THE SINGER AND THE SONG

Never sing a song the same way twice.

—Billie Holiday

Forgive me if I don’t have the words. Maybe I can sing it and you’ll understand.

—Ella Fitzgerald

PRELUDE

Believe me, I’ve worked with singers . . . lots of them, from the divine to the earthbound. But one thing’s for sure. All of them, almost to a person, had the desire and the courage to get up there on the bandstand and, as Ella Fitzgerald said above, to express themselves in a way that maybe they couldn’t do in conversation. There’s something magical about that when it’s really right and there’s no pretense attached to it.

When I first moved to Los Angeles, I was lucky enough to snag a gig in a rhythm section whose role was to accompany singers who would sign up to perform two tunes each at a five-night-a-week club showcase called “Pandemonium.” And believe me, it was often as chaotic as the name suggests, since we would talk through a lot of music (without actually rehearsing it), and play for six to ten singers a night. I don’t remember much about those who really needed to find a more constructive use of their time other than obliterating the Great American Songbook. But I do fondly recall the ones who could give you the chills—those who had genuine talent and a real feel for jazz and true and personal expression—singers who really caressed each word of a lyric and truly captured the essence of the song. Among these, there was a suave, yet tough-looking guy named Mike Batis, who sang “Somewhere over the Rainbow” with such subtle conviction and poignancy that you believed every bit of the longing he was feeling. Another great singer was Pamela Stonebrook, a tall and willowy blonde who made us all believe it when she sang “Anywhere I Hang My Hat Is Home.” And then there was the MC and organizer of the showcases, an imposing, gentle giant of a man named David Walker, who was quite simply one of the best ballad singers I ever worked with. It’s sad to think none of these three fine vocalists ever received the recognition and exposure they so richly deserved. Yet there it is: the reality of the music business. Three of the best singers you never heard of . . .

WHAT EXACTLY IS A JAZZ SINGER?

Just as there is a wide variety of instrumental styles in music, there are also a great many ways to sing a song. As listeners, we have many vocal genres to choose from as we experience music in our daily lives. We may enjoy great opera singers like Audra McDonald, folk singers like Jonathan Edwards, blues singers like B.B. King, rockers like Bonnie Raitt, or totally uncategorizable singers like Tom Waits, Delbert McClinton, Norah Jones, and Queen Latifah. All have wonderful gifts to offer us; however, jazz singing, by way of comparison, has its own unique approach to the art of the song that is very much worth exploring.

There has always been a lot of debate about what makes a vocalist a “jazz” singer. One camp suggests that someone who sings jazz should also be able to use his or her voice as a vehicle for improvisation; another camp says that it’s all in the phrasing—that a jazz singer is someone who can swing the lyrics and syncopate the phrasing of the words in such a way that a performance would capture the essence of jazz. Who is right? Let’s look briefly at the validity of each point of view.

When a singer finishes singing the lyrics to a song and follows those lyrics with a wordless, horn-like solo,
this is called “scat singing,” or “scatting.” Legend has it that the first scat singing happened quite accidentally, when a singer forgot the lyrics to a song and substituted nonsense syllables, just to be able to get through a performance. Whether or not this is true remains to be seen; however, it is what scat singing is all about—when the singer uses his or her voice as a musical instrument, rather than as a way to tell a story using both music and words. While it may be true that scatting existed as a novelty effect somewhat earlier, the first singer to really put scat singing on the jazz map was Louis Armstrong, beginning back in 1926 with his scat vocal on a song called “Heebie Jeebies.” He improvised a solo, not using his trumpet or cornet, but his voice. That solo and his subsequent scat vocals created a foundation that scatting singers have been building upon ever since.

Pops was a great jazz singer in another way—one that typifies the flip side of that coin where the singer doesn’t attempt to scat sing on any given song. He or she merely pays great attention to how to phrase the lyrics in such a way that they swing. More specifically, a jazz vocalist may sing a series of words that sound as though they might have been played by, say, a trumpeter (like Armstrong) or saxophonist. That might mean singing a little bit behind or ahead of the beat or singing some of the words using syncopated rhythms (see chapter 2 for a brief review of rhythm and syncopation). It might also mean altering some of the original notes in the melody just as a horn player, for example, might do in his or her statement of it. In these ways, a singer is actually improvising by making up new ways to sing the melody, so much so that sometimes the end result may be an instantaneous “countermelody,” one that might not even sound like the original song. For example, listen via the Internet to the great Billie Holiday sing the song “Them There Eyes,” from her July 5, 1939, Columbia Records recording. Unlike the original notes on the sheet music, “Lady Day” sings:

I fell in love with you, first time I looked into
[sings these words mostly on one note] them there eyes.
You had a certain little cute way of flirtin’ with
[this line also] them there eyes.
They make me feel so happy,
[almost speaks these two words] They make me feel so blue;
I’m fallin‘—no stallin’,
fallin’ in a great big way for you.
My heart is jumpin’, you started somethin’,
[speaks previous three words] with them there eyes.
You’d better look out, little brown eyes, if you’re wise.
They sparkle—they bubble,
... get you in a lot of trouble. [omits “They’re gonna ...”]
Ahhhhhhhh, Baby . . .
[somewhere between speaking and singing] Them there eyes . . .

Music and Lyrics by Maceo Pinkard, William Tracy, and Doris Tauber © 1930 Bourne Co.

After the tenor saxophone, trumpet, and alto saxophone solos, Lady Day reenters with the melody and sings it a completely different way, altering the notes and rhythms from both the original and the way she sang it before the solos. This is the product of a highly creative mind at work. There is no scat singing here, nor does there have to be. Billie’s genius, like Louis Armstrong’s, was that she created instantaneous variations in both the melody and the rhythm of this and many other songs. And she swung relentlessly and effortlessly every time.

FRANK SINATRA, TONY BENNETT: JAZZ SINGERS?

It is an indisputable fact that Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett are two of the most revered singers in the history of American popular music. But are they jazz singers? Neither one is a scat singer—even Sinatra’s “Doo-be-doo-be-doo’s” don’t really contain the basic elements of scatting. However, both have recorded with
many of jazz’s greatest musicians, most notably Sinatra with Duke Ellington and Count Basie, and Bennett with the Basie band and pianist Bill Evans.

Without a doubt, Frank Sinatra embodied the spirit of jazz in his choice of songs and, most important, in the way he sang them. His approach to a song was relaxed, and his fusing of melody and lyrics was flawless. Sometimes singers talk about “breath control”; how much breath do you need to sing one phrase, before you have to take another breath? Sinatra was a master of breathing, and you will never hear him on any recording struggling to take in air at the end of a phrase; he made singing sound utterly effortless. Have a look at this master singer at work on YouTube in a segment called “Frank Sinatra in the Studio, 1965” as he records “It Was a Very Good Year” before an in-studio audience. He sings with the same control and ease that trumpeter Miles Davis mastered in the latter’s lyrical work with arranger Gil Evans in the late ’50s.

Tony Bennett stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Sinatra in similar ways. Like the latter, Bennett has a rich voice and a penchant for knowing which songs to include in his gigantic repertoire. And also like Sinatra, his phrasing is relaxed, assured, and always swinging. Neither man merely stood in front of a large or small band and sang; they made themselves part of the music by listening to their accompanying musicians and capturing the overall feeling of the performance.

And Tony Bennett continues to deliver these qualities even today. At this writing, Bennett is 87 years young and continues to explore unique ways to present his song stylings, most notably in his recent series of genre-bending duet recordings with a wide variety of singers from country, pop, and rock genres, including James Taylor, k. d. lang, Tim McGraw, Willie Nelson, Paul McCartney, Aretha Franklin, Lady Gaga, the late Amy Winehouse, and many others. Bennett clearly inspires these fine song stylists to greater heights by his mere presence and staggering ability to make every song he sings sound like it was written especially for him.

So are Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett jazz singers? A fine singer from Los Angeles by the name of Julie Kelly suggested to me recently that both men are beyond category. They simply are who they are, and rather than attempt to pigeonhole them into one stylistic box or another, we should just sit back, relax, and enjoy their musical offerings. At the end of the day, that’s really not a bad idea.

WHERE DID JAZZ SINGING COME FROM?

In chapter 3 of this book we suggested that during the time of slavery, field hollers were often made up largely of a form of “call and response” that was established between a singer and those who responded to him or her. We suggested further that this call-and-response approach was also commonplace in the black Baptist churches, most notably in the South. The spirit of jazz in its infancy loomed over the fields, the churches, and the revival tent meetings.

People of color sang together for a variety of reasons: to show their devotion to God and a belief that a better life was coming; to communicate encoded messages among themselves; to get through a day a little faster picking cotton in the fields; and to be able, on a much broader level, to create a sense of community in order to help them survive the tremendous oppression they faced on a daily basis. To lift every voice and sing was to signify spiritual self-worth, as well as the will to overcome cruelty and injustice.

It was upon this foundation that gospel music and spirituals, the blues, and eventually jazz, were born. The evolution of jazz singing has the blues and, to a lesser extent, African American church music at its roots. However, of the three genres, jazz singing has been the most dynamic in terms of stylistic changes, whereas the blues, for example, has basically moved back and forth from traditional acoustic to electric, rock-influenced styles. Even so, jazz and blues singing are inextricably intertwined. There are some great jazz singers who can also sing the blues, and vice versa.

What this chapter seeks to do is to give new listeners a sense of direction by introducing some of the singers who have set the gold standard for jazz singing throughout its history—men and women like Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday, whose creativity and imagination have inspired generations of singers to follow, as well as those in more recent times whose contributions to the art of jazz singing are only beginning to be felt and recognized as important and vital to the art.
Like other chapters in this section that deal with musical instruments and their masters, this one is meant to merely open the door for new listeners, rather than to provide a comprehensive historical survey and analysis of jazz singing. The idea is to whet your appetite by offering snapshots that will hopefully entice you to visit the nearest record store or website in order to sample much of the fine vocal jazz that’s out there waiting for you.

EARLY JAZZ SINGERS

The first notable jazz singers were women who came from the blues tradition. Most experienced listeners agree that Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters were the most notable. Both had powerful voices and yet paid great attention to the nuances and feelings of a song’s lyrics. Bessie Smith, aside from being known primarily as a great blues singer, was also considered a jazz singer because of her ongoing musical relationships with legendary jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong and pianist James P. Johnson. In fact, even though she recorded with both men at different times, it was her emotionally powerful recording of “St. Louis Blues” in 1925 with Armstrong that is among the most memorable of early jazz vocal recordings.

“St. Louis Blues” was also recorded by Ethel Waters and showcases Waters’s total immersion into the song. Like Bessie Smith, she infused the song with great depth of feeling—but she also put a lot more drama into the lyrics, half-singing and half-talking the lyrics at various times and using the kind of syncopation favored by horn players throughout. Waters, like Smith, had a commanding presence as a vocalist, yet her voice was not as husky; however, whatever she may have lacked in weightiness, she more than made up for with the imaginative way she altered the lyrics and rhythmic phrases of any given song. Listen to her rendition of “Am I Blue?” and you will hear those improvisations. Our discussion of how Billie Holiday altered a song’s lyrics, melody, and phrasing should give you a pretty good indication of the influence Ethel Waters had and continues to have upon other great jazz singers who would succeed her for more than the next 90 years.

We can’t leave the subject of early jazz singers without mentioning pianist/organist Thomas “Fats” Waller, whose vocals were often quite humorous in terms of both subject matter (“Your Feet’s Too Big,” “The Reefer Song”) and tone (“Crazy ’bout My Baby”). Even though he came after Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters and was active from the late 1920s through the early ’40s, Waller—along with Cab Calloway and a few others—bridged the gap between early jazz and swing vocalists. Even though he infused humor into much of his music and vocal delivery, Waller was a phenomenal pianist, and it remains a joy to hear his piano, organ, and vocals today. Whether you’re faced with a gray, gloomy day or are hopelessly gridlocked in traffic, listen to some Fats Waller. He’ll put a smile on your face and help you walk “on the sunny side of the street.”

JAZZ VOCALISTS IN THE SWING ERA

The swing era was a time for big-band vocalists to flourish. Talented singers like Helen Forrest, Martha Tilton, Ray Eberle, Dick Haymes, and of course, Frank Sinatra traveled and recorded with the likes of Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, and Glenn Miller. The role of big-band singer was a peripheral one. When you see posed photographs of many of the big bands of the day, you’ll notice that on either the left or right side of the stage sat the band’s vocalist—either a man or, more often, a woman. In some cases, a band might feature both a man and a woman. The band singers would sit through a number of “instrumental” numbers (those that didn’t have any vocals) and wait their turn at the microphone. If a band played four sets of music on any given evening, a portion of each set was given over to vocal features.

While all of the singers listed above were truly fine vocalists, none—with the exception of Sinatra—could really be called jazz singers, based upon our determinations of what a jazz singer may be. There were, however, a handful of great jazz singers who gained popularity and critical notice during the swing era. Frank Sinatra sang first with trumpeter Harry James’s band, and then with Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey’s bands, where he gained immense popularity. Of course he went on to achieve fame as one of America’s greatest singers, as well as being an Academy Award–winning actor, among many other accomplishments.
Billie Holiday sang with both Count Basie and Artie Shaw, in addition to her own groups and those of pianist Teddy Wilson. The story of her incredibly difficult and tumultuous life has been the subject of a number of biographies, as well as a film named after her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*. There was a youthful exuberance, sensuality, and playfulness in much of her work, which as a result of the ravages of her drug, alcohol, and relationship problems, was replaced by a kind of world-weariness that reflected itself in the diminished strength and tone quality of her voice. Even so, the Billie Holiday you hear in her 1950s recordings is darkly beautiful in its way. There has always been a feeling of truthfulness in her delivery. You got the feeling that this Billie was talking directly to you, telling her story in such a personal and, in some ways, subtly painful fashion. She has been and continues to be praised as a major figure in jazz history—a musical storyteller, and one of the most individualistic of all jazz singers.
Mildred Bailey was featured with bands led by Paul Whiteman, Benny Goodman, and by husband Red Norvo. While not as well known as Holiday, her feathery voice and her remarkable sense of swing were nonetheless very distinctive, and together with vibraphonist Norvo, the two were known as “Mr. and Mrs. Swing.”

Jimmy Rushing, also known affectionately as “Mister Five-by-Five” (“five feet tall and five feet wide”), was a much-beloved jazz and blues singer who sang with Count Basie’s big band steadily from 1935 to
around 1950. Rushing was on many of Basie’s most famous and popular recordings. After leaving Basie, he performed and, in some cases, recorded with a wide variety of jazz greats, including pianists Thelonious Monk and Dave Brubeck, and he won many jazz polls both in the United States and in Europe.

And of course, there is the magnificent Ella Fitzgerald, “The First Lady of Song,” who bridged the gap between swing-era vocal stylings and bebop-influenced singing. Ella first came to the listening public’s attention in the mid-’30s. Her story has a true fairy-tale quality to it: In 1934—at age 17 and nearly destitute—she entered and won a talent contest at Harlem’s Apollo Theater. The following year, Ella came to the attention of drumming dynamo Chick Webb, who hired her to be the main vocalist in his big band. It was with the Webb band that Ella recorded “A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” which became a million seller and catapulted her into national prominence. With the arrival of the ’40s and the birth of bebop, Ella easily assimilated the language of bop into her broad musical vocabulary. She was featured with Dizzy Gillespie’s big band and also began her lifelong friendship and association with the legendary jazz promoter Norman Granz, whose 1946–1957 concert tour series “Jazz at the Philharmonic” (JATP) featured many of jazz’s finest performers, including Ella Fitzgerald.
In her lifetime, Ella recorded over 200 albums (including her famous “Songbook” series, which featured the music of many of our finest composers and songwriters) and was revered by both fans and critics alike. She was the recipient of many honors and awards, including the National Medal of Arts, awarded to her by President Ronald Reagan in 1987. She had a magnificent voice and fantastic technical and interpretive skills. Above all, at the heart of her singing there was unbridled joy and a true and genuine ability to “sing what she couldn’t say.”

JAZZ VOCALISTS IN THE BEBOP ERA

As mentioned previously, Ella Fitzgerald (see figure 18.2) helped build the bridge for us that extends stylistically from swing to bebop. She was one of the first bebop scat singers, and she was able to hone her skills working with bop master Dizzy Gillespie and as a member of the JATP touring groups. Another pioneering bebop vocalist was a man named Lee Brown, who was better known as Babs Gonzales. He was a tireless promoter of this new music and epitomized its hipness both musically and visually. Because of his quirky character, Gonzales became more of a bop “character” to the listening public, rather than a singer. In the latter arena, he was a bit more limited and excelled more as a scat singer and “personality,” rather than as an accomplished vocalist.

In addition to Ella, there are some notable female singers who appeared beginning in the late ’40s, who were influenced by the radical break with swing-era jazz and in turn had a definite impact upon the art of jazz singing from that time forward. One such singer was Sarah Vaughan, who could not only scat sing excellently—and did so with bebop greats such as Bird and Diz—but who was equally at ease singing up-tempo tunes as well as ballads from the Great American Songbook. There seemed to be nothing Sarah (or “Sassy,” as she was called by her fellow musicians and her fans) couldn’t do. Later in her career, she expanded her repertoire to include songs by rock icons like the Beatles and by Brazilian stars like Antonio Carlos Jobim, as well as collaborations with Count Basie, Stan Getz, and Milton Nascimento.
Another fine singer worth hearing is Anita O’Day, who was often called a “musician’s singer,” in that she was a favorite among musicians. Anita had a cool and totally evolved style that was outwardly relaxed yet intensely swinging at the same time. Her first important gig was with drummer Gene Krupa’s big band in the early ’40s, where Anita, together with trumpeter Roy Eldridge, recorded an instant jazz hit called “Let Me Off Uptown.” Following Benny Goodman’s lead, Krupa had a racially mixed band, and it was a daring yet ultimately beautiful musical moment to have a swinging white female vocalist and a great black trumpet jazz giant collaborate on a song that would become immensely popular for years to come.

Anita O’Day was not only an extraordinary singer but also an equally amazing human being. Like her idol Billie Holiday, Anita battled drug addiction and almost died from a heroin overdose in 1967. Remarkably, she kicked the habit completely and went on to resume her life as a jazz singer; she sang until her death in 2006 at age 87. Her autobiography, *High Times, Hard Times*, is an intimate window into her personal and musical lives, as well as a firsthand chronicle of jazz in both the late-swing and bebop eras. A few years after her death, Anita was the subject of an award-winning, Grammy-nominated documentary called *Anita O’Day: The Life of a Jazz Singer*. Anita O’Day lived “the jazz experience,” and we are fortunate to be able to see and hear her artistry and to read about the jazz life in her own words.
Another female song stylist who can stand shoulder to shoulder with those discussed so far is Dinah Washington, who was nicknamed “The Queen of the Blues”—a misleading moniker, especially since of all the singers profiled thus far (with the possible exception of Sarah Vaughan), Dinah was the most versatile in terms of mastery of a number of diverse styles. She was a powerful jazz and blues singer, but also an excellent pop singer as well. Dinah was an extremely effective rhythm and blues “crossover” artist, which meant that in addition to her career as a jazz vocalist, she excelled at R & B. In fact, Dinah won a Grammy in 1959 for her rendition of “What a Difference a Day Makes.” Her voice had a beautiful urgency to it, and her phrases were articulate yet bluesy—her sound was all her own, and like Ella, Sarah, and Anita, she had the gift of an immediately identifiable sound.

There were other fine vocalists who thrived during the bebop era. Nat “King” Cole and Mel Tormé were both excellent musicians before becoming known as jazz singers. Tormé was an accomplished drummer, and Nat Cole was a fine pianist who played with many great jazz giants, including Lester Young and Lionel Hampton. Both men had exceptionally smooth singing styles, and because of their excellent musicianship, they were able to forge solid jazz and popular music styles. Tormé was called “The Velvet Fog,” due to his smoky but pure tenor voice, and Cole had a silky smooth, easily identifiable approach; as a result both won many fans, especially Cole, who had his own television show on NBC in 1956–1957.

Other great jazz singers emerged in the ’40s and ’50s: the great baritones Billy Eckstine (whose big band included Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie), Joe Williams (one of Count Basie’s best-loved vocalists), Johnny Hartman (a great balled singer and the only singer to share album honors in the early ’60s with John Coltrane), and Mark Murphy, who is perhaps the most distinctive of this quartet of singers. Murphy bends and stretches notes and phrases as though they were made of putty. His voice lies somewhere in the baritone-bass range and has a dusky, streetwise quality to it that is irresistible. A recipient of multiple awards and honors, Murphy has retired from touring and recording. His website sums him up perceptively:

Listening to Mark Murphy, you will instantly understand that this artist is singing his life. The words, the notes, the intention of the song are all a part of the artist himself. (www.markmurphy.com)

ALL ALONE: A FEW WORDS ABOUT CHET BAKER

None but the lonely heart

The classical composer Tchaikovsky set Goethe’s poem to music, and the end result is something both haunting and beautiful. If we come to believe that the words and notes of a song are part of who an artist is, then we must talk about Chet Baker, since it is impossible to separate Baker the person from Baker the musician. And the words “haunting” and “beautiful” come to mind when listening to Chet’s singing. There has never been anyone quite like him in the jazz world.

A bit of background: Chet Baker’s life was like something out of a storybook—one with an unhappy ending. A native of Yale, Oklahoma, he migrated at an early age to California and achieved fame in the early ’50s as a jazz sensation and an embodiment of “cool,” thanks largely to his talent and his boyish good looks. Chet played with the original Gerry Mulligan quartet, a pianoless group that became a sensation, which led to his winning the DownBeat jazz poll in 1954, placing him ahead of jazz icon Miles Davis. The world, in short, was at Chet’s door. However, his lifelong addiction to heroin was ultimately his undoing and was the cause of his slow and painful decline as both an artist and as a human being. Chet Baker died in 1988 as the result of a mysterious fall from a second-story window ledge in a hotel in Amsterdam—the terrible end to a once-promising life. There have been a number of biographies about Baker, as well as a film documentary called Let’s Get Lost, in which he took part.

The astonishing thing about Baker’s singing is how closely tied it was to his trumpet playing, in terms of
both his delicate and almost fragile sound as vocalist and trumpeter, and the quality of his soloing as an
instrumentalist and a scat singer. Unlike other jazz singers who used syllables or nonsense words in their scat
solos—phrases like “ool-ya-coo” and “dee-ba-doo-bop”—Baker truly sounded like he was playing trumpet
with his voice. That is, his scat singing seemed more natural and less contrived than that of many of his
contemporaries. Pianist Phil Markowitz, who made some extraordinary quartet records with Baker in Paris in
the late ’70s, had this to say about working with him:

Working with Chet Baker was an apprenticeship of the highest order. We were young and he took us on, and was patient and taught by
example. Perfect phrasing, time feel like a taught rope, and the most intent listener I have ever seen on the bandstand. No show—just pure
intense feeling and concentration on the task at hand. His singing was an exact clone of his playing. Even at the older age, still the ebullient
young tone and feel that he had earlier in his youth.

Like Billie Holiday’s later work, Chet’s vocals throughout his career took on an aura of melancholy that has
touched the hearts of many listeners. His early recording of “I Get along without You Very Well” in the
mid-’50s and his heartbreaking rendition of “She Was Too Good to Me” over two decades later sound very
much like someone who had indeed lived some very sad moments. Hearing Baker sing songs like these
provides us with a window into the heart of sadness. “None but the lonely heart” are accurate words that
describe a singer who truly stands alone in the world of song.

WE’RE HIP: DAVE FRISHBERG AND BOB DOROUGH

I’m hip. I’m no square.
I’m alert, I’m awake, I’m aware.

From “I’m Hip” © 1964 (renewed), Swiftwater Music/Aral Music Lyrics: Dave Frishberg, Music: Bob Dorough

By now, it should be obvious that jazz mirrors the feelings of those who create it, as well as those who listen
to and experience it. We also know that it runs the gamut of emotions, and can be sad, wistful, contemplative,
angry, happy, and even silly. While many songs that jazz singers include in their repertoire have been written
by others, there is a small number of artists who both write and perform their own work. Two of the most
respected singer-songwriters in jazz are Dave Frishberg and Bob Dorough. And as their song attests, both are
“alert . . . awake . . .” and “aware,” and are two of the liveliest and most imaginative treasures in the world of
jazz tunesmiths.

Dave Frishberg is a diminutive and rather professorial-looking gentleman; however, as a pianist, he can
swing the doors off a barn, and as a writer of songs, he has few peers. Born in Minnesota in 1933, Frishberg
moved to New York City in 1957 and found work as a solo pianist. He ultimately wound up playing with
many of New York’s finest, including saxophonists Al Cohn, Zoot Sims, and Ben Webster; drummer Gene
Krupa; and singer Carmen McRae. A move to Los Angeles in 1971 brought Frishberg squarely into the city’s
legendary jazz scene, where he ultimately became quite popular among both musicians and listeners. While
his skills as a pianist were considerable, it was ultimately his songwriting and vocal renderings of his songs
that really put Frishberg on the map.

Many of Frishberg’s songs are left-of-center, witty, and playful, even though they may deal with both the
lighter and darker sides of the human condition. The titles of his songs are often offbeat as well, including
“I’m Hip” (in collaboration with Bob Dorough’s music), “Excuse Me for Living” (sarcasm raised to new
heights), “My Attorney Bernie” (a satirical look at lawyers’ lifestyles), “Too Long in L.A.” (about the
nightmare of the city’s freeway system and the diminishing quality of day-to-day living in the Golden State),
and one of his most famous songs, “Van Lingle Mungo,” in which all of the lyrics are made up of the names
of baseball players.
While he is arguably a critically acclaimed master of musical wit, Frishberg has written some attractive ballads as well. Most notable among them is a song called “You Are There,” one of the most touching songs ever written about love, longing, and perhaps loss. For this song, Frishberg’s words have been linked to a melody written by the legendary composer/arranger Johnny Mandel. One of the loveliest and most poignant renditions of this song—one well worth seeking out—was recorded by singer Irene Kral and pianist Alan Broadbent on an album on Choice Records called The Gentle Rain. It is considered by many to be among Dave Frishberg’s finest songs. The Kral album is available in a variety of places on the Internet, as is Frishberg’s own lovely version on his live duo album with Dorough called Who’s on First? (Blue Note Records).

Like Dave Frishberg, Bob Dorough is a gifted singer/songwriter whose work is by turns wickedly funny and sweetly heartfelt. Frishberg speaks of Dorough with admiration:

I’ve always been impressed by the excellence of his work. He doesn’t know how to write bad. He’s just a terrific writer, and very intent upon being excellent. (Jazz Times, January–February 2001)

Bob Dorough is sort of the Willie Nelson of jazz singer/songwriters. At age 88, he is ageless, energetic, audaciously funny, and he exhibits an effusive sense of joy and happiness about his life in music. Like Frishberg, he is a trenchant observer of the human condition and all of the foibles and follies that go along with it. Bob is a country boy from Cherry Hill, Arkansas, who brings new meaning to hipness; that is, Bob is “hip” without even trying.

**Interlude: Bobbin’ Along**

The first time I met Dorough was at the Deer Head Inn, northeastern Pennsylvania’s venerable old jazz club. I was new to the area, having relocated recently from Los Angeles, and wanted to check out what I had understood to be one of America’s oldest jazz venues—and a favorite destination of great players coming out from New York City and Philadelphia. The Deer Head was also known as a great watering hole for “locals” like Bob Dorough, Phil Woods, Dave Liebman, Bill Goodwin, and other jazz greats.

Even though I’ve forgotten who was playing there that night, I remember the ponytailed guy at the door, collecting the cover charge. I also remember saying something to him like “You know, your voice sounds really familiar,” to which he thrust out his hand and said, “Bob Dorough!” I said something dumb, like “Are you the club’s regular gatekeeper?” Bob laughed heartily and said, “Only when they can’t get anyone else.”

Here was the man behind the legend, the guy who was one of the only vocalists ever invited to sing two of his original songs on a 1962 Miles Davis record and whose composition “Devil May Care” was also recorded by the great trumpeter around that time. He was also the musical director, composer, and performer for the immensely popular kids’ television show Schoolhouse Rock! in the ’70s and ’80s. (Remember learning the multiplication tables set to music?) And here he was, taking my $12. That night was the beginning of a treasured friendship and some real musical adventures, which have included playing duo (thanks to a no-show bass player) for a fundraiser promoting the arts; singing and scatting a tune with him at the Deer Head’s weekly jam session; and working with him in the recording studio, playing drums on his “We the People” project. Bob is an easygoing, regular kind of guy who happens to possess enormous musical talent. He’s a poet, a two-fisted pianist, a teacher, and above all, a witty and compassionate man who’s a pleasure to be...
around. Most of all, he’s ageless, and his songs are timeless gifts that keep on rewarding you each time you hear them.

After graduating from the University of North Texas, Bob migrated to New York City at the beginning of the ’50s, where he immersed himself in that city’s dynamic jazz scene, as both a pianist and a singer. Twenty or so years down the road came the phenomenon of *Schoolhouse Rock!* where Dorough’s jazzy voice and music helped countless kids learn—among other things—their multiplication tables, with catchy, funny songs like “Naughty Number Nine” and “My Hero Zero.” Dorough has a special rapport with kids of all ages, and he never fails to inspire and spread pure joy during all his performances.

One of the things that makes Bob Dorough so unique is the quality of his voice. He bends and changes pitches in unpredictable places; he whispers, grumbles, chortles, sings falsetto—he even speaks his lyrics at times, rather than singing them. And he makes it all seem like he’s singing only for you, as though he might be sitting on the back porch with you after dinner, spinning a tale or two about life’s ups and downs. Part of the attractiveness in Bob’s voice and delivery comes from his background. The regional twang in his voice—like that of earlier singer-songwriter Georgia-born Johnny Mercer—has a pleasing quality in the way that it combines hip jazz phrasing and rural folksiness.

Both Dave Frishberg and Bob Dorough have created their own little corner of the jazz world, and taken either separately or together (as in their live duo concert recording mentioned above), they offer many hours of pleasure for listeners who enjoy stylish jazz singing and songwriting.

**BEYOND CATEGORY: A HANDBULK OF GREAT JAZZ SINGERS**

As we have discovered, there have been a great many individualists who have made their mark in the jazz world by following their own special paths. To try to fit these creative artists into a comfortable stylistic compartment is a futile effort at best, since some artists are completely beyond category. This is especially true in the world of jazz singing, which boasts a remarkable variety of vocalists, beginning—as we’ve seen—with Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday. While we’ve met some real individualists thus far in this chapter, there are many others who are worth a listen, due largely to the original and evocative way each approaches the art of the song. Here is a handful for your consideration.

In 2012, Sheila Jordan was honored by the National Endowment for the Arts by being named a Jazz Master. Such a prestigious award has been a long time coming for Jordan, now in her eighth decade. Jordan has always been a complete individualist, and her uncompromising approach to jazz singing had, until recently, won her a small but devoted following. Jordan has the ability to move from one note to another in truly unexpected ways. She swoops and glides in and around the chord changes like the eagle in Tennyson’s poem: up into the airstream, then diving into the abyss, only to swoop up once more. Even that’s not an accurate description of Jordan’s imaginative way with words and music. It has always been and will always be her own unique vision of singing. As of late, the listening public has finally begun to catch up to her visionary creativity. Her work with pianist Steve Kuhn’s quartet and especially her adventurous duet recordings with bassists Harvie Swartz (aka Harvie S) and Cameron Brown are great examples of Jordan’s art, yet they are only the tip of her creative iceberg.

Another totally original singer, Britain’s Norma Winstone, came into view in the late 1960s jazz scene in London, at Ronnie Scott’s legendary jazz club. Even though Winstone began her career singing more conventional material, she gradually became involved in more exploratory kinds of improvised music, including “wordless vocals,” where her voice—like Kay Davis’s voice on Duke Ellington’s 1945 version of “Mood Indigo”—was used primarily to provide additional tone colors in combination with other instruments. However, Winstone did more than just sing wordless melodies; she also improvised freely. This was a radical
departure in jazz singing, since it was not scatting but the creation of “free-form” singing—that is, vocal improvising without the restraints of chord changes or even syncopated phrases. In addition to developing and mastering this technique, Winstone has also become an important lyricist, creating the words for original compositions by a variety of well-known jazz artists.

Betty Carter was one of the most expressive singers in jazz and also one of the most distinctive, especially in how she was able to alter a melody, substituting her note choices for the notes in the original song. Such alterations can be quite risky if a singer tries to substitute one note for another and lands on the wrong note—say, a B-natural instead of a B-flat. The end result might sound out of place or “sour,” even to the inexperienced ear. Betty Carter was so musically skilled that she could give a standard song like “Misty” an almost completely different melody, so much so that the only way a listener would know it was the same song would be to hear the lyrics.

Betty’s road to jazz’s upper echelon was a long one, often fraught with frustration at not being able to fully pursue her musical vision. While she was much loved by fellow musicians and experienced listeners, Betty was confounded by critics who couldn’t grasp what she was doing as a jazz singer. As a result, she struggled for a number of years to be heard and appreciated as a true jazz artist. Her integrity paid off when she was invited to collaborate with singer Ray Charles. That collaboration yielded some fine recordings, most notably their rendition of “Baby, It’s Cold Outside,” which was an enormous hit and catapulted Betty Carter into national prominence. A well-known and highly respected jazz vocalist over the years, Betty was awarded a National Medal of Arts in 1997 by President Bill Clinton. She passed away a year later, but she has left us with a substantial body of work to enjoy, both on CD and video.

Like Betty Carter, Jimmy Scott didn’t become well known overnight as a jazz singer. Unlike many of today’s musical personalities from all genres, Scott (as well as many of the other singers profiled in this chapter) did not have the kind of support from a strong management machine, which has become almost always necessary for success (frequent bookings, substantial CD and MP3 sales, and effective publicity, among other things). In fact, it took Jimmy Scott over 70 years to achieve national prominence. He has recently been the subject of books and magazines, as well as a documentary called Jimmy Scott: If You Only Knew, which won an Audience Award in 2004.

Scott’s voice is pure magic. Because a disability limited his growth to just under five feet and also caused a lack of normal physiological development, Scott’s vocal range is somewhere in the region of alto, rather than the usual tenor or baritone ranges common to adult male singers; however, the undeniable beauty of his voice and the great emotion with which he renders a song have been known to bring listeners to tears. To put it another way, Jimmy strikes a real and true chord with all who hear him. He reaches down deeply into us and helps us connect with ourselves—our happiness, as well as our personal losses. His Grammy-nominated comeback album, called All the Way, was a critical sensation and thrust him squarely into his rightful place as one of jazz’s most endearing voices. Jimmy Scott has been called “The Golden Voice of Jazz.” Listen to him and you will immediately know why that description is accurate.

Other great song stylists deserving wider recognition are Abbey Lincoln and Nina Simone, both of whom, in addition to more conventional repertoire, wrote and sang songs protesting racial and gender inequality long before it became a widespread practice. Both Lincoln and Simone were also incredible song stylists who knew how to use body language as well as evocative lyrics to be able to tell a musical story. Another is Irene Kral, whose lovely alto voice lent itself well to ballads, and whose stunningly beautiful duo albums with pianist Alan Broadbent remain jazz classics long after her untimely death in 1978. Like Dinah Washington before her, Nancy Wilson excels in a broad range of styles in addition to jazz, including blues and pop tunes. Two of her most popular and best-selling recordings continue to be The Swingin’s Mutual with pianist George Shearing and Nancy Wilson/Cannonball Adderley, two classic examples of how in tune a versatile and accomplished singer can be with great instrumentalists. Wilson also hosted her own Emmy-winning television show in the ’70s, and she has been the host of National Public Radio’s Jazz Profiles series since 1995. Finally, there is Shirley Horn, who was one of the most exquisite ballad singers of all time. Like Betty Carter, Horn was also an accomplished pianist who led a trio for years—much of that time in her native
Washington, D.C. Trumpet legend Miles Davis, upon hearing Horn, invited her to open for him at the Village Vanguard in New York City. They remained friends for years, and in 1990, Miles appeared on Shirley’s album You Won’t Forget Me. And she certainly didn’t. Her 1999 album I Remember Miles won a Grammy Award for Best Vocal Performance.

A WORD OR TWO ABOUT VOCAL GROUPS

Whenever people get together to sing, each voice becomes part of a whole and has the responsibility to blend with the other voices in order to create an overall sound—much like playing a chord on the piano. Some voices carry the melody and others the harmonies. This is true whether we’re listening to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, a barbershop quartet like Old School, a doo-wop group like Little Anthony and the Imperials, or a rock group like Crosby, Stills, and Nash—and of course, jazz vocal groups, which, like vocal groups in the post-doo-wop rock world, weren’t as common as those in other genres.

Large and small jazz vocal groups have flourished in recent years on college and university campuses, and there are schools like the University of Miami in Florida that have maintained excellent programs for years. It may be fair to suggest that group jazz vocalizing in higher education may well have been a healthy by-product of the earlier innovators in the field. Three such early vocal groups were the Rhythm Boys, which featured Bing Crosby; the Pied Pipers, which was both a vocal group featured with Tommy Dorsey’s Orchestra and a backup group for Frank Sinatra; and the Mel-Tones, a group led by the prodigious singer-instrumentalist Mel Tormé. All thrive on both group harmonies and solos from each member.

The year 1957 saw a distinctive rebirth of the jazz vocal group with the advent of Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, which featured the collective and solo voices of Dave Lambert, Jon Hendricks, and Annie Ross. Each member of the trio complemented the other in terms of style, and their ability to blend their voices was remarkable. They often engaged in vocalese, which is essentially putting words to previously recorded instrumental solos (the vocalese style was created initially by singer Eddie Jefferson and further developed by King Pleasure). Annie Ross’s most famous vocalese effort was her composition “Twisted,” in which she put words to a composition written by the bebop tenor saxophonist Wardell Gray, and to his saxophone solo as well. Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross won a Grammy Award for their High Flying album in 1962. Ross departed later that year and was replaced by Yolande Bavan. There were three more recordings before the trio finally disbanded in 1964.

Other vocal groups followed, including France’s Swingle Singers, whose eight voices often performed a cappella (which means “without accompaniment”) or sometimes with only a bassist and a drummer. Their precursor, the Double Six of Paris, utilized six singers and multitracked (“overdubbed”) additional voices to double the number of voices, giving their recorded performances a choir-like effect. Singers Unlimited was the brainchild of vocal arranger Gene Puerling and began as a quartet of voices created to record commercials. Ultimately, they moved into the performance arena, as an a cappella group, featuring Puerling’s brilliant and now-classic vocal arrangements. They also recorded with a variety of musicians and utilized multitracking as well, to create a wide range of tonal colors and moods. The Manhattan Transfer, an enormously popular American group formed in the early ’70s, was a quartet of singers who also used overdubbing and added synthesizers as well. Their version of Weather Report’s “Birdland” became an instant classic and won the group a Grammy. Finally, the New York Voices, unlike the others profiled, has followed a different path—one that doesn’t feature the vocalese approach of words attached to solos. Instead, the group favors lyrics, scat solos, and horn-like vocal ensemble backgrounds and riffs. So a listener might hear a lead vocalist singing a melody or scatting a solo, while the voices in the background support the singer, much as a sax or brass section in a big band would play behind a soloist. The group also uses voices to create entire ensemble passages—another common characteristic of big-band music.

THE SCENE TODAY: SOME ESTABLISHED VOICES
The downturn in the recording industry, which has contributed to the slow demise of record companies, has come about largely as a result of our ability to download music from the Internet. The record-buying public is fast becoming the downloading public. Reacting to this trend, many musicians across genres have taken it upon themselves to produce commercially available CDs and MP3 downloads. This means that the artist is financially responsible for producing the project—from the recording to the layout and design of the disc or download. This phenomenon has been widespread, particularly in the independent (“indie”) rock and jazz worlds.

Many jazz artists have formed their own labels or have offered their music to small, independent jazz labels. One result of this has been the ever-growing volume of jazz artists who have recorded and released their work into the world. And with that growth, as well as websites such as [spotify.com](http://spotify.com), we as listeners are able to hear a much broader range of music than ever before from artists we might never have heard of otherwise. All this is a way of saying that there seem to be many more jazz vocalists on the scene today than in pre-Internet years; and as a result, this next section will offer a smattering of them, with the hope that you will further explore their music as well as the music of others you have yet to discover.

There are many wonderful male and female vocalists on the scene today, and all are worth hearing. As you experience the song stylings of whichever singers you choose, listen to each one perform in a variety of musical settings in order to get a better feel for his or her approach to jazz singing.

Among the more established of today’s jazz voices are Grammy winners Al Jarreau, George Benson, and Bobby McFerrin, all of whom have highly individualistic approaches to the art of the song. Al Jarreau has a light and airy voice and pays great attention to nuance, subtlety, and feeling in his vocals. He has, over the years, gravitated toward the adult contemporary pop genre, although he is perfectly capable of more traditional approaches to jazz singing. In recent years, he has also been involved on projects promoting children’s literacy through music. George Benson is, first and foremost, a skilled jazz guitarist—one who has recorded some great straight-ahead jazz records as well as some stellar collaborations with other jazz stars, including Miles Davis. Benson’s Warner Brothers recording *Breezin’* was a major turning point in his career, as it featured his vocal on a song called “This Masquerade.” The album topped the charts and went platinum in sales, catapulting Benson into fame and many more jazz and pop recordings. He has won 10 Grammy Awards and has been honored as a Jazz Master by the National Endowment for the Arts. Bobby McFerrin can only be described as a one-man orchestra. He can sound like Miles Davis’s muted trumpet or like Armando Peraza’s conga drums. His musical vision is virtually boundless; as his website puts it:

> Listening to Bobby McFerrin sing may be hazardous to your preconceptions. Side effects may include unparalleled joy, a new perspective on creativity, rejection of the predictable, and a sudden, irreversible urge to lead a more spontaneous existence. ([www.bobbymcferrin.com](http://www.bobbymcferrin.com))

McFerrin is an extraordinarily daring vocalist who is able to defy musical gravity, thanks to his superior musicianship. In 1984, before reaching national prominence, McFerrin recorded a solo voice album—no other instruments were used. He used his voice for each instrument—without any overdubbing or electronic trickery.

A breakthrough hit for him came with the release of his album *Simple Pleasures* and his song “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” which consisted of McFerrin’s voice overdubbed eight times. No instrumental accompaniment; all Bobby—all the way.

Over the years, Bobby McFerrin has won 10 Grammy Awards and has collaborated with the likes of pianists Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock and cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He has also been active as a conductor and works with choral groups in the United States and abroad.

The beauty and spirit of Sarah Vaughan burns brightly in the person of Dee Dee Bridgewater, whose 2011 mostly ballad release *Midnight Sun* is an extraordinary experience in heartfelt balladry. “Extraordinary” is an apt description of this artist, whose work spans almost four decades, beginning with her association with the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra in the ’70s, as well as her performances with such luminaries as Sonny Rollins, Dizzy Gillespie, and Max Roach. Much of Dee Dee’s subsequent work has been praised by critics and listeners alike. She has recorded many albums, many of which she produced herself.

Bridgewater’s artistic energies have not been limited to jazz. She has had extensive experience as an
actor/performer in musical theater and won a Tony Award in 1975 for her performance in *The Wiz*. She is also a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations in that body’s drive to end world hunger—and as if that weren’t enough, Dee Dee has hosted National Public Radio’s *Jazz Set* for over a decade.

**THE SCENE TOMORROW: SOME RECENT VOICES**

Look out! There are some other fine singers on the horizon, waiting for you to discover them, so they can turn your head around. Here are some of them, in no particular order.

Dianne Reeves, in addition to coming out of the tradition of Sarah Vaughan, Carmen McRae, and other great singers of that era, puts her own spin on style by infusing her rhythm and blues roots. Four of her recordings have each won a Grammy, and she has appeared in many kinds of settings, from small groups to symphony orchestras like the Boston Pops.

Canadian Diana Krall came into prominence in the early ’90s. She has a smoky contralto voice and is a very good jazz pianist. Diana studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston and with bassist Ray Brown and pianists Jimmy Rowles and Alan Broadbent in Los Angeles. Her first album was released in 1993 in Canada. Diana won a Grammy six years later for her rendition of “When I Look into Your Eyes,” on the Verve album of the same name. She married Elvis Costello in 2003, and thanks to his encouragement, began writing songs as well as collaborating with him on new material. Their musical association culminated a year after their marriage with a new album of music called *The Girl in the Other Room* for the Verve label.

Roseanna Vitro exudes personality both on and off stage, and it is very clear that she loves to sing—especially with top-flight musicians like the late drummer Elvin Jones, bassists Buster Williams and Christian McBride, and pianists Kenny Werner and Fred Hersch. Her recordings represent a broad diversity of musical interests, including tributes to Ray Charles, Bill Evans, and homages to Brazilian music and the blues. Her 2011 Grammy-nominated recording is a tribute to singer-songwriter Randy Newman and is simply called *The Music of Randy Newman*. The thread that runs through all of Roseanna’s recordings is the tremendous passion and vitality she puts into each performance. Whether it be a rousing blues shouter, a silky smooth bossa nova, or a burning straight-ahead tune, Roseanna is at the center of it all, the glue that holds the heart of music together.

She also served in 2009 as a Jazz Ambassador, sponsored by Jazz at Lincoln Center and the U.S. Department of State, and was awarded the same position five years earlier by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, co-sponsoring with the U.S. Department of State. As a part of her ambassadorship, Roseanna performed, taught, and gave workshops internationally and, as a result, has received broad exposure as a true world-class vocalist.

Two young singers whose intriguing, eclectic, and wholly original approaches to both singing and composition are Esperanza Spalding and Gretchen Parlato. We have already profiled Spalding as an up-and-coming bassist in an earlier chapter; however, her songs and vocals are wholly original affairs and, like her bass playing and instrumental compositions, emphasize nuance and texture in addition to syncopation and groove. The mix is like a delicious *cioppino*, full of sonic flavors that will lodge themselves into your memory long after the recording has ended. A new listener—or a seasoned listener who has yet to experience Esperanza Spalding—will want to begin by listening to her “Societies,” that is, her breakout disc, *Chamber Music Society*, and her funkier follow-up recording, *Radio Music Society* (both on the Heads Up label). Her vocals on both discs are light as a feather yet contain an urgency that belies their breathiness. And Spalding’s rhythmic skills as a bassist inform her singing as well, allowing her to effortlessly execute syncopations that many other singers would not even begin to attempt.

Gretchen Parlato, like her friend and sometimes singing partner Esperanza Spalding, is fearless when it comes to wholly original interpretations of a standard or a classic song from the jazz repertoire. For example, elsewhere in this book, we have mentioned the Bill Evans composition “Blue in Green,” as played by Miles Davis (and Evans with his trio): its moody, melancholy, and thoroughly beautiful melody and solos. Parlato has recorded a totally unique version of the song on her album, *The Lost and Found* (ObliqSound)—a
rhythmic shape shifter which finds Parlato’s beautiful, plaintive voice floating over the constantly morphing rhythm section, creating a stunningly and yet quietly intense effect as the song progresses. And Gretchen makes it sound easy.

Other excellent female singers recording and performing today include Cassandra Wilson, Kate McGarry, Patricia Barber, Jane Monheit, Karrin Allyson, Madeline Peyroux, Denise Donatelli, Tierney Sutton, Nancy Reed, and Julie Kelly.

The list of male jazz singers on the scene today is not quite as extensive as the roster of female vocalists; however, these are some of the more prominent gentlemen turning a phrase:

Kurt Elling, a singer whose formidable control and virtuosity have earned him a Grammy for Best Jazz Vocal Album, as well as 10 nominations, is a master of every facet of what makes a singer great. The New York Times referred to him as “the standout male vocalist of our time,” and the Washington Post called him “dynamic, daring, and interesting.” Elling not only sings standards but also writes and performs his own songs. He is also a master of vocalese and composes and performs his own word versions of instrumental solos, such as his utterly astonishing take on John Coltrane’s “Resolution” from the latter’s classic album, A Love Supreme. To label Elling as daring would certainly be an understatement. To call him a brilliant vocal stylist would be accurate.

A lesser known but equally appealing singer is Dwight Trible. In fact, to call him a singer is hardly an accurate description of who he really is. For sure, Dwight has a rich, full baritone voice that not only soars and glides above an ensemble, but he also knows how to “play the silence”: that is, to use silent moments to give the notes he sings more emphasis, more feeling, more meaning. To call him a singer, then, is to tell only part of the story. Dwight is a poet, a spoken word performer, and an intensely spiritual man, much in the same way we think of John Coltrane as spiritual. In fact, Dwight has been a member of ex-Coltrane saxophonist Pharoah Sanders’s group for some time now and adds the perfect dimension to Pharoah’s transcendent musical explorations. To play music with Sanders, Trible, pianist William Henderson, and bassist Trevor Ware was one of the musical highlights of my musical and spiritual life. Dwight Trible deserves to be heard by a much wider audience. His voice and music are filled with eternal peace and hope for a better world—his message clear and his voice sweet and strong.

Other male singers worth investigating are Giacomo Gates and Kenny Washington, who both possess clear and resonant voices, and are wonderful interpreters of many great old and new songs; daring experimenters Theo Bleckmann and JD Walter, who use electronics and other found objects in interesting and creative ways; and newcomer Gregory Porter—a name to watch and a voice to definitely hear. The future is now, and these vocalists, both older and younger, are out there, paving the way and building upon the traditions created by Satchmo, Lady Day, Sarah, Ella, Frank, Tony, and so many others. The singer and the song are inseparable. The music of the voices and their stories will always be with us, if we are open to the richness of the experiences that they offer us.
Getting Personal with Dwight Trible

What advice would you offer a new listener who will be experiencing your music for the first time, either in concert, on YouTube, or via one of your recordings?

For me the word “jazz” means spontaneous creativity. The advice that I would give to someone hearing me for the first time: We cannot insist that creativity must always follow the path that we have grown accustomed to.

It’s like a bird soaring free doing its own thing—a spiritual thing. Be open to it and maybe we can learn something new together.

What would be the first recording of yours that you would recommend for an initial listening experience and as a good introduction to your music?

I am attempting to give a glimpse of the sum total of my present and past life experience.

The record of mine that I would recommend is my latest: Cosmic.

The reason: I have struggled to get my spirit’s truth on recordings as I have demonstrated and been able to achieve in a live performance setting. I don’t feel that I have done it completely yet, but this record has come the closest so far.
Getting Personal with Roseanna Vitro

What advice would you offer a new listener who will be experiencing your music for the first time, either in concert, on YouTube, or via one of your recordings?

I’m not certain that you give people advice on how to listen to your music. I have found there are many elements that go into “whether” a person likes your music or not: the venue you’re playing in; the band you’re singing with; and the music that you’re interested in at that time.

For singers especially, a lot depends on “who” the listener has been exposed to. First we’re assuming that the listener likes music, or they wouldn’t have put themselves in front of you or put your record on. If you’re with a good band and you have a good sound system and it’s a club where audiences come to listen to music, your chances are good that the listener will enjoy you. I always tell my students that you have about two songs for the audience to decide if they want to hear more or not. If you sing with conviction and you begin with an easy-to-relate-to piece, plus look at the audience to invite them in, it usually turns out pretty good. It’s the same with a recording. It only takes a spot listen to a couple of tunes to determine if you enjoy the sonic sound of the singer you’re listening to.

What would be the first recording of yours that you would recommend for an initial listening experience and as a good introduction to your music?

If the listener is a bebop or post-bop jazz fan, I would recommend Softly (1994, Concord CD), with Fred Hersch, Jay Anderson, Tom Rainey, George Coleman, Tim Ries, and Mino Cinelu. It is a nice cross section of material with a beautiful sound.

One of my most popular recordings was Passion Dance (1996, Telarc). There is a large cast of musicians because my husband, great recording engineer Paul Wickliffe, was closing his studio, Skyline in Manhattan. This CD was born from a jam
session to say good-bye to Paul’s studio, and it features many great musicians such as pianists Kenny Werner and Larry Willis, bassists Christian McBride and Ratzo Harris, drummers Elvin Jones and Clarence Penn, guitarist Vic Juris, vibraphonist Steve Nelson, and many others. What a moment that was. Wow. I have stories on each CD.

I have recorded 12 albums with the greatest musicians in the world. Each recording is different, plus I have four tribute records: *Catchin’ Some Rays: The Music of Ray Charles*, *Conviction: Thoughts of Bill Evans*, *The Time of My Life: The Music of Steve Allen*, and *The Music of Randy Newman* (the Grammy-nominated one). On each recording, whether a tribute or not, I study the music I’m interested in and choose the players that I feel would best suit my project and then work with the band or pianist to create the arrangements. So I’ve given my heart and my best in each case. The rest is up to the listeners’ ears.

**SELECTED SINGERS’ WEBSITES: FROM THEN ’TIL NOW**

Note: Only official sites are listed. Use Google for all others.

Louis Armstrong: [www.satchmo.net](http://www.satchmo.net)
Billie Holiday: [www.billieholiday.com](http://www.billieholiday.com)
Ella Fitzgerald: [www.ellafitzgerald.com](http://www.ellafitzgerald.com)
Anita O’Day: [www.anitaodaydoc.com](http://www.anitaodaydoc.com)
Mark Murphy: [www.markmurphy.com](http://www.markmurphy.com)
Chet Baker: [www.chetbakertribute.com](http://www.chetbakertribute.com)
Dave Frishberg: [www.davefrishberg.net](http://www.davefrishberg.net)
Bob Dorough: [www.bobdorough.com](http://www.bobdorough.com)
Sheila Jordan: [www.sheilajordan.com](http://www.sheilajordan.com)
Jimmy Scott: [www.jimmyscottofficialwebsite.org](http://www.jimmyscottofficialwebsite.org)
Norma Winstone: [www.normawinstone.com](http://www.normawinstone.com)
Nina Simone: [www.ninasimone.com](http://www.ninasimone.com)
Irene Kral: [www.irenekral.com](http://www.irenekral.com)
Al Jarreau: [www.aljarreau.com](http://www.aljarreau.com)
Bobby McFerrin: [www.bobbymcferrin.com](http://www.bobbymcferrin.com)
George Benson: [www.georgebenson.com](http://www.georgebenson.com)
Dee Dee Bridgewater: [www.deedeebridgewater.com](http://www.deedeebridgewater.com)
Dianne Reeves: [www.dianereevses.com](http://www.dianereevses.com)
Diana Krall: [www.dianakrall.com](http://www.dianakrall.com)
Roseanna Vitro: [www.roseannavitro.com](http://www.roseannavitro.com)
Esperanza Spalding: [www.esperanzaspalding.com](http://www.esperanzaspalding.com)
Gretchen Parlato: [www.gretch parlato.com](http://www.gretch parlato.com)
Kate McGarry: [www.katemcgarry.com](http://www.katemcgarry.com)
Tierney Sutton: [www.tierneysutton.com](http://www.tierneysutton.com)
Julie Kelly: [www.juliekelley.com](http://www.juliekelley.com)
Jane Monheit: [www.janemonheitonline.com](http://www.janemonheitonline.com)
Karrin Allyson: [www.karrin.com](http://www.karrin.com)
Denise Donatelli: [www.denisedonatelli.com](http://www.denisedonatelli.com)
Kurt Elling: [www.kurtelling.com](http://www.kurtelling.com)
Giacomo Gates: [www.giacomogates.com](http://www.giacomogates.com)
Kenny Washington: [www.kennywashingtonvocalist.com](http://www.kennywashingtonvocalist.com)
Dwight Trible: [www.dwighttrible.com](http://www.dwighttrible.com)
Théo Bleckmann: [www.theobleckmann.com](http://www.theobleckmann.com)
JD Walter: [www.jdwalter.com](http://www.jdwalter.com)
Gregory Porter: [www.gregoryporter.com](http://www.gregoryporter.com)

**RECOMMENDED READING**

Note: The books included here represent only a small sampling of the many fine portraits of jazz’s master singers, beginning with those whose names are synonymous with the swing era. For additional readings, visit the websites listed in the previous section and google other names in this chapter to learn more about many other excellent vocal artists who populate the jazz world.

**GENERAL**


**Ethel Waters**


**Billie Holiday**


**Frank Sinatra**


**Ella Fitzgerald**


**Sarah Vaughan**


**Anita O’Day**


**Nat Cole**


**Tony Bennett**


**Nina Simone**


**Jimmy Scott**


**Chet Baker**


**Johnny Hartman**


*Figure 18.6. Roseanna Vitro. Courtesy of John Abbott.*
IS JAZZ ENTERTAINMENT OR IS IT ART?

CAN ART BE ENTERTAINING? CAN ENTERTAINMENT BE ART?

In order to even begin thinking about these questions, we need to look briefly at what we mean by the word “entertainment.” According to The Oxford English Dictionary (aka the OED), entertainment can be defined as “the act of occupying a person’s attention agreeably; amusement,” and as “a thing which entertains or amuses someone, [especially] a public performance or exhibition designed to entertain people.”

Now, a little definition goes a long way; it would appear that “entertainment,” then, can be anything from enjoying a night at the circus, a rock concert, or a Harry Potter movie, to pleasurably savoring a performance of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream or swooning at a ballerina’s graceful movements during Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake. The latitude given to defining the concept of entertainment is enormous; however, it may well boil down to the notion that entertainment is a phenomenon that has been created expressly for the pleasure of an audience.

That being said, we must now ask ourselves another, more complex question: What is art? Turning once again to the safety of the OED, we may define art as “a pursuit or occupation in which skill is directed towards the production of a work of imagination, imitation, or design, or toward the gratification of the aesthetic senses.” The OED further suggests that art may then also be seen as “the products of any such pursuit.” Translating that into plain English, we may say that artists are those who creatively use imagination, as well as some manner of design or structure, in order to produce visual arts like painting and sculpture, and performing arts such as music, dance, and film and theater arts. And often, artists begin their journey under the influence of other artists—those who provide inspiration via their own artworks. And this is where imitation comes into play. Artists—especially those who are less experienced—look to other artists and artworks for inspiration—and if they’re truly committed to their artistic growth, these artists will break away from their influences in order to create their own unique vision of the world.

So then, can art exist that entertains as well as evokes or pleases the senses? Can any form of art be expressly created to attract and bring a degree of pleasure to an audience? Look at paintings by the accomplished and imaginative artist Norman Rockwell, who painted many scenes depicting the smallest moments in American life. Chances are that viewing one or more of his works will be a pleasurable experience. Likewise, seeing a film like 2010’s Avatar can bring pleasure (the story itself) and can simultaneously appeal to our aesthetic senses (the visual beauty of the film and its engaging musical score). And in the world of “popular” music, Tom Waits’s Mule Variations and Joni Mitchell’s Blue both offer stories of other times and places, while still providing many musical pleasures for their listeners. These are but a few examples of how art, by our definition, can in fact bring pleasure (entertainment) to those willing to spend some time with it. So at the end of the day, it may well be that art can and does entertain, and that which we know as entertainment can also be quite artistic in nature. As you might guess, the line between the two can be a blurry one at best! In the final analysis, what is important is whether or not you find the work deeply fulfilling, perhaps in a way that even you can’t explain.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN: A FEW EXAMPLES OF JAZZ AS ART AND ENTERTAINMENT

Sometimes, as we have seen in the jazz world, musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington were both artists and entertainers; that is, they offered not only an amusing or pleasurable experience for listeners, but also the artistic creation of both written and improvised masterpieces, utilizing the building blocks that are