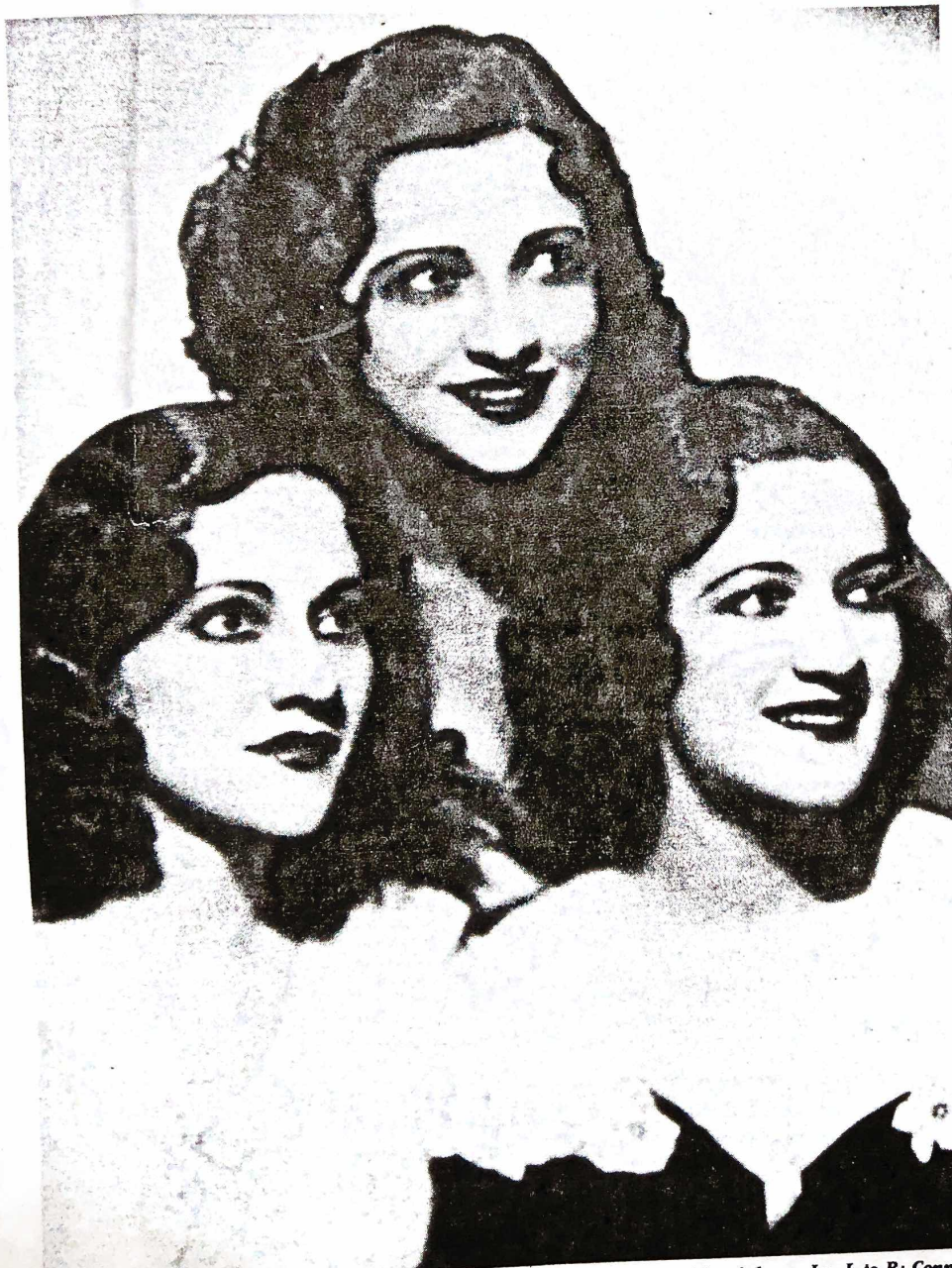


# CONNIE BOSWELL AND Pioneers In Vocal Jazz



THE BOSWELL SISTERS, 1932, internationally known singing trio from New Orleans, La. L to R: Connie, Martha & Vet.

In 1927, Duke Ellington used black singer Adelaid Hall in his band to record "Creole Love Call."<sup>1</sup> This recording exemplified Hall's use of wordless trumpet-like vocals. When black singer Ivie Anderson joined Ellington's band in 1931, she was also considered a part of the instrumental sound of the band. However, in the mid thirties, the vocal nuances of rhythmic changes, melodic and dynamic variations suggested by Ethel Waters and blues singers such as Bessie Smith, Maimie Smith and others, were not generally accepted or understood by most white vocalists. *The Boswell Sisters were one of the few white singing groups who utilized wordless vocals.*

The young Boswell Sisters grew up listening to the horn players of New Orleans, the singing of black servants within the Boswell home, and blacks who congregated at the French Market in New Orleans to play their homemade instruments and lift their spirits in song.<sup>2</sup> Specific black singers also influenced Connie Boswell and her sisters. In Simon's *The Best of the Music Makers*, Connie says, "And I tried to sing like Mamie Smith. She was a great blues singer, better even, I thought than Bessie Smith. When I was a kid, my mama took me to a theater for blacks—they'd let us whites in only on Friday nights—and there I heard Mamie, and after that I always tried to sing like her."<sup>3</sup>

The Boswell sisters' father preferred classical repertoire over New Orleans jazz, and as a result, the Boswell girls, Martha, Connie, and Helvetia (Vet), were classically trained. Martha studied piano, Connie studied cello, and Vet studied the violin. The sisters played other instruments as well. Vet played

Photo courtesy of Dain McCain

# THE BOSWELL SISTERS

banjo, Martha and Connee played saxophone.<sup>4</sup>

Connee and her sisters first recorded in 1925 on a Victor mobile unit. When they left home in New Orleans to perform on the road it was 1928, —the Boswell girls were in their early teens. The Boswells first went to Chicago to audition for touring vaudeville circuits. They were supposed to play a classical set on violin, cello and piano, a jazz set on banjo, piano and sax, some dancing by youngest sister Vet. and then, group singing.<sup>5</sup> However, they became so nervous that they were unable to play their instruments and instead resorted to singing just as they had always done at home. From then on the Boswells were asked to sing and soon were scheduled to embark on a rigorous tour of a Vaudeville circuit from the Midwest to the West coast.

Connee Boswell, who sang lead vocal in most instances and was responsible for most of the group's vocal arrangements, contracted polio at the age of four. There were no wheelchairs for Connee during the early touring days, so the other sisters would lock arms and carry Connee themselves.<sup>6</sup> Under the direction of manager Harry Leedy, the Boswell Sisters became nationally known and, by 1935, became an international hit with a tour in Europe and a command performance at Buckingham Palace.

What was so unique about this particular women's trio? Why was the trio's singing different from other white singing groups of the time? For one, the Boswell Sisters lagged behind the beat rather than sang on the beat. Secondly, they articulated lyrics much like a jazz instrumentalist: slurring up or down to a note, utilizing dynamics within a phrase in the way a horn player would approach a musical phrase.

Another aspect of the Boswell Sisters was the close harmony and blend. Often the sisters would change parts within a song — sometimes within one measure! It was and still is difficult to pick out one of the vocal parts from the other. Examples of these characteristics can be heard on all of the Boswell Sisters' recordings.

The Boswell Sisters also emulated the sound of trumpets, trombones, and banjos, singing "horn riffs" (similar melodic patterns or phrases) in the middle of their songs. One can clearly hear the Boswells' utilization of vocal "horn riffs" in their recordings of "42nd Street" and "Dinah." Below is a transcription of the introduction to the song "Heebie Jeebies" as sung by the Boswell Sisters. This example is one of many that demonstrates the Boswells' vocal articulation mimicking the articulation used by jazz horn players.

Though not the first unique singing group to incorporate jazz phrasing and improvisation, *Connee and the Boswell Sisters were pioneers who influenced many vocal groups after them.* Though not depicted in the preceding transcription, the Boswell Sisters' recordings demonstrated a unique sense of timing and phrasing; their change of musical "feel" and shift in tempo and keys within one song were unusual and creative.

The trio had an impact on all singers who heard them. One of the most notable women's trios influenced by the Boswells was the Andrews Sisters. In a recent interview, Maxene Andrews referred to the Boswell Sisters, "They were the all influence. There wasn't another group around that could hold a candle to them."<sup>8</sup> Although the song material of the Andrews Sisters was often performed and arranged in a more commercial

style to suit the times, the Boswell influence can be heard most clearly on the Andrews Sisters 1940's recordings of "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" and "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy."<sup>9</sup> One can compare these songs recorded by the Andrews Sisters to the 1931-1936 Boswell Sisters' recordings "42nd Street" "Top Hat" and others. However, in the Andrews Sisters recordings, there is little if any improvisation — unlike the Boswell Sisters.

Women singing groups — particularly sister acts, have been popular throughout America's popular music history. Through the Andrews Sisters, the Boswell's unique harmonies influenced many singing groups up to the present day. In the past some of these other singing groups include: Three Peters Sisters, Dinning Sisters, The Clark Sisters, The King Sisters, McGuire Sisters, and the Lennon Sisters.

Jazz critics from John Lucas to Don Morgenstern<sup>10</sup> have acknowledged the artistry of Connee Boswell and The Boswell Sisters. In retrospect, although there were many popular female vocalists, black and white, in the 1930's and 1940's, Connee Boswell and her sisters were one of the few white singers to mesh the black blues singing style with early jazz and swing. They were heard on live radio broadcasts and records. Connee Boswell, both as a trio member, and later as a soloist, influenced many singers, the most notable being Ella Fitzgerald. Directly, Connee influenced singers such as Bing Crosby, Mildred Bailey, and Kay Starr. Indirectly, through early Ella Fitzgerald — Boswell's influence became widespread — her musical ideas further developed by Ella and others to make jazz singing what it is today. Connee and her sisters essentially opened the door to vocal

style for white and black singers alike—bridging the gap, paving the road to creativity in vocal jazz.

As early as 1944, jazz critic and writer John Lucas acknowledged the impact of Connee Boswell on other singers. He wrote, "Few singers have influenced the development of America's everyday songs more than Connee Boswell."<sup>11</sup> One of the most acclaimed singers who emulated Connee Boswell is Ella Fitzgerald. Ella has often cited Connee as her primary vocal influence. In a 1977 interview with *Cadence* writer, Tom Everett, Ella says that when she first was asked to sing, "I tried to sing like Miss Connee Boswell."<sup>12</sup> Garvin Bushell, member of the Chick Webb band during 1938 and 1939, recalls he and his colleagues remarking to Ella, "You're sounding more like Connee Boswell everyday, Sis." Bushell followed by saying "Oh, and she did like that."<sup>13</sup> The influence of Boswell upon Fitzgerald is particularly noticeable on Ella's early recordings—the rhythmic phrasing and sliding into pitches are very similar to Boswell's.

At times even the pronunciation of particular words are similar. (Boswell was from New Orleans, Fitzgerald from Yonkers, New York). The vocal approach to particular words such as landing on the vowel of a word and singing it in full voice or in a fuller tone towards the end of the word is typical Connee Boswell—and influenced Ella Fitzgerald to do the same. When Ella sang "Rhythm and Romance" (1935)<sup>14</sup>, she borrowed the vocal sound and rhythmic phrasing of Connee by incorporating "whoa-o" within the song in the exact same way that Boswell would vocalize. Connee Boswell often used similar horn-like additions to her songs. But this particular horn like syllable, "whoa-o" is used in Boswell's early recordings and in her 1934 and 1935 recordings of "The Object of My Affection."<sup>15</sup> Other recordings that demonstrate the close association between Boswell and Fitzgerald's style include Ella's recordings of "Love and Kisses," "A Little Bit Later On," "Undecided," "Organ Grider's Swing," "A Tisket A Tasket" and "Just A Simple Melody."<sup>16</sup> One need only to listen to Connee and her sisters' 1931-36 recordings to hear a remarkable similarity.

It is evident that the early recordings of Ella Fitzgerald clearly emulate Connee Boswell's vocal style. However, Ella achieved her own vocal style, beginning with the Boswell sound, including the singing of horn-like riffs or 'scat'

syllables, — and took jazz singing another step further. Had it not been for Connee Boswell and the Boswell Sisters, perhaps Ella Fitzgerald would not have had the impact she did on vocal jazz and other singers. Perhaps vocal jazz, as we know it at present, may not have developed in the same way.

The Boswell Sisters, trained musicians, were innovators in vocal jazz history, and pioneers of vocal style which was quite a feat for singers of the 1930's era. As with many pathbreakers and leaders in history, it is only with time and reflection that we fully realize the boldness and major contribution Connee Boswell and the Boswell Sisters gave to vocalists. Perhaps now, fifty years later, we can thank Connee, Martha and Vet Boswell for breaking new ground.



Connee Boswell

#### EPILOG

**Maxene Andrews:** Born 1918, vocalist with the popular group, The Andrews Sisters.

**Danny Barker:** Born in 1909, plays banjo and guitar. Began in New Orleans (home of the Boswells). Worked with Dave Nelson, Fess Williams, Benny Carter, Cab Calloway. Backed various singers in New York in the 1930's and very familiar with Connee Boswell's work.

**Helvetia (Vet) Boswell:** Born in 1911, was the last surviving Boswell Sister. She died Nov. 1988, at age 77.

**Garvin Bushell:** Born in 1902, clarinetist, saxophone, oboe and bassoon. He played on the road with Maimie Smith and Ethel Waters, recorded with Bessie Smith, worked with Sam Wooding, Cab Calloway and Chick Webb. Garvin was present when Ella first sang and won the amateur contest. He worked with Ella during her early days. He is quite familiar with the work of The Boswell Sisters, and

Connee Boswell's solo work.

**Bob Crosby:** Born in 1913, bandleader who lead Bob Crosby and The Bobcats. Recorded 'hits' with Connee Boswell.

**Harry Hoffman:** Born in 1901, jazz violinist. In the early 1930's, Harry was the "second call" when Joe Venuti couldn't make a date. He played on some of the Boswell Sisters' recordings and later in a string section for some of Connee Boswell's solo performances. He worked with various singers such as Ethel Waters and Lena Horne.

**Mannie Klein:** Born in 1905, trumpet player. Has played and recorded with many bands and vocalists (including Benny Goodman, Dorsey Brothers). Played on recordings with the Boswell Sisters.

**Kay Starr:** Born 1921, vocalist who is jazz-oriented. Performed with Glen Miller, Joe Venuti; was influenced by Connee Boswell.

Jan Shapiro graduated with honors from Howard University, Washington D.C. with a Bachelor's degree in Music Education. She received her Masters degree from Cambridge College, Cambridge, Ma in Education. Jan has been a professional vocalist for nearly 20 years. In 1987 she sang in the prestigious Boston Globe Jazz Festival. She continues performing in the New England area. This year (1989) Jan is the recipient of National Endowment For The Arts Grant researching Connee Boswell and The Boswell Sisters. Support for this project has been expressed by several colleges—the final results of this project will be housed in these particular colleges' music libraries. They are: Howard University, Berklee College of Music, Hogan Jazz Archives at Tulane University, and the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather* (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 98.

<sup>2</sup>Helvetia (Vet) Boswell, interview by Jan Shapiro, April 4, 1987.

<sup>3</sup>George Simon, "Connee Boswell and The Boswell Sisters" *The Best of the Music Makers* (New York: Doubleday, 1979) 81-82.

<sup>4</sup>Vet Boswell interview, 1987.

<sup>5</sup>Vet Boswell interview, 1987.

<sup>6</sup>Vet Boswell interview, 1987.

<sup>7</sup>The Boswell Sisters, "42nd Street" "Dinah" on *The Boswell Sisters 1930-35*, Biograph C16.

<sup>8</sup>Maxene Andrews, interview by Jan Shapiro, June 20, 1989.

<sup>9</sup>The Andrew Sisters, "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" on *The Andrews Sisters: Sixteen Great Performances*, ABC ABDP-4003.

<sup>10</sup>Refer to:

John Lucas "Cats Hepped By Connee's Chirping" "Visionary Scoring Puts Boswells Over" *Downbeat*, Oct. 15, 1944: 3-4 and Nov. 7, 1944: 3.

John Lucas "Another Boswell Chronicle" *Jazz Journal*, Jan. 27, 1974: 5-6.

Dan Morgenstern, "Doggin' Around" *Jazz Journal*, Dec. 29, 1976: 14, 15, 40, 41.

<sup>11</sup>John Lucas, "Cats Hepped by Connee's Chirping" *Downbeat*, Oct. 15, 1944: 3-4.

<sup>12</sup>Tom Everett, "Ella Fitzgerald Interview" *Cadence*, June 1977: 7-8.

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