

# Jazz's Female Singers

Ella, Sarah, Billie, and More





# Ella Fitzgerald

- Born in Newport News VA and moved to Yonkers at a young age
- Got her earliest break with Chick Webb's orchestra, breaking through to the mainstream with "A-Tisket A-Tasket"
- As the bebop era started, she started trying to scat the horn lines being played by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, fully developing her sound
- Became widely recognized for her songbook series, where she recorded the standards of Great American Songbook composers
- Collaborated with all of the greatest of the greats
- Musical style: intricate hornlike scatting, joyful swing, exceptional sense of pitch



# Scatting Like a Horn Player

- Scatting is a style of vocalizing in which a singer uses nonsense syllables to create improvised or prewritten melodies
- Ella Fitzgerald learned to scat by copying horn players and creating improvised lines like they do
- This is primarily done with a combination of scales, licks, arpeggios, passing tones, and enclosures
- Ella Fitzgerald is famous for the intricacy of her scat solos, as well as her impeccable sense of pitch, as it takes an immense amount of musicianship to hear all of this and recreate it vocally

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C7

Enclosure

Passing Tone

Passing Tone

The musical notation is on a single staff. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The first measure contains a C7 chord, represented by a cluster of four notes: C, E, G, and Bb. Below this measure is the label 'C7' and the note names 'C,E,G,Bb'. The second measure contains an enclosure, shown as a sequence of four notes: C, D, E, and C, with a fermata over the final C. Below this measure is the label 'Enclosure' and the syllables 'C UNLN C'. The third measure contains a passing tone, shown as a sequence of four notes: G, A, Bb, and G, with a fermata over the final G. Below this measure is the label 'Passing Tone' and the syllables 'G UNPT G'. The fourth measure contains another passing tone, shown as a sequence of four notes: E, F#, G, and E, with a fermata over the final E. Below this measure is the label 'Passing Tone' and the syllables 'E LNPT E'.

C,E,G,Bb

C UNLN C

G UNPT G

E LNPT E

# An Ella Fitzgerald Scat Example

- The example line below was taken from Ella Fitzgerald's famous scat solo on "How High The Moon"
- The Fmaj7 chord is made up of F, A, C, and E
- Ella uses a series of passing tones (green) to get from the A (red) to the C (blue) in the Fmaj7
- The Fm7 chord is made up of F, Ab, C, and Eb
- She then uses an enclosure with an upper (purple) and lower (orange) neighbor to surround the Ab (yellow) in the Fm7 chord



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# Blue Skies

From Ella Fitzgerald's album "Get Happy"

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# Billie Holiday

- Born Eleanora Fagan in Philadelphia in 1915, but spent most of her early life in Baltimore
- Deeply traumatic childhood, but got her start after moving to Harlem and performing in clubs by 15
- Recorded her first hit with Benny Goodman at 18, and eventually went on to major commercial success in the 40's after releasing "Strange Fruit" in 1939
- Many of her versions of standards are the definitive version, particularly "Body and Soul," "Crazy He Calls Me," and "Easy Living"
- Musical style: melodic improvisation to match lyric delivery, unmistakable vocal tone, distinct back phrasing approach



# Strange Fruit

- Holiday's most socially important song
- Written by Abel Meeropol to protest the lynching of black Americans in the south with a metaphor comparing lynching victims to the fruit of trees
- Holiday always closed with it, and would require silence from the audience and the lights off except for on her face
- Sometimes called the beginning of the Civil Rights movement
- Had trouble convincing Columbia (her label) to record it, had to get an exemption to record it on Commodore
- Brought a ton of backlash to her, most notably from Federal Bureau of Narcotics director and noted racist Harry Anslinger
- He was determined to stop her from singing the song
- When she checked herself into a hospital for heroin issues in 1959, Anslinger placed her under arrest, and refused to allow doctors in to care for her

# Vocal Tone

- Holiday is one of the most instantly recognizable singers because of her distinct vocal tone
- Tone is achieved by keeping her mouth more closed during higher or louder phrases, acting like a muted horn instrument
- Billie Holiday's tone was a result of her nasally speech and set back tongue
- She also sang her syllables strongly, which contrasts with her very small range - Holiday sang in a range less than an octave - and her significant backphrasing, or purposefully late entrances, certainly influenced by her lack of formal training as well as her struggle with substance abuse





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# Easy Living

**From 1937's Teddy Wilson Recording featuring Billie  
Holiday with Benny Goodman and Lester Young**

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# **God Bless The Child**

**Written By Billie Holliday and Arthur Herzog in 1939,  
first released in 1941**

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# Sarah Vaughan

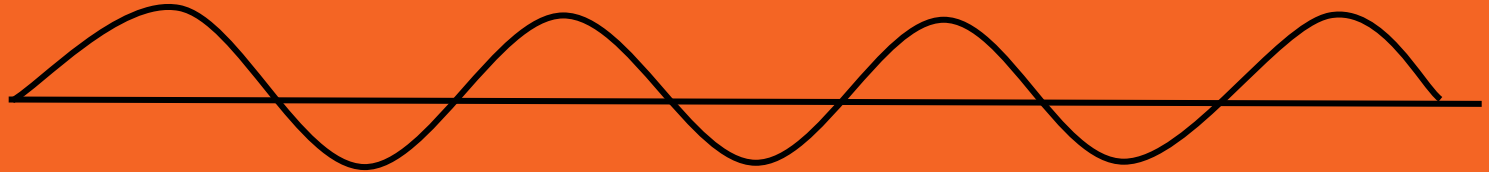
- Born in 1924 in Newark NJ and began learning piano and singing in church at age 7
- Began performing in clubs illegally as a teenager, and was discovered at the Apollo Theater's famed amateur night in 1942, which led to her joining pianist Earl Hines's band in early 1943
- Would go solo after a few years touring with Hines and Billy Eckstine, having minor commercial successes while achieving the highest acclaim in jazz circles
- Widely considered one of the greatest vocal instruments in jazz, with a huge range, controlled tone
- Musical style: huge range, distinct vibrato, varied repertoire, scatting



# Vibrato

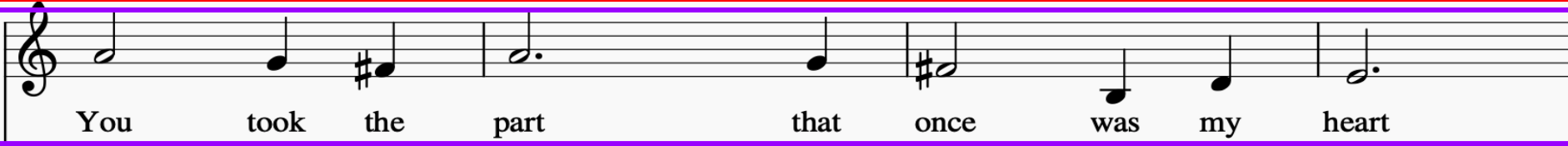

- Vibrato is a technique used by singers where they waver on the pitch very slightly above and below to add expression
- Very common in classical string playing (violin, viola, cello, bass) and opera singing
- Vibrato is achieved by changing the pitch of the voice slightly at a repetitive and consistent tempo
- If you extend the notes the pitch range will be wider or narrower, and if you slow down or quicken how fast you cycle through these notes, you can change the speed of the vibrato

Actual pitch



# Changing the Melodies

- All jazz singers take a ton of liberty with the melodies of the songs they sing
- This can involve changing the rhythms, notes, and placements of the phrases
- Sarah Vaughan was a master of taking the original melody and changing the notes completely while still remaining firmly entrenched with the chords of the song
- Example - “All of Me” original melody in purple, Vaughan variation in green

17	C6	Cm7	F7	Gmaj7	E7
					
					

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# **Black Coffee**

**From Sarah Vaughan's 1949 recording on Columbia  
Records**

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# Peggy Lee

- Born Norma Egstrom in Jamestown, ND, in 1920 as the seventh of eight children
- Got her start singing on a local radio segment sponsored by a local restaurant, which paid her in food
- Had a few false starts in Hollywood, but developed her signature vocal tone while performing regularly at The Doll House
- Rather than sing over the loud crowd, she sang under them to get their attention
- The Doll House gig brought her to the attention of Benny Goodman, who hired her for his band
- Had many hits, including “Fever” and “Why Don’t You Do Right,” and became emblematic of the “torch song” style of singing





# Torch Singers

- Style of singing often associated with Peggy Lee and others like Julie London, Edith Piaf, Helen Merrill
- Not necessarily jazz exclusive - Adele, Laufey, Sade, and Cher could all be considered torch singers to some extent
- Male torch singers also exist but are more commonly referred to as crooners
- Quiet, sultry style of singing meant to be more about the lyric than musical fireworks
- Largely developed in cabaret clubs, and torch singers are often referred to as lounge singers
- Many female jazz singers get the torch singer label by non-jazz audiences, but the ethos of Peggy Lee is very different than that of someone like Fitzgerald or Vaughan





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# **Fever**

**Peggy Lee's 1958 single**

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# Norah Jones

- Born Geethali Norah Jones Shankar in NYC in 1979 to famed sitarist Ravi Shankar and concert producer Sue Jones
- Grew up in Texas and Alaska taking piano and voice lessons and listening to Bill Evans and Billie Holiday
- Moved back to NYC after graduating UNT and became a lounge singer
- Eventually signed to Blue Note and released her debut “Come Away With Me,” which hit no. 1 on the Billboard charts and won her five Grammys, including best new artist
- Has sold 50 million albums and won nine Grammys
- Musical style: pop and folk infusions, Billie Holiday style vocal tone and phrasing



# Jazz In The Mainstream

- When Jones rose to prominence in the early 2000's, jazz had long lost its place in the American mainstream
- This can be attributed to many different factors, but Jones entered the mainstream by mixing jazz with pop, folk, and country styles
- Her mix of repetitive pop type melodies (below), jazz and country influenced piano playing, and the simplification of complicated chord progressions made her music palatable for radio listeners

8 **A1** B $\flat$  maj7 B $\flat$  7 E $\flat$  maj7 D7 Gm7 C7 E $\flat$ /F B $\flat$

9 B $\flat$  maj7 B $\flat$  7 E $\flat$  maj7 D7 Gm7 C7 **1.** E $\flat$ /F B $\flat$

# Simplified Jazz Progressions and Country/Jazz Influenced Piano

- The chord progression of “Don’t Know Why” uses common jazz harmonies, so many jazz musicians add a ton of extra notes to each chord (green)
- Jones resists the temptation to do this and plays the chords as a pop or country musician would (red)
- Jones also uses country influenced jazz piano licks to fill in between the melody
- This is done by using grace notes (fast notes played to slide into a target note)
- In country music, grace notes are the white keys
- In blues and jazz, grace notes are the black keys
- Jones plays them both to create the hybrid you hear in "Don't Know Why"



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# **Don't Know Why**

**From Jones's 2002 debut album "Come Away With Me"**

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# Laufey

- Born Laufey Lin Bing Jonsdottir in 1999 in Reykjavik, Iceland
- Grew up in a musical family - mother was classical violinist, grandfather taught at the Central Conservatory of Music in China, twin sister is a violinist
- Plays piano and cello in addition to singing, attended Berklee in Boston, where she gained fame on social media after releasing her first EP “Typical of Me”
- Works with many symphony orchestras across the world
- Won the Grammy for Best Traditional Pop Album in 2023 for “Bewitched”
- Massively popular with Gen Z
- Blends influences from Norah Jones, Taylor Swift, Billie Holliday, and Chet Baker, as well as bossa nova, for a very modern sound



# Jazz as Pop Music Today

- Laufey is much more unapologetically jazz, and has tapped into Gen Z audiences with her lyrics, nostalgic arrangements, fashion, and social media prowess
- In “From The Start” and “Fragile,” she uses bossa nova style nylon string guitar, 50’s influenced string arrangements, and a bossa nova clave feel
- She also liberally uses vocal harmonies, which is uncommon in traditional jazz but hugely important in today’s pop music by artists like Taylor Swift, Billie Eilish, and others
- She’s also not afraid to use bebop influences, with many of her scat sections using licks by famous bebop players like Chet Baker and Charlie Parker
  - Ex: her scat solo in “From The Start” is taken directly from Charlie Parker’s “Donna Lee” (below)

Laufey "From The Start"	Charlie Parker "Donna Lee"
Fm7	Fm7
Bb7	Bb7
	

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# Fragile

From Laufey's 2022 Debut Album "Everything I Know  
About Love"

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# Esperanza Spalding

- Born in Portland, Oregon in 1984, and began performing publicly and professionally as a child, first as a violinist
- Taught herself bass, went to Berklee College of Music on a full ride, and learned to sing more as a means of composing
- Began teaching at Berklee immediately upon graduating at age 20, and released her debut album in 2006
- Won the Grammy for best new artist in 2011 after the release of her third album, continues to tour and release music today
- Musical style: intricate rhythmic coordination between bass and voice, fusion of many genres into jazz



# Multi-Instrumentalists and Rhythmic Coordination

- Most of Spalding's music features her both singing and accompanying herself on the bass
- This influences both how she sings and how she plays, but the coordination of the two takes an immense amount of skill
- Very much a patting your head/rubbing your stomach style skill
- Below is an example of a bass line she plays against the melody she sings

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The top staff features a bass line with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It begins with a D major 7th chord (Dmaj7) and includes two triplet markings over groups of three eighth notes. The staff concludes with a C13(#11) chord. The bottom staff shows a melody line, also in one sharp, with various note values including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. Both staves are set against a white background with black notation.

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# Precious

From Spalding's 2008 release "Esperanza"

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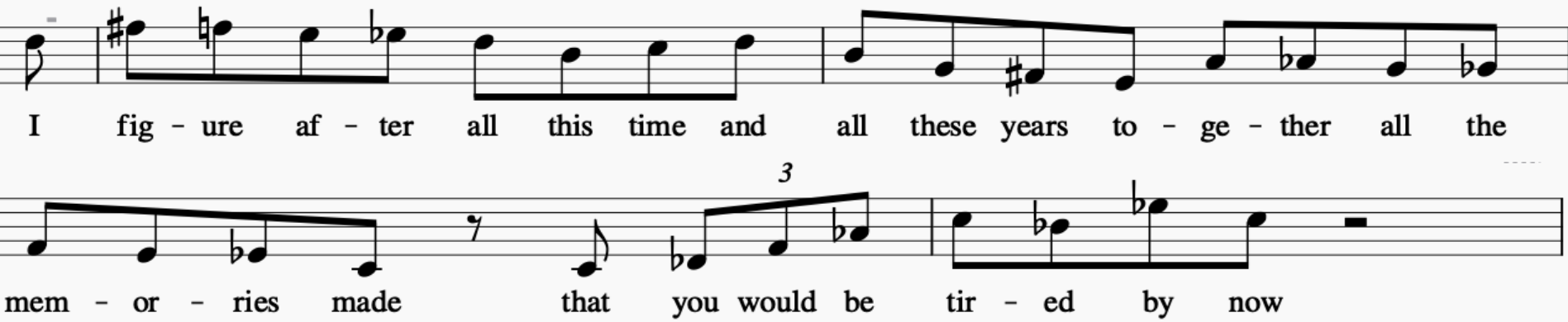
# Samara Joy

- Born Samara McLendon in the Bronx in 1999 to a musical family - several relatives were touring gospel musicians
- First got into jazz as a student at SUNY Purchase, released self titled debut album in 2021 and the follow up “Linger Awhile” in 2022
- Won the 2023 Grammy award for best new artist, the first jazz artist to do so since Spalding’s win 12 years earlier
- Stylistic characteristics and influences: deep/husky tone, vocalese, putting words to instrumental melodies



# Vocalese

- Popularized in the fifties by musicians like Jon Hendricks and King Pleasure
- Similar to scatting, but rather than nonsense syllables, words are written to a preexisting instrumental solo
- The below example is from Joy's version of "Nostalgia," an instrumental song from the 40's by trumpeter Fats Navarro
- Joy added lyrics to the melody, then transcribed Navarro's improvised trumpet solo and put lyrics to it
- Serves as an homage to the original improviser as well as a means for arranging



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# Nostalgia (The Day I Knew)

From Samara Joy's 2022 release "Linger Awhile"

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# Nina Simone

- Born Eunice Waymon in 1933 to a poor family in Tryon NC
- Her original goal was to become a concert pianist, but was denied entry from the large conservatories
- She began singing only when the owner of an AC club said he would pay her more if she sang while she played
- Took the name Nina Simone to avoid detection by her religious family
- Became one of music's greatest civil rights advocates
- Suffered from mental health issues stemming from experiences with racism and an abusive husband
- Musical style: eclectic mix of covers, low rumbling voice, protest songs, extreme backphrasing, blues and classical influences



# Backphrasing and Melodic Improvisation in Jazz

- Another way vocalists alter the melody is by backphrasing
- This is done by drastically altering the rhythms of the melody to make it your own
- The original melody of “Since I Fell For You” (top), is very straightforward and easily learned by a group
- Nina Simone backphrases liberally while also changing the notes (blues influence)

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E7 C#m7 F#m7 B7 E7

Love\_ brings such mis - er - y and pain

Love\_\_\_\_\_ brings such mis - er-y\_\_\_\_\_and pain



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# **I Put A Spell On You**

**Title track of Nina Simone's 1965 album**

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# Feeling Good

From Nina Simone's 1965 album "I Put a Spell On You"  
written by Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse

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# Veronica Swift

- Born in Charlottesville, VA in 1994 to successful jazz musicians Stephanie Nakasian (vocalist) and Hod O'Brien (pianist)
- Recorded her first albums at the ages of 9 and 13, both featuring major jazz names like Freddy Cole (brother of Nat) and Harry Allen
- Graduated from the University of Miami in 2016 and began appearing with major jazz acts like the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, Benny Green, Chris Botti, and Wynton Marsalis
- More recently has been moving towards rock and soul influenced music, particularly from Queen and James Brown
- Musical style: Ella influenced scatting, vocal dexterity



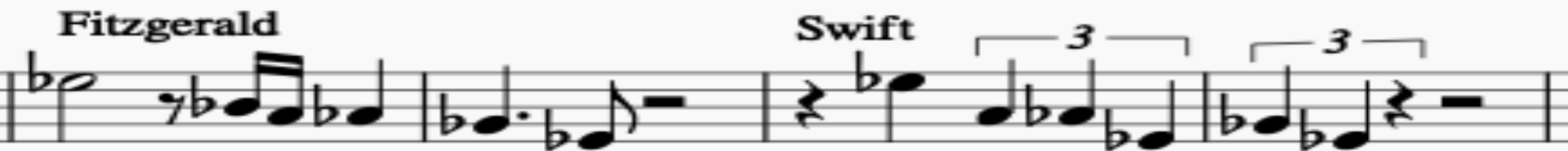
# Vocal Dexterity

- The greatest female jazz singers have incredible vocal dexterity, allowing them to jump around their vocal range with the precision of a piano player or saxophonist
- This is often done on difficult melodies with lots of large leaps (like “Easy Living” bottom) or while scatting quickly with either small or large intervals
- Large intervals like in “Easy Living” are tough because it’s easy to over or under shoot, and small intervals are tough because of the small margin for error
- Swift shows off her dexterity in the scat section of “I Am What I Am,” with leaps (red) and small intervals (blue) constantly mixing



# Stealing Ideas From Ella

- In jazz, musicians steal ideas from one another and use them in their own improvisations
- Example - Swift scats a blues lick on “I Am What I Am” inspired by an Ella Fitzgerald lick on “How High The Moon”
- Both singers use a blues scale in a similar way here, with Fitzgerald likely pulling it from a horn player, and Swift likely pulling it from Fitzgerald
- Another example is quoting - dropping a recognizable melody into your improvisation
- Examples: Fitzgerald quotes “Here Comes The Bride” in “Blue Skies,” Swift quotes “Sister Sadie” in “I Am What I Am”



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# **I Am What I Am**

**From Veronica Swift's self titled 2023 album**

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