

THE EVOLUTION OF ELLA FITZGERALD'S SYLLABIC CHOICE IN SCAT SYLLABLES: A  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HER DECCA RECORDINGS

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## PURPOSE

Ella Fitzgerald is commonly praised as the greatest vocal improviser in jazz music's history; she, in fact, declared herself to be exactly that.<sup>1</sup> Improvisational methods praise her ideas as "excellent models for students of vocal jazz"<sup>2</sup> and "musically and verbally inventive, filled with the joy of her creativity... represent[ing] the essence and pinnacle of scat singing";<sup>3</sup> critical commentaries praise her "perfect balance between a steam enginelike propulsion and an ethereal playfulness";<sup>4</sup> and reference books mention Fitzgerald as an exemplar of scat singing in definitions of the term,<sup>5</sup> using phrases like "[scat singing] is mostly closely associated by the general public with Ella Fitzgerald and her many imitators."<sup>6</sup> Though much has been written about Fitzgerald's melodic and harmonic improvisational approach, very little has been written about her syllabic approach to scat singing, which may be her most significant contribution to this particular art form. This is particularly curious given that one of the most common complaints

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<sup>1</sup> Will Friedwald, *Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1990), 282.

<sup>2</sup> Patrice Madura, *Getting Started with Vocal Improvisation* (Reston, VA: MENC, 1999), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Stoloff, *Scat! Vocal Improvisation Techniques*, (Brooklyn: Gerard & Sarzin, 1996), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Holden, "Ella Fitzgerald's Playfulness Ripens with Time's Passage." This citation refers to the reprint in Leslie Gourse, *The Ella Fitzgerald Companion: Seven Decades of Commentary* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), 162.

<sup>5</sup> *The New College Encyclopedia of Music* defines scat singing as a "jazz term for the use of nonsense syllables and other wordless effects in the course of a vocal number. The technique has been employed in a rapid and virtuoso way by Ella Fitzgerald amongst others." *The new Harvard Dictionary of Music* defines scat singing as "A jazz solo of vocal nonsense syllables... Scat came to be represented by virtuosic interpretations (by, e.g. Ella Fitzgerald) of rapid bebop instrumental improvisation."

<sup>6</sup> Carr, Fairweather, and Priestly, *Jazz: The Rough Guide*, 887.

voiced to vocal jazz instructors by novice jazz singers is “I don’t know what syllables I should use.” Most teachers, and most method books, recommend that students listen to recordings of great jazz singers to acquire a sense of authentic style, articulation, and syllabic choice. And though Fitzgerald is usually suggested as a starting point for guided listening, little has been done to codify her syllabic choices in scat singing.

Additionally, it is important to explore Fitzgerald’s innovations because of her influence on other singers. In Chip Deffaa’s profile of Fitzgerald in *Jazz Veterans: A Portrait Gallery*,<sup>7</sup> written shortly before her death in 1996, he wrote “No living singer is more respected by other singers,” quoting Annie Ross, Jon Hendricks, Anita O’Day, Ruth Brown, Cassandra Wilson, and others.

In light of both the esteem with which both Fitzgerald’s peers and the next generation of jazz singers held her, and the lack of analysis dedicated to the syllabic content of her scat solos, it seems worth examining the development of Fitzgerald’s style as a scat singer, as documented through the numerous recordings she made on Decca Records between 1939 and 1954. These recordings are not always held in critical esteem,<sup>8</sup> but a closer examination reveals that it was during this period that Fitzgerald established much of the melodic and harmonic – but especially the syllabic – vocabulary that would mark her improvisational style through the course

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<sup>7</sup> Originally published in 1996; subsequent citations of this article will refer to the reprint in Gourse, *Ella Fitzgerald, Seven Decades of Commentary*, 162-166.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Yanow, on page 78 of *The Jazz Singers* refers to much of her output on Decca as “juvenile novelties,” and Stuart Nicholson references the “critical opinion that would have us believe Ella’s Decca output was an artistic no-go area” on page 131 of *Ella Fitzgerald: A Biography of the First Lady of Jazz*.

of her career.<sup>9</sup> This syllabic vocabulary was a huge part of her sense of style and rhythm, as noted in 1954 by Louis Bellson, who stated: “The greatest drum solo I ever heard was done by Ella at this time doing her scat choruses.”<sup>10</sup> Syllabic choice was tremendously important to Ella Fitzgerald’s improvisational style, and is important to the style of any scat singer. My research seeks to be an example of a kind of research in timbre and articulation – research that has only been done on a limited basis for jazz vocalists and instrumentalists. For years, jazz musicians have analyzed notes, but not sounds; this document seeks to join a discussion of timbre and articulation for scat singers.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Mark Fidelman made this argument as well in *First Lady of Song: Ella Fitzgerald For the Record*. On page 17, he stated, in reference to an early Decca recording of “(If You Can’t Sing It) You’ll Have to Swing It”, “Here, then was the first real hint of the style that was to become the backbone of the career of Ella Fitzgerald.” On pages 45-46, he addressed her recording of “It’s Only a Paper Moon” with the Delta Rhythm Boys, noting “...Ella’s scat singing was featured, this talent obviously having progressed.”

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Mark Fidelman, *First Lady of Song: Ella Fitzgerald For the Record* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1994), 79.

<sup>11</sup> This limited discussion includes works like William Bauer’s “Scat Singing: A Timbral and Phonemic Analysis” and Diana Spradling’s *Jazz Singing: Developing Artistry and Authenticity*, both of which explore the issue of scat timbre and articulation from an academic perspective. Improvisation method books like Scott Fredrickson’s *Scat Singing Method*, Bob Stoloff’s *Scat!*, and Michele Weir’s *Vocal Improvisation*, do present syllables for students to incorporate, but not in a categorized fashion.

## SIGNIFICANCE AND STATE OF RESEARCH

Very little has been written about anyone's syllabic approach to scat singing, much less Fitzgerald's. William R. Bauer explored vocables in Louis Armstrong's "Heebie Jeebies" and "Hotter Than That" solos, along with Betty Carter's "Babe's Blues" solo;<sup>12</sup> Bauer did mention Fitzgerald in reference to Ella's "...mimic[ing] the tonguing, phrasing, and articulation of instrumentalists"<sup>13</sup> and in Betty Carter's early recordings being "peppered with... vocal licks out of Fitzgerald's vocabulary such as the rapid alteration of syllables that start with /n/ and /d/."<sup>14</sup>

Cerulli discussed syllabic choice at two points in "Ella... The Jazz Horn", featured in the liner notes to the compilation album *The Best of Decca*.<sup>15</sup>

It seems, too, in the syllables she uses for improvising, she chooses the ones most easily adaptable to the flow of a tenor sax.<sup>16</sup>

She adopts many of the phrasing devices of the tenor. There are many times when she will take a word like in and sing it "i-hin"; or and will emerge "a-ha-hand"; and she will have improvised within the word or a vowel, in the chord, and with the mannerisms of a tenor.<sup>18</sup>

Nicholson referenced the influence of instrumental improvisation in Fitzgerald's styling in the following commentary, which is somewhat limited in its descriptions of Fitzgerald's improvisational technique:

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<sup>12</sup> William R. Bauer, "Scat Singing: A Timbral and Phonemic Analysis," *Current Musicology*, Spring 2001/02, 303-323.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Reprinted in Gourse, *Ella Fitzgerald: Seven Decades of Commentary*, 41-42.

<sup>16</sup> Gourse, *Ella Fitzgerald: Seven Decades of Commentary*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

From start to finish her conception is purely instrumental, just like a trumpet or a saxophone “blowing” through the blues changes.<sup>19</sup>

Her “set riffs” would remain common to every performance of the song she gave for almost fifty years; they represented the building blocks around which she would construct her improvisation. This was a factor common to all her scat features.<sup>21</sup>

In a previous study, I transcribed a live recording of “Oh, Lady Be Good”<sup>23</sup> from Verve Records’ compilation album *The Essential Ella Fitzgerald: The Great Songs*,<sup>24</sup> reviewing the 525 scat syllables used by Fitzgerald during the course of the solo, identifying 69 unique syllables and grouping them into four categories, along with identifying combinations used on triplet figures.<sup>25</sup> This remains one of the few published analytical studies of Ella Fitzgerald’s improvisational style.<sup>26</sup>

Like Gunther Schuller in his article “Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation,”<sup>27</sup> I drew large conclusions based on analysis of one

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<sup>19</sup> Stuart Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald: A Biography of the First Lady of Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 139-140.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Diana Spradling, *Jazz Singing: Developing Artistry and Authenticity* (Edmonds, WA: Sound Music Publications, 2007), 83-89.

<sup>24</sup> This is not the most well-known Ella solo on “Lady Be Good”; the one with which most jazz listeners are familiar is the March 18, 1947 Decca Records studio recording featuring Bob Haggart and His Orchestra. This live Jazz at the Philharmonic recording was made on October 7, 1957.

<sup>25</sup> Spradling, *Jazz Singing: Developing Artistry and Authenticity*, 89. These distinctions were assigned solely by arbitrary endpoints based on the number of times a specific syllable was used in the solo.

<sup>26</sup> Spradling asked me to write Part Three of her book; this section was given the title “The Art and Craft of Scat Singing and Melodic Alteration.”

<sup>27</sup> Schuller, “Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation.” The article has been reprinted many times, including Walser, *Keeping Time*, 212-222.

particular solo.<sup>28</sup> While I do feel that the recording I chose is certainly a fine representation of Fitzgerald's improvisational style, it is hardly the exemplar. In writing "The Art and Craft of Scat Singing and Melodic Alteration," I then wrote similar analyses of "representative solos" from Mel Tormé,<sup>29</sup> Sarah Vaughan,<sup>30</sup> Betty Carter,<sup>31</sup> Mark Murphy,<sup>32</sup> and Bobby McFerrin,<sup>33</sup> then drawing a series of ten general conclusions about scat singing from these solos,<sup>34</sup> stating in regard to scat syllables: "An analysis of these solos shows that the most common scat syllables are: Ah, Ba, Bi, Bop, Bu, Da, Dat, Di, Dl, Dn, Do, Dow, Du, Ee, Oo, Wa, and Ya; they are used in interchangeable combinations with each other. Although these are not the only syllables used, they are historically the most common."<sup>37</sup>

I later wrote a paper exploring Ella's mid-1940s output for Decca Records in which I examined the following Ella Fitzgerald recordings in detail: "Into Each Life, Some Rain Must Fall" (1944), "It's Only a Paper Moon" (1945), "Flying Home" (1945), and "Oh, Lady Be Good" (1947).<sup>38</sup> In writing about her syllabic vocabulary, I chose not to use International Phonetic Alphabet in favor of labels that were based on more colloquial spellings to account for the more "pliable" behaviors of vowels in

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<sup>28</sup> An in-depth analysis of the flaws in Schuller's thesis can be found in Givan, "Gunther Schuller and the Challenge of Sonny Rollins: Stylistic Context, Intentionality, and Jazz Analysis," 167-237.

<sup>29</sup> Spradling, *Jazz Singing: Developing Artistry and Authenticity*, 91-102. "Route 66" (*Live at the Maisonette*, Atlantic, 1975)

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-107. "Shulie a Bop" (*Sarah Vaughan*, Verve, 1954).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-114. "Frenesi" (*Meet Betty Carter and Ray Bryant*, Columbia, 1955).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-120. "Effendi" (*Beauty and the Beast*, Muse, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-128. "Moondance" (*Bobby McFerrin*, Elektra, 1982),

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-131.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>38</sup> Justin Binek, "Ella Fitzgerald: syllabic choice in scat singing and her timbral syllabic development between 1944 and 1947," <http://www.michmusic.com/info/>.

scat singing, compared with the “pure” or “Europeanized” vowel behaviors for which IPA analysis is commonly used.<sup>39</sup> For each solo, I broke down both the complete syllabic palette utilized, with the number of times each syllable was used in the solo, and identifications of notable and/or unusual behaviors. For both “Flying Home” and “Oh, Lady Be Good”, I analyzed each solo chorus in the recording individually and summarized the complete recording, as well as identifying broader groups based on variants of “base” scat syllables. I also analyzed Fitzgerald’s onset attacks, or articulations, dividing them into six different groups for purposes of comparison and contrast.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

## METHOD

In this document, I will transcribe all or part of the following recordings as a continuation of the research I began in “Ella Fitzgerald: syllabic choice in scat singing and her timbral syllabic development between 1944 and 1947”:

“Cow Cow Boogie” (scat fills only)<sup>41</sup>

“How High the Moon” (full solo)<sup>42</sup>

“Basin Street Blues” (scat fills only)<sup>43</sup>

“Dream a Little Dream of Me” (scat fills only)<sup>44</sup>

“Smooth Sailing” (complete recording)<sup>45</sup>

“Airmail Special” (complete recording)<sup>46</sup>

“Rough Ridin’” (complete recording)

“Mr. Paganini” (scat fills only)<sup>47</sup>

“Preview” (complete recording)

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<sup>41</sup> *Ella Fitzgerald and the Ink Spots*, recorded November 3, 1943, master number 71482-A, first issued on Decca 18587.

<sup>42</sup> Recorded December 20, 1947, master number 74324, first issued Decca 24387.

<sup>43</sup> *Ella Fitzgerald accompanied by Sy Oliver and His Orchestra*, recorded September 20, 1949, master number 75282, first issued Decca 24868.

<sup>44</sup> *Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, accompanied by Sy Oliver and His Orchestra*, recorded August 25, 1950, master number 76750, first issued Decca 27209.

<sup>45</sup> Recorded June 26, 1951, master number 81215, first issued Decca 27693.

<sup>46</sup> “Airmail Special” and “Rough Ridin’” both are from *Ella Fitzgerald, accompanied by the Ray Brown Orchestra*, master numbers 82075 and 82076, first issued Decca 28126 and 27948.

<sup>47</sup> “Mr. Paganini” and “Preview” both are from *Ella Fitzgerald, accompanied by Sy Oliver and His Orchestra*, recorded June 26, 1952. “Mr. Paganini” was originally recorded and issued in two parts, with master numbers 83010 and 83011, both first issued Decca 28774. “Preview” has master number 83014, first issued Decca 28321.

Through this transcription and analysis, I will examine several areas of interest and define the following:

1. Codify individual scat syllables used and the number of times they are utilized, both in single solo choruses and in totality.
2. Identify broad “syllabic groups” comprised of variants on specific solos.
3. Analyze syllabic onsets to explore articulation at the beginning of Fitzgerald’s scat syllables.
4. Explore comparisons between syllabic behaviors in the various solos, both in terms of exact number of times used and on a percentage basis for purposes of comparisons between recordings.

Through this transcription and analysis, I will codify a system of scat syllables utilized by Ella Fitzgerald during this foundational period. I will then demonstrate Fitzgerald’s influence through a full analysis of Mel Tormé’s solo on “Lullaby of Birdland,”<sup>48</sup> as well as explore fragments from Kurt Elling’s “The More I Have You,”<sup>49</sup> Jon Hendricks’ “Listen To Monk,”<sup>50</sup> and Karrin Allyson’s “Everybody’s Boppin.”<sup>51</sup> Finally, I will explore Dizzy Gillespie’s influence on Fitzgerald’s scat vocabulary by analyzing portions of “Ool Ya Koo”<sup>52</sup> and “Oop-Pop-A-Da.”

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<sup>48</sup> From *Mel Tormé and the Marty Paich Dek-tette*, Bethlehem, 1956.

<sup>49</sup> From *Man In The Air*, Blue Note, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> From *Freddie Freeloader*, Denon, 1990.

<sup>51</sup> From *Footprints*, Concord Jazz, 2005.

<sup>52</sup> “Ool Ya Koo” and “Oop-Pop-A-Da” both taken from *The Complete RCA Victor Recordings*, Bluebird, 1995.

Analysis of these solos will assist in providing greater understanding of Fitzgerald's scat syllable choices, her technique, and influences on her development as a scat singer. My analyses will support the following arguments:

1. Ella Fitzgerald's improvisational approach changed drastically in the mid-1940s, driven largely by the new bebop jazz style and specifically due to her tours with the Dizzy Gillespie Orchestra. This change in her approach resulted in Fitzgerald recording a variety of solos that laid the foundational language for scat-based jazz improvisation.
2. Fitzgerald's syllabic evolution foreshadowed the improvisational styles of younger scat singers who immediately followed Fitzgerald, particularly Mel Tormé, but also including Anita O'Day, Carmen McRae, Jon Hendricks, Sarah Vaughan, and Betty Carter.<sup>53</sup>
3. Transcribing and analyzing Dizzy Gillespie's vocal improvisation will illustrate his impact on Fitzgerald's development as an improviser. Louis Armstrong, widely regarded as the father of modern scat singing,<sup>54</sup> and Leo Watson, whose influence on Fitzgerald's style has been documented in several sources,<sup>55</sup> are often credited as Fitzgerald's primary inspirations, but I propose that Dizzy Gillespie also deserves recognition as a significant influence.

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<sup>53</sup> Bauer's "Scat Singing: A Timbral and Phonemic Analysis" references Carter's early solos being "peppered with... vocal licks out of Fitzgerald's vocabulary such as the rapid alteration of syllables that start with /n/ and /d/."

<sup>54</sup> There are too many sources to mention here, but most standard accounts of both general music history and jazz history cite Armstrong's 1926 recording of "Heebie Jeebies" as the advent of modern scat singing.

<sup>55</sup> Notably in Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald: A Biography of the First Lady of Jazz*, 89-92.

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