

Improvisation & the Jazz Singer

If you're not improvising, you're not singing jazz. . .or are you?

by Jan
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What makes a singer a jazz singer? Does song content determine jazz from pop? Is improvisation necessary to make a vocalist a jazz vocalist? What category do we place singers Billie Holiday, Johnny Hartman, and Frank Sinatra, or vocalists who specialized in 'lyricized versions' of instrumental solos? These singers were not noted for 'scat' singing, and yet are acclaimed as some of American's best jazz singers.

Jazz singing has always been difficult to define. Musicians and singers have long disagreed on the specifics. Even well-known vocalists such as Carmen McRae shun the title "jazz singer," feeling it too limited and ill-defined.

To Improv or Not To Improv

While the topic is often contested, most musicians will agree that jazz singing includes improvisation. Early jazz singers such as Ethel Waters improvised within a song by altering

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Jan Shapiro (right) with student: "An understanding of vocal improvisation can only help a singer's craft."

rhythmic phrases, not by scat singing. Many singers such as Mildred Bailey, Connee Boswell, and Billie Holiday improvised by singing the lyric but changing the rhythmic phrase, melodic phrase, or both. Some vocal groups such as the Rhythm Boys, the Boswell Sisters, and the Mills Brothers set the stage for future vocal groups by emulating instruments—singing lyrics but phrasing in a 'horn-like' manner, and/or vocalizing percussive sounds.

As jazz singing evolved, artists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Mel Tormé began utilizing scat syllables in a whole



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musical chorus as yet a more elaborate vehicle of improvisation.

In Berklee's Voice Department, we feel it essential that students become familiar with many approaches to contemporary singing. We also believe that a basic knowledge and skill in improvisation will help any singer, regardless of style.

Vocal improvisation, though based in American jazz, is used in various forms of today's popular music. Learning the art of improvisation as related to the voice gives all vocalists a broader view of just what vocal style can encompass.

Teaching Improvisation

Despite the benefits of understanding improvisation, the majority of young students today are not experienced or familiar with scat singing. Jazz vocals are few and far between on commercial radio or television, so most students lack exposure to the genre. This creates special challenges in teaching vocal improvisation, and in promoting its usefulness to the contemporary singer.

In some of Berklee's departments, we have tried to reach students through playing or singing the blues. Since the blues is the foundation for much of our popular and contemporary music, it serves as an important teaching bridge between jazz and contemporary popular music.

In the Voice Department, faculty have found a blend of basic skills reinforcement and personal guidance to be most effective in teaching improvisation. Bob Stoloff, for example, specializes in vocal improvisation, having performed professionally with such artists as Bobby McFerrin, Urszula Dudziak, and Jay Clayton.

His fundamental course on improvisation is based on rhythmic patterns and articulation of scat syllables. Stoloff uses an instrumental approach to the voice, specifically encouraging the mimicking of drum and percussive sounds.

Stoloff first gives students a rhythmic foundation, using eighth note and triplet exercises. He then applies scat syllables derived from such artists as Mel Torme, Ella Fitzgerald, Jon Hendricks, and Eddie Jefferson. Bob also incorporates lip and tongue exercises in his teaching to help each student

SCAT SCHEMATICS

Voice Department faculty member Bob Stoloff has designed an effective curriculum of exercises and examples to help students improve their vocal improvisational skills. He first gives students a strong rhythmic foundation using exercises that mix eighth notes and triplets (see Example 1). Next, he introduces scat syllables derived from the great vocal improvisers, encouraging students to add shape and texture to their melodic solos (see Example 2).

Through additional vocal etudes of increasing difficulty, along with extensive lip and tongue exercises, students gain a fluency in the language of vocal improvisation with which they can build their own solos in their own personal styles.

Example 1: Balancing Triplets and Eighths

Example 2: Melodic Contour with Syllables

develop and improve vocal articulation (see "Scat Schematics").

The Chord Approach

Other teachers, like myself, may use combinations of materials to guide a student. For example, I often have students sing inversions of basic seventh chords on specific scat syllables, graduating from major seventh to minor, augmented, ninth, and thirteenth chords. I may assign a simple transcribed instrumental solo, which the student will sing over chord progressions, as well as learning and singing specific rhythmic patterns to a prerecorded rhythm section cassette tape.

When the student has a good beginning sense of hearing chord progressions, we may "trade fours"—taking turns at scat singing over a jazz standard. In all cases, I encourage lis-

tening, listening, and listening. Consistent listening to recorded examples of singers who utilize scat syllables, to jazz vocalists who improvise within the lyrics of a song, and to instrumentalists within traditional and contemporary ensembles is most important.

Are you singing jazz if you can't scat? The answer is subjective. Certainly, a firm understanding of vocal improvisational techniques can only help a singer's craft. Any vocalist would do well to explore the genre.

Still, we may never completely answer the question for vocalists, "What is a jazz singer?" Helen Humes, former singer with the Count Basie band, may have found the best definition when she said, "I've been called a blues singer, a jazz singer, and a ballad singer. Well, I'm all three... which means I'm just a singer." ■