



Comparative Performance Analysis of *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man*

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Abstract

This research focuses on how three renowned singers (Helen Morgan, Ella Fitzgerald, and Björk) from three eras (30's, 60's, and 90's), three styles of singing (Broadway, Jazz, and Pop-Rock) differently portrayed the song "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man". The vocal techniques, key areas in which they sang, stylistic interpretation, and mainstream influent are discussed by (1) investigating keys and ranges of the three singers in the selected performances, and (2) analyzing the vocal techniques. Along with the analysis, the researcher will also discuss briefly the interplay in the ensemble. Hopefully, this research will give an insight into the evolution of vocal performances of this particular song as it is important to understand the past to foresee the future. This research would help vocal teachers and music enthusiasts to see the gradation of singing styles, thus this may help vocalists find a new style of singing in the future.

Keywords: Comparative performance analysis, Singing styles, *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man*, Vocal techniques, Popular music singing, Helen Morgan, Ella Fitzgerald, Björk

1. Introduction

Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man is a song from the Broadway musical *Show Boat*, music by Jerome Kern and lyric by Oscar Hammerstein II. *Show Boat* was premiered on December 27, 1927, at Ziegfeld Theatre produced by Florenz Ziegfeld, one of the most important and influential producers in the history of the Broadway musical (Larkin, 2007, p. 2043). The *Show Boat* is the first Broadway musical to have integrated cast, racial identity and interracial marriage (Kennedy, 2010, p. 319).

In the original Broadway production of *Show Boat* in 1927, the song *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man* was sung in Act I by a character, Julie La Verne, performed by the original cast, Helen Morgan (Hischak, 2013, p. 27). This show was successful, and it even made her a prominent star. After the musical *Show Boat* ran for a year and a half, there is a total of 572 performances followed by many films and revised Broadway versions after the original production the song *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man* became a classic (Dietz, 2014, p. 168). In 1963, after the swing era has passed, the famous Ella Fitzgerald had sung this song again in the album *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Jerome Kern Song Book* in a jazz ballad style arranged and conducted by Nelson Riddle (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1963, track B5). The iconic alternative rock star, Björk, also sang this song in the album *Gling-Gló* recorded in 1990 with the Icelandic bebop group, Guðmundur Ingólfsson's Trio (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1990, track 16).

With the three totally different styles of singing compare side by side, we will see how jazz standards can be interpreted with much freedom and no limitations.

2. Objectives

- 2.1 To study how mainstream singing style changes from past to present.
- 2.2 To study how singers deliver each technique and how each style sounds different.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Study the original score of *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man* from the Broadway musical *Show Boat* by Jerome Kern.

3.2 Listen to three versions of *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man* from the following artists:

[976]



3.2.1 Helen Morgan. This version was recorded in New York City, USA on February 14, 1928, conducted by Victor Baravalli (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1928, side A).

3.2.2 Ella Fitzgerald. This song from album series Song Book was recorded between January 5-7, 1963 in Los Angeles, USA, which arranged and conducted by Nelson Riddle (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1963, track B5).

3.2.3 Björk Guðmundsdóttir. Recorded with the jazz group Tríó Guðmundar Ingólfssonar at Ríkisútvarpið (The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service) in Reykjavík, Iceland. The version used to analyze in this research is from Björk's live performance on August 30, 1990, at Hotel Börg, Reykjavík, Iceland.

3.3 Find the keys and vocal ranges from each version.

3.4 Analyze the singing techniques from each recording.

4. Results and Discussion

The song was sung by a character Julie Dozier (or stage name Julie La Verne) from a 1926 novel *Show Boat* by Edna Ferber (Hischak, 2013, p. 185). The original version of *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man* by Jerome Kern was in a key of Eb.

The lyrics of *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man* was written by Oscar Hammerstein II which could be divided into two sections: verse and chorus. In verse1 and 2, the melody was repeated but the extra verse section has a different melody. The chorus section is divided into four subsections: A1, A2, B, and A3. The A1, A2, and A3 subsections use the same melody while the B subsection uses different melody.

Extra Verse

Let me lay on my back
In a forty-dollar hack
No more gin, no more rum
For the misery's done come

Verse1

Oh listen, sister
I love my mister man and I can't tell you why
Dere ain't no reason why I should love dat man
It must be something dat de angels done plan

Verse2

De chimney's smokin'
De roof is leakin' in, but he don't seem to care.
He can be happy with just a sip of gin
I even love him when his kisses got gin

Chorus

A1

Fish gotta swim
Birds gotta fly
I gotta love one man till I die
Can't help lovin' dat man of mine

A2

Tell me he's lazy
 Tell me he's slow
 Tell me I'm crazy, maybe, I know
 Can't help lovin' dat man of mine

B

When he goes away
 dat's a rainy day
 And when he comes back dat day is fine
 The sun will shine

A3

He can come home as late as can be
 Home without him ain't no home to me
 Can't help lovin' dat man of mine

Helen Morgan

Helen Morgan was in the original cast of Broadway *Show Boat* for the role Julie La Verne. She was born on August 2, 1900. The dark deep sound of her was suitable for a sad lamenting song or so-called a torch song. The role Julie La Verne is a tragic mulatto (a sad mixed-race person) that made Helen Morgan perfect for the role (Hischak, 2013, p. 134). The age of late-20s to early-30s usually considered the prime of the voice for soprano. The version of Helen Morgan in this research was recorded on February 14, 1928, when she was 27 years old. We could say that her voice reached its peak in this recording.

Big band jazz was already popular around the time. The style of singing was extended from the classical technique from the previous era. Music performance depended on live acoustic sound, which produced round full sound with added speech-like accent and swing rhythm.

In the "extra verse" section of this selected version, the only version in this research that has an extra verse, Helen reached the high G5 in the last note. At the opening of the song "*let me lay on my back in a forty-dollar hack. No more gin, no more rum,*" she sang with clear vowels and pronunciation. From the beginning of the last phrase "*For the misery done come*" she changed to sing with an open covered vowel on the note D5 on the word "*for*" for preparation for high G5 on the word "*come*" at the ending (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1928, side A).

Example 1 "*Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man*" Helen Morgan, extra verse (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1928, side A)



After the extra verse she began the chorus section with A1, A2 then she went back to the verse (music only), Verse1 and then followed by A1, A2, B, A3 pattern.

For the chorus section, she started with clear enunciation until before the last part at B subsection. In the B subsection, the last note of each phrase went up to Eb5 and F5. She covered the sound on those words, "way", "day", and "fine".



Example 2 “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” Helen Morgan, section B (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1928, side A)



In general, the style of her singing is similar to classical style but with a more forward vowel and very articulate except with some words on some high notes she would sing it with classical-like covered sound. She balanced nicely between chest voices, pharyngeal voice, to head voice with good stable support which made over all of this song sounded seamless.

Ella Fitzgerald

Ella Fitzgerald was born in Newport News, Virginia on April 15, 1917. Her parents separated soon after her birth then she and her mother went to Yonkers, N.Y. Young Ella Fitzgerald wanted to be a dancer, although she loved listening to recordings by Louis Armstrong, Bing Crosby, and Connee Boswell (Nicholson, 2004, pp. 9-12). After her mother died in 1932 from a heart attack, she was taken to Colored Orphan Asylum in Riverdale, the Bronx (Ware, 2004, pp. 209-210). Ella was blessed with impeccable intonation, a distinctive sound, and a remarkable sense of timing (Nicholson, 2004, p. 206). Despite tremendous difficulties in her childhood she became the world's most prominent jazz singer and got the title “first lady of song” (Nicholson, 2004, p. 110).

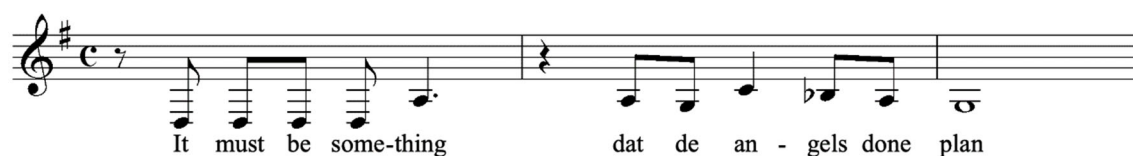
The series album *Song Book by Ella Fitzgerald* is comprised of nine volumes. Each volume was released separately and featured a particular composer, accompanied by different types of bands, symphony orchestra, big band, and small jazz band (Krohn, 2001, p. 71). The first volume, *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Song Book*, was released in 1956 and the last volume, *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Antonio Carlos Jobim Song Book*, was released in 1981. From the first to the last volumes took 25 years span. The song *Can't help lovin' dat man* is from the album *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Jerome Kern Song Book*. This volume was accompanied by a symphony orchestra, conducted by Nelson Riddle and released in 1963 when she was 46 years old (Johnson, 2001, p. 85).

This version is in V1 V2 A1 A2 B A3 form as in today's standard song form and ranges from D3 to D5. With the conversational style of the jazz language, Ella moved down to the key of G. For the main part of the song the range was from low G3 to high A4, within the range of her normal speaking voice. The style of singing with a speaking voice can easily convey genuine emotion and feeling through words. Some notes from the whole song extended from her speaking voice range to show astounding vocal skill, it went from D3 to D5 (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1963, track B5).

The more we age, our voice will sound deeper. At the age of 46, Ella's voice was very deep and dusky in this song. Singing in the key of G made the lowest note on verse went to D3, the note is considered very low and hard to reach. With the complexity of her life, her skill as a musician and the uniqueness of her voice made this song very touching.



Example 3 “*Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man*” Ella Fitzgerald, verse 1 (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1963, track B5)

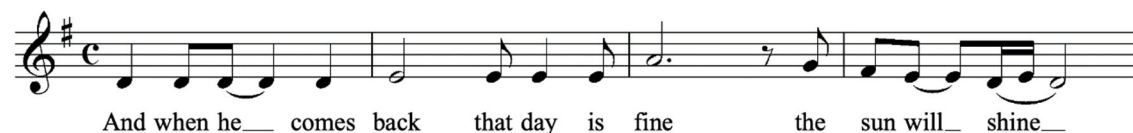


Example 4 “*Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man*” Ella Fitzgerald, verse 2 (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1963, track B5)



From the start of the song, V1, to A2 she sang with a light head voice and a slight touch of a chest voice. In section B the orchestra part was getting thicker. She gradually added a chest voice into this section from “when he goes away” on D3 to the heaviest chest voice in the song “that day is fine” on D4. After holding a chest voice on D4 on the word “fine”, her voice gradually got softer and instantly switched back to light head voice and continued on “the sun will shine.” The contrast of the sound can be clearly observed.

Example 5 “*Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man*” Ella Fitzgerald, section B (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1963, track B5)



At the beginning of the last section, A3, the orchestra played softer. Ella sang this section with head voice and then shifted back and forth between head voice and light chest voice. On the last phrase “can’t help lovin’ dat man of mine” she twisted the word “man” up to the highest note on D5 with mixed voice supported by the brass section. The note D5 sounded fuller when doubled by the French horn.

Example 6 “*Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man*” Ella Fitzgerald, section A3 (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1963, track B5)



Björk

Alternative Rock emerged from 70’s independent music and became widely recognized in the late ’80s to early ’90s after the rising of the classic rock era. The alternative rock is a choice for the audience aside from mainstream rock that needs a skillful guitar hero and a powerful lead singer. Alternative rock melody line didn’t usually have a wide range of note and, for the most part, sung in straight tone with little vibrato, so much like a speaking voice (Horn & Shepherd, 2012, p. 23).

Björk was born on November 21, 1965, in Reykjavik, Iceland. Her first album, *Björk*, was released in December 1977 when she was 11 years old. She became famous within Iceland (Whiteley, 2003, p. 99). In 1986, the Sugarcubes band was formed with Sigtryggur Baldursson, Einar Örn Benediktsson, Þór Eldon, Bragi Ólafsson, Margrét Örnólfsdóttir and Björk on vocals and keyboards. In 1987 an Icelandic alternative



rock, The Sugarcubes became internationally known after the single “*Birthday*” made its way to become USA and UK indie radio station’s favorites and, after that, the world recognized its lead singer, Björk. She and Sugarcubes became one of the few Icelandic bands to be famous outside the country (Greene, 2017, p. 183).

Björk recorded an album called *Gling-Gló* is a set of jazz standards and original compositions with a bebop group Tríó Guðmundar Ingólfssonar at Ríkisútvarpið (The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service) in Reykjavík, Iceland on August 23, 1990 (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927/1990, track 16). The album *Gling-Gló* was released only in Iceland. The version analyzed in this research is, however, from the live performance at Hotel Börg (Björk, 1990).

The song *Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man* from the album *Gling-Gló* was an AABA song form in a key of Bb with lyrics on A1A2BA3 followed by one chorus piano solo and then back to A1A2BA3 again.

Björk sang the whole piece from Gb3 to D5 through the chest voice except one falsetto in F5 on “Ooh-yeah-hey” in the tag at the very end of the song. Her voice is strongest in lower-midrange chest register, the timbre is getting thinner as she goes up. Björk can be very expressive and dramatic in her performance “thanks to flexible, floating, unanchored quality of her singing” (Shaviro, 2002, p. 27).

Example 7 Björk. (1990, August 30). *Gling-Gló*. Live Performance at Hotel Börg, Reykjavík, Iceland.



5. Conclusion

Helen Morgan’s vocal performance displays the early Broadway musical singing style developed from classical singing techniques. Singing with good diaphragmatic support and sustaining good tone quality throughout the song are top priorities. During the 1960s, the evolution of the microphone enables singers to express the feeling through a speech-like singing style which does not require as much support and projection as seen in Ella Fitzgerald’s performance. This allows the audience to get closer to the emotion of the singers. Similarly, the change from bel canto to verismo style, the 90’s music was much of expression and experiment as portray in Björk’s interpretation. The singer could scream or shout out in the song without any rules. This may cause disfavor to the older generation, but it gained more interest in the newer generation with its excitement. Nothing could go wrong in today’s music or the arts. Ruth Stone said about changes in musical styles best — “music evolves from simple to complex within society as they progress” (Stone, 2008, p. 25).

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