

Black Female Singers in Jazz

This annotated resource bank focuses on three of the most influential Black Female Singers in Jazz. As the original jazz greats vocalists, their intellectual contributions to this genre take the form of their many musical talents, abilities, and discoveries. Three major female Black singers this resource bank examines are Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald. Each woman’s special features bring an alternative perspective to the music classroom and challenge the notion of White supremacy, as all three have greatly advanced the jazz genre through their unique contributions.

Intellectual Contribution #1: “Black Coffee” by Sarah Vaughan

Vaughan, S. (Singer), Webster, P.F. (Composer & Lyricist), McEwen, J. (Producer), & Isaacs, J. (Producer). (1949). Black Coffee. On *The Divine Sarah Vaughan: The Columbia Years 1949-1953* [YouTube]. USA: Sony. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9izBbqe3SI&feature=youtu.be>.

Criteria	Information on the intellectual contribution
<p>Describe the intellectual contribution</p>	<p>Often referred to as “The Divine One”, Vaughan was an accomplished jazz song stylist. What makes her stand out is her wide range of vocal abilities. Vaughan also had the ability to scat over a singing groove while delivering a romantic ballad, which can be heard in her 1949 song “Black Coffee”. (Waring, 2021).</p> <p>Additional resource on Sarah Vaughan’s contributions to jazz: Sarah Vaughan (National Endowment for the Arts) https://www.arts.gov/honors/jazz/sarah-vaughan</p>
<p>Application</p>	<p>Vaughan’s music challenges the negative perceptions of what Black female jazz singers were capable of. Her work raises awareness on how female BIPOC voices directly influenced the genre. Her music makes a positive contribution to jazz as she was one of the first jazz vocalists to introduce bebop into her singing (Muhammad, 2018), helping advance what jazz singers were capable of. Additionally, her 1949 version of “Black Coffee” is considered the most notable version of the song.</p>

<p>Cultural origin and contextual information</p>	<p>Despite being a native to Newark, New Jersey, Vaughan often crossed over to New York City with her friends to watch jazz bands perform at Harlem’s Apollo Theater (Muhammad, 2018). Seeing as Black women are often omitted from the larger narrative in the history of jazz, musicians like Vaughan were among the first to challenge the racist and sexist “norms” of the time (Smithsonian Institution, 2019). As black women began to take the stage in jazz and share their diverse talents, their presence influenced and challenged the musical abilities of Black female singers in jazz; Vaughan was an integral figure in this movement.</p>
<p>Integration</p>	<p>Incorporating “Black Coffee” by Sarah Vaughan into music lessons will shed a light on the talents and abilities of female black singers in jazz, showing students that it is not simply a male-dominated field. Vaughan’s work also provides a BIPOC voice that will help build connections with BIPOC students and provide depth for White students.</p>
<p>Connections to course content</p>	<p>According to Brownell (2017), it is our social responsibility to be aware of the dominant discourse and what gets left out of it in our classrooms. It is true that both females and women of colour get left out of music history from around the world. By integrating Sarah Vaughan into the music classroom, teachers can debunk the myth that jazz is strictly a male-dominated/male-talented genre.</p>

Intellectual Contribution #2: “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday

Holiday, B. (Singer), Allan, L. (Composer & Lyricist), & Scott, T. (Producer). (1956). Strange Fruit. On *Lady Sings the Blues* [YouTube]. USA: Universal Music Group. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lx_mOECjT_8&feature=youtu.be.

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<p>Describe the intellectual contribution</p>	<p>Eleanora Fagan, musically known as Billie Holiday, had a unique way of communicating with a song. What makes Holiday so inspiring is the deep, soulful quality of her voice that made everything she sang seem autobiographical. “Strange Fruit” was an unexpected hit as it paints a picture of racial violence, making it an important contribution to jazz history. (Waring, 2021).</p> <p>Additional resource on Billie Holiday’s contributions to jazz: Billie Holiday Documentary ('From the BBC 'Reputations' Series) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_ccHPheiOO</p>
<p>Application</p>	<p>Holiday’s music serves as another example of what powerful female contributions looked like in jazz, and shows the influence that female BIPOC voices had on the genre. What makes her song “Strange Fruit” such an important intellectual contribution to jazz is that it was based off a poem on lynching written by Abel Meerpol (Muhammad, 2018). Singing about such a topic helped to advance the knowledge that the BIPOC community was facing at that time in history.</p>
<p>Cultural origin and contextual information</p>	<p>Billie Holiday was born in Philadelphia in 1915, and as a teenager she sang in various Harlem nightclubs (Muhammad, 2018). During Holiday’s time, Black women musicians were fighting harsh stereotypes pitted against their gender, race, and musical abilities (Smithsonian, 2019). Holiday became a pivotal figure in breaking down these stereotypes to unveil the truth the BIPOC community was living, particularly in her song “Strange Fruit”. Her contributions continue to shed a light on the social and political ideologies of the time.</p>
<p>Integration</p>	<p>By sharing Holiday’s work with students, they will be able to understand how Black female jazz singers fought against stereotypes throughout history. “Strange Fruit” will enable students to understand and respect the challenges these women and artists</p>

	<p>faced in their time, give a voice to BIPOC students, and provide historical insight to White students.</p>
<p>Connections to course content</p>	<p>Integrating Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” into the music classroom will help students “re-think the received histories of knowledge” (Connell, 2016, p. 4). It can help decolonize education. Jazz history not only provides students with a wealth of musical knowledge, but it also enables them to see and challenge the political and social ideologies of the time.</p>

Intellectual Contribution #3: “Misty” by Ella Fitzgerald

Fitzgerald, E. (Singer), Garner, E. (Composer), & Granz, N. (Producer). (1960). Misty. On *Ella Fitzgerald Sings Songs from "Let No Man Write My Epitaph"* [YouTube]. USA: Universal Music Group. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIMACAW-A0g&feature=youtu.be>.

Criteria	Information on the intellectual contribution
<p>Describe the intellectual contribution</p>	<p>Ella Fitzgerald, or the First Lady of Song, possessed an incredible talent for vocal improvisation. What made Fitzgerald so influential was that she was a silky balladeer who was able to balance technique with sensitivity. The jazz standard “Misty” has been recorded many times by various artists, and Fitzgerald brings her own flair to her 1960 version as one of the greatest jazz vocalists of all time. (Waring, 2021).</p> <p>Additional resource on Ella Fitzgerald’s contributions to jazz: Ella Fitzgerald - Just One of Those Things (Documentary) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1xi-3E2D5I</p>
<p>Application</p>	<p>Fitzgerald’s music serves as yet another model of female BIPOC contributions to jazz. Her intellectual contributions included tearing down gender and racial barriers by becoming the first Black female singer to win a Grammy at the inaugural awards</p>

	ceremony in 1958 (Muhammad, 2018), which in turn advanced and credited the expertise of black female singers in the genre.
Cultural origin and contextual information	Born in Newport News, Virginia in 1917, Ella Fitzgerald later moved to Yonkers in the early 20s and then to Harlem in 1933 following the death of her mother (Muhammad, 2018). Seeing as jazz was a radically new genre of music at this time, it was seen as socially unaccepted and labelled as “the Devil’s music”. Thanks to the pioneering Black women of the time like Fitzgerald, this genre became an expression of high art that continues to influence jazz musicians and listeners (particularly BIPOC women) to this day. (Smithsonian Institution, 2019).
Integration	Ella Fitzgerald used her musical talents as a means to elevate the genre of jazz, particularly for Black women. Songs like “Misty” will support students’ understanding of the breadth and depth of the genre. It will also spotlight Black female contributions to jazz, (hopefully) inspire BIPOC students, engage White students in meaningful racial conversations, and validate the entire genre of jazz.
Connections to course content	Seeing as many students still associate cultural differences with “bad” behaviour (Peck et al., 2008), it is vital to talk about how Ella Fitzgerald’s contributions challenged the negative reputation of jazz music. This cultural content is not only important, but integral when studying jazz. Ella Fitzgerald had one of the largest influences, and failing to mention her contributions would be leaving a large part of history out of the narrative, enabling mainstream ideologies to continue to exist.

Additional Resource:

- A Tribute to Black Women in Jazz: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xDmO9pWyb4>

References

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