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Taking Jazz Singers Seriously: Gender, Race, and Vocal Improvisation

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Taking Jazz Singers Seriously:
Gender, Race, and Vocal Improvisation

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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For Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Carmen McRae, without whom this project would not exist.

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Introduction

“How can you tell when a singer is at your door? She can't find the key, and she never knows when to come in!”

When the punchline of this joke first landed, I will admit, I laughed. Then I felt a momentary unease—a dissonance between my personal experiences, beliefs, and sense of humor. This fleeting sense of discomfort drew my attention toward my own personal contradictions. Initially, I was impressed by the metaphors within the joke and the ways in which language was shaped to create a clever double meaning, even if it perpetuated a negative stereotype about female singers. In context, the joke was delivered facetiously to demonstrate the importance of knowing your key and tempo on the bandstand. I understand that this joke could easily be brushed off as an insignificant, harmless quip—after all, I laughed at it myself. The more I thought about this joke though, the more I recognized the ways in which it affected me—first as a woman, and then as a woman who sings jazz.

In many societies, singing has been coded as a feminized form of music-making in order to reinforce a gendered dichotomy between female singers and male instrumentalists. Hence, the latent misogyny of this joke stems not only from the use of female pronouns, but from feminine associations tied to singing. This particular joke plays on stereotypes about the incompetence of female singers, extending misogynistic assumptions about the incompetence of women at large. The gendered division between vocal and instrumental techniques frequently coincides with a hierarchical system that positions singing as less important, valued, or virtuosic than playing an

instrument. As a woman who sings and studies jazz, this joke immediately brought to mind the gendered divisions between vocalists and instrumentalists in dominant jazz discourses. It also occurred to me that viewing the joke through the lens of jazz also suggests a racialized component that perpetuates negative stereotypes about women of color. Underlying assumptions about the incompetence of women at the intersections of race and gender prevent female jazz singers from being adequately recognized as virtuosic improvisers. Moreover, the negative perceptions of female jazz singers contribute to their underrepresentation or exclusion from the history of jazz. Overall, demeaning narratives about women in jazz are expressed through jokes, but also through the stark underrepresentation of female contributions within dominant jazz discourses. In this project, I seek to challenge the undervaluation of female vocalists and reframe the concept of “improvisation” to include their significant contributions.

I began studying and singing jazz during my time at Bard, where I deciphered an overtly and covertly embedded language about female vocalists. I quickly noticed that certain ways of talking about women in jazz, and specifically singers, permeated different systems of language. In “Be-in-tween the Spa[ces]: The Location of Women and Subversion in Jazz,” author Victoria Willis describes three languages of jazz: academic language, critic/reporter language, and jazz musician/ slang language. In my own personal experiences studying jazz and conducting research for this project, I encountered many instances of demeaning language describing female singers, ranging from explicitly problematic critical reviews of performances, to misogynistic arguments embedded under the guise of “objective” academic jargon. I have heard many opinionated remarks in documentaries and interviews questioning the agency and autonomy of female jazz singers. I have also heard several jokes in the classroom and beyond, told at the

expense of female jazz singers and women in the music industry at large. I have participated in class conversations that identified problematic ways of speaking about musicians, particularly at the intersections of race, gender, and class. Many of my classes at Bard have highlighted the contributions of women in jazz by requiring assignments about women, including the work of women in lectures and musical examples, and showing documentaries that properly credit women with contributions to jazz performance traditions. Through my experience singing jazz, I have learned that finding the key and knowing when to come in are not enough. What truly enables a singer to contribute to the dialogic music of jazz is the ability to find their own, individualized voice. In my own experience studying jazz at Bard, I discovered that I sought to find my voice not only in musical performance, but in the other systems of language that contribute to the discourse of jazz. This was a main driving force behind this project, to give voice to my own interpretations of the contributions of female jazz vocalists and to attempt to rectify some of the ways in which women in jazz are discredited and excluded from jazz discourses. Author Victoria Willis describes the urgent need for new ways of speaking about jazz. She writes:

Rather than allowing the naturalization of jazz as masculine to become undone, jazz scholars and critics have written women instrumentalists out of jazz, and have allowed jazz singers to speak because their voices are only half-voices. New ways of speaking about jazz also need to be created, ways that open the discourse and allow the subaltern not only to speak, but also to be heard. The women who are playing, talking, signifying, and subverting need to be written into the jazz canon- as blue notes, these women need a new way to be transcribed and represented. Without them, jazz and the power subversion, appropriation and voices created by it fall flat (Willis 2008: 300).

In my senior project, I contribute to the new ways of speaking about women in jazz, departing from the insidious language and perceptions that have historically reinforced the marginalization of female jazz vocalists in dominant discourses. I have explored alternative

methods of original transcription that consider undervalued techniques of improvisation including melodic quotation, kinetic pitch and lyric improvisation. I have also explored alternative methods of representing women in jazz with consideration of the potentially subversive elements of their performances. I view this project as an extension of the ongoing project of reconsidering the language around women in jazz and recognizing their significant contributions. In “Taking Jazz Singers Seriously: Gender, Race, and Vocal Improvisation,” I analyze the contributions of Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Carmen McRae to the enhancement of the art of jazz vocal improvisation. I argue that the conceptual reframing of improvisation is necessary in order to adequately recognize the significant contributions of female vocalists that have been excluded from dominant jazz discourses.

Defining Jazz Vocal Improvisation

Improvisation is a key element that distinguishes jazz music from other genres. It is so important that many jazz definitions include the term “improvisation,” and it is a required skill listed in many jazz curriculums. The ability to improvise is generally assessed by an individual’s capacity to internalize the stylistic and structural elements of jazz, then reconfigure this musical material in an original way during live performance. Many definitions describe the act of improvising as composing in real-time. This definition presents an interesting challenge because the extent of real-time composition is only truly known by the performer. For instance, some parts of an improvised solo may be memorized prior to the performance. Generally, a performer’s improvisational prowess is evaluated by the amount of variation they can achieve between performances of the same song; however, these variations may also be memorized and

alternated unbeknownst to the audience. Even if a performer composes in real-time by relying on spontaneity and chance, they still depend on conscious or subconscious musical memory to navigate their way through a particular improvisation. Thus, it is difficult to navigate the bounds of what constitutes improvisation. Improvisation remains a pillar of jazz performance as a foundational genre marker and gauge for determining greatness, yet improvisation itself is difficult to clearly recognize and define. Within this area of uncertainty, the prioritization of instrumental techniques and the gendered hierarchy of “mastery” in jazz have historically overshadowed the contributions of female jazz musicians in dominant discourses.

Scat-singing, or the act of singing with improvised, wordless syllables is perhaps the most distinguishable form of jazz vocal improvisation, because it allows a singer to depart from pre-written lyrical content and utilize their own syllabic vocabulary. Scat-singing yields possibilities for highly individualized improvisations containing endless combinations of syllables. By eliminating the emphasis on specific words and phrases, vocalists are able to improvise like an instrumentalist without the restrictions of preordained lyrical structures. Scat-singers have developed syllabic vocabulary that allows for the manipulation of melodic and rhythmic phrasing to imitate instrumental techniques. Scatting also involves instrumentally imitative usage of articulation and timbre. Overall, scatting is a form of improvisation that is both created with and judged upon instrumental standards.

Alternative improvisational techniques have been overshadowed by scatting in dominant jazz discourses, limiting perceptions of vocal improvisation. Jazz vocalists frequently utilize melodic and rhythmic variations in real-time, implementing a strong internalization of harmonic and structural musical material to vary compositions during performance. Beyond scatting, jazz

singers utilize other improvisational techniques including melodic quotation, kinetic pitch, and lyric improvisation. I also argue that specific shifts in timbre, dynamics and articulation can be considered additional components of improvisation, even when used in tandem with pre-existing melodic material. At the conclusion of this chapter, I address several potential reasons behind the underrepresentation of these distinctly vocal techniques and the possibility for reframing improvisation to include them.

Exclusion of Women in the Jazz Canon

The exclusion and underrepresentation of women's contributions to the dialogic traditions of jazz is a complex and ongoing issue. The main thread that weaves this project together is my aim to credit female vocalists with their significant contributions to the art of jazz improvisation. This thread derives from three core texts that have been imperative to the development of my project. The first text, *Feminine Endings Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, by musicologist Susan McClary guided my thinking regarding musical semiotic codes and gendered metaphors embedded in musical language. Although this text focuses on genres other than jazz, including European art music and popular music, McClary's multifaceted analyses applied to my understandings of music as a public forum, gender performance, and feminist music criticism at large. The second pivotal text is Sherrie Tucker's *Swing Shift*, which examines the historical erasure of all-women jazz bands. Tucker's work made me more aware of the perceptions and stigmas surrounding women in jazz, as well as the complex and nuanced opinions held by female musicians who worked in an environment of simultaneous opportunity and devaluation. This text also offered insight into the gendered and racial politics of the Swing Era, exploring the ways in

which certain narratives were prioritized and perpetuated in dominant discourses. The third crucial text was Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, which explores constructions of black femininity and social consciousness that are rooted in the work of blues women and extended by Billie Holiday. This indispensable work helped frame my understandings of collective music and struggle, expressions of female sexuality, and the subversive elements within Billie Holiday's performances of "Strange Fruit." These texts are connected by a feminist consciousness which grapples with the historical exclusion of female contributions and the coded language that reinforces the marginalization of women in music.

The element of intersectionality is crucial to consider in this project and when considering the exclusion of women at large. Scholar Victoria Willis explores the ways in which the centralization of black masculinity in jazz discourses came at the cost of women's voices. She asserts, "The popular claim that jazz is an all-inclusive genre, a claim that is made more frequently in recent years, is generally found in books or essays that fail completely to mention women, either singers or instrumentalists...Although gender subversion is most certainly taking place, it is, like homosexuality, largely ignored, while claims of all-inclusiveness focus primarily on the 'inclusion' of race" (Willis 2008: 294). The claims of "inclusion of race" that Willis outlines frequently exclude women of color. Willis examines the ways in which women fall between the discursive spaces at the intersections of race and gender, allowing for omission and underrepresentation within historical accounts. In regards to intersectionality, Sherrie Tucker considers which versions of femininity were available to female jazz musicians depending on their racial identity. I explore this concept with regard to issues of colorism more extensively in

chapter 4, where I examine the potential reasons for the underrepresentation of Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae.

In this project, I maintain a sharp focus on the intersections of gender and race in order to recognize the underlying anti-black misogyny that has perpetuated the underrepresentation of jazz vocalists within the realm of improvisation. I am specifically interested in the ways in which anti-black misogyny intersects with feminized conceptions of singing to reinforce the overarching marginalization of women in jazz. I argue that the potentially subversive qualities within performances of Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Carmen McRae challenge the gendered and racial assumptions about jazz vocalists. I acknowledge that by choosing to focus on these two aspects of identity, I am inherently excluding other important aspects including class, sexuality, and ethnicity. Due to the restrictions of a project this size, I have adopted a narrow focus on the elements of race and gender; however, I have tried to be mindful of the ways in which class, sexuality, and ethnicity also contribute to the representation and reception of jazz musicians. The intersection of other marginalized identity markers remains an important topic within this ongoing dialogue.

“Making a lady out of jazz”

Although this project is entitled “Taking Jazz Singers Seriously,” I am mindful of the discourse surrounding making jazz “a serious music.” Overall, I like this title because it clearly supports the notion of jazz vocalists as “real” musicians, capable of virtuosity and improvisational skill. My usage of “serious” is distinct from the propagation of jazz as “a serious music,” which is largely anchored in Eurocentric aesthetics and standards. This debate aligns

with the conceptualization of jazz as “America’s classical music,” and coinciding objectives to “tame,” “domesticate,” or “elevate” jazz. I reference this debate in greater detail in chapter 3, as it pertains to the simultaneous reconstruction of representations of femininity in jazz, presenting the figure of the glamorous jazz lady. I use this debate as a touchstone to illustrate the ways in which Billie Holiday’s singing style is subversive to the “songbird” image of female vocalists. The conception of jazz as “America’s classical music” aims to “elevate” jazz to stylistically resemble Eurological aesthetics and performance practices. The notion that jazz needs to be “tamed,” “domesticated,” or “elevated” positions jazz as inferior, frivolous, or “primitive” in comparison to European classical music. The underlying classist and racist attitudes that motivate this project also have ramifications for the representations of women in jazz, as ideals of beauty are juxtaposed to Eurocentric standards. The issues of colorism that arise from this paradigm are addressed in chapter 4, particularly in regard to Sarah Vaughan’s physical transformation aimed to advance her career and assuage anxiety regarding her non-European facial features. The process of making jazz a “serious music” is contingent upon aims to “elevate” the traditional practices of jazz to become more similar to those of European classical music. Instead of making claims about how female vocalists must change in order to be regarded as serious improvisers, I propose the conceptual reframing of “improvisation” to include their existing significant contributions.

Another similar expression in jazz that reinforces anti-black misogyny is the phrase “making a lady out of jazz.” Bandleader Paul Whiteman claimed to “make a lady out of jazz” during the Swing Era, receiving (rather undeservedly) the popular title of “the King of Jazz.” Plainly because Whiteman was a white man, he was afforded opportunities and credit that

contemporary bandleaders including King Oliver and Duke Ellington were not. His career was driven by absorbing jazz music and appropriating it for white audiences. The term “make a lady” carries misogynistic connotations and equates the whitewashing and “domestication” of jazz music to the transformation of femininity. Thus, the notion of ideal white womanhood subtextually permeates the aims to “elevate” jazz at the intersections of gender, race, and class.

Considering Identity

I have chosen to focus my senior project on Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Carmen McRae. My identity as a white woman poses several limitations that are important to acknowledge, particularly in my writing about black female vocalists who lived in a different time period and experienced struggles that no amount of scholarly research will enable me to fully understand. In her critique of the film *Paris is Burning*, author and activist bell hooks examines the problematic “white neutral gaze” assumed by white lesbian filmmaker, Jennie Livingston. In her documentation of drag performances within queer communities of color, hooks argues that “by cinematically masking this [white] identity, (we see her ask questions but never see her), Livingston does not oppose the way hegemonic whiteness ‘represents’ blackness, but rather assumes an imperial overseeing position that is in no way progressive or counterhegemonic” (hooks 2015: 151). Like film, scholarly writing is another arena where whiteness can be masked. The assumption of a “white neutral gaze” implies an overseeing subject position, which claims neutrality and omniscience. I acknowledge my subject position as a white woman writing about black women to lay bare the intersectional racial and gendered politics underlying my analysis. In my writing, I aim to challenge representations of black

femininity within dominant jazz discourses by amplifying the voices of black female jazz singers. I amplify the voices of Fitzgerald, Holiday, Vaughan, and McRae through original transcriptions of their performances, analyses of their manipulation of musical elements, and explorations regarding the subversive aspects of their work. This work must be ongoing and is by no means limited to the scope or subject matter of my project.

Discoveries in the transcription process

In my analyses, I utilized original transcriptions as tools to better understand how each vocalist manipulated musical elements including melodic and rhythmic phrasing, articulation, and kinetic pitch. The work of transcribing was a process of discovery, in terms of both the elements that could be effectively notated, and the elements that could not. Transcription is inherently a process of approximation, wherein the transcriber must make significant decisions to estimate values of pitch and duration. As I made these determinations, my greatest challenges involved notating swung rhythms and kinetic pitches. In each piece, the vocalist(s) employed the common jazz technique of swinging the rhythm, singing the melodies in line with the syncopated rhythmic groove of the accompaniment. I decided to notate each pitch duration as if the vocalist were singing it “straight,” thus maintaining the clear rhythmic notation, with a description of the swung rhythmic groove. The notation of kinetic pitches also presented a unique challenge, as jazz contains many microtonal techniques of bending and sliding pitch, and utilizing pitches that are between the intervals of Western equal temperament scales. I describe kinetic pitch in greater detail in chapter 3, with an original microtonal transcription of Billie Holiday’s 1959 performance of “Strange Fruit.” This was the most difficult and time-consuming transcription

within the project because it required a meticulous examination of pitch movement. Although other performances contain instances of kinetic pitch and microtonality, I did not utilize the same process of analyzing microtonal discrepancies of pitch for the other original transcriptions. Billie Holiday's use of kinetic pitch was an integral aspect of my analysis, whereas the pitches were comparatively more stable in the musical examples of Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and Carmen McRae. I decided that the in-depth analysis of kinetic pitch in these instances was outside the scope of my analysis; however, the work of notating kinetic pitch slides and microtonal nuances could be a valuable system to implement in jazz vocal pedagogy and to explore in further scholarly research. Much of my original microtonal transcription process was informed by scholars Hao Huang and Rachel Huang, who also advocate for further exploration of this topic in "She Sang as She Spoke: Billie Holiday and Aspects of Speech Intonation and Diction."

Peter Winkler's insightful article, "Writing Ghost Notes: The Poetics and Politics of Transcription" also largely influenced my thought process surrounding the simultaneous possibilities and limitations of transcription. Throughout my analyses, I first utilized transcription as a tool to improve my understanding of the musical elements including pitch and rhythmic content. The act of slowing down each recording, listening to it extensively and carefully, notating the pitches, and revising what I had written, enabled me to achieve a far greater level of comprehension and accuracy compared to my initial listening experiences. Transcribing was a deep learning experience during which I made surprisingly extensive discoveries about the music that were barely perceptible to me before. Peter Winkler outlines the following reasons to transcribe music: to show what is "really there," to support arguments about

the historical and social significance of the music, to establish the legitimacy of the music, to reproduce the music in live performance, and to appropriate the music as currency for academic exchange. Throughout my process of transcription, I consistently reflected on my reasoning behind my act of transcribing the recordings. For the purpose of my analysis, I mostly focused on showing what is “really there,” supporting my arguments about the historical and social significance of the music, and establishing the legitimacy of the music- to the extent that I use transcription to help demonstrate the contributions of female jazz vocalists to the art of improvisation. Although the act of creating original transcriptions has improved my understanding of jazz vocal improvisation techniques and thus, revealed new possibilities for my own singing, I did not use transcription to reproduce the music in live performance. Lastly, I am not reaping an economic reward from this project, nor am I eligible for any sort of promotion or tenure, unless my board has a great surprise for me. Despite this fact, I have considered how my original transcriptions are effectively appropriating certain recordings for the purpose of academic exchange, which I do not consider inherently bad. In regards to the limitations of notational practices, Winkler claims, “This modest function of notation- as a kind of index or blueprint- cannot be faulted. But it must be remembered that a transcription is a blueprint drawn *after* the building *is* built. And one must resist the temptation of mistaking the blueprint for the building” (Winkler 1997: 193). Throughout my analyses, I use transcription to serve as a blueprint for the music, with the repeated acknowledgment that it is not a substitute for the music itself, nor is it a complete or perfect depiction of the musical elements in their entirety.

Lastly, I learned through my process of transcription that many elements cannot be written using traditional Western music systems of notation, and these elements may never

become translatable through the medium of transcription. Although many of my arguments are supported by discrete musical examples within my original transcriptions or descriptive analysis of musical elements including timbre and articulation, certain elements of the music can only be fully understood and appreciated through the act of listening. It is for this reason that I include a discography in the appendix of the project, which renders my original transcriptions useful and counteracts the potentially harmful effects of considering a transcription as the ultimate representation of musical content. The following passage by Peter Winkler particularly resonated with me in this regard, as he describes the traces of Aretha Franklin's singing that cannot be captured in notation:

I must remember that in separating out these discrete 'dimensions' or 'aspects' of Aretha's singing- pitch, rhythm, dynamics, timbre, text-setting- I am being highly influenced by the notational system. These distinctions have little to do with the actual act of performance, or with how I experience her voice. It would be ludicrous to imagine her first deciding what notes to sing, then where to place them rhythmically, then what dynamics to apply. As she sings, I hear, not an assemblage of discrete ingredients, but a single entity, the result of a unified impulse. When I listen to her singing, I can feel that impulse, but it is not anything I can describe with any precision. On paper I have no way of representing that impulse; the best I can do is to hope that it might somehow be inferred through the traces it leaves in the various dimensions my notational system is able to represent (Winkler 1997: 192).

When I listen to Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Carmen McRae, and many other vocalists, I experience a "unified impulse" within the music that seems to defy transcription or description. This element is a thread that runs through each of my analyses, in the spaces between technical descriptions and notes in the score. I believe that it is important to honor this intangible space, for it represents the ineffable qualities of music and is present between both musical phrasing and discursive language alike.

Featured Vocalists

I chose to analyze the performances of Fitzgerald, Holiday, Vaughan, and McRae because they exemplify many of the jazz vocal aesthetics and techniques that contribute to the art of improvisation as I reconsider it. The indisputable influence and popularity of Fitzgerald, Holiday, and Vaughan have historically positioned them as the trinity representing jazz vocal aesthetics of the twentieth century. Despite their collective, widespread recognition, Sarah Vaughan has been underrepresented in scholarly literature, which is an issue I explore further in chapter 4. I have also included Carmen McRae in the fourth chapter on lyric improvisation because of her substantial contributions to this technique. Another lesser-known vocalist who I strongly considered adding to this project was Betty Carter, whose important contributions to the art of jazz improvisation are worthy of recognition. Due to limitations regarding the scope of my project, I decided that Carter's contributions were not as closely related to the improvisational techniques that I seek to highlight in my analyses. Carter's musical style pioneered inventive bebop scatting, opening up new possibilities deriving from instrumental imitation. Carter frequently utilizes her voice like a horn, prioritizing rhythmic phrasing over lyrical content. I am interested in reframing conceptions of improvisation by highlighting vocal techniques that are overlooked within a pervading criteria of instrumental techniques. For these reasons and the length of the senior project, I have decided to focus primarily on the vocal techniques of melodic quotation, kinetic pitch, and lyric improvisation as opposed to the instrumental techniques embodied by Betty Carter.

Reinscribing Traditions of Improvisation

In the following chapters, I will explore the contributions of Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Carmen McRae to the art of jazz improvisation. I argue that these vocalists employed particular techniques that extended traditional improvisational practices in ways that are frequently unrecognized in discourses regarding improvisation. In order to reinscribe the significant contributions of female vocalists, I advocate for a reconsideration of the term “improvisation,” which has historically described instrumental techniques. Scholar George Lewis explores the ways in which language communicates an underlying politics of inclusion and exclusion. He states:

Coded qualifiers to the word “music” -such as “experimental,” “new,” “art,” “concert,” “serious,” “avant-garde,” and “contemporary” -are used in these texts to delineate a racialized location of this tradition within the space of whiteness; either erasure or (brief) inclusion of Afrological music can then be framed as responsible chronicling and “objective” taxonomy (Lewis 1996: 102).

Lewis describes the delineation of a racialized location of the tradition of improvisation in Eurological discourses. This delineation leads to exclusion on the basis of coded language that scholars, critics, and musicians maintain under the guise of objectivity. Similarly, the term “improvisation” itself has been coded to predominantly describe instrumental techniques, covertly communicating an exclusion or undermining of vocal techniques. I argue that this conception of “improvisation” and the language surrounding it have perpetuated a gendered location of the tradition of improvisation, associating this practice with male instrumentalists. By equating vocal improvisation to scat-singing alone, the language surrounding vocal improvisation drastically limits the ability to recognize, discuss, and historicize the significant contributions of female vocalists.

In my analyses, I focus on vocal improvisation techniques that fall outside of the blanket understanding of scat-singing as a means of improvisation. Scat-singing has been effectively used as a tool by female vocalists to extend traditions of improvisation; furthermore, I do not seek to in any way minimize the impact of scat-singing as an improvisational technique. Three out of the four singers I have chosen to write about (Fitzgerald, Vaughan, and McRae) developed and utilized extremely effective individualized scatting techniques to enhance their vocal improvisations. In this project, I have chosen to focus on other components of their improvisational styles in order to combat the conceptualization of scatting as the sole means of vocal improvisation. This conception is dangerous because it praises vocal techniques that create instrumentally imitative effects and reinforces the blinders that exclude many vocal techniques from recognition under the realm of improvisation. The creative choices that vocalists integrate in live performances are thus minimized in comparison to the creative choices of instrumentalists, which are consistently rendered “improvisatory” due to associations embedded within the language.

In the following chapters, I explore improvisational techniques including melodic quotation, kinetic pitch and rhythmic phrasing, and lyric improvisation. In chapter 2, I examine Ella Fitzgerald’s creation of melodic collages, which exemplify the usage of quotation as an improvisational technique. I explore the ways in which Fitzgerald interweaves pre-existing musical material in original and innovative ways, to form masterful improvisational collages. In chapter 3, I focus on Billie Holiday’s use of speech-singing and kinetic pitch as methods of reclaiming poetic power on the bandstand. Holiday’s manipulation of pitch and rhythmic phrasing enables her to extend blues legacies through improvisation. Lastly, in chapter 4, I turn

to the art of lyric improvisation, as used by Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae. I describe the potential reasoning behind the underrepresentation of these two vocalists and the art of lyric improvisation at large. This chapter also delves into the dangers of canon formation, which creates a framework that becomes the basis for both inclusion and exclusion. In each chapter, I explore different forms of female vocal improvisation while discussing themes of subversion and the intersections of race and gender in dominant jazz discourses. I highlight ways in which Fitzgerald, Holiday, Vaughan, and McRae subvert preconceived notions hinging on the superiority of male instrumental improvisation. In these moments, I try to avoid definitive claims to each vocalist's intentions or autonomy, but instead seek to open the lens for viewing these improvisational techniques from a new perspective.

One may argue that these techniques of improvisation include the manipulation of pre-existing musical material, and therefore do not exemplify the original nature of improvisation. To this point, I would ask: what musical material is not pre-existing in some sense? The conceptualization of improvisation as primarily instrumental inherently hinges on musical language including chord progressions, harmonic structures, and musical forms. Improvisation that intentionally departs from traditional structural elements, such as "free jazz," also follows stylistic patterns which fall within specific genre markers or aesthetics. I argue that all improvisation is contingent on some internalization of musical material that is then manipulated in live performance. Jazz music is a dialogic practice, in which musical memory permeates lineages of musicians who utilize imitation and quotation as guides to develop their own individual style. So long as the conception of improvisation is contingent upon instrumental techniques, jazz vocalists are only improvisers by virtue of their scatting. This prevents vocalists

from being adequately recognized for their contributions to the art of improvisation and mutes their voices within the jazz dialogue. In this project, “Taking Jazz Singers Seriously: Gender, Race, and Vocal Improvisation,” I examine the ways in which female jazz vocalists approach improvisation outside of scat-singing in order to expand upon and innovate the art of jazz improvisation.

Ella Fitzgerald's Art of Collage

Ella Fitzgerald established a groundbreaking model for singers, combining technical virtuosity with aural ideals of beauty. Fitzgerald transcended the boundaries of innovation within the genre markers and musical structures of historically contingent jazz and popular music traditions. Throughout her body of work, she bridged the gaps between different cultural vocalities and genre markers of jazz and popular music. Deemed “The First Lady of Song,” Fitzgerald pioneered female vocal improvisation as the first known female singer to improvise over an entire jazz form. Ella Fitzgerald innovated the art of jazz improvisation through her original and virtuosic interweaving of different textures, which culminated in rich, sonic collages. In this chapter I will begin by grounding my analysis of Fitzgerald’s contributions in the dialogic traditions of jazz music, which include a rich historical practice of quotation, signifying, and expansion of pre-existing musical material. Next, I will compare Ella Fitzgerald’s scat rendition of “Flying Home” with Illinois Jacquet’s preceding tenor saxophone solo to illustrate the ways in which Fitzgerald utilizes instrumental imitation as a tactic for threading together musical textures. Then I will analyze Fitzgerald’s 1960 Berlin performance in which she interweaves 18 melodic quotations within a seven-minute-long scat rendition of “How High the Moon,” combining textural elements to create a complex collage. Lastly, I will delve into potential interpretations of Fitzgerald’s signifying, and the resounding impact of her musical collages.

Before I continue my analysis of Fitzgerald's intertextual collages, I will clarify my use of the term "texture." My utilization of this term is distinct from the conventional Western art music definition, which typically refers to the interplay between different voices within a musical work. There are four common "textures" according to this definition: monophony, polyphony, homophony, and heterophony. Therefore, the term "texture" describes the quantity of voices (monophonic and polyphonic) and the degree of similarity or dissimilarity between their interactions (homophonic and heterophonic). Conventional music discourses frequently use this term in tandem with "timbre," which refers to the tonal quality or "tone color" of an instrument. In the traditional usage of these terms, the combination of certain timbres contributes to the sound quality of different musical textures. However, for the purposes of my analysis, I intend to adapt the term "texture" to describe contrasting musical elements. As opposed to describing the interaction among different voices in a work, I use the term "texture" to describe elements of Fitzgerald's vocality, putting vocal timbre on par with other elements of her musical style. With this repurposed definition of "texture," I intend to expand upon the ways in which timbre is colloquially described (i.e. gravelly, smooth, rough, flat, feathery) and articulate an apt metaphor for Fitzgerald's conglomeration of musical elements. The other registers of texture that I will be addressing are melody, rhythm, intonation, timbre, articulation, dynamic phrasing, and text. By analyzing the different aural elements as textures that Fitzgerald pieces together in collage, we can acknowledge the integrity of each component and the dynamism that arises from their juxtapositions.

Dialogic Traditions in Jazz

The technique of quotation that Fitzgerald employs in her collages is part of a long history of quotation and signifying in jazz music. Moreover, jazz music is deeply rooted in traditions of collective memory and creativity from which individuality and improvisation can grow. In “Remembering in Jazz: Collective Memory and Collective Improvisation,” author Daniel Oakland describes the pedagogical paradigm in jazz by stating, “The knowledge passed on from the elder to the younger jazz musician is deeply rooted in the collective memory of the jazz community. By collective memory I mean the total sum of the subjective memories possessed by individuals sharing a common musical heritage” (Oakland 1998: 12). All jazz musicians are linked by this “common musical heritage,” which relies on a dialogue between past and present musicians communicated through quotation and signifying. Author Krin Gabbard describes the transcendent possibilities of quotation, claiming, “The art of quotation provides the jazz artist with modes of expression that are otherwise blocked by forces based in race, class, and popular taste” (Gabbard 1991: 93). The act of quoting, therefore, becomes a bridge between collective memory and an individual jazz musician’s identity, embedding the artist in the history of jazz. Fitzgerald’s original and virtuosic use of quotations extends this conversational practice to new extremes.

Fitzgerald’s masterful use of melodic quotation enhances her compositions, allowing her to utilize quotation as an improvisational tool. In his review of Lionel Hampton’s improvisations during the Swing Era, author Gunther Schuller describes melodic quotations as distractions to the musical argument. He states, “The liability of these tactics, however, on a serious level is that

they inevitably interrupt the musical argument, rather than extend or develop it” (Schuller 1989: 397). Although Fitzgerald certainly utilized musical quotations for extramusical purposes including entertainment and attraction to younger audiences, her musical quotations also enhanced the musical argument through contrasting textures. Each musical quotation introduced a particular textural element such a melody, rhythm, timbre, or text, which she threaded into the rest of the composition in an original and innovative manner. In her exploration of gendered discourses in Western art music, musicologist Susan McClary raises the following questions about semiotic codes and tonality: “What are the assumptions that fuel these mechanisms so often called by the neutral name of ‘tension and release’ (or by Schoenberg’s explicitly sexualized ‘attraction and repulsion’)? Whose models of subjectivity are they, given that they are not universal? To what ends are they employed in compositions?” (McClary 1991: 13). In the spirit of these questions, we might consider how contrasting textural elements may function as pairs in the “tension and release” dichotomy, and thus, progress the musical argument. And further, we might explore how these models of subjectivity apply to jazz improvisation. I propose that Fitzgerald uses quotation as an improvisational device to thread various musical textures together. Her inventive collages renegotiate the boundaries between subjective ideas of identity, originality, and musical argument, elevating the art of jazz improvisation.

Originality and Imitation in “Flying Home”

Ella Fitzgerald’s 1964 recording of “Flying Home” exemplifies her utilization of instrumental imitation as a mode of interweaving different musical textures. She blurs the boundaries between imitation and originality throughout the composition by incorporating her

own variations into her imitation of Illinois Jacquet's tenor saxophone solo from 1942. In "Scat Singing: A Timbral and Phonemic Analysis," scholar William Bauer describes the significance of Fitzgerald's imitative scat singing as follows:

The vocables used by such notable exponents of scat as Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan often mimic the tonguing, phrasing, and articulation of instrumentalists. Furthermore, by dissociating the vocal line from verbal meaning, scat singers venture into the realm of so-called "absolute" music where musical sounds are apparently free of the extra-musical associations that words create, a realm typically identified with instrumental music. Jazz singers who explore this realm do so by adopting the role of the horn player in the ensemble (Bauer 2015: 303).

Through instrumental imitation, Fitzgerald is able to thread together different textures of saxophone playing including melodic and rhythmic phrasing, articulation, dynamics, and timbre, while incorporating other intertextual quotations and original variations.

I have created a transcription comparing Fitzgerald and Jacquet's versions of "Flying Home" in order to examine the melodic and rhythmic components of each solo. In order to efficiently compare pitch values, I have transposed Fitzgerald's solo from the key of G major to Jacquet's key of A-flat major. While I use the original transcription to compare melodic and rhythmic elements, my transcription does not sufficiently demonstrate the syllabic structure or timbral qualities of each solo. Even with pitch and rhythmic values, the act of transcription is imperfect, particularly in articulating the feel of swung rhythms and sliding pitches that do not adhere to note values within major and minor scales. In my process of transcribing both solos, I attempted to document which notatable pitches were sounded and the notatable time at which I heard them. Therefore, my original transcription is an estimation of the similarity and dissimilarity between the melodic and rhythmic components of each solo. I use transcription as a

mechanism for illustrating the imitation and variation that Fitzgerald employs in her performance.

Using Jacquet's 1942 rendition as a foundation, Fitzgerald directly imitates the melodic and rhythmic elements of several phrases. She accurately imitates the pitches and rhythms that Jacquet originally played at corresponding points within the form. This occurs at the head of the solo and several succeeding phrases such as the bobbing triplet phrase in measures 10-13, and the repetitive, percussive quarter notes in measures 34-37.

The image displays two musical score excerpts side-by-side. The left excerpt, labeled '(mm.10-13)', shows a comparison between Jacquet's original (top staff) and Fitzgerald's rendition (bottom staff). Both parts feature a triplet of eighth notes. Fitzgerald's version includes a grace note (a small 'v' mark) before the first note of the triplet in each measure. The right excerpt, labeled '(mm.34-37)', shows Jacquet's original (top staff) and Fitzgerald's rendition (bottom staff). Both parts feature a sequence of quarter notes. Fitzgerald's version includes a grace note before the first note of the sequence in each measure.

Ex. 1-2: In the first example (mm.10-13), Fitzgerald imitates the melody and rhythm of Jacquet's solo, using the same triplet feel. The only notable difference is that she slightly slides up to the F at the beginning of each phrase, marked in the score by a grace note. In the second example, Fitzgerald directly imitates the repeating quarter note A-flat.

Fitzgerald frequently incorporates slight variations from Jacquet's melodic material, often replacing particular notes or rhythms. These slight variations serve to embellish the phrases or emphasize different pitches dynamically. Overall, Fitzgerald's interpretation of the song includes more eighth-note movement, chromaticism, and a wider range of pitches including ninths and thirteenths. Each variation helps establish Fitzgerald's individualized interpretation of the song,

as she merges bebop idioms with her imitation of Jacquet.



(mm. 21-23)

Ex.3: Fitzgerald slightly varies the rhythm of the first half of this phrase, then leaves out the final two pitches.

Fitzgerald seamlessly interweaves her own variations, as she imitates Jacquet during corresponding points in the form. For example, Fitzgerald adheres to the original melodic and rhythmic material (mm.10-13), then she departs from the original melody and rhythm to incorporate a sequence of moving eighth-notes (mm.14-17). After this brief sequence, she rejoins her imitation of Jacquet at the corresponding point in the solo (mm.18-20). This act of adding small sequences within the form illustrates her musical dexterity and ability to contribute original elements to her imitation. Melodic and rhythmic phrasing is perhaps the most common and clearly defined texture that Fitzgerald is able to manipulate in order to construct her compositions. In this way, Fitzgerald utilizes melodic and rhythmic variation as a vocal improvisation technique to enhance the composition.

The image displays three staves of musical notation, each representing a different section of a performance. The first staff, labeled '10', shows Jacquet (Jacq.) and Fitzgerald (Fitz.) with triplets. The second staff, labeled '14', shows Jacquet with eighth notes and Fitzgerald with eighth notes. The third staff, labeled '18', shows Jacquet with a long note and Fitzgerald with eighth notes.

Ex. 4: In the first line, Fitzgerald directly imitates the original melodic and rhythmic material (mm.10-13).

In the second line, she incorporates a sequence of moving eight-notes (mm.14-17). In the third line (mm.18-20), she continues directly imitating Jacquet at the corresponding point in the solo.

In addition to melodic and rhythmic variation, Fitzgerald utilizes specific scatting syllables to replicate important elements of Jacquet's saxophone playing such as articulation and attack. She incorporates slides between certain pitches (marked in the transcribed score as grace notes) as Jacquet does at the introduction of his solo and throughout several passages (mm.17-18). She uses syllabic articulations of diphthongs and triphthongs in her vocable structures to effectively imitate the attack and rhythmic structure of Jacquet's articulations. Fitzgerald's effective use of combined vowel sounds is exemplified by a droning repetition of a quarter note (m.34-38), for which she utilizes the triphthong vocable, "buoy," (which is

phonetically spelled boo-ah-ee), in order to create emphasis and replicate the swelling sound of the saxophone. The syllabic patterns contribute to the clear articulation of pitches and imitative aural quality, while also allowing Fitzgerald to contribute her own individualized interpretation to each phrase.

Sliding pitches marked by grace notes

The image contains two musical staves. The left staff is labeled 'Jacquet' and 'Fitzgerald' and is marked '(mm. 1-4)'. It shows a melody for Jacquet with grace notes and a corresponding accompaniment for Fitzgerald. The right staff is labeled 'Jacq.' and 'Fitz.' and is marked '(mm. 17-18)'. It shows a continuation of the melody for Jacquet with a grace note and a corresponding accompaniment for Fitzgerald.

Ex. 5-6: Although pitch slides are not sufficiently demonstrated in my transcription, I indicate where they occur. Jacquet quickly slides up to a C at the beginning of each phrase in mm. 1-4, and Fitzgerald slides up to the held B-flat in m. 18.

Fitzgerald also manipulates the timbral texture in order to imitate the sound of the tenor saxophone and add variety to different phrases. The timbre of the human voice is inherently distinct from the timbre of the tenor saxophone; however, Fitzgerald manipulates her tone of voice in such a way that both imitates and adds variation to the original timbral qualities. In his version of “Flying Home,” Jacquet uses a sweet and slightly raspy tone to slide between pitches, sometimes emitting a brassy aural quality to clearly attack the higher pitches. In her interpretation of the piece, Fitzgerald imitates the various timbral textures that Jacquet uses, interweaving them with her own distinct vocal tone. She begins the solo with a light and brief introduction, then maintains a characteristically sweet and consistent tone throughout the performance. Her voice takes on a sharper, more piercing tone as she reaches higher pitches in melodic sequences, which imitates Jacquet’s brassy inflections. In contrast, her vowel shaping of lower pitches allows her to achieve a deeper and darker sound. Lastly, she sometimes includes a subtle rasp at the conclusion of her phrases, perhaps imitating the raspiness within Jacquet’s

performance. She utilizes the act of instrumental imitation to explore various timbral qualities, which she interweaves with her natural tonal characteristics. This is yet another musical texture that Fitzgerald integrates into her process of imitating and altering the composition.

Intertextuality in “How High the Moon”

Fitzgerald’s 1960 Berlin performance of “How High the Moon” epitomizes her original and virtuosic interweaving of intertextual quotations. In the documentary *Ella Fitzgerald: Just One of Those Things*, jazz writer Will Friedwal lists the following 19 songs that are quoted in the five-minute-long scat rendition: “Poinciana,” “Deep Purple,” “Love in Bloom,” “Ornithology,” “I Cover the Waterfront,” “The Irish Washerwoman,” “Hawaiian War Chant,” “The Peanut Vendor,” “Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater,” “Stormy Weather,” “Yes We Have No Bananas” (in a minor key), “Flight of the Bumblebee,” “Did You Ever See A Dream Walking,” “Gotta Be This Or That,” “Rhapsody in Blue,” “Idaho,” “A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” “Heat Wave,” and lastly, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.”¹ This conglomeration of melodies consists primarily of contemporary popular songs that have become jazz standards. These standards include different styles of jazz including the Cuban standards “Poinciana” and “The Peanut Vendor,” torch songs such as “Stormy Weather” and “I Cover the Waterfront,” and the Charlie Parker bebop standard “Ornithology.” In addition to a variety of standards, Fitzgerald includes quotations from a traditional Irish jig, “The Irish Washerwoman,” the popular jingle “Yes We Have No Bananas,” Rimsky-Korsakov’s orchestral interlude, “Flight of the Bumblebee,” and the nursery rhymes “Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater” and “A-Tisket, A-Tasket.” Seven of these melodic quotations are

¹ *Ella Fitzgerald: Just One of Those Things* (2019). Directed by Leslie Woodhead.

from songs that Fitzgerald had previously performed and recorded including “Poinciana,” “Deep Purple,” “Hawaiian War Chant,” “Stormy Weather,” “Gotta Be This Or That,” “A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” and “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.” Each of these melodic quotations functions as an important part of this intertextual composition, which juxtaposes popular melodies from differing origins to reveal a cohesive musical collage.

Fitzgerald distinctly manipulates the textural elements of pitch, rhythm, and text to thread each element together seamlessly in her fast-paced, virtuosic scatting. She begins the performance with a melodically and rhythmically altered rendition of “How High the Moon,” complete with two A sections and an up-tempo B section. From this point, the fast tempo continues throughout the remainder of the performance and Fitzgerald transitions to dexterous scatting. In order to remain within the form, she transposes each melodic quotation to fit within the tonal center of A-flat. Her ability to flawlessly interweave melodies illustrates her profound internalization of musical structure, excellent relative pitch, and sharp musical memory. She rhythmically manipulates quotations of ballads by increasing the tempo, making them only perceptible to careful listeners. Fitzgerald also utilizes lyrics within her scatting as signposts for quotations including, “Ever seen a dream walking well I did” (Ever Seen a Dream Walking), “Tisket, a-tasket, I lost my yellow basket” (A-Tisket, A-Tasket), “Having a heat wave, tropical heat wave” (Heat Wave), and “Away, away back home in Idaho” (Idaho). The final quotation is from “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes, which she changes as follows: “They ask me how I knew, my true love was true/ I of course replied, something here inside/ Sweat gets in my eyes” to humorously describe her perspiration at the end of such a strenuous performance. Throughout the entire piece, she intersperses lyrics from “How High the Moon” to maintain a sense of continuity

and remind listeners of the original song. She also playfully sings “I guess these people wonder what I’m singing” and “I guess I better quit while I’m ahead,” adding more of her own unique flair to the performance. The act of integrating lyrics amplifies the effects of quotation, making each melody more recognizable. Because of Fitzgerald’s inventive manipulation of textures, each melodic quotation in the composition is strung together without pause or modulation, culminating in a technically virtuosic and elaborately intertextual collage.

Significance of Signifying

Ella Fitzgerald may have used signifying to demonstrate respect for, parody, and/or challenge the sources of her quoted material. According to the music historian Samuel Floyd, “Signifying is a process, practiced through ‘the transformation of pre-existing musical material by trifling with it, teasing it, or censuring it ... demonstrating respect for or poking fun ... through parody, pastiche, implication, indirection, humor, tone play or word play” (Floyd 1996: 8). Fitzgerald’s improvisational collages can be seen as a pastiche of former jazz styles, which she uses as a foundation for further quotation and innovation. Like many of her contemporaries in the bebop movement, Fitzgerald blurred the boundaries between respect and irony. Moreover, the aforementioned functions of signifying are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and may coexist in complex ways. The complexity of signification here coincides with an ambivalent America that prided jazz as a national treasure while forcing Fitzgerald and other black jazz musicians to enter venues through a back door. When performing in an environment of simultaneous opportunity and devaluation, many jazz musicians used quotation as an apt tool for navigating conflicting social and cultural realities.

Fitzgerald has performed different forms of signifying throughout her performances. She quotes “Ornithology,” in her 1960 Berlin performance, likely to show respect. “Ornithology” is a contrafactual tune that Charlie Parker wrote over the form of “How High the Moon.” The quotation in Fitzgerald’s bebop-inspired scatting version most likely serves as a respectful nod to Parker’s innovative rendition over the same chord progression. Another form of signifying occurs through body language, which she commonly uses to parody the quoted material. In “Speaking With the Hands and Eyes”: Ella Fitzgerald’s Art of Signifying,” author Marco Mangani describes Fitzgerald’s use of miming in performance as a way to parody certain musical gestures performed by her colleagues such as Dizzy Gillespie². Thus, quotations can be used to demonstrate respect for other musicians through playful mimicry.

Fitzgerald may have used collage as a subversive avant-garde gesture to make social commentary and elevate her status as a black female singer; moreover, quotations and signifying may have allowed Fitzgerald to engage in politics without explicit statements that could negatively impact her career in a white-male-controlled music industry. In “The Quoter and His Culture,” scholar Krin Gabbard traces the subversive use of collage from the bebop movement to the historical avant garde, stating: “Like their predecessors in this ‘historical avant garde’, boppers used quotation to undermine distinctions between high and low art and to question the ‘aura’ that in the minds of most listeners surrounds the work of composers like Percy Grainger but not the improvisations of a black saxophone player” (Gabbard 1991: 93). By directly juxtaposing nursery rhymes to symphony melodies, Fitzgerald clearly engages in this

² In “Speaking with the Hands and Eyes: Ella Fitzgerald’s Art of Signifying,” Marco Mangani describes her 1947 performance of “How High the Moon,” where she uses mimetic gestures to playfully mock the slapping of a bass and imitate Gillespie’s unique style of trumpet playing (Mangani 2002: 198).

undermining of the boundaries between “high and low art.” As author George Lewis states, “Bebop raised the stakes in the game of cultural thrust and parry to a new level of intensity, providing models of both individual and collective creativity that were adopted and extended during later periods in improvised music” (Lewis 1996: 95). In her collages, Fitzgerald both adopts and extends the individualized and collective forms of creativity by interweaving musical material in an original and virtuosic way. She expands on the avant-garde gesture of collage, participating in the dialogic traditions of jazz in an innovative and potentially subversive way.

At the risk of imposing my own perspective, I believe that there is evidence to support that Fitzgerald used her collages to challenge the supposed male superiority in jazz, and the cultural exploitation of black music in a racist society. Her virtuosic interweaving of musical texture, fast-paced tempi, and instrumental imitation challenged the perceived superiority of male instrumentalists. Contemporary discourses praising Fitzgerald as the only advanced female singer perpetuate this unequal glorification of male instrumentalists and instrumentally imitative techniques. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald’s precise quotations of contemporary male musicians directly challenged the debasement of female singers in popular discourses.

Fitzgerald also elevated black music within her collages by referencing spirituals and signifying on soul music. Music historian Judith Tick claims:

She was exposing the gulf between two kinds of vocality: the vernacular versus the cultivated voice, a dialectic running through American music history overall. As has often been (over)stated, rock and soul disdained conventional ‘prettiness,’ proclaiming authenticity through vernacular ties. In contrast, mid-century popular music, honed on theater songs from Broadway musicals and standards from Tin Pan Alley, embraced sonic ideals of beauty and tone (Tick 2019: 84).

In her dynamic collages, Fitzgerald threads together different musical textures including timbre, exposing the contrasts between different vocalities including bel canto and soul, vernacular and

“standard” English, and Eurological and Afrological aesthetics. Tick describes soul music as “Understood as both racialized vocality and a code word for a new movement within black culture with political implications... Soul is typically defined as a fusion of rhythm and blues with gospel idioms as well as a state of political and social consciousness drawing its strength from civil rights activism of the era” (Tick 2019: 86). By signifying on soul music, I believe Fitzgerald’s compositions take on a subversive political meaning, as she skillfully weaves the threads of political and social consciousness through her collages.

Storytelling on the Bandstand: Billie Holiday and Blues Legacies

Billie Holiday developed a distinctly original singing style centered on intense lyrical delivery and subverted instrumental phrasing techniques. Holiday's style and repertoire are firmly rooted in blues traditions, which she melded with contemporary jazz styles in innovative ways. Unlike many of her contemporaries including Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan, Holiday resisted the currents of bebop and free jazz and maintained her original singing style throughout her career. Many biographical accounts of Holiday blur the lines between her personality and persona, influencing audience perceptions of her as a tragic figure. Her image is cloaked in anecdotes surrounding prostitution, drug addiction, abuse, and racism, deeply influencing audience perceptions of her lyrical delivery and repertoire. Scholars have also debated the extent of Holiday's agency within her own career, emphasizing the roles of her male partners and her fraught relationship with record labels. Representations of Holiday, though interesting and related to the reception of her performances, are not the topic of this paper; however, I will explore the ways in which she subverts both the "songbird" and "torch singer" images of female vocalists. I argue that through her unique singing style, Billie Holiday positions herself as a storyteller on the bandstand, extending blues legacies and enhancing the dramatic possibilities for improvisation. In this chapter, I will begin by exploring the poetry of the blues as a site for community ritual and expression. I will then analyze the spoken-word effects in Holiday's singing style including kinetic pitch and intonation using an original transcription of "Strange Fruit." Next, I will explore her subversive rhythmic phrasing, which allows Holiday to claim a

central storytelling position on the bandstand. I will then delve into Holiday's political and musical voice which established a powerful tradition of protest music, extending threads of social consciousness from the blues and perpetuating the musical voice of justice.

The Poetry of the Blues

Scholars have designated the blues as a domain of emancipation and expression, describing blues performances as community rituals which rely on the synthesis of music and poetry. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, scholar Angela Davis tracks the development of the blues, beginning with its roots in the collective music of enslaved people. Davis then explores the transformation of the blues from individualized expressions of needs and desires to communal dialogues. She recounts the power of collective creativity and consciousness in blues performance. Davis critiques the discursive insistence on the "universality" of art, which she argues prohibits a relationship between art and collective racialized and gendered struggles. She orients blues performance as a bridge between individual and collective struggles, grounded in the historical feminist consciousness of working-class black communities. Author Charles Kiel expands on this theme of shared struggle, describing the blues as a site for "dialectical catharsis" for the black community. Kiel argues that themes of collective struggle in blues performance may be recognized and understood (perhaps subconsciously) within marginalized communities, while white audience members may perceive these features as pure entertainment. This relationship aligns with a phenomenon articulated by anthropologist James Scott, where marginalized groups utilize methods of resistance that are unrecognized by privileged groups. Scott describes a simultaneous performance of a "public transcript," which conforms with

dominant hegemonic desires, and a “hidden transcript,” which critiques systems of oppression. He describes the subversive elements of the hidden transcript, claiming, “It consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (Scott 2008: 4). Holiday performed the song “Strange Fruit” to lay bare the horrific violence of white supremacy in the public sphere, despite government warnings and targeted drug arrests. The inflections in her intonation and expressive potency of her performance became a “hidden transcript,” not because of her political secrecy, but as a result of many attempts to silence her voice. Throughout her career, Holiday negotiated between public and hidden transcripts by sneaking “Strange Fruit” into her performances and transforming popular jazz standards with subversive phrasing. The “hidden transcript” of “Strange Fruit” is a synthesis of music and poetry, extending blues expressions of collective racial struggle and catharsis.

Although the blues has been deemed “the devil’s music,” it shares the same musical roots and properties as spirituals. Angela Davis describes a key reason for the blues being condemned as devil’s music, stating, “ It was because [the blues] drew upon and incorporated sacred consciousness and thereby posed a serious threat to religious attitudes” (Davis 2011: 8). In his discussion of blues ritual elements, Keil positions the role of the blues performer parallel to that of a preacher. He states, “Bluesmen and preachers both provide models and orientations; both give expression to deeply felt private emotions; both promote catharsis- the bluesman through dance, the preacher through trance” (Keil 1966:164). Author Jacques Lacava extends this comparison by claiming, “The blues performer relies on three principal modes of expression- poetry, drama, and music- to convey a message not only through words and music, but also

through the ‘here and now’ on stage” (Lacava 1992: 127). Lacava argues that like a preacher, blues performers synthesize different elements of poetry, drama, and music, to create a mystical rapport with the audience and assume a priestly role. Through Billie Holiday’s unique singing style, she shapes various musical elements to evoke this synthesis and engage her audiences.

Although jazz music is structurally and sonically rooted in blues music, tensions formed between blues and jazz during the coinciding Harlem Renaissance and Classic Blues eras. Davis explains that many Harlem Renaissance strategists saw the blues music of Bessie Smith and Ida Cox as antithetical to their aims because it was associated with “low” culture and sexualities of working-class black life (Davis 2011: xiii). This gulf separated the lyrical poetry of the blues from Harlem Renaissance categories of “high art” including European-influenced literature and classical music. Classist, racist, and sexist attitudes surrounding “making a lady out of jazz” persisted in popular discourse, and exacerbated the perceived gap between blues and jazz music.

The classist project of reframing jazz as “America’s classical music” seeks to “elevate” or “domesticate” jazz. Many proponents of the “America’s classical music” argument support coinciding aims of increasing musical literacy and respect for jazz musicians. In describing contemporary jazz figures, author William “Billy” Taylor writes, “Their music expresses- in its melodies, rhythms and harmonies- feelings and emotions which people, regardless of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, can understand and appreciate. Jazz, America’s classical music, has indeed become multi-ethnic and multi-national in usage” (Taylor 1986: 22). The notion of “America’s classical music” is also underpinned by claims to the universality of art and thus, reductive of the nuanced expressions of shared racial struggle and autonomy that Davis

discusses. At large, this project seeks to “transcend” the structures, pitch discrepancies, and stripped down accompaniment styles of the blues.

Amid projects to produce “refined” jazz music, representations of black femininity were reconstructed within the white-male dominated music industry. The objective to make black music more palatable to white audiences also hinged on making the physical appearance of black female jazz musicians closer to eurocentric standards of beauty. Alongside commercial success, women in jazz were limited in the realms of financial and professional independence. Although it is unclear the extent to which they had autonomy over their presentation, female jazz singers were commonly described as “canaries” and placed on the bandstand as accessories. Alongside the physical aspects of a “makeover,” aural standards of beauty led many jazz singers to depart from the rugged expressivity of the blues.

Angela Davis describes the model of black female independence established by early blues women by stating, “The female figures evoked in women’s blues are independent women free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed” (Davis 2011:13). Davis claims that blues women combated intersections of racism and misogyny through their music from a stance of assertiveness and defiance. She effectively argues that early blues women pioneered discourses surrounding gender equality, female sexual desire, and male violence. Davis highlights the subversive nature of women’s blues music, claiming that the lyrics and positionality of the singer challenged mainstream perceptions of femininity. She writes:

Likewise, in their music, [blues women] found ways to express themselves that were at variance with the prevailing standards of femininity. Even as they may have shed tears, they found the courage to lift their heads and fight back, asserting their right to be respected not as appendages or victims of men but as truly independent human beings

with vividly articulated sexual desires. Blues women provided emphatic examples of black female independence (Davis 1998: 20).

Billie Holiday extends the complex model of black femininity established by early blues women by expressing female sexual desire, vocalizing complex narratives around male violence, and raising social consciousness through her performances of “Strange Fruit.” Through her blues-influenced repertoire and expressive lyrical delivery, Holiday melds blues elements with jazz standards, which contributes to her label as a “torch singer.” Holiday’s singing style is subversive to the “songbird” image of women in jazz, contrasting traditional ideals of sonic beauty and instead showcasing “raw emotion.” By embodying blues vocabularies in her performances of jazz standards, Holiday exposes and exploits the conceived tensions between different musical vernacular, extending blues legacies and reclaiming her power on the bandstand.

Speech-singing

Holiday’s speech-like intonation allows her to communicate lyrics in a poetic manner, heightening the dramatic possibilities for performance. Holiday lacked professional instruction and had a relatively limited pitch range of approximately an octave and a half (Daubney 2002: 21). As opposed to dramatic intervallic leaps, she constructed drama with intonational nuances, which correspond to emotional expressivity in speech patterns. Music critic Henry Pleasants claimed, “Holiday produced one of the wonders of vocal history. She did it by moving ... along – or back and forth across – the thin, never precisely definable, line separating, or joining speech and song” (Gourse 1997: 136). In “She Sang as She Spoke: Billie Holiday and Aspects of Speech Intonation and Diction,” authors Huang and Huang attribute this speech-singing effect to

continuously sliding pitches, which they coin “kinetic pitches,” that both mirror and depend upon English-speaking tendencies. Because intonation expresses emotions and attitudes, Huang and Huang identify pitch slides as emotional intensifiers. Therefore, Holiday’s stressed syllables and the pitch contours of slides articulate varying degrees of emotional expressivity, which she manipulates to heighten the dramatic narrative of a song. Through her speech-like lyrical delivery, Holiday enhances the dramatic narrative and acquires power as a storyteller.

Kinetic Pitch in “Strange Fruit”

Holiday utilizes speech-like intonation, kinetic pitches, and blurred diction to develop the dramatic narrative of “Strange Fruit.” Throughout her 1959 live performance of “Strange Fruit” documented by Reelin’ In The Years Productions, Holiday manipulates elements of articulation and pitch to depict the violent and jarring lyrical imagery. Holiday’s ability to poetically and dramatically perform “Strange Fruit” forced audiences to reckon with the concept of lynching in relationship to their morality. By utilizing effective techniques including kinetic pitch and emphatic lyric delivery, Holiday powerfully embodies a musical voice of justice, which historically spearheaded the Civil Rights Movement.

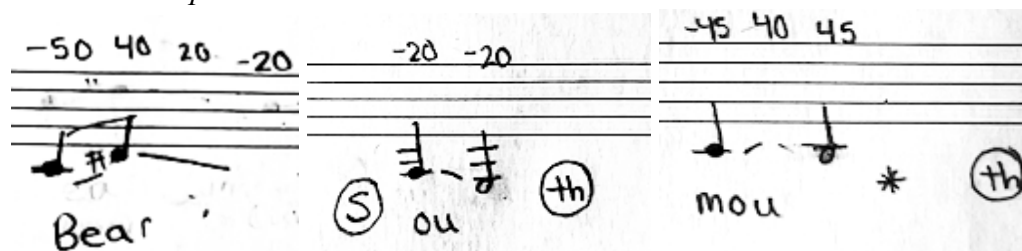
In order to analyze the vocal techniques that Holiday uses, I have created an original microtonal transcription of her 1959 performance of “Strange Fruit.” With the understanding that transcription is a process of approximation, I attempt to trace the contours of Holiday’s intonational idiosyncrasies. My transcription primarily illustrates kinetic pitch movement, voiced consonants, and dramatic timbral shifts. My process of transcription consisted of slowing the audio file without shifting the pitch, approximating the beginning and ending of each pitch value,

and utilizing a pitch tuner to evaluate each pitch to the nearest fifth cent. While creating my transcription, I immediately gained a greater understanding of Huang and Huang's term "kinetic pitches," because I quickly discovered the constancy of subtle pitch shifts that contribute to the momentum of Holiday's lyrical delivery. In their analysis of Holiday's 1941 performance of "All of Me," Huang and Huang recount her pitch slides into, out of, and in between notes, acknowledging the danger in conceptualizing her lines as discrete pitches with discrete durations. Because of the intonational nuances and kinetic pitch movement, I decided to begin my transcription process by recording the approximate pitch value of each note in cents. This system of approximation allowed me to understand Holiday's usage of microtonal movement to build drama; however, this system is imperfect because it inherently compares each pitch value to the system of equal temperament used in Western art music. Similarly, the rhythmic values in my transcription are approximations of durations that continuously flow into one another at a rubato tempo. While this transcription is useful for determining kinetic pitch movement, the rhythmic components are largely estimated due to the unique challenges of notating discrete durations for sliding pitches. Nonetheless, my original transcription offers deeper insight into the techniques that Holiday employs in her poetic and dramatic lyrical delivery. I have chosen to forgo the implementation of notation software and use a manual transcription in order to best illustrate each element within my analysis. I use this process of transcription to explore kinetic pitch movement, articulation, and technical nuances, and analyze how these features produce an expressive, dramatic narrative.

Of all the vocal techniques that Holiday employs in this performance of "Strange Fruit," I am most interested in her use of kinetic pitch. Her usage of pitch slides in conjunction with

dynamics is integral to shaping the dramatic narrative. Furthermore, her pitch slides affect every other technical element including articulation and technical nuances, which are shaped around the melodic pitch contours. In reference to pitch slides, authors Huang and Huang observe, “The performance and the transcription suggest a modified, perhaps reversed, relationship between structural and ornamental behavior. Specific rhythms and static pitches are a fragile edifice here, lightly and even ornamentally balanced atop a pitch contour which does not necessarily derive from them” (Huang & Huang 2014: 292). I observed a similar relationship in my original transcription, where most pitches were “sharp” or “flat” according to standards of Western equal temperament. None of the pitches remained static for a prolonged period of time, and every multi-syllable word contained pitch movement to some extent. I quickly encountered a challenge for notating pitch slides, articulated effectively by Huang and Huang; “A gliding tone... moves continuously (if briefly) through an unbroken range of frequencies, infinite as the number of points on a line” (Huang & Huang 2014: 292). In my attempt to trace the contours of Holiday’s pitch movement, I made an approximation of the beginning of a pitch, noting the direction of its movement. If the pitch continued in a single direction, I attempted to find the concluding pitch, and notated a slant in the score to indicate the pitch slide. If the pitch undulated in different directions, I attempted to find the beginning, peak, and concluding pitches, notated by directional slants in the score. With this process, I was able to identify the intonational contours of kinetic pitch movement in relation to the lyrical content and other technical elements.

Ex. 1: Kinetic pitch notation

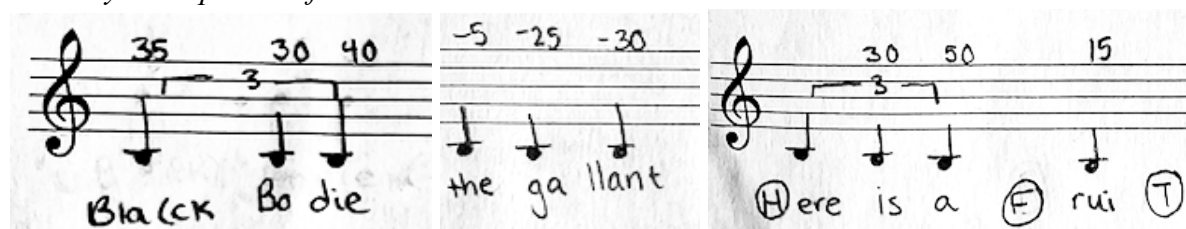


I demonstrate kinetic pitch motion by using slants to show the upward or downward movement of a pitch, notating the degree of cents above each note. In the first example (line 1), there is a downward pitch slide on the second syllable of "Bear," which slides from a D#4 +40 to a D#4 -20, pausing in the middle at D#4 +20. The second example (line 5) shows a pitch slide between two pitches, from F3 -20 to E4 -20. The last example (line 6) shows a pitch slide that rises from C4 -45 to a peak of C4 +40, then down to B3 +45. Although some of the pitch slides in the transcription are subtle, they help trace the contours of Holiday's intonational inflections.

The subtleties and nuances of kinetic pitch movement in Holiday's singing directly relate to the alteration of pitch in natural speaking patterns. Incredibly slight pitch shifts allow Holiday to achieve an expressive, speech-like delivery of lyrics. In several phrases with a repeated note, such as "Here is a fruit," she shifts the pitch slightly on each syllable, melding each word into the dynamic flow of continuously moving pitches. With the exception of the climactic final line, for every line ending in a pitch slide, there is a decrease in pitch. In spoken English, falling intonation at the conclusion of a phrase typically signals negative emotional states, clear relaying of information, or authoritative commands. Paired with the context of "Strange Fruit," Holiday's downward pitch slides likely correspond to the grim narrative. They also emanate overtones of an authoritative aura, both convincing audience members to believe the narrative about lynching and urging them to act. Wavering intonation, created by fluctuating pitch movement, is another element that Holiday consistently uses within phrases. Wavering intonation can indicate strong and specific emotions including sadness and anger. The intonational nuances of Holiday's kinetic

pitch movement enhance the dramatic dynamism and heighten the emotional undercurrents that made this performance such an effective rallying cry for the Civil Rights Movement.

Ex. 2: Syllabic pitch shifts



Holiday shifts the pitch slightly between different syllables, maintaining kinetic pitch motion throughout phrases of repeating notes. These examples each occur around the pitch B3, where the original melody contains repeating notes. In the first example (line 3), the B3 falls then rises very slightly. The second example (line 5) shows the repeated B gradually falling in pitch. The final example shows a more widely fluctuating contour, of B3+30 rising 20 cents, then falling 15 cents. The pitch movement here may be barely perceptible to many listeners, contributing to the incredibly subtle nuances that give rise to the overarching expressions of emotional undertones throughout the performance.

Holiday manipulates different elements of her articulation including blurred diction, voiced consonants, and vowel sounds to shape her lyrical delivery. I use the term “blurred diction” from Huang and Huang’s analysis to describe syllables and consonant sounds that Holiday omits or blurs. Within the performance, she omits or blurs the following concluding consonants demonstrated in parenthesis: Bea(r), Bloo(d), A(t), Bla(ck), Swingin(g), Southe(rn), and Hangin(g). These instances commonly occur in passages where Holiday creates a liaison between words, connecting the lyrical content without clear distinction between the conclusion of one word and the beginning of another. These glides between words perpetuate a sense of momentum and flow, stringing each line together poetically and adhering to the line breaks in the original poem. Each verse is separated by a brief instrumental interlude, further reinforcing the structure of poetic stanzas constructed by speech-like articulation. Holiday uses emphatic voiced consonants throughout the performance, which clarify the lyric and add percussive effects.

Notably, she concludes each line with a voiced consonant, with the exception of the final two lines which each end in dramatic, prolonged pitch slides. The use of voiced consonants here may simply coincide with the rhyme scheme and overarching structure of the poem; however, Holiday does not consistently voice these same consonant sounds in the middle of phrases. This indicates an intentional use of voiced consonants to distinguish important words and line breaks.

Holiday also manipulates her articulation of vowel sounds in conjunction with shifting pitches, in order to achieve resonant and kinetic sonic qualities. In “Songbird or Subversive? Instrumental vocalisation technique in the songs of Billie Holiday,” author Kate Daubney analyzes elements of articulation including vowel shaping, rhythmic placing, and word-painting:

The range of shaping is apparent in the first few lines: ‘trees,’ ‘bear,’ and ‘fruit’ are all enunciated clearly yet with a moulding which makes each word sound like it has more than one vowel in the middle. She extends this simple pronunciation with slight vibrato or oscillation in the next couple of lines: ‘leaves’ and ‘root.’ She handles the irony of the opening of the next verse with a combination of melodic and rhythmic adjustment: she begins with a striking ‘tuning in’ to the first syllable, sliding up to the note for ‘past-oral’ from below smearing the clarity of the word, and she rounds off the same line leaning back on the rhythm of ‘gallant south’ to weaken the heroic reference. She uses rhythm again as the song approaches its climax: the delivery of ‘magnolia’ seems almost idle as she rolls through each individual vowel sound, making the adjectival ‘sweet and fresh’ quite late, but then she alters the pace markedly and with unashamed word-painting, bringing in the ‘sudden smell’ so early that the ‘burning flesh’ is a profoundly rhyming contrast with the previous image. Word painting is employed again for the penultimate rhyme ‘drop,’ with its extension and *rubato* freedom from the beat: she lifts the note in order to emphasise its final descent, but again shapes every nuance making a single syllable into four. By contrast her final word, the rhyming ‘crop’ is simply but carefully placed. (Daubney 2002: 25).

Holiday maintains the poetic integrity of “Strange Fruit” by carefully placing the rhyming lyrics in accordance with various elements of articulation. This enables her to deliver lyrics in a cohesive and flowing manner, enhancing the dramatic effects of other technical aspects of her performance.

Holiday utilizes other technical elements to exude emotional undertones including vocal breaks, vibrato, and timbral shifts. I use the term “vocal break” to describe a sudden and short shift in vocal tone, where a pitch value is momentarily silenced or switched by means of a technical shift in vocal registers. The vocal break, also known as a “cry break,” is an element of Holiday’s style that is common throughout blues music and derives in part from the imitation of wailing guitar licks. Although she does not exclusively use vocal breaks in “Strange Fruit,” Holiday employs them here to enhance the dramatic narrative. She uses vocal breaks in the following words: “Southern,” “Twisted,” “Burning,” and “To.” In context, the words “Southern” and “To” occur as the penultimate lyrics in their respective phrases, and the vocal break adds a distinct timbral element to the conclusion of each line. The words “Twisted” and “Burning,” however, contribute to the graphic depiction of lynching, and the vocal break draws attention to these harsh adjectives. She also uses slight vibrato at the conclusion of many words, which may convey emotional undertones associated with the shaky and breathy features of crying. This use of vibrato is most dramatic in the very last word, “Crop,” where her vibrato amplifies the dramatic octave leap, which is the largest interval in the piece. The vibrato extends over an instrumental crescendo, making this moment the climax of the song. In addition to vocal breaks and vibrato, Holiday manipulates her timbre to produce a husky, growl-like quality during particular points in the song. These husky timbral shifts occur in the onset of the following lines: “Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,” “Then the sudden smell of burning flesh,” and “Here is a strange and bitter crop.” By using a distinct and guttural vocal timbre in these lines, Holiday gestures at the expressive sounds of sorrow and anger. The selective use of this timbral quality draws attention to these graphic lines and heightens the overarching dramatic effect.

Complete Transcription

"Strange Fruit" Transcription

Billie Holiday, 1959 (Reelin' in the Years Archives)

VI.

③ ou the(r)n ③ ree * ③ Bear a ③ tra (nge) ③ Frui ③

Bloo(d) on the leave ③ an(d) Bloo(d) a(i) the roo ③

H

Bla(ck) Bodie ③ wingin (g) * In the ③ ou the(r)n Bree * ③

③ tran ③ (f)ruit hang in (g) ③ From the Pop lar ③ ree ③

Pa ③ tar a l ③ ce * ne of the ga llant ③ ou ③

H

The Bu (l) ging Eye * ③ And the ③ wi * ③ ted mou * ③

③ cent of mag no l i a * ③ weet and ③ re ③

Then the ③ udd(e)n ③ me * ll Of bur * ning * fle * ③

Here is a ③ Frui ③ For the ③ row * ③ To ③ plu ③

③ For the rain ③ To ga ther * ③ For the wi nd ③ To ③ u ck

Handwritten musical notation for "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday. The notation is on three staves. The first staff has lyrics "For the Sun To rot For the Tree * To * Drop" with pitch contours above. The second staff has lyrics "Here is a (St) ran * (ge) (ch) and bitter * (C)ro * p" with pitch contours above. The third staff is empty. A key at the bottom explains symbols: /: Pitch Slide, *: Vocal break, Circled Consonant: Voiced Consonant, *: Slight Vibrato, H: Husky Timbre, Parenthesis: Unvoiced consonant.

Singing to Her Own Beat

Through rhythmic back-phrasing, Holiday sings to her own beat, which allows her to use instrumentalists as if they were a backing track and claim a central position as the storyteller. In "Strange Fruit," the piano accompaniment is sparse, following her rhythmic rubato with supportive chords and brief interludes between verses. Huang and Huang describe the mesmerizing effect of her rhythmic rubato and back-phrasing by stating, "Her timeless, floating quality comes partly from our being unsure how to identify 'the beat.' The presence of a recitation beat, different from the band's beat, creates a very special, intoxicating confusion for the listener, who must comprehend time in two simultaneous and independent tracks" (Huang & Huang 2014: 289). In "Strange Fruit," Holiday extends many phrases, creating a sense of suspension. She and the accompanist maintain a sense of rubato throughout the performance, which allows her to stretch out and quicken certain phrases, leading to more poetical emphasis in her lyrical delivery. Scholar Kate Daubney describes Holiday's reappropriation of instrumentalist

rhythmic phrasing, which enables her to subtly subvert the torch singer image constructed by the lyrical content of most of her repertoire (Daubney 2002). Daubney deduces that whether or not this subversion was conscious or intentional, Holiday's propensity to utilize elements of the dominant male instrumental discourse allowed her to develop a singing style distinct from the "songbird" characterization of female singers. In a protest song such as "Strange Fruit," these elements of subversion are multilayered.

Holiday's musical and political voice

In her 1959 performance of "Strange Fruit," Billie Holiday extends blues legacies, perpetuating the musical voice of justice. She follows in the footsteps of other preceding black female artists incorporating critical social consciousness in their work including blues women Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Holiday's unique singing style allowed for a poetic lyrical delivery of "Strange Fruit," enhancing the dramatic and powerful storytelling. Today, Holiday's recorded performances of "Strange Fruit" serve as a model for other protest music, and stand as a monument historicizing the horrific experiences of lynching. The resounding power of Billie Holiday's poetic musical style serves as a haunting reminder and call to action against racial violence in America.

Lyric Improvisations of Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae

In popular discourse, many scholars reference Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, and Sarah Vaughan as the trinity exemplifying female jazz vocal aesthetics of the twentieth century. Although Sarah Vaughan is repeatedly recognized as one of the greatest jazz singers of all time, there is a profound lack of scholarly literature pertaining to her life and career. Despite her enduring popularity and numerous accolades, Vaughan remains largely underrepresented in academic jazz discourses. Vaughan has been credited for her expansive range, timbral variety, and inventive merging of operatic, pop, and jazz sensibilities. Outside of the aforementioned trio of jazz vocalists, Carmen McRae also made significant contributions to the art of jazz improvisation with her expressive lyrical delivery and careful use of rhythmic space within ballads. Like Fitzgerald and Holiday, Vaughan and McRae developed distinct vocal styles by manipulating the same musical elements including melodic and rhythmic phrasing, timbral shifts, and articulation. Although each of these vocalists made undeniable and important contributions to jazz, potential factors such as gendered colorism may have prevented their inclusion into the mainstream jazz canon. Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae developed highly individualized styles that enhanced the art of lyric improvisation in ways that have been underrepresented in the jazz canon. In this chapter, I will discuss potential causes for the underrepresentation of Vaughan and McRae's contributions to the art of lyric improvisation including gendered colorism, the centrality of instrumental imitation, and the delegitimization of crossover artists in jazz discourses. Next, I will discuss the meaning of "lyric improvisation" and

compare this technique to vocal-instrumental approaches to singing. I will utilize an original transcription of Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McCrae performing “Body and Soul” together to analyze how musical elements are manipulated to establish the framework for lyric improvisation and create expressive lyrical delivery. Lastly, I will explore the ways in which the interaction between voices further amplifies the elements of lyric improvisation throughout the performance.

Potential Causes for Underrepresentation

Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McCrae’s contributions to the art of lyric improvisation may have been overlooked or excluded from jazz discourses due to gendered colorism, biases toward instrumental imitation, the delegitimization of crossover artists, and the intersections of these factors.

The pervading issue of gendered colorism in the music industry has both reflected and reinforced historical American social realities. Musicologist Susan McClary discusses the role of music in asserting, adopting, and contesting social realities. She writes, “It is in accordance with the terms provided by language, film, advertising, rituals or music that individuals are socialized: take on gendered identities, learn ranges of proper behaviors, structure their perceptions and even their experiences. But it is also within the arena of these discourses that alternative models of organizing the social world are submitted and negotiated. This is where the ongoing work of social formation occurs” (McClary 1991: 21). Gendered colorism in the jazz arena both reflected and informed perceptions of black womanhood, influencing the reception of female jazz vocalists along social axes of whiteness and femininity. Throughout the 1920’s, several jazz

clubs including the Cotton Club were rumored to use a “paper bag test” to choose young female performers for the chorus line, excluding any women who had skin tones darker than a brown paper bag. These politics of exclusion at the intersections of race and gender have insidiously persisted within the jazz arena, both reflecting and reinforcing gendered colorism.

Many biographical accounts of black female jazz vocalists emphasize the element of transformation, describing extreme physical makeovers and narrative arcs of “elevation” from tragic, poverty-ridden pasts to the glamor of stardom. The music industry’s aims to market black music to white audiences coincided with projects to transform images of black female jazz musicians. Although it remains unclear the extent of agency each jazz vocalist had in the process of their transformation, the music industry certainly encouraged images of black womanhood that conformed to aesthetic beauty standards contingent on Eurocentrism and whiteness. In her analysis of Betty Carter, author Tanya Niquelle Ellerbee argues that the female jazz vocal aesthetic is grounded in the beauty and appeal of physical appearance rather than the specific characteristics or quality of the voice. She writes:

Jazz vocalists have always personified their signature look and through the enhancement of their careers; we have seen them (through live videos/photographs) go from ordinaries to glamorous divas, i.e. Sarah Vaughan in her flowing evening gown and sculptured hairdos, Ella Fitzgerald in fur stoles and diamonds, Carmen McRae being a natural beauty in dapper outfits, Billie Holiday with evening gowns and moniker white gardenia in her hair, to name a few (Ellerbee 2012: 8).

Musicologist Sherrie Tucker describes the reproduction of idealized white womanhood as the key for commercial success for female jazz musicians. She states, “The bands that have been more often included in dominant jazz and swing histories are those understood as white and glamorous, aspects that jazz and swing historians tend to interpret as inherently visual and

unmusical... Despite their skills as musicians, their ability to reproduce images of idealized white womanhood... was a key element assuring their visibility in the entertainment industry and no doubt helped secure them a limited place in history as well” (Tucker 2000: 11). In a 1961 interview with *DownBeat Magazine*, Vaughan stated, “I often wished I was a medium-brown skin color...I imagined people that color were regarded more highly than I. To most persons who knew me, I thought, I was just another little black girl for whom the future was just as dark as it was for thousands of others like me” (Gardner 1961: 1). At the beginning of her career, Vaughan underwent an extreme transformation including nose-thinning plastic surgery, teeth-straightening, beauty salon appointments, and a new wardrobe at the advice of her manager and first husband George Treadwell. Author Elaine M. Hayes argues that Vaughan’s transformation functioned to create a physical appearance that American audiences would deem appropriate for her voice. This transformation also brought Vaughan closer to the physical standards that defined “idealized white womanhood” in an effort to bolster her commercial success.

Carmen McRae addresses issues of racial discrimination through her repertoire, choosing lyrics that align with personal narratives. Carmen McRae describes her personal connection to lyrical content, stating, “Every word is very important to me. Lyrics come first, then the melody. The lyric of a song I might decide to sing must have something that I can convince you with. It’s like an actress who selects a role that contains something she wants to portray” (Gourse 2001: 281). The lyrics McRae chooses to sing are intimately bound to the sense of personal narrative that characterizes Afrological traditions of improvisation. In the song “Black and Blue,” which

McRae recorded on her 1988 album *Fine and Mellow- Live at Birdland West*, she sings the following lyrics:

I'm white inside, but that don't help my case
 Cause I can't hide what is on my face
 I'm so forlorn. Life's just a thorn
 My heart is torn. Why was I born?
 What did I do to be so black and blue?

I'm hurt inside, but that don't help my case
 Cause I can't hide what is on my face
 How will it end? Ain't got a friend
 My only sin is in my skin
 What did I do to be so black and blue?

The lyrical reference to shades of color, as in “black and blue,” can be seen as a metaphor for bruising to describe the pains of racism experienced by black people. It may also allude to issues of colorism, describing the magnified discrimination that people who are further on the axis of whiteness may experience. The song, which was written by Harry Brooks, Andy Razaf, and Fats Waller, takes on a multifaceted meaning when performed by McRae, who may be responding to discrimination at the intersections of race and gender.

Many female vocalists utilized vocal-instrumental approaches to singing in order to join the dialogic conventions of jazz. Scholar Victoria Willis addresses gender anxiety surrounding female jazz musicians by stating, “Rather than allowing the naturalization of jazz as masculine to become undone, jazz scholars and critics have written women instrumentalists out of jazz, and have allowed jazz singers to speak because their voices are only half-voices” (Willis 2008: 300). Willis' assertion that women's voices are “half-voices” in jazz refers to the notion that women can only fully participate in the conversational elements of playing, signifying, and subverting through instrumental imitation. Ironically, the effective instrumental playing that female vocalists

are encouraged to emulate is perceived as a larger threat in the hands of female instrumentalists, who were consequently excluded from the jazz canon altogether. The inventive scat-singing of female vocalists like Ella Fitzgerald presented new opportunities for improvisation within the female jazz vocal aesthetic; however, the ability to imitate male instrumentalists including Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, and John Coltrane remained the defining standards for determining the quality of female vocal improvisation. Gendered politics and Eurocentric notions of “absolute music” permeated jazz discourses, displacing lyrical content from the center of improvisational interpretation. Jazz dialogues depend on collaboration and processes of listening, imitating, and varying. The collaboration between vocalists and instrumentalists has been thoroughly examined as influence flows from instrumental playing to vocal performance; however, this discourse has eschewed the importance of the channel between vocal lyric improvisation and instrumental performance. The decentralization of lyrical content has reinforced the conception of women’s voices as “half voices” because it has constructed a model that relies on masculine instrumentalism. This stands as a potential reason for the underrepresentation of Vaughan and McRae’s contributions in the field of lyric improvisation.

Finally, the delegitimization of crossover artists in the jazz arena may contribute to the underrepresentation of artists such as Vaughan and McRae, who crossed over into popular music genres. The act of crossing into other genres may have influenced perceptions of vocalists as less serious or dedicated to the traditions of jazz. This, however, seems unlikely given the widespread popularity and praise received by Ella Fitzgerald, who utilized crossover as a staple for her improvisational collages and career. Likewise, the underrepresentation of Betty Carter, an “authentic” jazz artist, weakens the argument that crossover status is the only factor in the

underrepresentation of Vaughan and McRae. In terms of Betty Carter's devotion to jazz, Carmen McRae claimed, "This lady is the only one of us who hasn't copped out. She's the only Jazz singer left" (Ellerbee 2012: 47). Although this remark may reveal McRae's personal belief on musical integrity, it is unlikely that genre crossover is the primary reason for underrepresentation in this case, although it may intersect with other factors including gendered colorism and the undermining of lyric improvisation.

The Art of Lyric Improvisation

In "The Art of Lyric Improvisation: A Comparative Study of Two Renowned Jazz Singers," author Susan Johanna de Jong defines lyric improvisation as "maintaining the integrity of the original lyric and the essential musical material yet extemporaneously creating melodic and rhythmic variations unique to each individual" (de Jong 2008: 1). Like de Jong, I use the term "lyric improvisation" to describe a style of vocal improvisation that prioritizes lyrical content as opposed to instrumental imitation and "absolute music." In this way, my use of the term "lyric improvisation" could also be viewed as an alternative to scat-singing. Like scatting, lyric improvisation employs a specific vocabulary of varying musical elements including melodic and rhythmic phrasing, timbre, and articulation, to explore inventive improvisational possibilities. Instead of scat syllables, lyric improvisation utilizes additional or varied lyrics and expressive word delivery to vary the original material in inventive and improvisatory ways. Throughout their respective careers, both Vaughan and McRae exemplified the art of lyric improvisation, using lyrical content as their primary medium for sculpting improvisatory phrases and gestures.

Lyric improvisation in “Body and Soul”

While the preceding chapters have focused on solo performances, I will now analyze a duet of “Body and Soul” in order to compare the ways in which Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae utilize techniques of lyric improvisation. Although less common than solo performances, jazz duets typically feature a female and male singer, each enacting different characters within the narrative of the song. In contrast, Vaughan and McRae utilize overlapping lyrics as opposed to call-and-response techniques. They trade phrases and harmonize together as their voices merge to express the overall message of devotion conveyed through the lyrical content. Throughout the duet, Vaughan and McRae trade phrases, demonstrating the clear contrast between their vocal styles. Their voices also meld together within the climactic bridge and final chorus, amplifying the expressive effect of lyric improvisation. Because the duet features these two contrasting elements and also subverts the traditional gendered roles within jazz duets, it is ripe for analysis of lyric improvisation.

In a two-night concert series entitled “Jazz Meets the Philharmonic” in 1977, Carmen McRae, Sarah Vaughan, Earl Klugh, Bobby Hutcherson, and Noel Pointer performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl. In a review of the performance, music critic Jeffery Weber claimed, “The highlight of the evening came when Sarah and Carmen sang a trio of exuberant duets. Filled with the confidence of having worked with each other in the past, their respective styles, though markedly different, became entirely compatible, to the point of intense enjoyment, both for the audience as well as the singers” (Weber 1977: 76). I chose to utilize this duet because it clearly demonstrates each vocalist’s individualized style of lyric improvisation, while amplifying the expressive lyrical effects through the interaction among their voices.

In order to analyze the manipulation of musical elements by Vaughan and McRae, I have created an original transcription of their performance of “Body and Soul.” In creating the transcription, I encountered several difficulties involving time signatures and rhythmic notation. Vaughan and McRae are both known for rhythmic back-phrasing, rarely beginning phrases on the downbeat and utilizing rhythmic space that contrasts the consistency of their instrumental accompaniment. In this orchestral version of “Body and Soul,” they maintain a sense of swing that follows the metric pulse of the accompaniment, but utilizes a 6/8 feel. Contrary to the singer’s rhythmic phrasing, several instruments in the orchestra follow a slow and straight 4/4 time signature. As Vaughan and McRae follow the 6/8 rhythmic pulse, they are able to manipulate rhythmic phrasing by seamlessly interweaving triplet and duplet subdivisions. This rhythmic dissonance creates a sense of space that contributes to the floating, suspended quality of many of Vaughan and McRae’s overlapping improvisatory phrases. I notated the vocal parts in the time signature of 6/8 in order to best capture the rhythmic feel and momentum of the lyrical phrasing. In order to create the original transcription, I slowed the recording using audio software and utilized a metronome with triplet subdivisions to capture the rhythmic phrases and vocal interaction to the best of my ability. At several points in the audio, the orchestra volume overshadows the intricacies of the vocal line, making it difficult to determine the duration of pitches in loud, climactic moments. I approximated the duration of these notes through a combination of careful listening and watching the body language of each singer in the video recording. Lastly, I have chosen to focus on the bridge and final chorus of “Body and Soul” due to the findings of Susan Johanna de Jong’s comparative analysis of Vaughn and McRae’s use of lyric improvisation. She states, “It is in the second chorus that the manipulation of a multitude of



Lastly, Vaughan introduces rhythmic variation including triplets and sixteenth notes to ornament several phrases. These moments of rhythmic variation increase the momentum and lyrical emphasis of each phrase. The sixteenth notes frequently serve as pickups, leading into a phrase with added speed. The triplet rhythms commonly function as tools to emphasize or draw out the lyrics, in the line “my life a wreck you’re making,” for example.

Sixteenth-note variation



Triplet variation



McRae’s melodic and rhythmic phrasing is characterized by kinetic pitch, sustained low pitches, and rhythmic space. In comparison to Vaughan, McRae’s intonation consists of more

Vaughan's melodic lines. When McRae is singing the melody for “for just [the] taking,” she creates suspense by avoiding the downbeat and excluding the article “the.”

Brief echo on “you’d” (m. 6)



Back-phrasing to create suspense (mm. 25-28)



In addition to melodic and rhythmic phrasing, both Vaughan and McRae use their own lyrical variations to add emphasis and meaning to the overarching message of the song. In several phrases they omit words such as “the” or “it” in order to emphasize other important lyrics without detracting from the overall meaning. For the original line “My life a wreck you’re making,” McRae changes the lyrics in both iterations. Instead she sings, “My life a *hell* you’re making,” and later, “my life revolves about you.” These lyrical variations personalize the lines for McRae and articulate a more intense message of suffering and codependency. This exemplifies the expressive possibilities of lyric improvisation.

Interaction Between Voices

The lyric improvisational effects in this duet of “Body and Soul” are amplified by the interaction between two distinct voices, which overlap and collide to convey the overall lyrical message. The emotional undertones expressed by the lyrical content of sadness, loneliness, longing, desperation, and surrender, are amplified by the interactive vocal effects throughout the duet. Throughout the bridge and final chorus, Vaughan and McRae’s voices consistently echo one another, creating an ebbing and flowing sense of momentum. Throughout the bridge, Vaughan and McRae create drama by using contrasting pitch motion. This occurs most prominently in the following measures (mm. 11-14):

The image shows a musical score for two voices, SV (Vaughan) and CM (McRae), in measures 11-14. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#). The SV part begins with an ascending fifth on the first measure, while the CM part begins with a falling minor third. The lyrics are: "are you pre - ten-ding" for SV and "are you pre - ten-ding" for CM. The second measure shows SV with "looks like the" and CM with "the end - ing". The third measure shows SV with "end-ing" and CM with "the end - ing". The fourth measure shows SV with "end-ing" and CM with "the end - ing".

Vaughan begins the first phrase “are you pretending” with an ascending fifth, while McRae responds with a falling minor third. On “looks like the ending,” Vaughn creates a melodic contour that uses the relative pitch pattern high, low, high, while McRae uses a pitch pattern of low, high, low. The contrary motion of voices creates a dynamic tension that Vaughan and McRae amplify through dynamic swells. After the word “surrender” (m.31) the contrary motion

ceases, with descending pitches on each of the subsequent phrases.

The image shows a musical score for two voices, Sarah Vaughan (SV) and Carmen McRae (CM), in G major (one sharp). The score is divided into two systems. The first system contains the first two lines of the song. The second system, starting at measure 38, contains the final two lines. The lyrics are: 'surrender my self to you - - -', 'I'll glad-ly su-rren-der my-self to you - bo-dy and sou -', 'sou - l', and 'l bo - dy and sou - l'. The melody for both voices is highly expressive, with many slurs and ties, and the lyrics are written below the notes.

Each of the concluding syllables have a falling motion, conveying the emotional undertones of surrender as the contrary pitch motion transforms into parallel movement downwards.

At the risk of reaching for a metaphor, the interaction of the two distinct, yet equally expressive voices may subconsciously convey the meaning behind the song, representing “body and soul.” As the two voices express the lyrical content with melodic and rhythmic variation, they may figuratively embody the voices of “body and soul,” distinct, yet united in their longing for the subject of the song. Moreover, the rising intensity of overlapping phrases, dynamic swells, and pitch range at the conclusion of the performance align with the emotional intensity of the final lines: “I’d gladly surrender/ Myself to you, Body and Soul.” In addition to intensifying the effects of lyric improvisation, the interaction between the two voices of Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae also establish new possibilities for improvisation. This performance, which features two highly individualized voices melding together to expressively deliver lyrical

content, exemplifies the groundbreaking lyric improvisation abilities of both Vaughan and McRae.

The underrepresentation of Vaughan and McRae may be interconnected to the underrepresentation of lyric improvisation techniques. Because Vaughan and McRae extended the art lyric improvisation, their underrepresentation may result in lesser knowledge and appreciation of these vocal techniques. Likewise, the undervaluation of lyric improvisation may consequently influence the undervaluation of vocalists who utilized these techniques as staples in their individualized styles. Through further exploration of lyric improvisation, we can understand and value the work of jazz vocalists including Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae on a greater level.

Conclusion

In order to recognize the significant contributions of female jazz singers, we must consider techniques of vocal improvisation. Through the work of Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Carmen McRae, I have highlighted several vocal improvisation techniques including melodic quotation, kinetic pitch, and lyric improvisation. From this analysis, I hope to bring these undervalued contributions to the forefront, and encourage a more inclusive reframing of improvisation.

Each of these techniques are distinct from instrumental techniques because they focalize particular vocal qualities and rely on a synthesis of speech and song. The first technique, melodic quotation, is most effective when interspersed with lyrics to make melodic content easily identifiable. In her melodic collage of “How High the Moon” for instance, Ella Fitzgerald utilizes words as a primary musical element alongside articulation, timbre, and dynamics. By placing the lyrical content on par with other improvisational textures, Fitzgerald creates a distinctly vocal improvisation. Vocalists are able to quote a synthesis of words and melodies, melding different elements of language together to yield greater improvisational possibilities. Although many instrumentalists utilize melodic quotation as a tool for improvisation, many melodic quotations are also strongly associated with vocal lines. Additionally, the act of “quotation” becomes more explicitly referential when quoting text.

Kinetic pitch is another distinctively vocal technique because it emulates fluctuations of speech that are distinct from sustained tones. Authors Huang and Huang describe the differences between conceptions of speech and song and the ways in which notational practices reflect the

conceptual disparities. In their description of Billie Holiday's use of kinetic pitch in "All of Me," they write:

The extreme tendency toward sliding pitch in this performance is axiomatic of speech. Simultaneously, it contradicts a conventional conception of song. A sung melody composed of "notes" is a series of discrete pitch frequencies, which are assumed not to change throughout most of the duration of the note. The pitch contours of spoken English are not, normally, this type of melody: "static" or "level" tones, which maintain a single identifiable frequency over time, are rare in speech. Far more common are the so-called "kinetic," moving or gliding, tones. Conventional Western music notation reinforces the conceptual difference between speech and song. A note in a score represents a single frequency, as well as a proportional length of time. In addition, a notated melody makes what we might call a "quantum leap" from each pitch frequency to the next. A gliding tone, on the other hand, moves continuously (if briefly) through an unbroken range of frequencies, infinite as the number of points on a line. Conventional notation has no way to represent gliding motion through all the frequencies between two specified pitches, other than the "glissando" symbol (Huang & Huang 2014: 292).

Kinetic pitch is thus a distinctly vocal technique because it relies on the synthesis of speech and song, challenging certain musical expectations of discrete pitch frequencies while incorporating pitch contours akin to the fluctuating tones of spoken language. In her 1959 performance of "Strange Fruit," Holiday utilizes kinetic pitch constantly, shifting pitches between nearly every note. While sustained pitches are important in many forms of music, they are generally the exception in speech patterns. Holiday utilizes kinetic pitches to achieve strong speech-like effects, to the extent that sustained pitches are the exception. Kinetic pitch is a vocal technique that challenges preconceived notions of pitch movement in music and standard Western notational practices.

Lastly and unambiguously, lyric improvisation is an important vocal technique for improvisation. Typically, the main objective of lyric improvisation is to communicate lyrics in an individualized and expressive manner. Both Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae made significant

contributions to the art of lyric improvisation, developing highly individualized styles that brought lyrical content to the forefront. George Lewis claims, “In my own view, the development of the improviser in improvised music is regarded as encompassing not only the formation of individual musical personality but the harmonization of one’s musical personality with social environments, both actual and possible. This emphasis on personal narrative is a clear sign of the strong influence of the Afrological on improvised music” (Lewis 1996: 110). The Afrologically-influenced elements of lyric improvisation are exemplified by the emphasis on developing an individualized style and communicating a personal narrative through idiosyncratic delivery. According to Lewis, these components adhere to generalized perceptions of improvisation, and by extension, qualify vocalists to be viewed as skilled improvisers. If we reframe the concept of improvisation to include lyric improvisation, the significant contributions of vocal improvisers can be recognized alongside instrumental improvisers who have also created musical identities within particular social and cultural contexts. Ideally, the identities of “female jazz vocalist” and “improviser” can apply simultaneously to individuals within this framework, reconstructing perceptions of lyrical content as an asset to improvisation as opposed to a barrier.

After further questioning the forces that separate “singers” from “improvisers,” I recall the joke that I addressed in the introduction about the incompetence of female vocalists. I claimed that the gendered assumption of incompetence may be used to mask the potential threat of female singers. While there is strong evidence to support this, another anti-black misogynistic notion is the threat or seduction of female vocalists in jazz. Throughout my analyses, I have grappled with the potential reasons for underrepresentation of female jazz singers within

dominant discourses. I explored issues of the “songbird” image of singers, representations of femininity diverging from tropes of ideal white womanhood, and gendered colorism. Although they may share several answers, the question of what makes female jazz singers underrepresented is different from what makes female jazz singers threatening. As I engaged in processes of recognizing the contributions of women in jazz, I recurrently questioned the stakes of such a project, and the possible reasons this work could be seen as dangerous to the overall nature of jazz.

Power dynamics on the bandstand potentially underlie the threat of female vocalists in jazz. The battle for attention presents an interesting dilemma for male musicians who are fearful of being perceived as “sidemen.” This is likely a result of the prevailing notion of female singers as “canaries,” placed on the bandstand as sexualized accessories to make bands more appealing to audiences. The prioritization of physical appearance over vocal quality during the Swing Era may have manifested into a fear of female singers robbing the attention of audiences with their beauty. This underlying fear yields perceptions of female vocalists as obstructions that draw the attention away from the music, as opposed to fellow musicians who can help improve the aural qualities of the band. Through a racialized lens, this notion of the sexual threat of women in jazz coincides with anti-black misogynistic perceptions of seduction and exoticism. Victoria Willis explores this concept, describing the ways in which black female vocalists were labeled as “Jezebel” singers. She notes the ways in which white men in the music industry emphasized the sexuality of black women especially by taking photographs with unusual, suggestive angles (Willis 2008: 296). Overall, the perception of women singers as sexualized accessories coincides

with anti-black misogynistic assumptions about the mutual incompetence and threat of jazz singers.

Another factor in the battle for attention is the inherently soloistic nature of female vocalists within traditional band structures. Typically, the voice becomes the main focus because it communicates the lyric; furthermore, another threat of female singers lies within the power of lyrical content. In jazz trios and quartets, the voice is primarily used as a solo instrument, rarely participating in comping or other accompaniment techniques. This stylistic usage fundamentally separates the voice from instruments on the bandstand, perhaps leading to the conceptual framing of vocalists as inferior in order to mask the perceived threat.

While vocalists Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, and Sarah Vaughan have achieved widespread popularity and recognition, female instrumentalists have yet to gain recognition even within dominant jazz discourses. This blatant exclusion within the jazz arena naturally prevents female instrumentalists from being recognized on a larger scale. Sherrie Tucker grapples with gendered anxiety surrounding the roles of female instrumentalists, claiming, “Women musicians were consumed as singers who didn’t sing, dancers who didn’t dance, cross-dressers who performed entertainment understood as masculine in bodies understood as feminine” (Tucker 2000: 6). She describes the ways in which all-girl bands were labeled as freaks, gimmicks, or spectacles, and constantly compared to men in critical reviews. Ultimately, female instrumentalists have been met with dissonance between female representations in jazz and the supposed superiority of male instrumentalism.

Female vocalists may have comparatively posed less of a threat to male instrumentalism due to gendered anxieties which have historically coded singing as feminine. In *Real Men Don’t*

Sing: Crooning in American Culture, Scholar Allison McCracken explores the vocal qualities of white male crooners and the ways in which they challenged conservative masculine norms. She writes:

In fact, romantic crooners' vocal delivery drew on a variety of popular (working class, religious, and non-Anglo) musics, and these same vocal characteristics would continue to figure in performances of blues, jazz, hillbilly, and gospel music. For the white middle-class males at the forefront of American culture, however, these characteristics were recoded as objectionably feminine. For them falsetto, high pitch, and "sliding" (glissando) notes became indicative of a greater pathology and had to be silenced (McCracken 2015: 26).

The vocal characteristics that McCracken argues were culturally stigmatized as "effeminate" for crooners are quintessential to the female vocal improvisation techniques that I explore throughout this project. The qualities of falsetto (which is a vocal range designated "normal" for female voices), high pitch, and "sliding notes" (or kinetic pitches), are therefore less threatening when used by female vocalists because they have been "recoded as objectionably feminine." In other words, these vocal qualities are accessible to women and commended in female voices because they reinforce conservative gendered associations with singing. As women in jazz utilize these particular vocal qualities, they may pose less of a threat for other male jazz musicians who do not seek to master these "feminine" attributes. Along these lines, vocal qualities coded as "masculine" have also been appropriated from female vocalists by male musicians and singers alike. Maureen Mahon offers a pertinent example of this appropriation in "Listening for Willie Mae 'Big Mama' Thornton's Voice." She describes Elvis Presley's performance of "Hounddog," stating, "[Presley] imports her swagger and her forceful vocals, following her practice of 'hollering it out' in a deep, husky voice. Ironically, Presley's sexy masculinity comes into being in part as he draws on Thornton's confrontational black

femininity” (Mahon 2011: 10, see also Halberstam 2007). The white male identity that allows Presley to popularize aesthetic styles deriving from black music is the same identity that he falls back on when he no longer profits from “miming blackness” as Mahon describes. His refusal to credit or compensate Thornton is an acute example of the historical exclusion on the basis of gender and race in the music industry at large. Within this framework, only female vocalists who ascribe to feminine coded vocal qualities seem to receive limited recognition in dominant discourses.

In order for women in jazz to be adequately represented in dominant discourses, the current hierarchical gendered assumptions about “greatness” in jazz must be questioned and dismantled. Scholar Phillip Ewell addresses several key challenges in deframing and reframing the white racial frame in the field of music theory. He states, “Our true challenge, [is] that we must accept a measure of a ‘diminishing societal position,’ cede some music-theoretical territory to nonwestern, nonwhite music theories in the academy, and make structural antiracist changes in our field” (Ewell 2020: 18). This challenge of “diminishing societal position” also applies to the reframing of improvisation in jazz, where the recognition of female vocal contributions will require the deemphasis of supposedly superior male instrumental contributions to jazz. I wonder what conversations about jazz improvisation would be like if Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Carmen McRae were highlighted alongside the popularly recognized male instrumental masters of improvisation including but not limited to Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Thelonius Monk. While this may seem threatening to what Victoria Willis coins “the naturalization of jazz as masculine” (Willis 2008: 300), the improved understanding of vocal techniques can ultimately enhance possibilities for instrumental

improvisation. Moreover, many musicians irrespective of their instrument can implement techniques such as melodic quotation, kinetic pitch, and even imitation of lyric improvisation. By highlighting specific vocal techniques, jazz musicians can enhance their musical vocabulary. The academic and critical work of recognizing female singer's contributions in jazz can help musicians develop a deeper understanding of the origins of uncredited improvisational styles and a greater appreciation for the women who pioneered them.

The project of crediting black female jazz vocal improvisers with their contributions extends beyond the arena of jazz. The overarching aim of historicizing the significant contributions of women, and particularly women of color, is long overdue across many fields. For this movement to be effective, the language that reinforces the continued exclusion of women at the intersections of race, gender, class, and other marginalized identities must be reconsidered. "Improvisation" is one of many concepts that can be reframed as more inclusive, and this process can serve as a model for other concepts in music and beyond. Many scholars have participated in the act of deeply examining language in music, including Susan McClary's exploration of the gendered aspects of music theory (McClary 2002) and Phillip Ewell's analysis of Schenkerian theory as a racialized structure (Ewell 2021). I consider these explorations of language essential for the improvement of the racial and gendered dynamics within music and beyond.

Jazz singers such as Fitzgerald, Holiday, and Vaughan, had significant influence across genres and generations. Their important contributions to the art of jazz improvisation offer further insight into overlapping genres including popular music. The aforementioned vocal techniques of melodic quotation, kinetic pitch, and lyric improvisation extend beyond the genre

markers of jazz, due in part to these crossover jazz singers who integrated their stylistic elements into other genres. Analyzing these techniques in the context of jazz improvisation can help us to glean an understanding of their origins, develop better notational systems to represent them, and identify the ways in which they are utilized in music today.

Throughout my analysis, I considered further areas for research that were beyond the scope of this particular project including expanded notational systems, more accurate kinetic pitch analysis, and comparative kinetic pitch analysis. This project would have benefited from alternative methods of notation to more accurately represent kinetic pitches, rhythmic back-tracking, and swung syncopated rhythms. At the risk of making the process of analysis too technological, I considered processes of graphing kinetic pitches in order to visually observe melodic pitch contours. This potentially tangential analysis would be best accompanied by a careful consideration of what this transcription work might accomplish and what the limitations may be. Along with this, I considered the notion of graphing kinetic pitches and rhythmic durations with error bars in order to compensate for the lack of precision of my transcription tools. This brings me to the next area of research, which is the development of more accurate and accessible measuring systems for kinetic pitch. In my kinetic pitch transcription of “Strange Fruit,” I utilized audio software to slow the audio file without shifting the pitch, approximated the beginning and ending of each pitch value, and then measured each pitch to the nearest fifth cent. This arduous, yet rewarding process could be improved by more accurate audio software, and specifically software that can trace pitch contours without implementing pre-existing systems of Western equal temperament. I am also confident that better software exists in comparison to the relatively inexpensive programs that were accessible to me for this project.

All singers use kinetic pitch to an extent, making comparative kinetic pitch another interesting area of study. Without the time constraints of this particular project, I would have employed a comparative kinetic pitch analysis to the “Body and Soul” duet featuring Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae. Comparative kinetic pitch analyses can be useful for understanding the idiosyncrasies of each vocalist’s individualized styles. Such a comparative analysis could follow the model of “The Art of Lyric Improvisation: A Comparative Study of Two Renowned Jazz Singers,” by Susan Johanna de Jong, which compares the melodic and rhythmic variations of Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae from repeated performances of “Sometimes I’m Happy.” I would also be interested in further studies regarding the ways in which kinetic pitch is utilized across genres and generations, and the similarities between kinetic pitch contours in speech and song.

This project is an extension of the ongoing process of crediting female vocalists with their significant contributions to the history of jazz. I view this project as an exploration of contributions that have been undervalued within dominant jazz discourses, not an attempt to solve the overall gendered and racial exclusion of female vocalists. I focused on acknowledging certain issues of exclusion because in order to improve these problems, we must first understand them. It is my opinion that proposing immediate solutions can be counterproductive because they may obscure complexities and longstanding histories. I do, however, think that the urgent need to recognize underrecognized contributions of women of color across many fields demands our attention and effort. By addressing these issues openly and analytically, we can unpack the politics of exclusion that must be dismantled in order for women in jazz to be fairly recognized and accredited for their contributions.

A key component of my project has been bringing to light the contributions of female jazz vocalists. This project is an extension of the dialogic traditions of jazz, a site for negotiating and renegotiating the bounds of identity, memory, and cultural and socio-political realities. While the process of recognizing the contributions of Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Carmen McRae was complex, I did not struggle to unearth any of their recordings. In fact, I was surprised by how many resources were available for listening to the music of these jazz singers. The music of women in jazz is not some buried relic of a nearly forgotten past, although I would ask what insidious ulterior motives may be at play behind the perceptive distancing of Billie Holiday's powerful performances of "Strange Fruit." Female vocalists continue to make significant contributions to the history of jazz, molding their personal narratives through the artform of improvisation. In learning to recognize and describe these significant contributions in inclusive and accurate language, we can transform the dialogue of jazz for the better.

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Appendix

"Flying Home"

Illinois Jacquet, 1942

Ella Fitzgerald, 1945

Includes sections AABA, AA

A

Illinois Jacquet

Ella Fitzgerald

6

Jacq.

Fitz.

A 10

Jacq.

Fitz.

14

Jacq.

Fitz.

B 18

Jacq.

Fitz.

22

Jacq.

Fitz.

2

26
A
Jacq. 
Fitz. 

29
Jacq. 
Fitz. 

33
A
Jacq. 
Fitz. 

37
Jacq. 
Fitz. 

41
A
Jacq. 
Fitz. 

45
Jacq. 
Fitz. 

"Strange Fruit" Transcription

Billie Holiday, 1959 (Reelin' in the Years Archives)

VI.

-20 -35 15 25 -90 30 -50 40 20 -20 20 50 20 10 20

(S) ou the(r)n (Ch) ree * (S) Bear a (S) tra (nge) (Ch) (F) rui (T)

-15 15 15 25 -5 15 50 -20 -30 45 -10 35

Bloo(d) on the * leave (S) an(d) Bloo(d) a(h) the roo (T)

H

35 30 40 -40 -50 -30 -35 -20 -25 -35 15

Black Bodie (S) wingin (g) * In the (S) ou the(r)n Bree * (S) (20)

5 -15 -10 35 45 45 35 55 45 -30 -20

(S) tran (Ch) (f)ruit hang in (g) (F)rom the Pop lar (Ch) ree (S)

45 -20 -10 30 30 20 0 -5 -25 -30 -20 -20

Pa (S) tor a l (S) ce * ne of the ga llant (S) ou (th)

20 20 40 0 0 35 0 -25 0 10 -5 -15 40 45

H

The Bu (l) ging Eye * (S) And the (T) wi * (S) ted mou * (th)

-45 40 -10 15 15 -10 -5 -40 5 30 -10

(S) cent of mag no l i a * (S) weet and (F) re (sh)

35 0 25 -10 -20 -30 35 15 5 0 35

Then the (S) udd(e)n (S) me * ll of bur * ning * fle * (sh)

30 50 15 0 -10 20 -30 0 -35 -30

Here is a (F) rui (T) (F) or the (C) row * (S) To (Plu) (CK)

50 5 -10 -25 -10 -25 -10 50 25 0 0 -20

(F) or the rain (T) o ga ther * (F) or the wi nd (T) o (S) u (CK)

-5 40 5 -10 30 40 10 -40 -5 -5 5 -40 50 -45
 For the Sun To rot For the Tree * To * Drop
 25 30 30 -35 15 -20 0 40 25 5 → 35
 Here is a St ran * (ge) ch and bitter * Cro * p

Key: /: Pitch slide *: Vocal break Circled Consonant: Voiced Consonant
 #: Slight Vibrato H: Husky Timbre Parenthesis: Unvoiced consonant

Body and Soul

Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae, 1977

Bridge and Final Chorus

Vaughan

I can't be-lieve it hard to con-ceive it

McRae

I can't be - lieve it hard to con -

5

SV.

that you - 'd turn a-way ro-mance

CM.

ceive it you'd turn a - way ro-mance

10

SV.

are you pre - ten-ding looks like the

CM.

are you pre - ten-ding

14

SV.

end-ing un less I can ha-ve one more cha-nce to

CM.

the end - ing

18

SV.

pro - ve dea - r my life

CM.

my life my life re-volves a -

2

24

SV. 
 my life ³ a wreck you're ma-king you know I'm you -

CM. 
 bout you - - - you know I'm yours

27

SV. 
 rs ta - king woa-h I'll glad-ly surren-

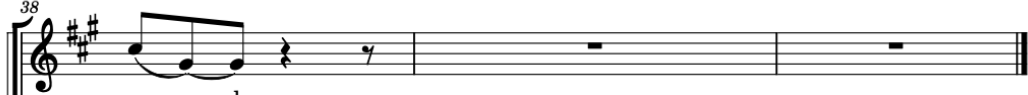
CM. 
 for just ta-king woa - h I'll glad-ly


32

SV. 
 der my - se-lf to - you - - -

CM. 
 su-rren-der my-self to you - bo-dy and sou

38

SV. 
 sou - l

CM. 
 l bo - dy and sou - l