lack of access to the power networks that would have provided her with the same kind of distribution and exposure accorded Bing Crosby (1995, 38).

While Brackett rightly notes the impact Holiday's skin colour had on her commercial profit, in this particular instance he fails to show—as he does in other cases—that that factor is also inextricably entangled with her gender.

In a very astute observation, Brackett points out the magnitude of the challenge faced by Billie Holiday, in terms of overcoming hegemonic stereotypes. "On a sociological level, how can an African-American woman retain her dignity and display herself as a glamorous icon to an audience, when a large percentage of that audience does not view her as fully human (1995, 55)?" Brackett also, however, shows that he is acutely aware of the interconnections between gender, race and class, in particular, when he states: "...African-American women, because of a

specific articulation of class, sex, and racial oppression, have had to struggle against certain negative 'controlling images,' specifically those of 'the Mammie, the Matriarch, and Jezebel (1995, 48).'" This is one of the rare examples in the literature on vocal jazz in which the author explicitly addresses the intersections of these different modes of oppression.

Back to our question: why is Bing Crosby's position in the vocal jazz domain so unshakable? In stark contrast to the pejorative images ascribed to African-American women in particular, Bing Crosby enjoyed a public image that has been described as the "All-American everyman" (Brackett 1995, 34) or the "ultimate American everyman" (Friedwald 1990, 25)—a title for which there does not seem to be female equivalent.

David Brackett notwithstanding, most writers on vocal jazz have confined themselves to reporting anecdotes of racial and gender-based discrimination, such as Clora Bryant's recalling of the following incident: "There were so many complaint calls they had to take me off. They didn't want a black with the band. Now it was '52 or '53..."(quoted in Dahl 1996, 214). Another example of this type of reporting is the following:

[Lena] Horne says in effect that while it is indeed possible for a black woman to win through, she must also tote up the personal psychic and emotional costs in a society where racism and sexism exact enormous energies from the black woman artist (Dahl 1996, 139).

In other instances, writers use informants' comments to convey admiration for a singer, but the underlying racial and gender stereotypes remain obscured. Witness, for instance, John Hendricks' exaltation in reference to Ella Fitzgerald: "She's Mama!" (quoted in Pleasants 1996, 985). While this seems like a compliment on the surface, it actually maintains one of the stereotypes—or as Brackett calls them, "controlling

images"—assigned to black women, in this case that of the maternal figure with a sexual undercurrent, as described by Antelyes.

Created through a complex web of elements such as physical attributes, choice of repertoire, manner of dress, etc., the public persona or image of a jazz vocalist participates to a large extent in the construction of her status. For instance, the traditional dress code associated with jazz singing, particularly for women, has contributed to the visual differentiation between her and the band and one could argue, her status within it. As Dahl explains: "Almost always she [the big band singer] was the lone woman in the band, conspicuous in her party clothes against a field of serious, suited males" (1996, 122). As Elaine Delmar, a British jazz vocalist, reports on the big band era dress norms: "In those days it was the sequined gowns with a very tight waist..." (quoted in O'Brien 1996, 77). When a singer resisted this custom, she was easily branded.

... singer Anita O'Day set a new trend for female singers on the road by wearing a shirt and big band jacket on stage instead of a gown. ...for many years she was considered to be a 'mannish' lesbian, because she refused to be mere bandstand decoration (O'Brien 1996, 76).

The importance of a female singer's appearance and, in particular, manner of dress is notable in the overwhelming influence it had on her ability to maintain her career. Whitney Balliett attributes the commercial failure of Sylvia Syms to her physical appearance and to "her own intransigence toward working conditions, managers and bookers, and *clothes*" (1988, 79, emphasis mine). Sylvia Syms herself reflects: "They expected Miss America but they got me. I still didn't know how to dress, and the clothes I wore made me look like the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' ... But I've finally discovered that your wardrobe can be one of your most important assets" (quoted in Balliett 1988, 85-6).

Aside from the occasional reference to the zoot suit, hardly any mention of the male singer's mode of dress—in the big band era or otherwise—can be found in the literature on vocal jazz. It simply is not an issue for males. They seem to follow the fashion of the time with the same degree of consideration as do the instrumentalists in the bands.

I turn now to the incidents of writing which, in my view, produce and reproduce gender and racial stereotypes simultaneously. It is important that I make it clear at the outset that I do not single out the following writers in order to incriminate them personally, but rather to demonstrate a broader phenomenon of which they are but a few examples.

Very often, writers' assumptions about gender and race are not overt but rather show up in their language, or more subtly in their omissions. For instance, in a chapter entitled "Cult of the White Goddess," Will Friedwald explains the 1930's trend in the big bands of hiring white female singers to increase the popular appeal of the music. Some of the "white goddesses" to which he refers are Mildred Bailey, Connee Boswell and Lee Wiley, who are named in a paragraph containing the following statement: "Most importantly, Duke Ellington annexed Ivie Anderson... to His Famous Orchestra in 1931, and Benny Goodman, in premiering his ground-breaking white swing band in 1934, brought along Helen Ward" (1990, 70). There is no mention of the fact that Duke Ellington and Ivie Anderson were African-American. In fact, emphasis is placed on the whiteness of Benny Goodman's band. This combined with the title of the chapter make it significant that the author avoids mentioning the race of one of the most important singers in the history of vocal jazz. Ivie Anderson was important, in part, *because* she was one of the first African-American singers to be hired by a big band. This fact never enters Friedwald's text.

Another manifestation of racial discrimination in jazz writings is a tendency to treat African-American musical characteristics with what Edward Said would term a "an orientalist attitude" (1978). It can be observed in comments such as: "When Ella was a girl, what the white majority liked was white music enriched by the more elemental and more inventive musicality of black singers and black instrumentalists" (Pleasants 1996, 984, emphasis mine). The author's assumption of black music being "primitive" is obvious. The words "elemental" and "inventive" point to intuition and emotion, rather than the logic and intellect which are perceived to be the province of white people. The omission of any explanation as to what exactly the author means by "white music" leaves this ethnomusicologist rather perplexed. Furthermore, this quote betrays the traditional stereotype of African-Americans as having music "in their blood," so to speak, by juxtaposing "white music" with "black musicality."

The same type of essentialist assumptions can be noted in the following quote:

Ella [Fitzgerald]'s singing, ... has never been specifically or conspicuously black. It represents rather the happy blend of black and white which had been working its way into the conventions of American popular singing since the turn of the century... (Pleasants 1996, 984).

By qualifying the blend of musics as "happy," this author appears to celebrate diversity. However, he stops well short of describing exactly how Ella Fitzgerald's voice would sound if it were "conspicuously black." Furthermore, this comment could easily be interpreted as meaning that whatever "black elements" exist in the singer's voice are somehow improved by the presence of "white elements"—an idea that is highly questionable, to put it mildly.

In what seems like high praise by the author, there is evidence not only of an underlying essentialist attitude, but also one of a white supremacist order.

On [Lee] Wiley's own song, "The South in My Soul," the band substitutes concert aggrandizing for black feeling (Don Redman recorded it with Harlan Lattimore, "The Colored Crosby," handling the refrain), but with her [Wiley's] help they pull it off with conviction. (Friedwald 1990, 87, parenthetical remarks in original)

Once again we confront the questions: what exactly is "black feeling" and why is it in opposition to "concert aggrandizing?" The label "The Colored Crosby" reveals how certain white males set hegemonic standards against which all others are compared, and especially contrasted.

A perhaps extreme example of male chauvinism, racism, as well as orientalism and downright vulgarity can be found in the following comments in reference to the vocal texture of singers Mildred Bailey and Connee Boswell.

Unlike Bailey's thin, delicate wisp, which, though charming, represented a coy middle-American attitude toward sex, Boswell's is a more directly sensual, genuinely vaginal instrument, something else she picked up in New Orleans. That isn't fur on her voice, honeychile, that's pubic hair. Bailey may elaborate on Bessie Smith's rhythm, but Boswell picks up on her attitude (Friedwald 1990, 80).

This author does not use the terms 'black' or 'African-American,' or any other more explicitly racial reference. But, through several rhetorical moves this author implicitly connects open sexuality with blackness, and in so doing, reproduces the stereotype of the oversexed "black mama." First, he attributes the "directly sensual" to New Orleans. Then, he follows this with the insertion of the term "honeychile"—in imitation of the black New Orleans accent—which is condescending at best and frankly offensive. Finally, he makes the direct comparison between the "white goddesses" (Bailey and Boswell) and Bessie Smith. Note the adjectives used to describe Bailey's voice, or "wisp"—delicate, charming and coy—which buttress the stereotypical white female as a symbol of virtue, that is, pure, morally superior and sexually unavailable (Dyer 1997, 127-31).

Any one of these rhetorical devices, in isolation, might not indicate with any certainty traces of sexism and racism on the part of the author. However, taken together they show how subtle, and at times not so subtle as is the case here, and insidious sexo-racism can be.

The author implies that rhythm and attitude are essential characteristics of African-Americans, characteristics that can be appropriated by white singers to create an exotic image. Once again this reinforces the stereotype of black people as natural-born musicians with little or no intellectual or analytical ability.

What is also made clear by the aforementioned quote is how gender and race become modes of oppression. In chapters of the same book pertaining to male singers such as Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong, nowhere does Friedwald refer to their sexuality, much less qualify their sound by reference to their genitalia. Quite the opposite, he is more preoccupied with their "greatest accomplishments" (1990, 31) and talent (ibid, 34). The above-mentioned quote on Bailey, Boswell and Smith is indicative of a highly permissive attitude—on the part of male jazz writers in particular—to treat women as sexual objects, according to different rules, depending on the woman's skin colour.

The reason I have chosen to spend so much time deconstructing this particular passage is that the book from which it was drawn carries considerable influence in the jazz community, and therefore cannot simply be cast aside as an aberration. The chapter containing this quote was reprinted as part of a collection of readings on jazz with the following as a partial introduction: "Friedwald's 1990 book *Jazz Singing* is the fullest and finest consideration we have or are likely to get of the art of jazz singing (Gottlieb 1996, 960)." Also, Ken Druker qualifies the book as "excellent" in the liner notes which accompany a Verve collection of compact discs entitled *Jazz*

Singing: The jazz Vocal Collection (1997, 2). In addition, Jazz historian Ted Gioia lists this volume as a "further reading" in his recent book *The History of Jazz*.

I must say, I find it disturbing to know that the types of statements discussed here can be written in the first place, but also that they can be accepted at an editor's desk. I feel a profound responsibility to voice my disappointment in the lack of respect inherent in these types of quotes, and in the fact that otherwise valuable resource materials on vocal jazz are tarnished by such lapses in judgement and most basic respect.

So far the literature examined has focussed on singers who were active in decades past. There are reasons to believe that, although things have radically changed since the 1950s, the status of vocalists is still being directed to a large extent by the canon of jazz as a male genre, among others. Along with other pejorative labels such as "canary," "warbler" and "chirpers" which referred to female lead singers of big bands, the term "girl-singer" is loaded with assumptions that the singer in question is unable to read music, not necessarily a good singer and is on the band stand primarily to attract audiences through her physical appearance more than her sound. The stereotype of the "girl-singer" is still alive in the discourse used by the jazz community, even though the Big Band era, which spawned the term "girl-singer" has long been over. Tell-tale expressions come up in the stories told by singers working in Montreal today. Jeri Brown recounts an evening back in Akron Ohio, in 1982, when she met Bob McKee, former drummer and musical director for the Mike Douglas Show.

... I didn't do any singing [from the late 1970's] until 1981 or '82, when my son was born, and it was at that time, my husband encouraged me to sing at some place. We went out to dinner and they had a band and he said: 'You know, you don't sing anymore.' And so I went up and sang a song, and the band leader was an important band leader.

... Bob McKee was the drummer, and he was the musical director for [the Mike Douglas] show. ... [I]t was his band. And he said: 'Ah! You're a *good* girl-singer! Won't you join my group?' (personal interview, June 11, 1998)

Brown played with a variety of McKee's combos until about 1987. From 1985 to 1988, Brown was commuting between Akron and New York City to take advantage of an apprenticeship with the Sutton Artists Agency. It was at that time that she met and performed with people like trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie and tenor saxophonist Joe Lovano. Their acquaintance led to a series of referrals which propelled her career in the jazz field. She remembers:

[A]fter I met these people, it became apparent through the course of conversation, that I was a singer who had education. I wasn't *just a girl singer* who just was talented, who they had met and who sang. I could read the charts. I could read the notes. This was a miracle, because they have very low expectations of what a singer can do beyond having natural talent. (personal interview, June 11, 1998, emphasis mine)

Brown explains that a major reason she has not suffered from the stigma of the "girl-singer" is that she has created an image for herself that projects dignity and musicianship. She has made some conscious choices about her image that help to define her public persona as something other than a "girl singer." This image that Brown cultivates has been noted in the press:

Clad in black chiffon, elevated on six-inch stiletto heels and bearing two white roses, one for her and one for pianist Fred Hersch, Brown gave warning before she uttered a sound, that we were in for a class act. (Pederson 1994)

In effect, her image is—at least in part—a reaction to the canon of jazz as a male genre.

I say, it's the way you carry yourself. I've always been perceived, it seems, as if I'm a lady. And when people perceive you that way, ... it's just extremely impossible to really be reduced to a 'girl-singer.' They might call you another thing. [pause] It starts with a 'b' [laughter]. (personal interview, June 12, 1998)

While the quoted passage from the press article is certainly flattering to Brown, it shows that journalists still have a tendency to comment—in detail—on a female vocalist's appearance before they ever address her music or musicianship.

Brown's self-definition as a "lady" has served her not only in distancing her from the "girl-singer" stereotype. It has also helped her to ward off a certain degree of racism.

[T]hings like prejudice, racism, I have been fortunate to cut through a lot of that. Where my male musicians have come head on with the problems per se, but I would cut through that, because I just simply insisted on being a lady. And it goes a long way. (personal interview, June 12, 1998)

Karen Young says that, for much of her career, her *modus operandi* has been that of an "eternal student," always opening herself up to learn from the musicians that surround her. She has nurtured an image that is well encompassed in the phrase: "I always want to be nice and not arrogant" (Young, personal interview, June 3, 1998). Unfortunately, what she describes as her self-effacing attitude has made her vulnerable to people—particularly the press—assuming, like they did after her last album was released, that she was less competent at composing and arranging than the other musicians in her bands. She elaborates:

[E]very once in a while I just get tired of the whole thing and I quit the group. And it's my own fault that everybody thought that I was just an *air-head chick-singer* [she laughs].

So very slowly I started having more and more opinions and knowing more and more what I wanted, and getting more and more out of this eternal student kind of thing. And finally, I guess you get to a certain age and you say: 'Now I have something to say. Now I have the tools to say it. I have the experience. I have enough baggage, and now it's going to come out.'

And so that's basically what I've done, but still, it was hard for some people to believe that it wasn't the other people that I played with that did everything, wrote everything, arranged everything. (personal interview, June 3, 1998)

Karen Young and her partner, Jean Lacasse, agree that the reason for many people's scepticism about her authority is the combination of two factors: the fact that she is a singer, and that male chauvinism is still quite rampant. Lacasse refers to the fact that Young writes her own compositions and arrangements:

Peu de gens admettent ça, ou veulent le dire, ou le mentionnent quand c'est une femme. ... Mais le fait que c'est une chanteuse... Même si elle était chanteur, peut-être ça serait la même affaire. Les musiciens disent toujours que dans un *band* ya des musiciens, le batteur et la chanteuse. (personal interview, June 3, 1998)

All this despite the fact that Young has been the band leader and musical director for every ensemble in which she has participated, from the Bug Alley Band of the late 1970's to the larger jazz ensemble with which she recently toured. She has been recording steadily since the early 1980s, and since 1992, she and Lacasse have produced all of her albums (four so far) through their company, Ursh Records. She has been responsible for all vocal arrangements for her bands, and, as time passes, more and more of the entire ensemble arrangements. She has written or co-written most of the songs on her albums. Furthermore, she can play piano, guitar, percussion or electric bass, while singing at the same time.

One issue that confounds Young is that, for years now, she has witnessed a systematic discrimination against her by the English media throughout Canada. One of the reasons, it could be suggested, is that her music does not fit the traditional mould of jazz. Although she is highly influenced by the school of bebop, it is but one influence among many in her repertoire. This seems to displease many purists—or as Young calls them, the "jazz police"—who maintain that her music is something other than jazz, especially the music she has made outside the confines of the Young/Donato duo. As she says: "The jazz community was mad at me for quitting the duo" (personal interview, June 3, 1998). The displeasure of the anglophone jazz

community is made that much more complicated by the fact that the francophone community has embraced her wholeheartedly. It should be noted that Young is the only well-known jazz vocalist in Montreal who sings regularly in French, even though she is, herself, anglophone. She reflects:

We used to tour across Canada. It was always the franco communities that came to see us. And we were always entertained by them. We went to several, we met all the franco communities all across Canada. ... They knew about Young and Donato and maybe we were the darlings of Radio Canada. So they all knew us. English Canadians didn't really know the duo much. (personal interview, June 3, 1998)

Ranee Lee says that, as a result of being introduced to the jazz community of Montreal through a network that included her husband, she has not, for the most part, had to face the same kinds of career inhibiting discrimination as others may have. She states:

[T]hrough his [husband, Richard Ring's] friends and through his work, I sort of became a part of the jazz society here, of the city. And therefore, through that acceptance, I was given maybe more opportunity than maybe someone approaching that on their own, or just approaching the city and walking into it and playing, as a female

...my problems aren't the problems of my sisters of the past who've had to sort of chip away at taboos or negatives in order to be heard and to be recognized and to be celebrated, shall we say. And theirs was the original struggle.

...there were more men playing, so of course there were going to be more recognition in the male gender than for the female. And the only recognition for the most part, that the female could gain, was as a vocalist. Because they wouldn't give the same credentials to a female musician, as they would to an instrumentalist, you see. Because it was just a gender thing. (personal interview, June 30, 1998)

Lee maintains that being black was an advantage in the Canadian music market of the late 1960s, early 1970s. She explains:

[T]hey [agents] would name the groups and it was easier to say "Ranee Lee and the Trio," "Ranee Lee's Quartet," that

sort of thing. And you know, there weren't that many black female artists at that time, and especially on road, so it was more beneficial for someone to call it my show because of the focus. And we got a lot of work because of that.

...So it was exploitive, but because this is the nature of the business. But I was for it because I was the one benefiting. And you know, maybe too young, stupid, or [in]experienced to realize it and demand anything from it. But I always felt exonerated because I got from it what I needed to get (personal interview, June 30, 1998).

The situation Lee describes is very much in keeping with the double-bind in which many black artists find themselves, not only in jazz, but in other musics as well (see Gioia 1997, p. 125; Rose 1994, p. 17). Lee's positive attitude does not diminish the fact that she was not compensated in any way for the leadership role she occupied in the bands—not to mention the time and energy this position entailed—or for the obvious "other-ing" to which she was subjected in the process.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the term "jazz singer" not only describes a musical function but also a social construction which relies heavily on gender and racial stereotypes. The tendency in the literature is to treat the low status of jazz vocalists as though it only existed in the historical past. There is a great need to update what is known about the situation of jazz singers who are working presently.

It is true that, thanks to the feminist movement, the language used to refer to jazz vocalists is no longer as overtly offensive as it was even 20 or 30 years ago. As Jeri Brown explains:

Today, of course, that's a very sexist statement to make, you know: a 'girl-singer' or something. But it stems from a time when that's how one referred to the Peggy Lees, the Ella Fitzgeralds, and the whole ton of singers who were females, who were the mascots of big bands. There were tons of great singers!

And so some of the musicians today, who came from an older tradition in the music, still refer to that. It's a slip

of the tongue. They don't truly mean any harm, but it's just the way they were brought up in that tradition. But if you find anyone who's relatively young and informed [who uses the term 'girl singer'], you should correct them, for sure, because it's an old statement. It's sexist. It relates to nothing that's relevant. It's just [hesitation]... it's not a good thing (personal interview, June 12, 1998).

Modifications in the language is certainly important, as it not only reflects a shift in attitude, but has the power to effect deeper societal change. This takes time, however, and needs to be reinforced—as Brown suggests—whenever possible or necessary. It is my belief that there is much to be done before this deep change can be said to have occurred.

As Jeri Brown, Raneé Lee, Ernie Nelson and Karen Young have all demonstrated, there exist strategies for improving the status of jazz singers on an individual basis, generally by combining a personal image that reflects grace under fire with simply maintaining a high standard of professionalism and musicianship. And with more and more young musicians learning from such vocalists and instrumentalists like Lorraine Desmarais and Rod Ellias, there is indeed hope for a better understanding in the future.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Musical Practices and Learning Strategies

Every instrument has its own set of idiosyncracies, special attributes, capabilities and challenges. This chapter examines those of the voice, as it can be used in jazz. To address the specificity of singing, I will focus on how the signifying practice (as described by Henry Louis Gates) involved in vocal jazz, is performed by Montreal jazz vocalists currently.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to distinguish between specificity and exclusivity. By speaking about the specificity of singing, I am in no way saying that other instruments are incapable of "measuring up" to the voice, or that some of the musical practices of singers are not shared by instrumentalists. That would be reproducing the same misguided assumptions discussed in Chapter One. On the contrary, I wish to focus on the voice for its own sake and on its own terms, not to diminish or belittle the importance of other instruments, but to raise awareness about the contributions of both the voice and vocalists in jazz.

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<sup>1</sup> Although I have not adopted Gates's spelling of the word "Signifyin(g)", the term "signifying" will be used throughout the chapter in the sense coined by him.

Looking at the musical practice in this way will allow us to answer the following questions: what are some of the musical characteristics that are valued in jazz singing and how are such characteristics passed on from generation to generation? To answer these questions I turn to my informants, who all have considerable teaching experience.

Besides her extensive curriculum of recording, performing, leading bands, producing, composing, songwriting, arranging, and acting, Karen Young taught vocal jazz at the Université de Montréal for six years, ending in 1992. Previous to that, she had spent one summer teaching at the Domaine Forget—a well-respected music and dance academy in Quebec—and two years at the Jane Kee Ellison vocal workshop—also in Quebec. She was also trumpeter Charles Ellison's teaching assistant for one year at Loyola College.

Ranee Lee has been affiliated with McGill University since 1985. Her newest teaching assignment takes her to Drummondville to teach at the CEGEP level. She also has one Carleton University student who travels from Ottawa to study with her. She has given private lessons out of her own home on and off since 1978.

Jeri Brown has held a full-time position at Concordia University in Montreal since 1989, when she moved from the United States, and is one of the very few vocalists who are full-time, tenured professors at a university. She has commuted between her homes in Montreal and Halifax since she moved to the latter with her family in 1994. She is also affiliated with St. Francis Xavier, Dalhousie and Acadia universities in Nova Scotia. I personally commuted weekly to Montreal for private instruction in vocal improvisation with Brown for the 1998-1999 academic year at Concordia University.

Ever since the mid-1970s, Ernie Nelson has dedicated a large portion of his energy to teaching. He started out teaching actors to sing at the National Theatre

School in Montreal. Since 1980, he has held his private studio at the music school called "Popular Singing Lessons"—also in Montreal—where he teaches voice and piano.

As alluded to earlier, Rod Ellias is an associate professor (tenured) at the University of Concordia in Montreal, where he has taught courses in jazz ensemble, improvisation, composition and theory, as well as classical counterpoint and composition, and private instruction on guitar since 1993. Previously, he spent three years as an assistant professor at St. Francis Xavier university in Nova Scotia. In the 1980s he did some sessional lecturing at Carleton and Ottawa universities.

Lorraine Desmarais has 20 years of teaching experience at CEGEP St. Laurent and the Université de Montréal combined. She focusses mainly on private piano instruction and keyboard harmony. Her performance career was propelled by her teaching ability, when in 1982 she undertook a lecture-concert tour throughout Québec about the history of jazz piano, from ragtime to free jazz. She also did what she calls a "new and improved" version of the tour in 1994-96.

### Specificity of jazz singing

As we have seen, the voice is most frequently discussed in terms of its relationship to other instruments, while vocalists are most commonly discussed in terms of their personal life stories, their status and their image. Although most authors who write about vocal jazz undertake to some degree a discussion of sound, it is at a relatively superficial level—one that may interest the general public, but leaves the music student thirsting for more. The treatment of sound generally takes the form of commentary on—rather than a detailed description or analysis of—the singer's use of vibrato, tone quality, diction and/or "vocal style." The terms of reference are usually vague and many times rather dubious.

Without question, Paul Berliner's treatment of sound in *Thinking in Jazz* (1994) shows the most integrity of all the works examined here. However, as mentioned earlier, his is a work which focusses on the language of jazz in general. Singing is but one component of a much larger framework in this case. Accordingly, detailed and extensive analysis of idiosyncracies of the voice, such as the lyric interpretation of a song, accommodations in relation to the singer's vocal range and so on, are not central to this work.

Some issues related to vocal jazz musical practices are treated in isolated cases in the literature on vocal jazz. The notion of signifying as a musical value, for instance, is applied to the voice in only one of the writings examined here (Brackett 1995). Signifying, as coined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988), is a rhetorical device which communicates unfixed, dialogical meaning, either through words or music, or for that matter, any other art form. In my view, this issue deserves further exploration. As Gates suggests: "There are so many examples of Signifying(g) in jazz that one could write a formal history of its development on this basis alone" (1988, 63). While this is not my mandate here, I wish to focus on signifying as a point of departure into a study of vocal jazz.

Signifying, in this context, is very closely linked—although not synonymous—with improvisation. I offer the following distinction between the two terms to clarify their usage in this study. Signifying is the creation, alteration, manipulation of meaning, whereas improvising is one method by and through which signifying is achieved in jazz. Signifying can be achieved without any improvising whatsoever. Conversely, every improvisation signifies in some way.

Many jazz scholars have employed Gates's theory of signifying in their analysis of instrumental jazz. For instance, Ingrid Monson (1996) draws on this

theory to help explain the musical interactions within jazz rhythm sections. Robert Walser (1993) highlights the intertextuality of signifying in his study of Miles Davis's playing and its interpretation by his critics. Gary Tomlinson (1991) emphasizes the dialogical aspect of signifying when he discusses his own conception of knowledge, which itself is based on a decentered epistemological model.

As stated earlier, David Brackett (1995) is the only author I have encountered who has made a connection between vocal jazz and signifying. Within his reception study entitled "Family Values In Music? Billie Holiday's and Bing Crosby's 'I'll Be Seeing You'", he compares and contrasts Billie Holiday and Bing Crosby's renditions of the song "I'll Be Seeing You" to show the multiplicity of potential interpretations of one song, depending on the vocal techniques used to express its lyrics. He discusses the musical affect which is achieved by Holiday and Crosby through their signifying practice. He states:

In this particular form of Signifyin(g), a parodic effect of a "dominant discourse" is produced by means of inflection and stress (and because this is a sung text, "inflection" and "stress" must include tone color and aspects of musical coding). (1995, 62, parenthetical remarks in original)

Brackett uses signifying, here, as a point of entry into a discussion on "musical codes". While I applaud Brackett's invocation of Gates's theory of signifying to analyze vocal jazz performances, I find his emphasis on musical coding rather incompatible with the idea of signifying. "Musical coding" implies a degree a fixity; once a code is unlocked there is no more to discover. By contrast, signifying is explicitly unfixed. Each occurrence of it depends and builds upon its antecedent as well as subsequent occurrences. Jeri Brown describes this aspect of signifying when she states:

... j'adore me confronter aux standards. Quand je chante "Summertime", ce n'est pas du tout une limitation de savoir que le thème a été parcouru en tous sens des centaines de

fois. J'aime penser que toutes les chanteuses qui m'ont précédée sont avec moi. Surtout quand je chante sur scène. Ce n'est pas une superstition: je les entends vraiment, c'est comme un immense chœur dont je serai la nouvelle venue, un chœur qui ne se moque pas de moi et de ma pauvre petite interprétation, mais qui m'encourage à réagir personnellement aux idées qu'il me souffle. (quoted in Barbey 1999)

Ranee Lee emphasizes the dialogical aspect of signifying in jazz in her description of her interaction with other musicians.

[I]t's [nice to play] with various other musicians, because technique-wise, emotionally, just the way they handle music is always different from the next person, and you hear a different set of chords or a different approach to something which makes it all new again.

[I]f you're singing the same songs for the last 30 years, each given musician will always approach it differently. So you, in turn, as the soloist, or the person that's working "in front" at that particular time in that song, will then approach it differently as well, because you're hearing different things. (personal interview, June 30, 1998)

There are several ways in which signifying takes place in vocal jazz, some are specific to singing, while others are shared with other instruments. In this study, I wish to focus mainly on the former, while highlighting those musical issues that were raised during interviews with vocalists in Montreal and their instrumentalist colleagues. Those issues are: words, non-words, vocal ambitus (or range) and emotional involvement.

We will also examine some improvising techniques that are used by these same vocalists to fully exploit the specificity of the voice in their signifying practice. Those techniques will be: vocalese, solee, singing the original lyrics to a song while improvising on the melody, and the scat solo.

## Words

The most important idiosyncrasy of singing is the use of words. The vocalist is the only member of the ensemble capable of articulating the literary content of a song. As Lorraine Desmarais puts it: "... les paroles, ça c'est la propriété de la voix" (personal interview, August 16, 1998).

Getting the words across to the audience means not only enunciating the words clearly, but expressing their specific emotional content as well; declaiming the words so as to make them as potent as possible. The singer tells the story and delivers the dramatic side of the music. Besides creating a mood or an affect, which all instruments can do, the singer actually performs a dual role as both musician and actor. That includes the body language that a singer has to master in order to deliver the words effectively. For example, if one is singing words like "Good morning heartache, here I am again,"<sup>2</sup> it is necessary to recognize that a broad grin is probably not the most appropriate accompanying facial expression. Finding the right body language is key to a singer's art, whereas instrumentalists can focus all their attention on their instrument. Indeed, acting out the lyrics in an overt physical sense could both interfere with instrumental playing and distract from the music.

For many singers visual communication through body language is completely automatic and does not require extensive analysis on their part. They simply think of the lyrics, and the appropriate expression comes to them naturally. However, some songs are ambiguous in their message or can be interpreted in different ways. Or they have been performed so many times, by so many different artists that their lyrical content gets lost as people (artists and audiences alike) get desensitized to it.

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<sup>2</sup> Opening line of Billie Holiday's "Good Morning Heartache."

The song "Autumn Leaves" is a good example. It is often sung at a medium tempo, with a swing beat that makes singers project a light-hearted, carefree expression. When one takes a closer look at the lyrics, it is easy to see that the song is actually very sad, talking about a lost love which is represented by falling leaves. A singer's body language becomes one of the ways a singer can signify upon the lyrics of a song. It can make the difference between a message of anger, pain, sarcasm, disillusionment or indifference, for example.

Another way jazz singers act out the words to a song is to utilize speech-style singing. Karen Young describes how taking breaths at different points in the song can contribute to this type of expression.

[I]n jazz what it [taking frequent breaths] does is it breaks up the phrase. And it makes you think, ... it's more like speaking than singing. Rhythmically, you're always, of course, ... aware of the beat, and try to keep as rhythmic as possible, but you also have another rhythm which is the way the words are: making sense of the words and bringing the words out.

And you can start on beat one-and-a-half, or... you can back-phrase, you can forward-phrase. But always trying to make it so that it sounds like you're talking, so that the words are coming out with the right accents and the right emphasis. ... I think the words are very important. I only choose songs where I can get into the words too. (personal interview, June 6, 1998)<sup>3</sup>

Like Young, most of the other informants for this study stressed the importance of the verbal message of a song. The following comments by Rod Ellias sum up very well the consensus I observed among the informants.

I think what's necessary is bringing the words out, which is what you can do with the voice that you can't do with a guitar or a saxophone. Well, you can with a guitar or a saxophone. You can bring the meaning of the words out, but you can't bring the actual words. I think that's what people want to hear, when they hear a singer, is the words

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<sup>3</sup> Back-phrasing and forward-phrasing are techniques which will be discussed later on in the chapter.

and how you express them. (personal interview, June 19, 1998)

Lyrics are one of the singer's most important vehicles for signifying via improvisation. Raneë Lee refers to this practice as "paraphrasing," and explains that exploring the words of a song goes hand in hand with exploring the melody (personal interview, June 30, 1998). She adds:

[G]enerally these songs—especially the songs I sing—have been heard and heard again. And in some instances you will hear them the way they were written or originally conceived. But if you take certain liberties (as I do in many cases) that story becomes fresher by the interpretation. (personal interview, June 30, 1998)

Lee gives what she calls a "simplistic" example of this type of improvisation, using the song "Body and Soul," which begins with the following lyrics:

My heart is sad and lonely.  
For you I sigh,  
for you, dear, only.

She can change that lyric by adding a couple of words that do not interfere with the message of the song, such as:

My heart is sad and lonely  
*You know*, for you I sigh,  
for you, dear, only.

While the addition does not drastically change the actual meaning of the original text, it does emphasize a certain part of the lyric ("for you I sigh"), so that her signifying takes the form of added emphasis in this case.

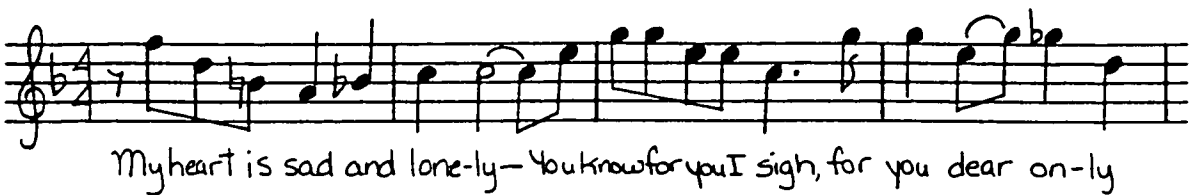
In order to accommodate the two extra words, Lee has to improvise on the melody as well. The following example contrasts the melody and lyrics of the first phrase of "Body and Soul" as they were originally written by Heyman, Sour, Eyton and Green, against the same phrase as paraphrased by Raneë Lee.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Please note that all musical examples that appear in this text are excerpts.



Example 3.1.1: Original melody of "Body and Soul."



Example 3.1.2: Raneé Lee's melodic and lyric improvisation on "Body and Soul." (♩)

Paraphrasing draws on the element of signifying that Gates refers to as "repetition, with a signal difference" (1988, 50), or formal revision (ibid, 51). By altering the original melody and lyrics, she is at once commenting on them as well as on previous versions she has sung or heard. Furthermore, she is entering a dialogue with other versions the listeners have heard, that she herself may or may not have encountered.

Jazz singers may also choose to signify through the lyrics of a song by altering or "bending" the meaning of the words more dramatically to suit the message they want to get across. For example, Karen Young makes it a practice to receive language coaching from a native speaker whenever she sings in a foreign tongue. One of the reasons she does this is to accurately pronounce and interpret the meaning of the original songs. But at times, she wants to be able to alter the usual meaning.

In 1995, Young composed the music and played one of the leading roles in the play *Sliding in All Directions*, by playwright Marion Ackerman. The music was based on the biblical text of the *Song of Songs*. "The play was actually written for her [Karen Young], with the express intention of creating a vehicle for her" (Marion Ackerman, quoted in Fidelman 1995). Young also composed the music for Ackerman's next play, *Celeste*. At the time of our interviews, Young was working on an album featuring her music from the *Song of Songs*, using the text in several languages, including Latin. Her Latin coach, in this case, was helping her understand the words to the point where she could signify through them.

Because you see, I wanted to change some of the meanings of the Latin words. And in order to change [for instance] who's 'The Beloved?' Her, in this instant, or is it him? Or is it Love with a capital L? Sometimes I want it to be 'Love' itself, not 'my beloved,' just little things like that. And so he [the language coach] helped me with all that. (Karen Young, personal interview, June 3, 1998)

By shaping the meaning of words in this way, she not only gives them new meaning but comments on the standard meaning of those words.

Just as improvising on the lyrics can necessitate an adaptation of the melody, improvising on the melody of a song can engender adjustments to the lyrics. Sometimes it is hard to tell which factor—words or music—is the leading signifying element, because they are bound together so closely in vocal jazz. At different times, a singer may choose to repeat a word, change or remove a word or phrase entirely. The next two examples show, first, the original melody of "I Thought About You," as written by Heusen and Mercer, and Raneé Lee's improvisation, in which she repeats the words: "and I thought."



The light that gave you glo-ry will take it all - a-way -  
 take it all - a-way all a-way -  
 take it all all- a- way -

Example 3.3: Jeri Brown sings "Softly, As In A Morning Sunrise." (♭)

The following examples show a comparison between the song "Stolen Moments," as written by Oliver Nelson, and Karen Young's version, in which she completely re-wrote the lyric to fit the original melody.

If I told you I love you pret-ty ba-by would it make up for what they say  
 If I hold you and shield you dar-ling would you lin-ger a while to-day? If you...

Example 3.4.1: "Stolen Moments," as written by Oliver Nelson.

Now has a-ny man e-ver made the most of those few days that are his to use?  
 No there's too much dis-trac-tion co-ming from the fear of each path we choose. Once I hold...

Example 3.4.2: Karen Young sings "Stolen Moments." (♩)

One of the jazz vocalist's goals is to achieve the "ability to restore to tired words the vitality they once had..."—a quality Benny Green attributes to Billie Holiday (1996, 946)—as well as to breathe life into new lyrics. The importance of words is emphasized in the teaching of lyric interpretation. Jeri Brown taught me to analyse each song's lyrics by writing or typing them out on a sheet of paper in the format of a poem. Then I was to highlight or circle the most important word in each line. Doing this raised my consciousness about precisely which words I wanted to emphasize in my singing, and it altered my phrasing drastically. I will discuss phrasing further in the section on improvisation techniques.

In addition some of the most famous instrumentalists—Lester Young for instance—have gone to great lengths to convey the message of a song's lyrics. Some, like Chick Corea, profess to memorizing the lyrics to every song they play, so that they can interpret musically what the lyrics express (Jeri Brown, personal interview, January 4, 1999). Rod Ellias teaches his students to think of the words and to play their instrument while singing the words either in their heads or aloud,

essentially emulating the rhythm and tone of the words with their instruments. He says:

[T]here is a school [of thought] that says, well, you should know the words to all ... the tunes that you play. But I don't know, I guess, my philosophy has been (without even thinking about it), well, if I know them, that's great. If I don't, I'll at least know the sentiment behind them.  
(personal interview, June 19, 1998)

### Non-words

Besides words, jazz singers have use of a technique which most refer to as "scatting" or "scat singing," which consists of using non-verbal syllables—usually one syllable per note sung—rather than words. The first person ever reported to use this technique was Louis Armstrong, although this attribution is treated with a degree of scepticism in most recent jazz histories. Gioia, for instance, speaks about Armstrong's 1925 recording sessions, "where Armstrong the vocalist takes charge, not only revealing his highly personal manner of interpreting a song, but also "inventing"—*at least according to legend*—scat singing in the process (1997, 62, emphasis mine). Crowther and Pinfold state:

Whether or not, as he [Armstrong] later insisted, he accidentally dropped the words of the song ['Heebie Jeebies'] onto the studio floor and had to improvise the scat chorus is irrelevant. What is important is that from here there developed generations of singers who have since used scat singing—sometimes for better, often for worse" (1997, 32).<sup>6</sup>

Not all jazz vocalists make use of scatting. And as we can see from Crowther and Pinfold's comments, scatting is not always appreciated by critics and audiences. Rod Ellias verbalises a common view of scatting when he says that if he likes a jazz singer, "it has got nothing to do with scatting. ... With the exception of Mark

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Berliner defines a chorus as "a single pass through [a piece's cyclical rhythmic form]" (1994, 63).

Murphy. I think that his sort of thing is to scat, and he's very good at it." I asked Ellias: "Is the scatting secondary to you, or does it just depend on the person?" He replied: "Yeah. As a matter of fact, I don't like it. I really don't. I mean, I like it when Ella [Fitzgerald] does it, or [hesitation]... I think it's a very, very specialized thing..." (personal interview, June 19, 1998). Will Friedwald would agree:

Though scatting (I use the term to describe any wordless performance, generally an improvised one) is an essential part of jazz singing, in sixty years I doubt that we've come up with even ten artists who ought to be permitted to scat for a mere thirty-two bars. (1990, xii, parenthetical remarks in original)

Despite the frequent criticism against scat singing, many singers today make it an important component of their musical practice and want to pass it on to the next generation of jazz singers. As Linda Dahl states:

... the trend has been toward more ambitious and sustained scatting among emerging jazz singers of recent years. For scat singing is one of the principal means by which a singer can exhibit and explore her vocal-instrument technique as a horn player might. (1996, 100)

Many singers would agree with Dahl. But as we saw in Chapter 2, there are singers who, rather than trying to emulate another instrument, would prefer to explore the specificity of the voice. I believe the tendency of singers to want to scat sing is as much a function of what the voice itself can do, as it is a function of approximating another instrument.

Words are not a limitation for the singer, as many writers have inferred (ex.: Hodeir 1986; Levey 1983; Green 1996). As we saw above, lyrics can be readily manipulated by singers who want to improvise on the melody. Words are a level of structure to the vocalist much as the chord progression.<sup>7</sup> It is part of the framework

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<sup>7</sup> For an explanation of jazz chord progressions, please see Paul Berliner's "A Very Structured Thing: Jazz Compositions as Vehicles for Improvisation." In *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago

within which singers can improvise. However, removing words in favour of scat syllables removes this layer of structure, giving the singer a sense of added freedom which can be equated with that of other instruments.

What cannot be equated with other instruments is the ensuing necessity to replace those words with new syllables. It means that instead of improvising one word here or there, the singer improvises an entire language. Once words are removed, singers have access to an infinite "vocabulary" of sounds and syllables which no other instrument can boast. This opens up a whole new dimension to improvisation, one that is specific to the voice.

All four vocalists who participated in this study practice scat singing to varying degrees. All of them teach or have taught it to their students, although they themselves are self-taught in this regard. Each of them has developed their own scatting style, which consists of a particular arsenal of syllables, rhythms, intonations, textures and dynamics, and continue to develop more as time passes. By isolating the syllables as a factor of comparison, we can see how personal and unique each singer's scatting style is.

The following are samples of scat syllables from the four singers' interviewed, transcribed from recordings, using the phonetic alphabet<sup>8</sup>. It must be noted that this sampling is by no means exhaustive. On the contrary, by highlighting these particular examples, I mean to draw attention to the myriad other possibilities that are not shown here for reasons of practicality and feasibility.

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Press, 1994), 63-94.

<sup>8</sup> Syllables transcribed in phonetic alphabet appear within square brackets.

[shud lud lud lud lud lud lud lüdət lüt lüdət lüt lüt lud lu]  
 [ju ba du dn dlət dlat lu ba du yət]  
 [he yee da ba udü udla udla dut dayude]  
 [ude u dut dayut dayut dlat u dau]

Example 3.5.1: From Jeri Brown's performance of "I've Got Your Number" on latest album by the same name (1999). (♩)

[dɪt dæ dey dɪ dɪ-dɪ po pa da]  
 [do dn dæ do dn dæ do dn de-deeeee]  
 [po po pæ bæ po-po bap pay]  
 [bop po ti ta to-to tay]

Example 3.5.2: From Raneë Lee's performance of "One Note Samba" on her album entitled *I Thought About You* (1996). (♩)

[ihi ihi ihi ohu ohu ohu ɛhi ɛhi ɛhi]  
 [oahi ooahi ɛhi ɛhi ɛhi o]  
 [ohu ohu ohu oho ohu oho ohu ohu]  
 [ɛhi ɛhi aha aha ɛhi aha ɛhi]

Example 3.5.3: From Ernie Nelson's performance on "Black Beauty" on Sonny Greenwich's album entitled *Spirit In The Air* (1996). (♩)

[düdü dɛt dæ dü dæt deya]  
 [düdü deya düdü deya]  
 [düdü dæ de dæ düdü dɔ dn dü dɛt deya]  
 [dɛt dn deya dæ düdü düdü dn deeee dn dɛt dɛ]

Example 3.5.4: From Karen Young's performance of "Bebop Macédoine" on her latest album *Nice Work If You Can Get It* (1997). (♩)

The syllables shown here depend not only on the singer's personal style (some may tend to be more percussive, others more lyrical), but also on the singer's intent in a given song. Some songs may call for a haunting legato line, whereas others may demand a more rapid-fire and rhythmic approach. Nevertheless, any individual singer will have a preference for certain syllables over others. As Raneë Lee suggests:

Sometimes a number of syllables sound good in someone's mouth, in someone's instrument. And sometimes they don't. And sometimes a limited use of syllables sound good in someone else's instrument and some don't.

Like Chet Baker maybe has 3 syllables to his whole [repertoire] . But it sounds like he's reading you a soliloquy by the time you've heard a complete vocal, because he plays very close to what he's doing with his trumpet. (personal interview, June 30, 1998)

As we saw in chapter 2, many singers use other instruments as inspiration for choosing syllables. Ernie Nelson teaches his students to scat through this approach, letting the student develop her or his own "vocabulary." He says:

[You can use] whatever you come up with that feels right to you. Instead of saying '[di-bi-di-bi-di]' that you heard somebody else do. What feels right to you? That's the way I can get people to scat [and] feel fairly comfortable. But it takes a while.

It takes months for the person to get comfortable with what they're saying because there's always that other side: 'people are going to laugh at you. You better not do this.' (personal interview, July 7, 1998)

Jeri Brown also prefers to let the student "invent" her or his own syllabic tendencies,<sup>9</sup> but emphasizes listening to singers as well as instrumentalists. She said during one of my lessons: "I've had students who've been very upset with me because I didn't give them a language to scat on." She adds:

... what you have to do is listen to ... many many great jazz singers and instrumentalists scatting. And you'll hear some common sounds. But the variety!

So once you listen to about ten of them doing very up-tempo things, then you should feel daring enough to try your own. (March 29, 1998)

Ranee Lee prefers the opposite approach, requiring her students to practice as many syllables as she can teach them, and then proceeding by elimination. She explains:

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<sup>9</sup> I say tendencies—as opposed to a "set of syllables"—because the syllables a singer uses never stops developing over time, whereas a set implies far too much fixity.

So it's just... building a storehouse of sounds that you don't feel uncomfortable no matter what comes out of your mouth, because really the direct approach is the benefit of the phrase. So if you're accenting the phrase, if you're stretching the phrase, if you're making the phrase move faster or slower, you use the syllable as if it were a word to accompany the phrase. (personal interview, June 30, 1998)

There are many other sources of inspiration for choosing scat syllables, not the least of which is nature. Singers can get syllable ideas from all the sounds to which they are exposed, whether it be clocks ticking or birds chirping, etc. Karen Young has found that it is better to choose syllables that just "come out naturally." Her background in world musics serves her in this regard.

And yeah, that's a whole other thing, ... because another way to use all those 18 languages that I've sung is all those incredible syllables, those incredible things that are done with the tongue instead of '[bu bap fu wa].' I'm really tired of '[bu bap fu wa].'

And a lot of times when I improvise now, I just go '[uuu].' Or '[rrrrr]' if it's fast, instead of '[du bi du bi].' I can't stand that kind of stuff.

Just the Bulgarian way to do vibrato gives this '[wa wa wa wa wa],' gives this phasing, porous, kind of weird harmonic effect. I mean, there's so many things you can do in improvising! (personal interview, June 3, 1998)

When the word improvisation is used in conjunction with vocal jazz, it is often assumed that scat singing will be the way that is achieved, but as we have seen above, scatting is only one of many styles of vocal improvising. Linda Dahl notes:

There are improvisatory singers of all kinds—those who target their delivery strictly for supper clubs and "saloons," those who sing only slow-tempo ballads, those who sprinkle their "soul" liberally with jazz feeling. Some only scat; others are revered in the hermetic world of gospel and would not wish to sing "worldly" jazz. Still others were trained for opera. (1996, 101)

In vocal jazz, there exists an infinite variety of levels of improvisation based on words, syllables and melody, from improvising on the melody without changing

the words, to improvising on words and melody, to improvising with syllables and melody, or a combination of words and non-words, and to different degrees in each of these cases.

### Vocal Ambitus

Unlike singers of Western classical music, who are expected to sing any given piece in the key in which it was written, jazz vocalists routinely change the key of songs to accommodate their vocal ambitus. In the example given by Raneé Lee (Example 3.1.1), for instance, she sang the opening line of "Body and Soul" in the key of F-major. This may or may not be the key in which she normally sings this particular song, but since she was singing *a cappella*, she simply started on the note that came to mind, which is impossible to identify on the voice without perfect pitch or another instrument to which to refer.

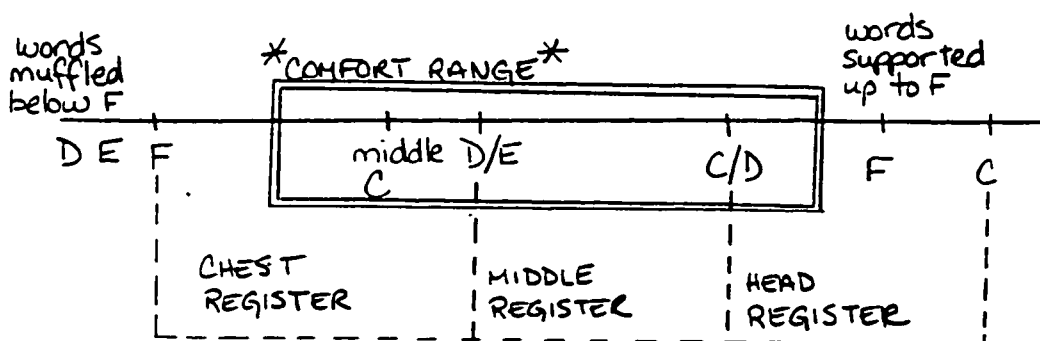
In the second example (Example 3.1.2), when she improvised upon the first one, she sang in the key of E-major. Again, since she sang *a cappella*, there were no restriction on what key she could sing in. This points out that, although not having perfect pitch may appear to be a disadvantage for the vocalist, to the contrary it can actually be an advantage. It shows the flexibility of the voice in terms of its ability to produce a sound without labelling that sound as a B or a C, for example, in order to choose the tone appropriate for one's own voice. Instrumentalists must spend years to achieve this level of assimilated knowledge and integrated technique. This is why relative pitch can be seen as more useful to a singer than perfect pitch.

Thanks to this flexibility, a jazz singer can always choose the key that best suits either the range of the voice or the effect she or he wants to produce in a given song. A singer can choose a key that puts her or him in the lower part of the

register to signify a certain mood, such as sultriness, darkness or melancholy, for instance.

Jeri Brown taught me to choose a key to take advantage of the notes that "sparkle" in my vocal range (January 4, 1999). Even if a vocalist has a wide ambitus (Brown can boast a four-octave range, but most singers can consider themselves lucky to reach two to two and a half octaves), there is a register within that ambitus that is more accessible to each singer. Brown's advice is to choose a key that is "comfortable when singing the song as written," that is, without melodic improvisation. She says that the top note in a song should not be at the height of the middle register of the voice, but rather a third below it. She emphasizes the importance of singing in the accessible part of voice, "allowing high and low sparkling notes to be revealed."

She suggests choosing two or three keys for each song, making charts for them (writing out the chord changes transposed from the original key) and "singing them a lot." This makes it possible to choose the key that best suits the individual's voice. To this end, she had me make what she called a "comfort range chart," which is a graphic representation of my particular vocal ambitus, divided into low, comfortable and high registers.



Example 3.6: Sample of comfort range chart.

Using this guideline also ensures that the singer has enough "space" above and below the comfortable range to improvise freely. Brown explains why she emphasizes choosing the right key for one's range:

You've got instrumentalists here [at Concordia University] learning how to find the right reed to put in their horns to get this *sound*. But it takes a lot more for the singer: for us to negotiate voice placement, to know how to make yourself sound clear, and that's just the beginning. The next part is deciding, 'now that I can make myself sound efficient as a singer, now I want to put my personality into my sound.' So your timbres, textures, everything ... changes.

But since you're singing songs, you've got to make sure that the timbres and textures and whatever you want people to hear, are effective in every song that you sing. If one song is off, it's really noticeable. (private lesson, January 4, 1999)

For the advanced or professional jazz instrumentalist, the necessity for a vocalist to transpose to a "comfortable key" is not a problem, since it is part of their training, and a mark of great skill to be able to play songs in all twelve keys.

In the 1960s, when Ernie Nelson was playing the nightclub circuit in the United States, and in Montreal after 1968, he was singing some jazz, but mostly show tunes, blues and R&B. He says that "they were all beautiful songs" and that "the hard work was learning them all and putting them in the right keys." He adds:

Because sometimes I would sing something that Aretha Franklin would sing, or Dionne Warwick would sing. And [chuckles] I couldn't sing it in those keys, so you got to work it out in your own key. And that's a lot of fun. You take a song from a record. No [sheet] music. And your ear is getting this work-out. (personal interview, July 7, 1998)

I asked Nelson if he would make charts for the other members of the band or if he expected them to be able to play by ear, in any key. He replied:

Most of the musicians know how to do that [play by ear]. I mean, that's [hesitation], if you don't know how to do this, don't come up on the band stand. It's that type of thing. If you come up here and think we're going to be reading something, forget it. (ibid)

As Paul Berliner explains, "musicians commonly test one another's skills by performing pieces 'through all the keys,' modulating by descending half steps or by ascending fourths with each chorus" (1994, 82). I was made aware of this practice in René Lavoie's jazz improvisation class in 1994, when he required the class to do the exercise Berliner describes. Lavoie suggested that if I could not sing the song in certain keys because of my vocal range, then I should improvise notes that were within my range and that made sense with the chord progression.

The other students could play in all keys because their instruments have a relatively wide range compared to the voice. If the song got too high or too low, they could simply play the song in the next octave, something that a vocalist can only do in certain keys because of the more limited ambitus of the voice.

Though Lavoie's approach seems like the opposite of the one Brown advocates, the two are not incompatible. While the instrumentalists in Lavoie's class were practicing their non-improvisatory skills, that is technical skills on their individual instruments, I was required to practice vocal improvisation. We all benefited from the ear training, albeit for a different purposes.

Ranee Lee has also found that singers can benefit from singing in keys that are not necessarily comfortable.

I use a lot of the Aebersold. I'm not always thrilled with them because they're always in the original key, which don't work for the vocal, and especially the female vocal. [A]t first I used to rebel against that and try to come up with ways of slowing down the tape ... Of course, then it does something to the time! But then I thought 'why do that?' Because ... you're not *performing* for me. You're just trying to work out areas to go [or melodic variations], ... especially in a paraphrase or solo...

I mean, it's not easy! And it's always a complaint, but it's a good idea because then you're not so stuck in the

perfect register of the voice. (personal interview, June 30, 1998)<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to performance time, however, Lee—like Brown—advocates choosing a comfortable key. Then, she explains, the benefit of practicing in awkward keys can be felt, even though the singer is performing within her or his most comfortable range.

Once the key is chosen for a particular song, a vocalist can signify by moving in and out of the comfort range in her or his improvisation. By so doing, the vocalist can create many different impressions, including comedy, parody, soulfulness, etc. I observed Rane Lee performing one such comedic effect during her performance on December 5, 1998, at La salle Odyssee in Gatineau, Québec. In the middle of a song, she leapt into a very high vocal register while pretending through her gestures that she has suddenly lost her normal voice. She then made a grand display of jumping to her low register; a move which did not fail to rouse the audience. It showed both her vocal skill and control while at the same time providing a tasteful and entertaining bit of comedy that was her own addition to the song.

In a similar fashion, a vocalist can also comment on her or his position in the band in relation to the other instruments, or create a communication with those instrumentalists, by "borrowing" the range that is characteristic to that instrument. Low notes can create a communication with the bass player, for example.

### **Emotional involvement in singing**

The voice is often considered to be the most personal of instruments. Many people feel instinctively drawn to the sound of the human voice in a way

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<sup>10</sup> Aebersold refers to Jamey Aebersold's series of recordings which feature a jazz rhythm section accompaniment only. They are commonly used for learning repertoire and practicing jazz improvisation.

unparalleled by any other instrument. This can be observed in the behaviour of jazz audiences that frequently carry conversations while listening to instrumental tunes, only to stop abruptly when a vocalist begins to sing. This understandably frustrates some instrumentalists, who would ask for nothing more than to be listened to so attentively. However, as we saw in Chapter Two, there are those who know and appreciate how the voice can touch people, and they try in every way possible to highlight the strengths of the voice through their playing.

The other side of the coin is that the ability to grasp and hold the attention of audiences can also be a drawback. Singers often lose out on work opportunities, such as cocktail parties and wedding receptions, because the client fears the guests would stop talking.

One of the reasons people react to the voice in this way may be that it is the only instrument that is fully contained within the human body, and that we all possess from birth.<sup>11</sup> Also, the voice is as unique as a individual's fingerprints, making it a useful identifier for security systems, for instance. As much as other people can identify us visually by our physical dimensions and facial features, so do they recognize us by the sound of our voice.

Although it is possible to identify an instrumentalist by listening to their playing, this cannot be done with the same degree of ease as recognizing someone's voice, and probably requires more ear training than the average person receives. We must usually listen more to their playing style or technique, than to the actual sound of the instrument, which is more closely related to the instrument than to the individual.

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<sup>11</sup> It could be argued that body percussion could be described this way, but it is so rarely used in jazz—Bobby McFerrin being a notable exception—that it is not figure prominently in this equation.

The human voice is so closely linked to a person's identity that a critique of the voice can easily be taken as a personal attack. That is why so many people grow up learning to despise the sound of their own voice when they hear it, for instance, on an answering machine. Countless people utter regularly: "I can't sing" or only half-jokingly remark "You don't *want* me to sing." These are very self-deprecating statements because the voice and the self are almost deemed to be one and the same.

No one says "I can't play the piano" to put themselves down. It would be ridiculous to think they could play the piano if they have not taken lessons. They know that if they wanted to, they too could learn to play the piano. And yet, even those who possess what most people would consider a pleasant voice often say "I can't sing." And if they don't know how to sing in tune, they assume it cannot be learned. Few people realize that singing is a skill that can be learned and that real tone-deafness is extremely rare.

Ernie Nelson says: "people, they want to sing, but they are really frightened, so I just help them open up and try to give them confidence and encouragement" (personal interview, July 7, 1998). He also explains:

[W]hen we're dealing with vocals, it has more to do with emotions, because the person has nothing to hide behind. You can sit at the piano and hide behind the piano. You don't have to deal with your emotions so much. But as a lead singer, you've got to learn how to deal with your emotions. It's more personal. (Ernie Nelson, personal interview, July 7, 1998)

Nelson uses singing as a common metaphor for playing expressively or with feeling.

I try to get them [piano students] to play from their heart. To play from their heart and let their fingers do the singing. Because that's what they're doing. ... If you watch these giants, these pianists. You watch them, you listen to what they're doing. They're singing, man! Sometimes they're even singing along with what they're playing. (Ernie Nelson, personal interview, July 7, 1998)

This illustrates the particularly high degree of emotional involvement required in jazz singing. As Karen Young stated earlier, she chooses songs that she can "get into," as much for the words as the music. Like many singers, Young wants her music both to have a personal connection and to make a musical statement.

This personal connection appears to be as important to listeners as it is to the performers. I asked Lorraine Desmarais what are some of the qualities she, as a listener, values in a singer. I believe she reflected the view of many when she replied: "Moi, le timbre; j'aime beaucoup la couleur; puis le message; *la façon qu'elle va venir me chercher*; la façon qu'elle va interpréter les choses... C'est difficile à décrire." (personal interview, August 16, 1998, emphasis mine). People want to be emotionally reached by a singer. Besides her or his technical skill, which people may or may not appreciate, a singer's emotional involvement can be one of the most powerful factors in a listener's decision to buy a disc or a concert ticket.

### Vocal Improvisation Techniques

Although the following list spans a wide spectrum of techniques for vocal improvisation, it cannot include all possibilities which, as seen above, are endless. However, I believe it gives a good indication of some of the techniques used by jazz vocalists today. Jazz vocalists frequently make use of some or all of the following techniques, often in combination, to give an additional layer of signifying to the music: vocalese; solee; singing words and improvising on the melody; scat singing an improvised melody.

## Vocalese

In the tradition of vocalese, the jazz singer writes lyrics to an existing instrumental melody. This melody generally consists of an improvised solo, but can also be the main melody of an instrumental tune. It can be a melody that the singer her- or himself has performed or composed, or one from another artist. What began as an improvised melody is then transformed into a relatively fixed arrangement, as the melody is memorized and words are attached to it.

Once the vocalese arrangement (words and music) is made, it is generally performed the same way every time. Consequently, many jazz singers find the technique somewhat constraining. Then again, the singer may choose to improvise using different textures of the voice or different dynamics, even though the melody and words are fixed. Also, the singer can use the vocalese style for a section of a song or a chorus, and still leave room for another type of improvisation in another segment of the arrangement.

Karen Young, in particular, used this technique a lot at the beginning of her jazz development in the 1970s. The Bug Alley band, which Young had formed with her brother, went from what she describes as country-jazz-folk group to one more focussed on jazz after her brother left the band to go back to school in 1974. Young moved to downtown Montreal to be more centrally located, and the group practiced in her kitchen while her children were sleeping. The group's most productive period was between 1975 and 1978. They played a lot of jazz in the bebop vocal style which relies heavily on vocalese. Their major influences included Lambert, Hendricks and Ross (a group famous for their use of vocalese), Miles Davis and Wayne Shorter. They also did some barbershop-style singing, and even some songs from the Boswell Sisters. The group broke up after doing their album in 1980. She states:

The reason why we broke up was because I was tired of being 'the trumpet'—the top voice—and always having to do the same thing... I love vocal harmony. But I needed to start working on my solo singing. (Karen Young, personal interview, June 3, 1998)

Young still sites Lambert, Hendricks and Ross as a strong influence on her music. Her most recent album contains Young's composition "Look Ma No Hands," which makes use of the vocalese style. Example 3.7 is an excerpt from that song.

### Improvising on the melody

An extremely prevalent technique for vocal improvisation is to sing the lyrics of the song as they were written, but to improvise on the melody. Even though a singer is not changing the words, she or he can signify on them through this type of improvisation by emphasizing them rhythmically or melodically—to say nothing of using timbres and textures to comment on the lyrics.

This type of improvisation can be as subtle as a slight alteration of the phrasing of the song; that is, back-phrasing, forward-phrasing or breathing in different places to emphasize a certain note or passage, as Karen Young described earlier. Back-phrasing and forward-phrasing (also known as delaying or anticipating respectively) entail singing or playing the melody either after or before the beat. Sometimes the jazz vocalist (or any soloist) can be an entire measure ahead or behind the other instruments, without creating any sense of dissonance or rhythmic conflict with them. This is due to what Richard Waterman coined as the "metronome sense" (1967), which allows the soloist to know where the basic beat pattern falls despite singing a completely different rhythm. When a vocalist uses this technique, the actual notes of the melody are not necessarily changed, although

they frequently are. Example 3.8.2 shows how Jeri Brown signifies against the original melody (Example 3.8.1) through phrasing, changing the rhythm of the melody, rather than the pitches.

VOICE

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When I was young I hard-ly knew just what to do

with Old Faith-ful burst- in in my chest 'n tear-in out my throat 'n zap-pin

through my fin-gers 'n toes mak-in em snap 'n tap mak-in my lips 'n tongue

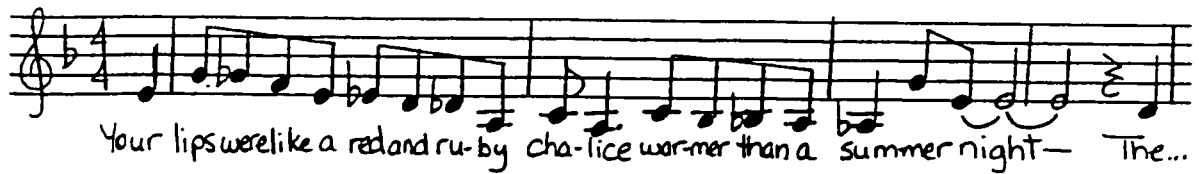
do con- tor- tions in pro- por- tions that they nev-er, no ne-ver, ne-ver done be-fore

and ma-kin my hips swing dis-cov-er-ing rhy-mn in my bo-dy and

me-lo-dy in my breath and har- mo- ny in my fin-gers Look Ma, no

hands!

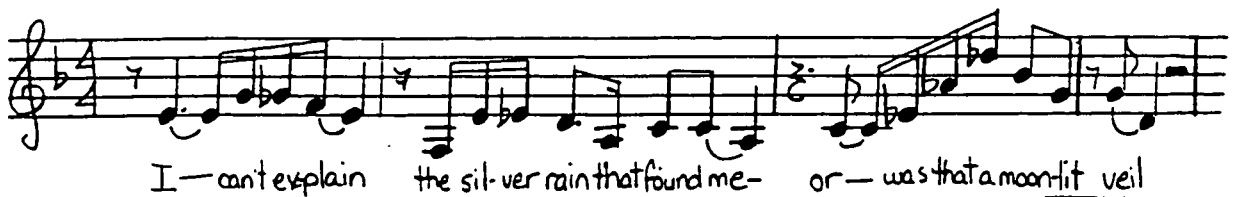
Example 3.7: From vocal part of "Look Ma No Hands," by Karen Young. This excerpt was graciously provided by the composer. (♩)



Example 3.8.1: "Midnight Sun," as written by Hampton, Burke and Mercer.



Example 3.8.2: From Jeri Brown's performance of "Midnight Sun," on album entitled *I've Got Your Number* (1999). (♩)



Example 3.8.3: Second excerpt from Jeri Brown's performance of "Midnight Sun," on the same album entitled *I've Got Your Number* (1999). (♩)

The other extreme of this practice is for the singer to completely "re-write" the melody in improvisation. Sarah Vaughan is one who is said to have this technique mastered. Example 3.8.3 (above) shows another iteration of the same line from a different chorus. This time, Brown improvises melodically as well as with the phrasing.

As this sequence of examples suggests, a singer will often sing the head relatively "straight"—that is, as it was written or close to it—at the beginning of a song. Then, in the subsequent choruses she or he will take more and more liberties with the melody. This establishes a sort of baseline for signifying in the first iteration and gradually builds upon itself. So, even if the listener has not heard the song before, she or he has a chance to hear the theme before hearing the variations, so to speak. Even the first iteration can signify differently from one listener to the next, as it is heard either as something completely new, or in relation to all other versions known to that particular listener.

Most of the time, a vocalist is called upon to sing the head at the beginning of the song and at the end—just as Berliner describes—plus a possible solo in between. Some singers choose to deviate from this pattern. For example, I observed Jeri Brown at the Upstairs Jazz Club in Montreal on November 26, 1998. She sang several choruses right at the beginning of most songs before "passing the baton" to the other musicians. This gave her a chance to interpret the melody as it was written, and to immediately comment upon that melody by improvising while singing the lyrics. Then, without hesitation, she would break into an improvised scat solo, which will be discussed in the next section.

Each time she sang a chorus, whether with lyrics or without, she was commenting on the previous choruses, which consisted of her own improvisation. This approach differs from the more traditional practice of singing the melody once at the beginning and then once again at the end. In this latter case, the singer is commenting on the preceding choruses performed by other members of the band. Brown's approach allows her to do both: to comment on her own musical statements, as well as those of the other musicians when she comes back to sing the head at the end of the song.

It should be noted that even though Brown may be commenting on a chorus she has just completed, there is also a level of dialogical signifying happening simultaneously, as she reacts to what the other musicians play to accompany her. This holds true for any good jazz performance.

### The scat solo

As mentioned earlier, scattling is the use of syllables, as opposed to words as the vehicle for rendering a melody. Though not all jazz singers make use of scattling, especially to a melody that is improvised, it can be seen as the ultimate level of improvisation for a jazz vocalist. Many people consider scat singing to be the closest a voice can get to other instruments.

In a scat solo, a singer must be comfortable enough with a song's harmonic structure to be able to create a new melody that will sound good with the changes<sup>12</sup>. Because the vast majority of vocalists cannot identify pitches without a reference from an instrument, the chord progression passes through time much too fast for a her or him to analyse which note to sing over which chord. She or he must therefore react directly and immediately to what she or he hears from rest of the band. As Jeri Brown says:

...you could actually think of vocal improvisation without ever reading one note. And all you'd have to do is to maybe hear whatever the tune is, (I'll just put it that way, because it's much more organized than that), but hear the tune once and say 'O.k. I'm ready. Let's go. I'm ready. I can improvise to this.' (personal interview, June 10, 1998)

More commonly though, singers who want to feel comfortable scattling a solo tend to memorize a song's melody and harmony so that they can anticipate what will

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<sup>12</sup> Changes are what jazz musicians call the chord progression of a song.

come next, and thereby improvise a melody that will be compatible with the changes.

As Ranee Lee puts it:

... if you dare to go on stage or go before the public and present yourself (unless you have some sort of sadistic pleasure in being stomped on!), you know the song well enough, and you should be able to have fun with it.  
(personal interview, June 30, 1998)

Scat solos require a large degree of spontaneity, which is why most jazz singers perform them more extensively in concert situations than they do in studio recording sessions. As Karen Young observes, there is a permanency to a recording that can make a singer very self-conscious about scat solos. She says:

I found whenever I improvise in the studio I never liked it. There were always little mistakes and everything. And it was never perfect enough for me.

... You have to see the microphone as as intense a thing as being in front of an audience. ... It is hard. You have this different energy that comes out when you've got that [an audience].

... I do it [improvise a scat solo in the studio], but I have to like it, because I know I have to live with it forever.  
(personal interview, July 16, 1998)

## Solee

Another technique that uses scat syllables is what Ranee Lee refers to as "solee." This is in essence a synonym for singing in unison with the other instruments. This can take the form of a short passage, such as the introduction to a song, for instance. It can be an entire vocal solo<sup>13</sup> that is doubled by the other instruments. Or it can be the main melody—also called "the head"—of a song that was

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<sup>13</sup> Berliner describes how a solo takes place in jazz: "It has become the convention for musicians to perform the melody and its accompaniment at the opening and closing of a piece's performance. In between, they take turns improvising solos within the piece's cyclical rhythmic form. A solo can comprise a single pass through the cycle, known as a chorus, or it can be extended to include multiple choruses. Just as the [chord] progression's varied timbral colors provide a rich setting for the head, they also highlight the features of solos" (1994, 63).

original written with or without words. Lee uses this technique regularly in her performances. As she says:

It's become more popular to do that but I like that because I like the fact that I'm integrated with the music, the ensemble sound. ... And sometimes I just learn the head and sing either the melody or slight syllables, so that the voice is incorporated as an instrument, which is my ultimate goal. (personal interview, June 30, 1998)

Like vocalese, this technique is relatively fixed once the arrangement is made.

However, the singer is free to improvise on the choice of scat syllables, as well as on timbres, textures and dynamics. As Lee indicates:

Sometimes I'll just play little games with myself and change things... Because I know what's going to happen, so I can afford to say, 'Ooh, maybe I won't go [aaaa], I'll go [oooo].' [chuckles] Something like that. You know, we have to have fun too... (personal interview, June 30, 1998)

By engaging in this type of improvisation, she signifies on several levels.

Intertextually, she comments on all the previous versions of the arrangement that she has performed, as well as against the lyrics of the song, even though she is not, at that moment, uttering them. Dialogically, she signifies against what the instrumentalists are playing. For that matter, simply using this technique signifies upon what Lee wants her role to be in the ensemble.

Also as in vocalese, it is easy to use solee in one part of an arrangement, and still allow for more open improvisation in the rest of the song. A good example can be found on Ranee Lee's performance of "One Note Samba," on her album entitled "*I Thought About You...*" (1994). The introduction to the song consists of a solee

arrangement which is based on the bridge.<sup>14</sup> She then sings a full chorus using scat syllables before turning to the lyrics with some improvisation on the melody.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined several ways of signifying through vocal jazz improvisation. Through that process, I hope to have shown that the possibilities for exploration and musical dialogue in vocal jazz are truly endless.

I have attempted to dismiss certain assumptions about jazz singing and about jazz singers that have so far impeded their full inclusion into the histories of jazz. By removing the premise that singers are not musicians, or that they are the "pop" element that supposedly diminishes the quality or validity of the music as full-fledged jazz—to name only these two elements—I have been able to observe the musical practices of some of the country's best-known jazz vocalists, highlighting their contribution to the genre as a whole.

In my view, vocal improvisation need not be treated as a poor imitation of its instrumental "sibling." The role of the voice can be studied and valued in its own right and analyzed in positive terms, rather than in contrast to that of other instruments. In other words, it can be seen as what it is, rather than what it is not.

By addressing the specificity of singing, my goal has been to show the level of mastery required in vocal jazz. I maintain that only for rare exceptions is jazz singing a natural gift. For most people, it requires the practice and dedication that are crucial to any successful musical training.

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Berliner defines the bridge as synonymous with the "B-section" of a song's form. He adds: "Its harmonic design differs markedly from that of the A-section and commonly involves fleeting movements through a succession of different tonalities" (1994, 76).

The brief overview of the wide range of techniques available in this art form, I hope, will help reposition the status of vocalists in jazz, so that they may be seen as full participating members in the jazz community. Jazz vocalists should not indeed be kept outside the politics that are inherent in realm of jazz music, but rather part and parcel of it.

## CONCLUSION

How do jazz singers signify? As we have seen, they signify musically, against previous and future versions of songs, against musical statements within songs, through new compositions and improvisations. But jazz singers also signify against the canons of jazz simply by being a jazz singer. By creating a place for themselves as *musicians* in the jazz community, today's jazz singers are in fact commenting on past roles that were offered to them, as well as those that were not offered to them. The singers who participated in this study have insisted that their voice is an instrument, and that they intend to use it as such. They have surrounded themselves with other musicians who share their vision, so that they can thrive in a setting that is not always hospitable to them.

Why talk about the status of jazz vocalists? Why should it matter that they are mostly women and that their status depends on their gender and race, as well as on their choice of instrument? Lorraine Desmarais is often noted for her role as a woman in the male-dominated field of instrumental jazz (Guilbert 1995; Brunet 1992; Mayes 1990; Lemery 1988; Morisset 1986; Block 1986; Miller 1984), yet she has always down-played that aspect of her success, saying that women are becoming more prominent in all sorts of professions, such as doctors, stock-brokers, etc. (personal interview, August 16, 1998). For her, the ultimate goal is simply to make music—a goal from which she never strays, whether she is playing as a soloist or as an accompanist. Her strategy appears to be to lead by example, as do all the participants in this study. That does not preclude, however, the need to raise consciousness in trying to effect real change.

Jazz singers, especially female ones, have to face certain realities if they are to successfully negotiate their role in jazz. One of my assignments under Jeri Brown was designed to teach me to cope with other musicians who might treat me as less than a full musical partner. In working with an arranger in a big band setting, I discovered very quickly that my opinions were not welcome and that my presence was merely tolerated, much less valued. I asked Brown if the lesson she had intended was that I would encounter these types of difficulties all through my career, and that I must learn to manage them with grace. The answer was an emphatic yes. She explained:

[T]raditionally, the barriers that seem to occur between the singer and the instrumentalist often have a lot of sex/gender attached to them, where they view the 'girl-singer' or the singer not as a musician, but a mascot.

... and so the challenge is to be able to communicate, to assert yourself, in a very diplomatic way, that you are in charge of anything that you are involved in, at all times. It will always be something that you have to do, unless you hand pick and pay, and work with relatives [laughs].

... It might not be a sexist issue, but just one where the expectations of a singer is not that high in terms of musicality. (private lesson, March 15, 1999)

Ernie Nelson expresses the same view quite succinctly when he says: "You have to *demand respect*" (personal interview, July 22, 1999, emphasis mine).

Female jazz singers have to protect themselves against the very real possibility that they may be, at times, faced with very unkind working conditions. In her discussion on the big band singer from the first half of this century, Linda Dahl comments: " ... coping with everyday sexual and emotional pressures must have been difficult indeed for many singers. ... Onstage the female vocalist may have looked glamorous, yet her life on the road with the band was anything but" (1996, 122-23). Unfortunately, it is still not uncommon for male bandleaders to assume that a young female singer will simply be a trinket that will look good on stage but not contribute

much musically. Even today, some bandleaders have been known to hire young female singers for the sole purpose of using them for their personal sexual satisfaction.<sup>1</sup>

Dahl also states that the female vocalists of the early big bands had problems that were "not unfamiliar to working women today, including the sometimes lascivious employer, the array of libidos and egos of the male crew, and the lower status, reflected in lower pay" (1996, 122). The female vocalists interviewed for this study have great experience in leadership roles from band leader to producer and make it their common practice to be in charge of their own musical projects. Because of their strong leadership, these women have not only matched their pay levels to the other members of the band, but can now fetch greater fees for their performances based on their individual reputations and experience. Ernie Nelson points out the difference between a vocalist leading her or his own band and being invited to join a band that is already established. In the latter case, he states: "You'll always have trouble getting band leaders to pay you. They're hard of hearing". He adds: "If the singer is the one getting the engagement and hiring other musicians, then they make whatever money they want or the same as everybody else (personal interview, July 22, 1999). This points out what is possibly a trend in the business of jazz: that in order to survive, a singer must be her or his own boss.

Even so, it can be more challenging for a singer to get engagements than it is for her or his instrumental colleagues. Raneé Lee explains that a solo piano player, for instance, can travel all over the world and get engagements. She adds: "As a solo singer, I could never do that" (personal interview, July 22, 1999). One of the reasons she gives is that, as a singer, she requires other instruments "to create her sound,"

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<sup>1</sup> I respectfully acknowledge the informant's wish to remain anonymous.

whereas a pianist has the option of being more independent. She also maintains that there is widespread discrimination against singers in jazz. At the time we spoke on July 22, 1999, she had just ended a one-week tour in the United Kingdom, with Richard Ring and her long-time friend and colleague, pianist Oliver Jones. She had six stops in England and one in Scotland. She says "Ninety percent of the places did not cater to singers." I asked her to clarify what she meant by "catering to singers." She replied: "They *don't hire* them." She continued: "Because of the stigma attached to what singers used to do, which was sing the head once and sit down... They are not used to singers who become 'musician vocalists.'" She says she got the gig because Oliver Jones is well-known in Europe and has a following there. This tour allowed her an opportunity to expose herself to a public that would not otherwise have known her, and to create a following of her own.

This widespread discrimination that jazz vocalists must overcome is not only reflected in the literature, but produced and reproduced there. If we were to believe John Gilmore's assertion that there were no improvising jazz vocalists in Montreal until after the 1970s, then the singers interviewed for this study would represent the first generation of their kind. Not so, according to Karen Young and Raneé Lee, who both indicate that there were improvising jazz singers in Montreal before they started out. They name people such as Joanne Desforges (from whom Ernie Nelson took voice lessons for six months in the early 1970s), Malicia Battlefield, Dutch Robinson and Linda Niles. Both Young and Lee assure me that if I did further research, I would find many more names (personal interviews; Lee July 22, 1999, and Young August 3, 1999). I believe this would be a worthwhile endeavour.

This study has aimed to demonstrate that the history of jazz is in need of a re-examination. The critical review of some of the canons outlined in Chapter One shows how the politics in jazz practice and literature have led to include and exclude,

from both performance and historical documentation, countless names of active jazz performers. As shown in Chapter Two, misguided views about gender and race—that are at the root of the discrimination against vocalists in jazz—need to be dismantled. As I have begun to do in Chapter Three, more research needs to be conducted on the musical contributions of jazz vocalists to do justice to the rich and varied musical dimensions of vocal jazz and its practitioners. The full scope of jazz vocalists' participation in the history and development of jazz—past, present and future—needs to be highlighted alongside that of their instrumentalist partners.

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