

**A Brief History
Of
Jazz & Popular
Singing**

by

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*How vocal jazz, show choir, and popular
group singing got its start*

From The Book

Popular Choral Handbook

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American popular music has its joint roots in the rich musical traditions of Africa and Europe. The two cultures were united in the Gospel singing of the American South which, in turn, led to the development of jazz. Among the influences contributed by Africans are the expression of feelings through melody, syncopated beats, shifting accents, variety of rhythms, and the call-and-response format of voodoo chants.¹ European influences include form, melody, and functional harmony.² Jazz gained popularity as an instrumental form which imitated human sounds. These sounds were often drawn from the songs of early blues callers, field workers, and street vendors in the southern states. Sung outdoors, with no musical accompaniment to set the pitch and guide the intonation, these songs developed curious inflections and intonations. The voice was allowed to slide to tones foreign to the normal diatonic scale, and to intervals smaller than the half-step. Grunts and groans were added in the melody, becoming part of the melodic texture. Out of these inflections and intonations there developed a unique melody and harmony which later became a distinguishing feature of jazz.³

As these early singers became familiar with band instruments, they began to use them to reproduce their vocal sounds. Eventually, jazz vocalists began to reproduce the sounds played by the instrumental jazz musicians, thus coming full circle. The first singers to set patterns for vocal interpretation in jazz were thousands of southern blues callers and gospel singers. The earliest blues callers to be recorded, and thus survive in the memories of jazz critics, were Blind Lemon Jefferson and Ma Rainey. Blind Lemon Jefferson was singing for years before they ever got him to a recording studio. He symbolized all of the anonymous people who may have been his contemporaries or predecessors.⁴

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Gospel singing was greatly influenced by earlier styles of Black religious music. The prevalent opinion as to what constitutes gospel music is that it simply consists of the introduction of syncopated rhythms and blues singing into religious music.⁵ The Church of God in Christ of the Holiness sect, played a major role in the emergence of the gospel tradition. One of the Church patriarchs is reputed to have said, "The devil should not be allowed to keep all this good rhythm."⁶ The innovations of the Holiness church included the use of such instruments as drums, tambourines, guitars, and saxophones. Emphasis was placed on rhythmic vitality and freedom of expression, achieved through improvisation and the use of *bent note* scales added to traditional musical forms. A related group, the Pentecostal Church, called for full participation of the congregation in all its worship, resulting in the frequent use of call-and-response. Since the use of piano, guitar, and drums was regarded by orthodox Black churches as a sinful attempt to bring ragtime and blues into the church, this musical style tended to remain exclusively within the Holiness groups until it was finally endorsed by the 1930 National Baptist Convention in Chicago.

The first published Black gospel songs that included both words and music were written by Reverend C. Albert Tindley in the 1900s. Most of his compositions were heavily influenced by the traditions of Black spirituals.

Thomas A. Dorsey exerted the greatest influence on the gospel tradition during the 1920s. He began his career as an accompanist, song writer, and arranger for Ma Rainey, Clara Ward, and others, and later also worked with Mahalia Jackson. The melodies of his mature songs were written as simply as possible, in order to give the maximum latitude to the soloist and accompanist for

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improvisation and individual interpretation.⁷ As early as 1928, Dorsey began to change the style of his gospel songs by emphasizing the beat and adding blues riffs. Through the promotion and publication of his music, he became a major force in influencing the acceptance of gospel music by the 1930 National Baptist Convention.

An affinity between jazz and gospel music has made it possible for many gifted Black singers who received their basic musical training in religious music--as performers in church choirs or smaller singing groups--to enter the jazz or popular fields with ease. Among those who made the transition were the late Dinah Washington, who began as a gospel singer in Chicago; Billy Williams, formerly with the Golden Gate Quartet; the late Sam Cooke, formerly with the Soul Stirrers; Ray Charles, formerly of the Five Blind Boys; Sarah Vaughan, formerly a member of a Baptist choir in Newark, New Jersey; the late Nat *King* Cole, who had sung and played in his father's church in Detroit; Della Reese, formerly a performer with Mahalia Jackson; Dionne Warwick, formerly with the Gospelairees; and Lou Rawls, formerly with the Pilgrim Travelers of Chicago. Many Black rock-and-roll quartets also began as gospel singing groups.⁸

Classic blues singers first gained national prominence during the jazz age in the 1920s. Ma Rainey, although not the first to be recorded, is often singled out as the earliest of the great singers in this idiom. Classic blues seemed to combine all the diverse and conflicting elements of Black music.⁹

The most influential of all the early blues singers was undoubtedly Bessie Smith, whose career as a recording artist began in 1923. Her medium was almost exclusively blues material written for her by others, tailored to her life and

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background. Compared with most other blues singers of her day, she was a giant among midgets.¹⁰ Her male counterpart was Huddie *Leadbelly* Ledbetter, who was a guitarist as well as a singer. He performed his blues stories with a conviction expressive of the violence that marked his personal life. During the time of Bessie Smith, for example, he was in jail for murder.

The first sign of an extension of vocal jazz beyond blues forms appeared in the early work of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five. Although Armstrong frequently sang the blues, he was also given to singing improvised passages similar to those expressed with his horn. Armstrong epitomized the essential qualities of the jazz singer. His parched, guttural tone was similar to the sounds that musicians then identified as jazz timbres. Lyrics became secondary to musical values, and merely served as a vehicle for transporting the melody. Each song was sung as if he were in the process of personal creation, as if he were blowing the lyrics through his trumpet.¹¹ In later years, jazz voices by the dozens echoed the Armstrong technique.

Ethel Waters was Armstrong's female counterpart in demonstrating that jazz singing was adaptable to the popular song. In her popular rendering of the song *Dinah*, she rephrased it, making extensive use of syncopation and rubato, as well as adding a synthetic hot touch through the use of occasional growling tones. Waters paved the way for the use of Tin Pan Alley material by every jazz vocalist in later years.¹²

Jazz singing until the late 1920s was largely confined to black artists and, despite significant exceptions such as Armstrong and Waters, was mainly limited to the blues form. Mildred Bailey was one of the first white vocalists to attempt the blues idiom successfully. Some white singers, such as Al Jolson and Sophie Tucker,

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experimented with jazz sounds, but were only able to scratch the surface of the Black style. Bailey, in contrast, was able to invest her thin, high-pitched voice with a vibrato, comparable to Bessie Smith's overtones, and had an easy sense of jazz phrasing.¹³

Two vocalists stood out during 1930s: Billie Holiday, the rugged and rasping Lady Day, whose tone and Armstrong-influenced phrasing made even the tenderest love song sound caustic and hopeless; and Ella Fitzgerald, who was the voice of light as Holiday was that of darkness, swinging her bell-clear tones in an endless parade of trivial songs, and triumphing over her material in a gaily rhythmic manner.¹⁴ Other prominent jazz singers of the era were Joe Turner, Billy Eckstine, Betty Carter, Sarah Vaughan, and Dinah Washington.

Also during this time, group singing gained public acceptance. The most popular female singing group on the radio was the Boswell Sisters, who had begun making records in 1925. They did not, however, become popular until the 1930s, at which time they appeared regularly on the *Music That Satisfies*, a program sponsored by Chesterfield cigarettes and broadcast over the NBC radio network. The Mills Brothers 1931 recording of *Tiger Rag* was the first album by a vocal quartet to sell a million copies. The huge success of this, their first recording, allowed them to go on to motion pictures, nightclubs and network radio programs. The 1937 Andrews Sisters version of the Yiddish song *Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen* was the first recording by a female group to equal the Mills Brothers' sales. With its release, the Andrews Sisters were on their way to becoming one of the most successful vocal groups of that time.

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Scat singing, or vocal improvisation, became an accepted form of embellishing a melodic line during the 1930s. Leo Watson was to become one of the pioneers of this form by his frequent singing of meaningless syllables with only an occasional use of English. Eddie Jefferson, a former dancer, was an innovator in the field of jazz-vocalese (later used by such groups as Double Six of Paris and Manhattan Transfer). This technique added lyrics to existing instrumental improvisations. During the 1940s, he started using the improvisations of Charlie Parker. Among these tunes are *Billie's Bounce* and *Parker's Mood*.¹⁵ The sophisticated duo composed of Jackie Cain and her husband, Roy Kral, made use of many of the ideas originated by Jefferson and Watson. The couple sang bop lines combining lyrics and scat.

During the 1930s, the public began to manifest an increasing interest in vocalists, and the bands began to feature them prominently. The first pop singer to add stature to a great jazz band was Ivie Anderson, whose smooth phrasing and gentle vibrato graced the Ellington bandstand for over ten years. Eventually, singers began to dominate the bandstand, gaining greater public attention and becoming a vital part of dance band music.

Some of the greatest singers in the history of popular music began their careers with the dance bands of the thirties. For example, Doris Day sang with Chick Webb; Bing Crosby with Paul Whiteman; Perry Como with Ted Weems; and Frank Sinatra with the Tommy Dorsey Band. They were all young, unknown, and comparatively inexperienced singers when they started, but they emerged as solo vocalists who would leave their mark on American popular music. After World War

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II, the public began to lose interest in the big bands. The more personal intimate art of the singing stars began to become even more popular.¹⁶

The record business grew during the post-war years. In 1946, the first full year of peace, twice as many records were sold as in the previous year. More than the stage or motion pictures, records were the medium for making songs into hits and singers into stars. Many of the songs that received a top spot on the radio program *Your Hit Parade* between 1945 and 1949 began as best-selling records by other artists. Such performers as Perry Como, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Nat *King* Cole, and Doris Day rose to fame through recordings. Vocal groups such as the Mills Brothers, the Ames Brothers, The Four Aces, The Platters, the Ink Spots, the Chordettes, the Andrews Sisters, and the Kingston Trio shared top honors on the record charts with solo vocalists.

During the 1950s, many vocalists who started out as blues singers were commercially motivated to change over to pop songs. One of the most important of these was Ray Charles. The desire for financial success led him to perform Tin Pan Alley songs backed by string sections, but much of the bittersweet beauty of his original style lingered on.¹⁷ Other vocalists in the jazz tradition also switched over to commercial music. Prominent among them was Nat *King* Cole, an authentic jazz singer when he recorded trio arrangements in the early 1940s, who had become strictly a pop singer, with only faint traces of jazz, by the time he died, in 1965.

In 1958, Annie Ross, a British born singer, teamed up with Jon Hendricks, an ex-drummer and singer who shared her interest in turning instrumental choruses into lyrical stories. They were joined by Dave Lambert, a vocal group arranger who had previously recorded with Charlie Parker, to form Lambert, Hendricks & Ross.

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Such vocal innovations as adding lyrics and unique harmonies to existing tunes, for which Hendricks was mainly responsible, established them as one of the most progressive vocal groups in modern jazz, supplanting such pop-oriented quartets as the Hi Lo's and the Four Freshmen.¹⁸

With the advent of rock and roll and the growth of television, radio made one last bid to challenge the growing supremacy of television in the field of entertainment during the 1950s. During this time there appeared a star-studded, ninety-minute variety program appropriately named *The Big Show*. Other new musical radio programs were *Musical Comedy Theater*, which offered selections of Broadway show music; *Coke Time*, starring Eddie Cantor; and shows featuring Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney.

New programs to appear on television included musical versions of *Our Town*, *Cinderella*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, as well as variety shows such as *Arthur Godfrey and His Friends*, the *Jackie Gleason Show*, the *George Gobel Show*, the *Dinah Shore Chevy Show*, the *Jack Benny Show*, *Your Show of Shows*, the *Red Skelton Show*, and the *Gary Moore Show*. These television productions became a major force in shaping the direction of jazz and popular music.

Fred Waring was an early force in the history of popular music in the choral form. Late in the 1920s, Waring and the Pennsylvanians began recording for Victor. Their first release was *Sleep*, which later became Waring's signature music. Waring's influence and popularity grew to the point where he became an institution on the radio.

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Much of the evolution of popular-music choirs can be traced to college and university groups which formed in the early 1950s, such as the Indiana University's Singing Hoosiers and the University of Iowa's Old Gold Singers.

Mitch Miller, while working at Columbia Records in the late 1950s, was the first to realize the commercial potential of the pop vocal ensemble. His subsequent *Sing-A-Long* albums and *follow the bouncing ball* television show led the way for numerous pop, jazz choirs.

In 1963, the Swingle Singers, an octet that turned Bach works into jazz by singing the original vocal version, but adding a rhythm section, appeared in Paris. Two other influential groups were the Hi-Lo's and The Four Freshmen. Within the last three decades, groups such as the Singers Unlimited, Anita Kerr Singers, Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians, the Ray Coniff Singers, the Johnny Mann Singers, The Norman Luboff Choir and the King's Singers, as well as numerous college and university choral groups, have contributed to the growth and acceptance of pop and jazz choir music. Among these are Manhattan Transfer, Take Six, New York Voices, Rare Silk, The Real Group, Voicestra, and many others.

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- ¹³Ibid., p. 153.
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¹⁸Ibid. p. 157.

¹⁹Ewen, D. (1977). All the years of American Popular Music. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall,
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