

**The Inventive Vocal Style of
Connee Boswell
and The Boswell Sisters: Is There More Than What Has Been
Released On Records?**

"All the people who would know about music, they all told us that we were very much ahead of our time" said 76 year old Helvetia (Vet) Boswell, the sole survivor of The Boswell Sisters, in a recent interview.¹ (Some of the people referred to by Vet Boswell included the Dorsey Brothers--Jim and Tom, Benny Goodman, and Joe Venuti.) Why were the Boswell Sisters considered so ahead of their time? In a 1944 Downbeat issue, John Lucas wrote "that the harmonies of the Boswell Sisters were unorthodox."² According to Henry Pleasants, the usual type of group singing during the late 1920's was barbershop quartet style.³ By the early 1930's, there were trio singing groups such as The Bronx Sisters, The Rhythm Boys and The Pickin Sisters. The Boswell sound was different from the mainstream vocal groups; so different that the listening audiences of the early 1930's were not always pleased. John Lucas, in "Cats Hepped By Connee's Chirping," writes that Connee Boswell and her sisters received a letter from an irate listener who referred to the Boswell Sisters as "savage chanters."⁴ Yet, Max Jones writes that the Boswell Sisters influenced all vocal groups up to today's Pointer Sisters.⁵ What was so unique about this particular women's trio?

The trio's singing was different from white singing groups of the time. Vet Boswell says "we used to go down to the French market and listen to the colored people sing."⁶ The influence of the black blues singers is clearly evident in the recordings of the Boswell Sisters; they Borrow some of the blues singing style of phrasing. The Boswell Sisters lagged behind the beat rather than sing on the beat. They articulated lyrics much like a jazz instrumentalist: slurring up or down to a word, utilizing dynamics within a phrase in the way a horn player would approach a musical phrase. Examples of these characteristics can heard on all of the Boswell Sisters' recordings.⁷

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".⁸ John Lucas, in his article "Visionary Put Boswells Over" praises Connee Boswell for her imaginative concepts.⁹ Sally Placksin remarks that¹⁰ white singers were not expected by audiences to sing very 'hot.' Placksin also cites a 1939 article in Downbeat entitled "The Gal Yippers Have No Place in Our Jazz Bands".¹¹ The Boswell Sisters, with their blues-style phrasing and "horn riffs" were three white girls who sang in much more of a black "hot" style than the white singers of the day. Vet Boswell recalls "we saw a French newspaper that had a drawing of three black girls listed as The Boswell Sisters."¹²

Milt Gabler, former A. & R. man (artist and repertoire) for Decca records, recalls how bad the record business was in the 1930's as a result of The Depression in America.¹³ Jazz and swing were just beginning to gain popularity. Record companies were anxious to record 'hot' popular groups but at the same time were taking a cautious conservative view toward this new style of music. Gilbert Erskine states that Connee Boswell was prolific in her recordings. He writes, "But she began recording at a time when there was no market for jazz per se, and, in order to keep her share of the popular market, she had to spend the bulk of her time doing inane ditties-commercial pop which the public quickly ate up, and just as quickly forgot."¹⁴ Connee herself remarks on the album The Boswell Sisters: 1932-1934, "If you think these sides are way out you should have heard the first versions. Jack Kapp [A&R man for DECCA Records] howled and insisted they be remade more conventionally."¹⁵ Vet Boswell also mentions that Jack Kapp threatened not to record them because of their vocal arrangements. She says "Jack Kapp was the guy who used to always tell us, '-sing the music just the way it's written.'"¹⁶

According to Michael Brooks, the last six recordings The Boswell Sisters made together (on Decca records) were much less adventurous than in the Boswells' earlier recordings.¹⁷ If we compare

"Crazy People" and Heebie Jeebies,"¹⁸ to the Decca recordings Brooks refers to, we can detect a stylistic difference by simply listening. In the later Decca recordings, there are no tempo changes or 'stop-time', fewer horn-like riffs, and solo blues verses characteristic of the groups' earlier recordings. According to Brooks, the Boswell Sisters had been "swinging the classics" in the early 1930's, and he quotes Connee as saying that when Jack Kapp heard Connee's 1937 recording of the class "Martha," "he nearly fainted--said Flotow [the composer of "Martha"] would turn in his grave. He wouldn't issue it at first and only consented after I said that if the record didn't reach a certain number of sales I'd take full-page ads in Variety three weeks running to absolve him and the company from any blame."¹⁹ In the recent interview with Connee's sister, Vet, I asked if Jack Kapp had ever threatened not to record the group because of a particular vocal arrangement or style. Vet Boswell's reply was "oh, he said that a couple of times." 20

Connee Boswell had said there were songs like "I Hear a Rhapsody" that she recorded unwillingly just so that Kapp would let her record a song of her choice. She cites as an example the song "I Hear a Rhapsody", which she recorded so Kapp would record her performance of "Amapola". Kapp, however, held Connee's recording of "Amapola" in favor of Jimmy Dorsey's instrumental version. When Connee's cut was released, she claimed it sold well but, "Jimmy had the inside track."²¹

Connee Boswell states her views about The Boswell Sisters vocal sound in George T. Simon's book, The Best of the Music Makers,²² "We revolutionized trio and group singing!" Connee Boswell told Simon.²³ But as George Simon observes, some of Connee's vocal arrangements for the Boswell Sisters were too wild for the conservative record companies. "We'd sing them in clubs. It's a shame, though, they wouldn't let us record them." Connee said "One of the arrangements apparently "too wild" for the records was "All the Kings Horses"--it was never released.²⁴

There are some discrepancies in the discographies by Brian Rust and Brunyninckx as to the actual songs recorded by The Boswell Sisters, and by Connee Boswell, as solo artist. Discrepancies also exist as to which recordings were rejected or never released.²⁵

Listed below are excerpts from their listings:

(The last number or letter indicate times or 'takes' recorded. A listing with a matrix number and then the letter B, for example, would indicate that the second recording was selected for release. In the case of a listing with two letters [A & B], there is no way to tell which one was accepted .)

Brian Rust's Jazz Records:

March 22, 1925

2113-1-2-3-4 "You Can Call Me Baby All The Time" 4 takes
(rejected)
32132-1-2-3 "Pal O Mine" 3 takes
(rejected)

March 25, 1925

32123 1-2-3-4 "Dad" 4 takes
(rejected)

Oct. 3, 1930

404409-A-B-C "I'm Yours" 3 takes
(rejected)

(all the above were never issued)

Feb. 5, 1932

B11240 A "We've Gotta Put That Sun Back In The Sky"
(rejected)

B11241 A "Was That The Human Thing To Do?"
(rejected)

Feb. 19, 1932

B11320 A-B "Was That The Human Thing To Do?" 2 takes (B side was
accepted)

B11321 A "We've Got To Put That Sun Back In The Sky"
(accepted)

B11353-B

B11354-A-B

B12152-A-B

Dec. 7, 1932

B12697-A

Jan. 9, 1933

B1222860-A

Nov. 14, 1933

B14320-B

Dec. 10, 1934

LA-279-B

May 28, 1935

B17646-2

B17646-3

"Stop The Sun, Stop The Moon"
"Everybody Loves My Baby"
"Sleep Come On And Take Me" (rejected)

"Crazy People"

"Mood Indigo"

"Coffee In The Morning"

"It's Written All Over Your Face"

"St. Louis Blues"

"St. Louis Blues"

Feb. 12, 1936

60463-B

60464-B

"Let Yourself Go"

"I'm Putting All My Eggs In One Basket"

Below are listings from Brunyninckx :

(The last number indicates 'takes' selected but not necessarily issued in record form).

March 22, 1925

32113-4 "You Can Call me Baby"

32114-1 "I'm Gonna Cry"

32123-3 "Pal O' Mine"

(unissued)
(2 takes)
(3 takes -but
unissued)

March 25, 1925

32123-4 "Dad"

Oct. 3, 1930

404409-C "I'm Yours"

(unissued)

Feb. 5, 1932

11240-A "We've Gotta Put That Sun Back In The Sky"

11241 "Was That The Human Thing To Do?"

(unissued)
(unissued)

Feb. 19, 1932

11320-A "Was That The Human Thing To Do?"

11354-A "Put That Sun Back In the Sky"

Feb. 24, 1932

11353-B "Stop The Sun, Stop The Moon"

11354-A "Everybody Loves My Baby"

August 6, 1932

12152 "Sleep Come On and Take Me"

(unissued)

12153-A "Down Among The Sheltering Palms"

12153-B "Down Among The Sheltering Palms"

Dec. 7, 1932

12697-A "Crazy People"

12697-B "Crazy People"

Jan. 9, 1933

12860-A "Mood Indigo"

12860-B "Mood Indigo"

Nov. 14, 1933

14320-B "Coffee In The Morning"

May 28, 1935

17645-1 "St. Louis Blues"

17646-2 "St. Louis Blues"

Feb. 12, 1936

60463-B "Let Yourself Go"

60464-B "I'm Putting All My Eggs In One Basket"

One can see from these lists that there are small variances of detail as to exactly what was recorded, how many 'takes' there were,-- and, how many times a song was actually recorded in the studio. Brian

Rust's Jazz Records lists "Crazy People" as being recorded once.²⁶ Bruyninckx lists two 'takes' of "Crazy People"; they state that the A side was accepted but that the B take was issued on Biograph Records. (Biograph reissues of The Boswell Sisters 78rpm records began in 1972). Bruyninckx also lists two 'takes' of "Mood Indigo"; Rust cites only one.²⁷

The questions posed by the discrepancies between these two discographies cannot be answered without further research. Until the actual Master Recording Tapes can be located, we have only selected reissues of The Boswell Sisters and of Connee Boswell. Listening to some of the reissued recordings reinforces the impression that the record companies directly or indirectly inhibited the jazz vocal style of Connee Boswell and her sisters--for example, the Boswells' recording of "Heebie Jeebies"²⁸ to one of their last recordings, "I'm Putting All My Eggs In One Basket."²⁹ In their earlier recording, "Heebie Jeebies",³⁰ they emulate horns in the introduction of the song; their articulation also mimics the articulation used by jazz horn players. The following is a transcription of the introduction of the piece, as recorded by the Boswell Sisters.

Handwritten musical score for piano and voice. The score is divided into three systems. The first system starts with a tempo of quarter note = 84 and a dynamic of *cresc.* It includes vocal lines with lyrics "OH - OH OH OH - OH OH OH OH OH OH OH OH" and piano accompaniment with chords B \flat , B \flat ²⁴⁰, B \flat , F⁷, B \flat , A, G, A, G, F. The second system has a tempo of quarter note = 92 and a dynamic of *mf*. The third system has a tempo of quarter note = 104 and a dynamic of *poco rit.* The piano part includes chords B \flat , A, G, A, G, F, B \flat , and B \flat .

Trans. by V. Williams

By comparison, "I'm Putting My Eggs in One Basket," recorded on Decca Records (with Jack Kapp as A & R man), does not display the same inventive style as the earlier Boswell recordings; 34 There are no horn-like riffs, no stop-time nor tempo changes.

There are also some variances in style between the old 78 reissues and tapes of live radio shows from the early 1930's. The taped radio programs reissued on Radiola records, 32 feature The Boswell Sisters singing shorter versions of songs, skipping some of the horn-like riff patterns or, some of the usual tempo changes. On radio program #3041, syndicated by the Continental Broadcasting Corp., 33 The 'Boswell Sisters' performance of "Heebie Jeebies" is shorter and more reserved without the horn-like introduction and solo blues chorus by Connee heard on their 1931 recording. Their "hot" jazz style was discouraged for radio broadcasts as it had been for records.

Connee Boswell's recordings, without her sisters, also show inconsistencies of style. In 1937, she recorded two duets with Bing Crosby entitled "Basin Street Blues" and "Bob White." 34 Both recordings display some of her jazz artistry, her phrasing, articulation, and rhythmic nuances. On the other hand, her recording of "That Old Feeling" 35 made in the same year sounds much more reserved in style. Comparison of several other recordings by Connee strongly suggests that her "hot" jazz style was inhibited by record companies. Below are some of the recordings she made that are sung in a more reserved manner, completely unlike her style on earlier recordings with her sisters.

"Carioca"

April 27, 1934 New York
(reissued on Take Two TT 216)

"Blue Moon"

January 15, 1935 New York
(reissued on Take Two TT 216)

"The Nearness of You"

August 22, 1940 New York
(not dubbed but on Smithsonian
Collection of American Popular
Song)

"I Hear A Rhapsody"

January 16, 1941 Los Angeles
(reissued on Connee Boswell: Sand
in My Shoes MCA MCL 1689)

(Connee Boswell recorded The "Nearness of You", which was performed in a "straight" style; compared to her swinging rendition of "Nobody's Sweetheart," recorded during the same time).

In 1956, Connee Boswell left Decca records and recorded on a small unknown record label called Design records. All of the songs on the album, Connee Boswell Sings The Rogers and Hart Song Folio,³⁶ are performed in Boswell's unique jazz vocal style.

A comment by Takashi Edgar Ono³⁷ also raises the question of whether or not we actually have the original sound and style of Connee Boswell and The Boswell Sisters on record. Ono writes that white singer Mildred Bailey signed with Brunswick Records in the early 1930's. (Both Mildred Bailey and Connee Boswell were becoming popular jazz artists of the time). Mildred Bailey considered signing with Decca records, but declined Decca's offer. But Connee "did become a Decca recording star and was assigned by the company to sing pop songs with commercial arrangements. Although she remained popular, many Boswell Sisters fans lost interest in Connee's work and that ultimately hurt her career."

Before a full assessment can be made of Connee's and The Boswell Sisters' style, available Master tapes and 'out takes' must be located and studied. "Is there more than what has been released on records?" The obvious answer is yes.

NOTES

- 1 Vet Boswell, Personal interview. April 4, 1987.
- 2 John Lucas, "Visionary Scoring Put Boswells Over," Downbeat. 1 Nov. 1944:3.
- 3 Henry Pleasants, The Great American Popular Singers (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 15-48.
- 4 John Lucas, "Cats Hepped By Connee's Chirping," Downbeat 15 Oct. 1944: 3-4.
- 5 Max Jones, "Connie Boswell: A Great Singer," Melody Maker 23 Oct. 1976: 14+.
- 6 Vet Boswell interview.
- 7 See for example, "Was That The Human Thing To Do" and "If It Ain't Love" on The Boswell Sisters 1932-34 Biograph BLP C3; and "Dinah" The Boswell Sisters 1930-1935, Biograph C16.
- 8 See for example, The Boswell Sisters, "42nd Street" The Boswell Sisters 1930-1935, Biograph C16. The Boswell Sisters, "Dinah," The Boswell Sisters 1930-1935, Biograph C 16.
- 9 Lucas, "Visionary Scoring Put Boswells Over," Downbeat, 3.
- 10 Sally Placksin, American Women in Jazz (New York: Wideview, 1982) 85-90.
- 11 Placksin 87.
- 12 Vet Boswell interview.
- 13 Ted Fox, "Milt Gabler," In The Groove (New York: St. Martin's, 1986) 72-99.
- 14 Gilbert Erskine, "Connie Boswell and Lee Wiley: Sweet and Low Down" The Second Line, Winter, 1977: 19.
- 15 Connee Boswell, record jack notes, The Boswell Sisters 1932-1934 Biograph C.3, 1972.
- 16 Vet Boswell interview.
- 17 Michael Brooks, record jacket notes, Connee Boswell: Sand In My Shoes, MCA 1689, 1982.
- 18 For example, The Boswell Sisters, "Crazy People" The Boswell Sisters 1932-34 Biograph BLP C3. The Boswell Sisters, "Heebie Jeebies" The Boswell Sisters 1930-1935, Biograph C 16.
- 19 Brooks, record jacket notes Connee Boswell: Sand In My Shoes, MCA.

- 20Vet Boswell interview.
- 21Brooks, record jacket notes Connee Boswell: Sand In My Shoes, MCA.
- 22George T. Simon, "Connee Boswell and The Boswell Sisters," The Best of the Music Makers (New York: Doubleday, 1979) 81-82.
- 23Simon, The Best of the Music Makers, 82.
- 24Connee Boswell, record jack notes, The Boswell Sisters 1932-1934 Biograph C.3, 1972.
- 25Brian Rust, "The Boswell Sisters" "Connee Boswell", Jazz Records 1897-1934 Biograph C3, 1972.
- 26The Boswell Sisters, "Crazy People" The Boswell Sisters 1932-34 Biograph BLP C3.
- 27The Boswell Sisters, "Mood Indigo" Biograph BLP C3.
- 28The Boswell Sisters, "Heebie Jeebies" The Boswell Sisters 1930-1935 Biograph BLP C16.
- 29The Boswell Sisters, "I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket" Connee Boswell: Sand in My Shoes MCA 1689.
- 30The Boswell Sisters, Biograph BLP C16.
- 31The Boswell Sisters, "I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket" Connee Boswell: Sand in My Shoes MCA 1689.
- 32The Boswell Sisters, Radiola Records 3MR-3.
- 33Radiola Records, 3MR-3.
- 34Bing Crosby and Connee Boswell, "Basin Street Blues" "Bob White" (78 rpms.) on Decca 1483, 25430.
- 35Connee Boswell, "That Old Feeling" Connee Boswell: Sand In My Shoes MCA 1689.
- 36Connee Boswell, Connee Boswell Sings the Rogers and Hart Song Folio Design, SS-44, 1956.
- 37Takashi Edgar Ono, record jacket notes, Mildred Bailey Victor VIM 4507, (no date).

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Selected Discography

Connee Boswell

I'm Gonna Cry

The Boswell Sisters 1932-1934

The Boswell Sisters 1930-1935

Under A Blanket of Blue

Connee Boswell Sings The Rodgers
and Hart Song Folio

Connee Boswell: Sand In My Shoes

Singing The Blues

Victor (1925)

Biograph BLP C3

Biograph BLP C16

Take Two TT 216

Design SS-44

MCA MCL 1689

Decca DL5445

(1953)

Radiola 3MR-3

Swingin' Sisters On The Air

Smithsonian Collection of American

Popular Song "The Nearness of You" and

"Basin Street Blues" (Connee Boswell and Bing
Crosby)

Connee Boswell and The Original

Memphis Five

Smithsonian

RCA Victor LPM 1426

Bing Crosby

Mr. Crosby and Mr. Mercer

"Bob White" (Connee Boswell and Bing Crosby) MCAC DLM 8025

Jan Shapiro

Boston, Massachusetts