

Performance Matters

Vocal Colour in Blue Early Twentieth-Century Black Women Singers as Broadway's Voice Teachers

Masi Asare

Volume 6, Number 2, 2020

Sound Acts, Part 1

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075800ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075800ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Institute for Performance Studies, Simon Fraser University

ISSN

2369-2537 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Asare, M. (2020). Vocal Colour in Blue: Early Twentieth-Century Black Women Singers as Broadway's Voice Teachers. *Performance Matters*, 6(2), 52–66.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1075800ar>

Article abstract

This essay invokes a line of historical singing lessons that locate blues singers Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters in the lineage of Broadway belters. Contesting the idea that black women who sang the blues and performed on the musical stage in the early twentieth century possessed “untrained” voices—a pervasive narrative that retains currency in present-day voice pedagogy literature—I argue that singing is a sonic citational practice. In the act of producing vocal sound, one implicitly cites the vocal acts of the teacher from whom one has learned the song. And, I suggest, if performance is always “twice-behaved,” then the particular modes of doubleness present in voice point up this citationality, a condition of vocal sound that I name the “twice-heard.” In considering how vocal performances replicate and transmit knowledge, the “voice lesson” serves as a key site for analysis. My experiences as a voice coach and composer in New York City over two decades ground my approach of listening for the body in vocal sound. Foregrounding the perspective and embodied experience of voice practitioners of colour, I critique the myth of the “natural belter” that obscures the lessons Broadway performers have drawn from the blueswomen’s sound.

© Masi Asare, 2021



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

EAR TRAINING

Vocal Colour in Blue: Early Twentieth-Century Black Women Singers as Broadway's Voice Teachers

Masi Asare

The Twice-Heard Voice of Broadway

Broadway belting is a much mythologized vocal sound, one whose force flows in no small part from beliefs that it is both natural and dangerous. In my experience, students who seek to learn to belt out show tunes often come to lessons with the strong fear that singing in such a powerful way may damage their voices. Certainly, many voice teachers within the classical tradition impress this idea upon their students. By contrast, rising dancers may study ballet, jazz, and modern dance, as well as tap, yoga, and African dance forms, for example, without confronting the unforgiving assertion that using one's body to express certain genres will ruin it forever for others. In music conservatories, it is quite a different story; classical singers and jazz singers train in segregated tracks that remap the lines of racialized genre and style. Young classical singers are fiercely protected from the potential contamination of pop music vocalization on the grounds of preserving vocal health. Within this context, musical theatre has the potential to be a productive zone of miscegenation where singers train and perform in multiple technical modes. Professional musical theatre singer-actors sustain proficiency in both belt numbers and light classical repertoire, the latter referred to, in a telling phrase, as "legit" songs. But the flourishing of interleaved vocal styles in Broadway music is secured, I submit, by the narrative that the quintessential Broadway belter is, and always has been, a white woman. In fact, listening to a performer such as Ethel Merman has been touted as no less than "listening to the voice of Broadway itself" (Miller 1998, 108).

My project here is to complicate the premise of the implicit whiteness of the Broadway woman belter's voice, and further, to attend to the racial histories borne in vocal sound. To these ends, I will trace a line of historical singing lessons that locate blues singers Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters in the lineage of Broadway beltors. Contesting the pervasive notion that black women who sang the blues and performed on the musical stage in the early twentieth century possessed natural and "untrained" voices, I argue instead that singing is a particular form of sonic citational practice. In the act of producing vocal sound, one implicitly cites the vocal acts of the teacher from whom one has learned the song. And, I suggest, if performance is always "twice-behaved" (Schechner 1985), then the particular modes of doubleness present in voice point up this sonic citationality, a condition of vocal sound I name the "twice-heard." I listen across this profoundly underacknowledged lineage of musical theatre vocality for the ways that early twentieth-century singers' voices are twice-heard, across racial lines, up to and including Ethel Merman's Broadway belt.

Masi Asare is assistant professor of theatre and performance studies at Northwestern University. As a composer/writer she holds commissions from Broadway producers and Marvel, and her voice students have performed on Broadway and in international tours. Masi's scholarly book project examines the impact of blues singers on Broadway belting and makes the case for the need to feel the racial history in contemporary musical theatre performance. Her writing appears in *The Dramatist*, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, and is forthcoming in *Studies in Musical Theatre* and *TDR*.

The Listening Singer

For singers, the acts of listening and producing sound are conjoined and co-present. One listens to one's own sound, and to the sounds of others; within and across this field of listening, one's own voice takes sonic shape.¹ Nina Sun Eidsheim (2015) has argued for a move away from thinking sound as a fixed, external object to be apprehended, and rather, sound as practice experienced multiply at the level of apprehenders' material experience. Consider the various ways that bodies cradle sound beyond the curl of the ear. Singers' listening encompasses the awareness of how vocal sound vibrates in the bones of the breastplate and the skull; how the muscles in the abdomen, the neck and across the back ripple into motion as the voice climbs; the textural feel of subtle shifts in one's throat, nose, and mouth; the pressure of air rushing past the vocal folds as they draw close and draw apart. All of this is listening that, like the performance of a responsive pianist, accompanies vocal sound. It is typically said that a piano accompanies a voice and not that a voice accompanies a piano. Similarly, the act of voicing is generally understood as the main attraction, beyond the singer's multiple acts of listening that underscore it.

And so, the singer may not be circumscribed by the overemphasis on listening and reception that has been detected in sound studies scholarship by the authors of this special issue (Herrera, Marshall, and McMahon 2019). In fact, the practitioner-driven voice science and voice pedagogy literatures manifest an attunement more likely to privilege the production of sound, articulated in anatomical terms, with *less* attention to singers' acts of listening. Within this literature, there is also a pervasive narrative that black women singers of popular music such as the blues have always been "untrained" (Woodruff 2011), in possession of voices that sprang forth fully formed, just by "feeling it." This dismissive view—even when cloaked in tones of admiration—reduces black women singers to the category of vocal production only, making no provision for the ways in which such artists have listened to and studied with one another, sculpting their voices over time. This article offers a double intervention by engaging black women singers of the musical stage as highly trained producers of vocal sound as well as voice teachers in their own right. In so doing, I refute the assessment of such black voices as "untrained" and assert that beyond personal, musical, or cultural *style*—often a euphemism for racial essence or the celebrated aestheticization of black suffering—early twentieth-century blues singers possessed and deployed robust vocal techniques.

The following analysis draws on archival sources, close readings of recorded and documented performances, and my more than two decades as a singer, songwriter, and voice coach in the musical theatre. As I consider how performances of vocal sound replicate and transmit knowledge, I take the "singing lesson" as a key site of performance for analysis. Unlike the stories of classical singers (Story 1990; Eidsheim 2019), the archive is largely silent on lessons or training that early twentieth-century popular singers, in particular black women singers, used to gain their technique. What it does present, by contrast, are lessons of content—the ways and contexts in which singers learned particular songs. Thus the singing lessons I examine are largely occasions having to do with the shared experience of learning repertoire. It is these singing lessons and their implications I wish to consider here. By singing lesson, I mean, primarily, a particular scenario in which a singer learns a song and polishes its delivery by working with another singer or voice coach. Thus, I engage the learning of song repertoire as a specific scenario (Taylor 2003) of both listening and vocalizing by which the transmission of technique registers in the archive.²

Ma Rainey's Singing Lesson

Let's begin with Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. Rainey is widely regarded as the "Mother of the Blues." And yet, it is difficult to claim full maternal rights to the form for Rainey when she herself spoke of learning her first blues number from a young woman in 1902 while working the tent show circuit in Missouri; the point of black maternal origin proves unlocatable. In her one known interview, Rainey shared the anecdote with the black musicologist and choir director John Wesley Work, Jr., who later related:

She tells of a girl from the town who came to the tent one morning and began to sing about the "man" who had left her. . . . The song was so strange and poignant that it attracted much attention. "Ma" Rainey became so interested that she learned the song from the visitor, and used it soon afterwards in her "act" as an encore. (Work 1940, 32)

Three-quarters of a century earlier, white performers such as T. D. Rice were described by contemporaries as having drawn material from the "peculiarities" of street and stable-yard performances by black men to craft blackface minstrelsy. Rice is said to have taken up the song that would make him famous for the number "Jump Jim Crow" as the result of a simple hearing, a chance encounter with a street performer, and the reported decision on the white listener's part to elevate a performance by taking it to the stage (Lott 2003, 57). In Ma Rainey, by comparison, we have an example of study in which the soon-to-be Mother of the Blues studied and learned a particular song, taught by one black woman to another, with all its strangeness and poignancy.

What does it mean to learn a song? What does it mean to share a repertoire between teacher and student, between an originary singer and the one who listens and sings back, in a process of learning to put the song into her own body and voice? Descriptors such as "strangeness" and "peculiarities" call up notions of technique; specifically, techniques thus far unfamiliar to the listeners in question, whether Rainey or Rice. From my work as a songwriter and voice teacher, I know that any song makes certain technical demands of the singer. One must be able to sustain this note, execute that leap, navigate such and such a rhythm. Yet while the song, with its particular configuration of pitches, intervals, and rhythms, may provide a map to technique, the singer must animate this map in performance, imbue it with a series of choices about how to deploy the breath and flesh of the vocal mechanism.

Bessie Smith's Shout: Learning the Vaudeville-Blues

Listening to "Poor Man's Blues," a song Bessie Smith authored and whose lyrics Angela Davis has lucidly analyzed as containing an incisive social protest (Davis 2011, 97), I take in the slides in Smith's voice, each a caressing or easing over the many surfaces of a given pitch with all its curves. I hear the gravel in her sound, the majestic, muscular ripple of vibrato, and the ring to her tone. There is a sweetness underneath the grit and growl that comes, as the metaphorical landscapes of anatomy and acoustics would have me believe, from a particular technical posture, holding the throat in the position of a laugh, or a sob, or both simultaneously. The affective arrangement of body for voice is a performance in its own right. The shape contains an ambivalent multiplicity that in itself evokes the blues. As James H. Cone writes, "The blues were living reality. They were a sad feeling and also a joyous mood. They are bitter but also sweet. They are funny and not so funny" (Cone 1992, 122). I

hear this doubleness in the colour of Smith's voice, the physiology and phonic materiality of double entendre, an en fleshed performance that means more than one thing at once.

The way that Bessie Smith delivers a song has to do with more than just the timbre of her voice, and more than its grain, understood as a kind of frictive beyond-timbre—what Roland Barthes calls “the body in the voice as it sings” (Barthes 2012, 508). Although, as far as grain is concerned, Steven Connor usefully cautions that the body does not “upload” cleanly into voice, and voices may also ventriloquize the rooms in which they resound (Connor 2014, 28). Further, in the crack of the voice, the cut of the grain, as Fred Moten teaches, a black singer's vocal sound may thwart both the accusation of incompleteness and assumptions around “the soft, heavy romance of a simple fullness” (Moten 2003, 107). Beyond timbre, consider Bessie Smith's phrasing, consider improvisation, consider her stage presence, reportedly commanding, and the fact of the songs she penned herself. But I am after the vocal *sound* and what it bore, what it continues to bear. How did Bessie Smith learn to shout, and with her particular sound?

It has been suggested, and sometimes refuted, that the Tennessee-born Bessie Smith learned to sing from Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and certainly, the two did perform together early in Smith's career. Smith's entrée into show business came when she was hired to work mainly as a dancer with a travelling company in 1912 at the age of eighteen and soon after appeared in a troupe with “Ma” and “Pa” Rainey. Yet Maud Smith, Bessie's sister-in-law, commented, “Ma and Bessie got along fine, but Ma never taught Bessie how to sing,” and Smith's biographer Chris Albertson insists “Ma Rainey may well have passed on to the younger singer a few show business tricks, and she probably taught her some songs, but Bessie was, by all accounts, a good singer before she left Chattanooga” (2003, 14). What is interesting about these comments is the way they seem to suggest that learning to sing is an on/off switch—you've learned or you haven't—when, in practice, technique develops over time. There is also a sense of defending Smith's legacy, as if having learned anything at all other than “a few show business tricks, and . . . some songs” robs Smith of her authenticity, somehow diminishes the force of her talent. The anti-theatrical investment in the authenticity of blues performers, as Paige McGinley (2014) has documented, disavows the technique—whether theatrical or, as I discuss, musical—that such artists developed and displayed. Of course, the impressiveness ascribed to black singers often flows from the mysterious and magical sense in which they are supposed to be those who are never taught but just “feel it” all along.

However, in contrast to the on/off switch model of singing training, where “on” perpetuates the myth of authentic, unlearned, natural black talent—and off is, well, just *off*³—I contend that learning to sing, which is always learning to sing in a certain way, generally has a slow rise to it. To the above assessments, then, I argue for the validity of continuing to learn. Even once a singer has grasped the basics of vocal production, even if she knows “how to sing,” she can continue to learn and grow in her technique. It is impossible that Smith could have learned nothing from Rainey as they shared a stage; the assertion that she would not have studied and in some aspects emulated the more successful singer eight years her senior, is, far from preserving her legacy, only an insult to any self-respecting performer who aspires to be a star. Sharing a stage, singing together, and learning songs from another singer certainly constitute scenarios that fall within the category I consider here as “singing lesson.” And then, if the learning of repertoire is what we are after, what is to be made of two singers who write a song together?

The song “Don't Fish in My Sea” was co-written by Rainey and Smith, as documented by Davis (2011, 213), and recorded by Rainey in Chicago in 1926. The tune is a straightforward 12-bar blues

that works up to a woman's assertion of the boundaries, value, and territory of her body over and against the actions of a philandering man: "If you don't like my ocean, don't fish in my sea. . . . Stay out of my valley and let my mountain be." There is a smoothness to Rainey's sound, a forswearing of overexertion. This is an easy sliding over notes, with pickups, those quick notes between phrases, thrown away almost to the side instead of straight ahead. Her sustained tones are burnished with warm vibrato, the low notes sound as though she's leaning right in to make her point. It's as if a blue note sounds blue because she can't be bothered to reach all the way up to it . . . the way a queen should not be expected to work too hard, with a languid elegance that calls up hot and humid air. The recording consists only of Rainey's voice and Thomas Dorsey's upright piano playing, which prances along behind her, liting and dipping into tremolos at every occasion. After the second verse, however, there is a brief spoken line before the sung melody resumes:

He used to stay out late, now he don't come home at all
 He used to stay out late, now he don't come home at all
 [Spoken] Won't kiss me, either
 I know there's another mule been kickin' in my stall
 (Davis 2011, 213)

Angela Davis speculates, "The speaking voice sounds to be that of Bessie Smith, who may very well have been present at this recording session on an informal basis" (Davis 2011, 256). It's hard to tell. The line comes close on the heels of the last sung note, and it could have been difficult for Rainey to have finished singing and managed to spit out the line as quickly and casually as it sounds; I can understand why Davis hears this as the voice of a second woman in the room. And it does have some of Bessie Smith's inflection: "Won't kiss" as two dotted quarter notes of emphasis, like two firm shakes of the head with a certain flash of indignance; affect aside, the rhythm, bend, and articulation of such a two-note phrase reverberate throughout Smith's own recorded repertoire. What I enjoy about this acoustic riddle are the generative implications of the two interpretations that seem most likely. If the spoken line is Rainey herself, then the fact of its being mistaken for Smith's (whose body of recorded work is more extensive than Rainey's and thus more familiar to the listening historian's ear) only points up a strong similarity between the two women's voices. In this event, the case for the younger Smith having learned a hefty portion of vocal technique from the older Rainey is strengthened. And if the interjection is in fact Smith's voice? Imagine her scenario of listening, envision her sitting silent in the room next to Dorsey's piano while Rainey sang into the recording horn, taking it all in and perhaps holding her cowriter accountable to sing the song in the way the two had agreed.

The scene of Rainey and Smith's collaboration reimagines the scene of teacher-to-student repertoire learning as one of shared repertoire creation, in which a new song is borne out in the voices and embodied performances of two black women as they sang and wrote the blues together. I picture the two bent over a hot piano and a fresh sheet of paper, backstage at one of the theatres at which they performed together, companions in song and in travel on the black theatre circuit of their time. Singing the tune back to one another, ensuring its viability in its twice-heardness.

Blues Shout as Show Tune

As blues singers, Smith and Rainey before her are widely and deservedly credited as artists who cleared the way for the traditions of recorded jazz that would follow them. But the two women's connections to the theatre world deserve consideration as well. Of note, in the 1930s, Rainey owned and operated the Lyric Theatre in Rome, Georgia, after retiring from her career as a performer (Peterson 1997). This was a theatre on the famed Theatre Owners Booking Association circuit whose acronym, TOBA, was also said by black performers of the day to stand for “tough on black asses.” In the first two and a half decades of the twentieth century, Smith and Rainey performed for black audiences across the circuit at many of its nearly eighty theatres, which ranged in size from the five-hundred-seat American Theatre in Houston to the eighteen-hundred-seat Lyric Theatre in New Orleans (Sampson 2013). What's more, in the 1920s, Smith was lauded in the black press as “one of the greatest colored actresses” of the day (*Philadelphia Tribune*, October 27, 1927).

Musicologist Eileen Southern aptly observed that singers like Rainey and Smith were vaudeville artists, noting that scholars “have found it difficult to describe adequately the quality and style of the blueswomen's voices, which ranged from lilting soprano to deep contralto, from expressive, soulful wails to abrasive, gut-bucket groans and moans” (1997, 373). Southern refers to the music these singers sang as “vaudeville-blues,” an important intervention in prevailing narratives of musical theatre history. Tracing a history of musicals that listens through black women's voices, then, requires a rethinking of the dominant narrative of blackness via minstrelsy that is subsequently co-opted into white vaudeville innovated by European immigrants and then, via a dash of European operetta, arrives at (white) musical comedy, from which black musical comedy is a separate and “parallel” strain (Block and Graham et al. 2015). The black vaudeville-blues artist, by her very existence, complicates this articulation.

As theatre artists, Smith and her cohort of black women blues singers were performers on the same vaudeville stage widely accepted as an antecedent of musical theatre. But hearing a blues singer like Bessie Smith and her vaudeville-blues sound in the lineage of Broadway belters puts pressure on the oft-stated assumption that white Broadway belters such as Ethel Merman deployed a vocal sound traced to another great lady of show business, the Jewish “coon shouter” Sophie Tucker.

Sophie Tucker's Immigrant “Coon Shout”

The recorded archive bears out that Tucker's is a voice with heft, not sunlit gossamer like the voices of the vaudeville ingénues who were her contemporaries. Hers is an immigrant voice, encrusted⁴ with a foreignness that cannot be fully disguised by Negro dialect or ragtime rhythms, let alone the blackface makeup in which she performed at the start of her career. The ethnically marked sign of Tucker's voice is a complex one; scholars have also noted the ways that her repertoire was predicated on and engaged Jewish audiences, who responded with great emotion to the songs she sang in Yiddish, both in the US and abroad (Lavitt 1999; Merwin 2006). Jayna Brown has also noted the fondness with which some black artists of her era regarded Tucker, not least the songwriters whose careers she advanced (Brown 2008, 214). Still, it would have been difficult for a singer like Sophie Tucker to be as legible and widely embraced by her audiences without the figure of the blues singer who ghosts her sound. Regardless, the black women blues singers who were her contemporaries, among them Smith, Rainey, Alberta Hunter, and Ethel Waters, appear nowhere in the pages of her autobiography.

Clearly, these singers crossed paths, as the blueswomen's accounts confirm. Alberta Hunter narrates an encounter with Tucker as follows:

[White performers] studied us so hard that you'd think they were in class. . . . The white shows used to come in from New York and everybody else was there to see us work, the stars, the chorus girls, Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker, everybody. One night I was doing "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and they handed me a little note from Sophie Tucker. She wanted that song, and that's how they were, always trying to get something out of us, always trying to pick up on our little tricks. And what could we do? Only thing we could do was to do those numbers even better—which we did. (Albertson 2003, 21–22)

The above anecdote⁵ sheds new light on the assertions Tucker made elsewhere that securing new, original repertoire was the key to success for the aspiring performer;⁶ clearly, the goal was to discover material that would be fresh to white ears, a longstanding approach of business-minded musicians throughout the history of US popular song. In another anecdote, the celebrated singer Ethel Waters offers up another scenario of study involving Tucker that stands as a rare example of a lesson explicitly focused on vocal technique rather than, or in addition to, repertoire. Waters recalls encountering Tucker during the late 1920s when Waters performed regularly at the venue Rafe's Paradise in Atlantic City:

Sophie Tucker was playing at the Beaux Arts that year and she, too, came several times to catch my act. This "Last of the Red-Hot Mammams" was then called a "coon shouter," an expression whose passing from the common language none of us laments. Miss Tucker paid me a little money to come to her hotel suite and sing for her privately. She explained that she wanted to study my style of delivery. (Waters and Samuels 1992, 135)

It remains an open question as to how conscientious Miss Tucker really was in her requested studies; the written and recorded archive attests that her vocal sound was quite different from that of Ethel Waters. As I address below, Waters made her way from the vaudeville circuit and dive cabarets in Harlem to the Broadway theatre and international renown on stage and screen. Along the way, she even took a singing lesson, of sorts, with her contemporary Bessie Smith. Hers was a sweet but powerful vocal sound that gave new meaning to what it meant to sing the blues, and where the blues could take a singer.

Ethel Waters's "Low Kind of Singing"

Of the blues singers I have considered thus far, Ethel Waters is the one most readily associated with the musical theatre; her Broadway shows include *Africana* (1927), *As Thousands Cheer* (1933), and *Cabin in the Sky* (1940), and she remains known for definitive performances of iconic songs from stage and screen musicals such as "Supertime," "Am I Blue?" and "Stormy Weather." Born in Philadelphia in 1896, Waters, the Queen of the Blues, was just two years younger than Empress Bessie Smith. On the strength of an impromptu performance at a South Philly venue, at age seventeen, she was booked by a touring vaudeville company; even at that time, her voice had, by her own account, a "sweet, bell-like' tone" (Waters and Samuels 1992, 87). Waters toured as a member of the Hill sisters group and under the stage name "Sweet Mama Stringbean," then performed at the famed Harlem dive bar Edmond's Cellar and in the recording studios and touring company of Black Swan Records before going on to new heights across Broadway, Europe, and Hollywood. Yet, while

a famed blues singer in her own era, today, she lacks the prominence of Smith and Rainey and does not easily map onto the narrative of blueswoman as proto-jazz singer.

The signature blues song of the young Waters's vaudeville days offers a productive site through which to hear and assess some of the reasons why her voice has proved difficult to categorize. Astutely navigating the early structures of music licensing, she wrote the publishers of composer W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues" soon after its publication in 1914 and received permission to be one of only two acts and the first woman then allowed to perform the song. Despite the facts that the published sheet music identifies it as both a blues and ragtime tune and that the song's opening section strategically incorporates the tango rhythm all the rage at the time of its writing, "St. Louis Blues" is now considered one of the great blues numbers of all time. Listening to a recording of the song made during World War II (Armed Forces Radio Network, July 14, 1942), I hear in Waters's voice a liquid tone, not without blues viscosity but with some lift to it. She floats out high notes in octave leaps ("to-mor-row") but has deep low notes as well and isn't afraid to show them off, vibrato melting the ends of phrases into warmth. She sings through the voiced consonants, the final *n*'s and *ng*'s of things like trains and rings gaining new, extended lengths of expression. When she heads up high ("Saint Louis," "When you see me leaving"), the sound remains clear but gets thinned out and a bit brighter, maybe nasalized (in the best of senses), the voice's taffy texture stretching out thinner and thinner as it wisps to new heights. She adds in a growl and flutter here and there ("I'll be gone), but overall, this is a warm, smooth sound with a lot of lift to it. Lighter in heft and mass of vocal folds engaged, this sound feels less earthbound than those generally employed by Smith, Rainey, or Tucker. This blues singing comes with the Northern accent of the Philadelphia-born singer, not elongated Southern vowels. Yet it's still a blue sound, with backphrasing and the bluing of notes true to style, and that sense of tossing notes away common to all the blues singers.

Around 1918, Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters shared a stage at the No. 91 Theatre in Atlanta. By this point, Smith was already a high-earning star on the vaudeville circuit who called the shots wherever she performed. A respectful Waters deferred to her status, calling her "Miss Bessie" and trying to stay on good terms, later recalling:

Bessie, like an opera singer, carried her own claque with her. . . . [She] was in a pretty good position to dictate to the managers [and] told the men who ran No. 91 that she didn't want anyone else on the bill to sing the blues. I agreed to this. . . . And when I went on I sang "I Want to Be Somebody's Baby Doll So I Can Get My Lovin' All the Time." But before I could finish this number the people out front started howling, "Blues! Blues! Come on, Stringbean, we want your blues!" Before the second show the manager went to Bessie's dressing room and told her he was going to revoke the order forbidding me to sing any blues. He said he couldn't have another such rumpus. There was quite a stormy discussion about this, and you could hear Bessie yelling things about "these Northern bitches." Now nobody could have taken the place of Bessie Smith. People everywhere loved her shouting with all their hearts and were loyal to her. But they wanted me too. There had been such a tumult at that first show that Bessie agreed that after I took two or three bows for my first song I should, if the crowd still insisted, sing "St. Louis Blues." (Waters and Samuels 1992, 91)

This encounter between Smith and Waters can be understood as a kind of failed voice lesson. The restriction Smith attempts to place on the repertoire Waters may perform does not hold; the lesson

is not attended to. Consequently, Waters establishes herself as a skilful blues singer even in comparison with the greater star she concedes was “undisputed tops as a blues singer” (Waters and Samuels 1992, 87). In this way, Waters models the student who defies the teacher—here, with the backing of the theatre manager and audience—to assert her own technical approach in contrast to the performance held up as definitive. It is not that her performance recreates or supersedes Smith’s shouting but rather that she presents a vocal sound with an effective but contrasting mode of delivery. To the voice teacher’s assertion that, essentially, “It must be done the way I do it or not at all,” the student counters with, “What if I do it this way?”

According to Waters, the two singers made peace after the incident and struck an amicable tone for the rest of the engagement. They had much in common: both were statuesque, powerful women who lived the full-bodied blues life, collecting female lovers as well as male, and not afraid of a knock-down, drag-out fight if they thought their rights were being trodden on. But Smith continued to maintain that Waters had the lesser voice. For her part, Waters recognized the value in her own sound, what she called “my low, sweet, and then new way of singing blues” (Waters and Samuels 1992, 87).

It was this blues sound that carried Waters to cabarets and clubs of New York. While performing at the cramped, dingy Edmond’s Cellar in Harlem in the 1920s, Waters sang the blues songs she had performed in travelling vaudeville shows up until that point. At Edmond’s Cellar, Waters also took a set of lessons in learning repertoire from piano player Lou Henley, who convinced her that learning popular ballads and Tin Pan Alley songs in addition to the blues would open her up to new career opportunities. Arriving early to her gigs at Edmond’s for sessions with Henley, she learned a range of popular ballads and worked out ways to interpret these songs. This mode of study—rehearsing and developing new repertoire with a trusted accompanist—was repeated throughout her career, later during her decades-long collaboration with pianist Pearl Wright.

With Wright, Waters stated that the key to their partnership lay in the fact that Pearl was a singer herself: “An accompanist who can sing knows the effects you seek, and you can feel understanding and help coming out through her fingers, through the piano, to you” (Wright and Samuels 1992, 227). Wright, the black woman singer-as-accompanist, proved an able coach for Waters when she was presented with material by white songwriters that had the potential to transform the blues singer’s career. At an audition for Broadway’s Plantation Club to replace headliner Florence Mills, the star of the hit, all-black Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*, Waters was asked by Tin Pan Alley songwriters Harry Akst and Joe Young to learn one of their songs. When they performed it for her, “doing it fast and corny” (Waters and Samuels 1992, 184), Waters was dubious. The songwriters encouraged her to work up the song in her own (blues) style. Waters went away and rehearsed the song with Wright and discovered she liked it after all. Returning to the songwriters and producers to perform the number “in her own way” got her the job and her first big hit. The song was “Dinah,” which she recorded for Columbia Records in 1925, a recording later inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. It is notable that where Sophie Tucker claimed Tin Pan Alley songwriters as voice coaches, Waters learned and restyled her new repertoire at the elbow of the black piano accompanist who was also a skilled singer. This pattern is repeated with Akst and Young’s song “Am I Blue?” and Harold Arlen’s “Stormy Weather.” In each case, the learning of new repertoire is framed by the singer’s suggestion, “Let me take the lead sheet home. . . . I’ll work on it with Pearl” (Waters and Samuels 1992, 198, 220).⁷

From Blues to Broadway

Ethel Waters has sometimes been the target of censure from black listeners in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century who surmise that she turned her back on her own race and sought to sound “white.” As Faedra Chatard Carpenter has noted, assumptions “about what *sounds black* or *sounds white* in simplified racial terms” have long formed part of US cultural conversations (Carpenter 2014, 195). Like the upper-middle-class black people Langston Hughes critiques in his seminal essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” her too-sweet vocal sound has sometimes been heard as self-loathing, the prim rejection that says, “We don’t believe in ‘shouting’” (Hughes 1993, 57). In pitting Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters against one other, Angela Davis valorizes Smith as the singer who, with her blues singing, authentically represented her race and heritage, while Waters “consciously cultivated a sound from which many of the unfamiliar and inaccessible elements of black culture had been purged” (Davis 2011, 153). Dwandalyn Reece takes Davis to task for this assessment of Waters’s voice and blues sound, pointing out that aesthetic styles and their expression have varied forms and modes; black performance cannot be understood in static, essentialist terms (Reece 2000, 34).

I have gone to some effort to show the extent to which Waters was celebrated by black audiences as a bona fide blues singer in her era, and not as a whitened, lesser imitation of Bessie Smith. Even as I attend to vocal colour shaped by the blues, I want to be clear that there is not, nor ever was, only one way of singing the blues. Further, paying attention to the processes by which singers studied and shifted their vocal delivery over time enables us, as Shane Vogel has elucidated, to understand musical performance in historical terms “as both an object and a process” (Vogel 2008, 97). Without the acknowledgement that singers not only produce but also learn technique and repertoire, adjusting their sound over time, their performative contributions are certain to be denied. In such a situation, the singer emerges merely as the hollow symbol of the race, composer, or genre she is thought to represent.

I submit that this is a key reason why Waters has been so under-celebrated in the pantheon of blues, jazz, and popular songstresses. Her movement from blues to Broadway simply doesn’t align with the more familiar blues-to-jazz or blues-to-gospel trajectories of popular music histories. And the blues are not seen as a proto-genre of Broadway in the way that they are in the case of jazz and gospel (and the rock’n’roll these spawned). But listening through the twice-heardness of vocal sound enables a hearing of the Broadway belter’s indebtedness to the blues singer, whether her blue sound took the form of Smith’s shout or Waters’s sweet tone. Nonetheless, popular opinion rewards those who perpetuate the mythology that their talent is so innate that it sprang forth from nowhere; this narrative was certainly espoused by Broadway belter Ethel Merman, and loudly.

Ethel Merman’s Belt: Vocal Sound as Knockout

Born in Astoria, Queens, just six years after Ma Rainey learned her first blues, Ethel Merman lives in collective memory as the archetypal Broadway belter—the possessor of a loud, brassy voice that cut clear to the back row of the theatre, carrying over a full orchestra without the need for anything so mundane as amplification. Merman’s career break came when she appeared in the Gershwin’s 1930 musical *Girl Crazy*. She attests that during intermission of that show’s opening night, composer George Gershwin ran up three flights of stairs to congratulate her on her performance of the song “I Got Rhythm.” Merman reports of this performance,

When I held the C note for sixteen bars, an entire chorus, while the orchestra played the melody, the audience went a little crazy. I don't think they were responding to the beauty of it. I think it was the newness. Nobody had ever done it in a Broadway show before. Thank God I was blessed with a strong diaphragm and lungs. Because I had to sing I don't know how many encores. And that was the song that made me. (Merman and Eels 1979, 39)

Gershwin was so taken with Merman's voice that, as she recalls, he counselled her, "Make me a promise. . . . Never go near a singing teacher. Because you have a natural talent. And if you ever go near a singing teacher, then you'll become conscious of breathing . . . and you're going to lose all the naturalness that you have" (Eichler 2015). The great composer's advice not to let conventional voice teachers tamper with her singing is one that reverberates throughout the archive, repeated again and again in the Broadway star's interviews and biographies. Merman wore the alleged "naturalness" of her mighty voice as a badge of honour.

How did Merman learn her sound? To whom did she listen and sing back? Little information is available about Merman's childhood and teenage years. Although she was taught by her father and in high school classes to read music, she is not known to have sung in the school choir or glee club. At the same time, her Queens background must have had a hand in her diction, rendering Gershwin lyrics such as "Who could ask for anything more?" as "Who could ask for anything maw?"⁸ She roundly denied assertions by the pianist Al Siegel that he coached her into her own particular vocal technique. But she admired Sophie Tucker, to whom her sound has often been compared, and who was in turn complimentary of Merman's delivery. Reviewers also detected in Merman's voice echoes of torch singer Libby Holman, another Jewish star whom she also respected and whose signature song "Moanin' Low" was a staple of Merman's nightclub repertoire. Even if it is unlikely that Merman would have listened to recordings of blues singers aimed at black audiences, it is known that Holman was an avid student of the blues and modelled her voice on singers such as Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters. A millionaire who lived a life full of scandal—in between Broadway engagements, she was tried (and acquitted) for the murder of her late husband, and she proudly cultivated a string of lesbian relationships—Holman found a trusted voice coach in the black guitarist Josh White, a blues musician who became her long-time accompanist (Wald 2000, 95; Kellow 2007, 17). But despite what she learned from Tucker and Holman, the luminaries Merman claimed as responsible for her career time and again were the songwriters—George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter—of the hit songs she belted out.

The word "belter" itself discloses a scenario of listening. The origins of the word "belt" in reference to singing can be traced to boxing ("Origin of the Musical Verb 'Belt.'" 2014). Correlated with the idea of the "knockout" performance, the image of the singer-as-boxer adds an oppositional dimension to that of the singer-as-shouter by figuring the listener (or opponent) in the word for the act of singing itself. In order for the belter to belt, there must be one who is belted. Thus, the belter is so named because of the way her song is received, the levelling reaction that her powerful sound produces. Accordingly, the scenario of listening that the descriptor evokes is one that is forward-facing rather than back-formed, foregrounding lessons taught rather than lessons learned. The major contribution of Ethel Merman, with all the singers her voice carries, is that her belt voice makes such an impression on many a listener who, once recovered from the shock, picks herself up off the ground, dusts herself off, and seeks to learn to make just such a sound herself. In contrast to this

oppositional encounter, the blues singers who precede Merman teach another way—by activating listening scenarios in which sound takes shape via the studied act of *singing along with* another’s voice.

Conclusions

I have argued here against listenings that would filter out the frequencies and impact of black blues singers on the musical theatre belt sound, attending to the specific bodies through which its shouted tones resounded in historical context. My goal has not been to merely catalogue performance traits (blues shouting) that signal blackness and detect them within white performance modes (Broadway belting) where they may have gone previously uncredited. This would be an oversimplification, not least because, as the sounds of Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters show, there is no one “pure” way to sing the blues. The essential signifier of blackness in the voice proves impossible to locate. But I have contested the idea that black women who sang the blues and performed on the musical stage in the early twentieth century (and beyond) possessed “untrained,” spontaneously formed voices. Against this notion, I have examined a series of singing lessons that variously map the ways that black women singers learned from and taught one another and their white contemporaries.

I have examined several kinds of singing lessons here. One kind is the lesson that occurs in the context of the professional singer’s ongoing practice, challenging the notion that learning to sing can be understood as a sort of on/off switch. Another kind is the lesson in which two women write a song together and teach it to one another. Others are lessons that are disavowed, unacknowledged, ghosts of lessons, denied in some archival accounts and revealed in others. There is also the failed lesson—that in which the student refuses to attend to the teaching and instead goes her own way. Beyond the lesson taught by the teacher who defines himself as a proper voice teacher, there is the one given by the teacher and coach who calls herself a piano accompanist. And in addition to the lesson that the singer disavows, there is the lesson that the Broadway songwriter-as-voice-coach helpfully disavows on her behalf, solidifying a cult of the white belter and her so-called “natural” sound. This last must be attended to, in sifting through the echoes of all the lessons that precede it, because it perniciously recasts the so-called “untrained” voice as nothing short of miraculous, never minding the ways in which its sounds, for all their seeming offhandedness, are already studied, already citational, already twice-heard.

Notes

1. On this point, Nina Sun Eidsheim writes, “By shifting our assumption of the singer from pure producer to producer and listener, we can recognize that he or she is listening to and also assigning meaning to or withholding it from a given labeling of his or her vocal timbre” (2019, 180).
2. Diana Taylor posits the “scenario” as a unit of the repertoire that effects a “once-againness” and stages “the generative critical distance between social actor and character” (2003, 30, 32).
3. Daphne Brooks (2010) has pointed up the fact that present-day listeners are trained by television reality shows to exercise a certain vigilance against supposed intonation problems, standing ready to apply the damning critique of “pitchy-ness” to singers whose performance disappoints.
4. I refer here to the “mixed voice” theorized by Steven Connor: “Like flypaper, the voice gathers things on the way, lilt, leanings, aches, eccentricities, accents” (Connor 2014, 29).

5. In her biography *Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues*, blues diva Hunter also narrates a specific incident in which she was asked to give a singing lesson to Sophie Tucker and declined (Taylor 1987, 39).
6. In her autobiography, Tucker writes, “For all the years I have been in show business, to singers who have asked my advice I have said: ‘Get new songs. Pay a writer to write them for you. Get songs that you can make your own. Don’t copy other singers. Don’t sing their songs. Don’t do their stunts. Don’t make your act a carbon copy of someone else’s. Not if you want to succeed’” (Tucker 1945, 59).
7. Additionally, Waters studied with Jamaican voice teacher Louis Drysdale in London in 1929. The Kingston-born Drysdale relocated to London in 1906, where he studied at the Royal College of Music with distinguished teachers in the bel canto tradition. In the 1920s, Drysdale’s studio welcomed students of different races from the worlds of Broadway, cabaret, opera, and British musical comedy in the West End. His students also included Florence Mills, Marian Anderson, and Alberta Hunter.
8. Merman was a favourite of not only George Gershwin but also Broadway composer/lyricists Cole Porter and Irving Berlin, who had nothing but praise for her diction. Berlin is reported to have said of her, “If you’re writing for Merman, be sure your lyrics are good, because they’ll be heard.” See Pleasants (1974, 337).

References

- Albertson, Chris. (1972) 2003. *Bessie*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Barthes, Roland. (1972) 2012. “The Grain of the Voice.” In *The Sound Studies Reader*, edited by Jonathan Sterne, 504–10. New York: Routledge.
- “Bessie Smith Star of Fast Revue At Gibson’s Next Week.” 1927. *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 27, 1927, 6.
- Block, Geoffrey, and Sandra Jean Graham, et al. 2015. *American Musical Theater: Grove Music Essentials*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Brooks, Daphne. 2010. “‘Sister, Can You Line It Out?’ Zora Neale Hurston and the Sound of Angular Black Womanhood.” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 55 (4): 617–27.
- Brown, Jayna. 2008. *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Carpenter, Faedra Chatard. 2014. *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Cone, James H. (1972) 1992. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Connor, Steven. 2014. *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters, and Other Vocalizations*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Davis, Angela. (1998) 2011. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Eichler, Alan. 2015. “Ethel Merman, 1978 Interview and ‘Annie Get Your Gun’ Medley.” The Michael Douglas Show. Filmed July 14, 1978. YouTube video, 16:45. Posted November 2015. https://youtu.be/vaoFW_ij9I0.
- Eidsheim, Nina. 2011. “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera.” *American Quarterly* 63 (September): 641–71.
- Eidsheim, Nina Sun. 2015. *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practices*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Eidsheim, Nina Sun. 2019. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Herrera, Patricia, Caitlin Marshall, and Marci R. McMahan. 2019. “Sound Acts: Unmuting Performance Studies.” American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR), Prick Up The Ears Working Group reading.

- Hughes, Langston. (1926) 1993. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell, 55–59. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lavitt, Pamela Brown. 1999. "First of the Red Hot Mamas: 'Coon Shouting' and the Jewish Ziegfeld Girl." *American Jewish History* 87, no. 4 (December): 253–90.
- Kellow, Brian. 2007. *Ethel Merman: A Life*. New York: Viking.
- Lott, Eric. (1993) 2013. *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McGinley, Paige. 2014. *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Merman, Ethel, and George Eels. 1979. *Merman: An Autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Merwin, Ted. 2006. In *Their Own Image: New York Jews in Jazz Age Popular Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Miller, D. A. 1998. *Place for Us: An Essay on the Broadway Musical*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- "Origin of the Musical Verb 'Belt.'" *A Way With Words* radio show and podcast. Posted 14 February 2014. <https://www.waywordradio.org/origin-of-musical-verb-belt/>.
- Peterson, Bernard L. 1997. *The African American Theatre Directory, 1816–1960: A Comprehensive Guide to Early Black Theatre Organizations, Companies, Theatres, and Performing Groups*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Pleasants, Henry. 1974. *Great American Popular Singers*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Reece, Dwandalyn. 2000. "A Performance Biography of Ethel Waters (1896–1977)." PhD diss., New York University.
- Sampson, Henry T. (1980) 2013. *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.
- Schechner, Richard. 1985. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Southern, Eileen. (1971) 1997. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Story, Rosalyn M. 1990. *And So I Sing: African American Divas of Opera and Concert*. New York: Warner Books.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Taylor, Frank C. 1987. *Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Tucker, Sophie. 1945. *Some of These Days: The Autobiography of Sophie Tucker*. New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Company.
- Vogel, Shane. 2008. "Performing 'Stormy Weather': Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, and Katherine Dunham." *South Central Review* 25, no. 1 (Spring): 91–113.
- Wald, Elijah. 2000. *Josh White: Society Blues*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Waters, Ethel. 1942. "St. Louis Blues." Command Performance #22. Armed Forces Radio Network, July 14, 1942.
- Waters, Ethel, and Charles Samuels. (1950) 1992. *His Eye Is On the Sparrow: An Autobiography*. Da Capo Press.
- Woodruff, Neal W. 2011. "On the Voice: Contemporary Commercial Voice Pedagogy Applied to the Choral Ensemble: An Interview with Jeannette LoVetri." *Choral Journal* 52, no. 5 (December): 39–53.
- Work, John Wesley. 1940. *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular*. New York: Crown Publishers.

