

JAZZ SINGERS: SEEKING THE SOUL OF A SONG

Coordinator: Tom Grant

Jazz singing is the imaginative approach to a song, any song, where the voice is used as the instrument of improvisation. The jazz singer strives to be original, searching for what jazz singer and educator, Tierney Sutton, calls “the soul of a song.” Consequently, they court the displeasure of audiences and even composers, several of whom have publicly criticized singers who “take liberties” with their work. But the jazz singer remains undaunted. “I hate straight singing,” declared Billie Holiday, surely the highest authority on this subject. “I have to change a tune to my own way of doing it.”

This course traces the evolution of jazz singing from its emergence during the “blues craze” preceding World War I through the subsequent decades, when the commercial recording industry took control, becoming a decisive arbiter of changing popular taste in music—and thus often hostile to originality—and into the present time, when jazz itself has become, lamentably, an embattled minority cultural expression.

Tom Grant, having offered many study groups on American writers (“American Humor,” “Mark Twain”), is venturing further into American music after co-coordinating “Jazz Appreciation,” prompted by many years as an amateur musician.

Type of Study Group: Seminar-style group discussion

Readings and other Materials/Online Services: Readings each week will be put online, along with an annotated playlist to be listened to in advance and suggestions for additional listening.

******* SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *******

WEEK 1

TOPIC: The “Blues Queens”

READING:

“I Used to be Your Sweet Mama” by Angela Davis, excerpt from *Blues*

Legacies and Black Feminism, 1998.

QUESTIONS:

What do the unabashedly secular blues of the 1920s owe to vocal traditions in the Black communities of the past, most notably plantation songs and church spirituals? (Note: an introduction to this musical period will be provided as part of the first week's reading.)

Among the important female blues singers of the 1920s, only Ethel Waters was able to move into the emerging white commercial music mainstream dominated by "tin pan alley" songs. How is that successful transition apparent in her choice of material, singing style and appearance?

How did the female blues singers of the 1920s influence later interpreters after World War II, most notably Dinah Washington?

WEEK 2

TOPIC: "Louis Also Wants to Sing!": the male Blues tradition

READINGS:

"Louis, Bing, Bessie & Ethel: Creating Jazz Singing" by Gary Giddins;
"Creating Jazz Singing" [Tom's title], from *Bing Crosby: A Pocketful of Dreams--The Early Years 1903-1940*.

QUESTIONS:

Although recognized from the start as an exceptionally gifted trumpet soloist, Louis Armstrong was prevented from singing by his early employers because they thought his gravelly timbre too unpolished for (especially) white audiences. Yet this is among the many vocal qualities so widely admired for many years until his death? Are you among his admirers and why?

Louis Armstrong's great rival during the 1920s was a very different Black singer, Cab Calloway, the first Black male singing star who didn't double on an instrument. Listen to how both treat ballads. What differences do you hear?

Before he became a popular star interpreting the emerging Great American Songbook, Bing Crosby was widely admired, especially by his new friend, Louis Armstrong, for his ability to spontaneously improvise on a melody—and do so with an impeccable sense of swing. How are those talents apparent?

WEEK 3

TOPIC: The scat tradition

READING:

Interviews with Mel Torme, Anita O'Day, Jon Hendricks, Bobby McFerrin

QUESTIONS:

Scatting, improvised singing of nonsense syllables, common in many cultures, became a signature style by the late 1920s in America, coinciding with the emergence of swing music. How did this style help to inspire originality in improvisation?

Two challenging features of scat singing are humor and musical wit. As you accommodate your ears to jazz by listening intently, can you detect those moments when you “get” the references?

Ella Fitzgerald is widely recognized as the greatest of all scat singers, the “Queen of Scat.” Why is that accolade so richly deserved?

WEEK 4: Jazz “Divas” I: Billie Holiday & Ella Fitzgerald

WEEK 5: The swing era & breakout stars

WEEK 6: Bebop: the vocalists

WEEK 7: “The Birth of the Cool”: reaction to bebop

WEEK 8: Jazz “Divas” II: Sarah Vaughn & Carmen McCrae

WEEK 9: Soul sisters

WEEK 10: The emergence of vocalese

WEEK 11: Post-bop jazz scene: modern vocalists

WEEK 12: Jazz singers abound: the contemporary scene

LP² STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR SPRING 2023

INSTRUCTIONS

Text settings: Begin each response at the left margin below the section title.

Coordinator Names: Listed in alphabetical order. (#Primary contact, *First time coordinator).

Study Group Description: Preferably 150 words or less.

Coordinator Biographies: 30 words or less per coordinator. Coordinators are listed in alphabetical order.

Type of Study Group: List all that apply: •Presentation followed by discussion; •Mostly discussion; •Seminar, Workshop, •Reports by participants, •Other (specify)

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Include approximate cost of required materials.

Books: Full title in *italics* followed by author. Add editor/translator/publisher if a specific edition is required.

Coordinator Supplied Materials: e.g., email attachments or study group website, or links to online materials. Provide up to three examples of the sources for articles and excerpts here and/or in the Syllabus.

Films, videos, DVDs: Specify if a video subscription is required.

Syllabus:

Weeks 1-3: Provide Topics, Readings and at least 3 Questions/week
Weeks 4-12: Provide Topics for each week. Readings and Questions may be added but are not required.

NEW: GUEST SPEAKER HONORARIUM POLICY

Each 12-week study group is allowed two (2) paid guest speakers @ \$200.

If you plan to have an outside guest speaker who requires an honorarium:

Discuss with your Curriculum Committee contact

- Read the attached [Honorarium Policy](#)
- Submit [Honorarium Request Form](#) to your contact
- After the guest has finished your session, notify the IER Treasurer

N.B. This does not apply to outside guest speakers who are not paid

