

PANTHEON  BOOKS

A BIOGRAPHICAL
GUIDE TO THE
GREAT JAZZ
AND POP SINGERS



WILL FRIEDWALD



ALSO BY WILL FRIEDWALD

Stardust Melodies

The Warner Bros. Animation Art

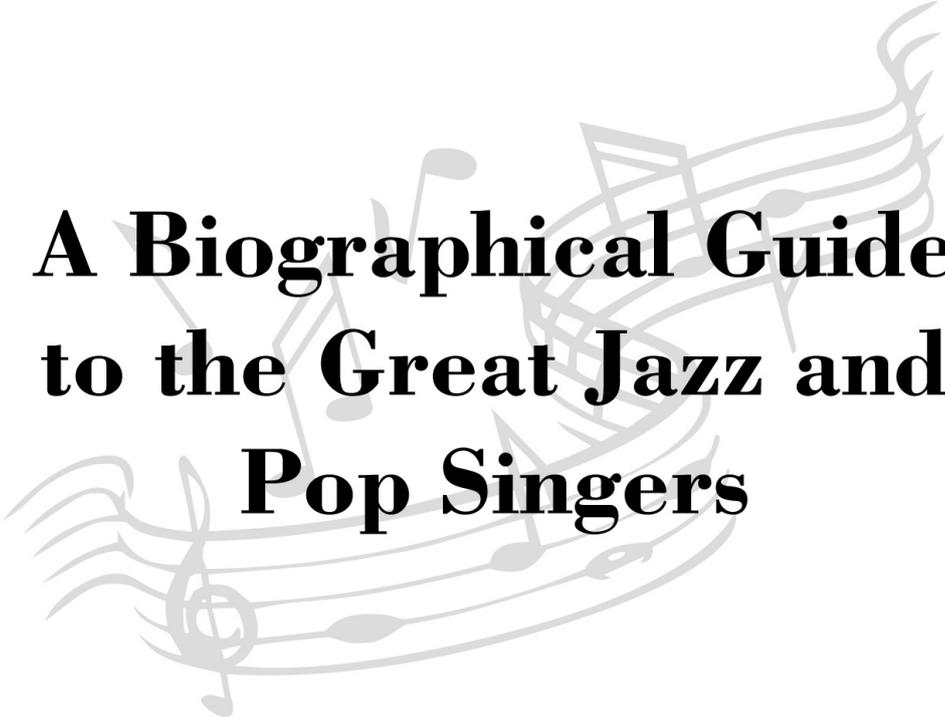
The Good Life
(with Tony Bennett)

Sinatra!
The Song Is You: A Singer's Art

Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices
from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond

Looney Tunes and Merry Melodies

The Warner Bros. Cartoons



**A Biographical Guide
to the Great Jazz and
Pop Singers**

WILL FRIEDWALD



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To Rosemary, who was there at the beginning

And to Pamela, who was there at the end

It doesn't matter what you think about me, but it matters a whole lot what I think about you.

—Louis Jordan, “Beans and Cornbread”

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About the Author

Introduction

Jazz singing and popular singing are two extremely broad fields that have a great deal of territory in common—there's a considerable amount of pop in a jazz singer like Ella Fitzgerald and a great deal of jazz in a pop singer like Steve Lawrence. Indeed, the two genres are frequently so close that it's difficult, and often pointless, to distinguish between them. By and large, both kinds of singers collaborate with the same musicians, and, more importantly, they both rely upon what has come to be known as the Great American Songbook as their basic source of material.

Traditionally, those of us who write about jazz vocalists devote a lot of verbiage to discussing what does and what doesn't constitute jazz singing, and who is and who isn't. Although there is a degree of consensus, in the main it's a highly subjective call, and one that, after years of literature debating the subject, seems tired. Perhaps too much time has been spent arguing who is and who isn't a jazz singer; better to spend time worrying about who is and who isn't a good singer.

This book is about singers—make no mistake. However, like my previous work (*Stardust Melodies*, which was also suggested and edited by Robert Gottlieb), this current work is driven, to a degree, by songs. Songs were the essential criteria by which artists were or were not included. Of the thousands of artists of the last hundred years or so who could be described as either jazz or pop singers, my first consideration was to focus on those who primarily sang the American songbook, and, even more so, to concentrate on those artists who made a vital contribution to the way the songbook is sung. All kinds of people have sung the songbook, particularly in recent decades, from opera divas (like Renée Fleming) to rock stars (like Rod Stewart, who is, in fact, covered in a special section). But, for this book, the idea was to focus on those artists for whom the songbook was bread-and-butter, or, as Eliza Doolittle would put it, mother's milk.

Obviously, there's a lot of gray area: Joe Williams and Jimmy Rushing can comfortably be described as blues singers, yet the majority of their output is based in the songbook. Other singers are more problematic: In the case of Ray Charles, Bobby Darin, and Nina Simone, it seemed that they had all made a substantial contribution to the art of singing this music, and therefore my essays on these artists focus on this one aspect of their careers, and are not intended as comprehensive coverage of their entire canon.

To a degree, this book still has a jazz bias; I have tried to include all the major jazz singers and as many pop singers as there was room for. Most of the singers I've picked, even from the pop side—Vic Damone, Steve and Eydie, Jack Jones—have some sort of jazz credentials and they almost all swing (whenever they need to, at least), even if they don't necessarily scat up a

storm.

Obviously, the great singers of Broadway are part of this picture. I have given due attention, I hope, to four of the major leading ladies of musical comedy (Ethel Merman, Mary Martin, Julie Andrews, Barbara Cook) as well as to half a dozen or so of the most important, name-above-the-title baritones and leading men. My criterion was to look for those Broadway leads who also had substantial careers as recording artists (beyond original cast albums)—and there were surprisingly few. I have also included an essay on four major leading ladies from the great movie musicals of the thirties and forties (“Hollywood Divas”), whose recording careers were generally scattershot, but were very interesting, to say the least.

So who isn’t here? Obviously not blues singers who sing the blues exclusively, as well as Brazilian singers who include jazz elements in their music or occasionally sing “Skylark.” We have also left out concert singers and opera singers, such as the imposing figure of Paul Robeson; they sang standards occasionally but weren’t focused on them. More recently, there’s been a trend for rock and pop stars—mainly, by some unexplained coincidence, those who were popular in the seventies—to do whole albums of standards, and these are discussed in an essay of their own.

There also is something of a generational bias, in that I focus on the middle of the twentieth century. There are many earlier artists and some more recent ones, but on the whole, it seems the golden years for singing the American songbook came a generation or so after the songs themselves were written, in the immediate postwar era. More major singers seem to have been actively working and recording in the fifties than in any other decade. In this high-growth period, the new medium of the long-playing disc led to a commercial boom in record sales; virtually everyone who had the least bit of celebrity or could remotely carry a tune (sometimes not even that) was given the chance to make records, and the major stars of the medium, your Fitzgeralds, Vaughans, and Sinatras, were constantly in the studio, their productivity not limited by the market but by their own stamina. (Nat King Cole recorded seven full albums in 1958 alone, although not all of them were issued in that year.)

The main perspective of this book is historical; it should not be taken as a survey of the current scene (as of 2010). You will find only a handful of contemporary and younger artists who sing the songbook, all of whom already have a proven track record. There is just a smattering here of artists born after 1950 (Cassandra Wilson, Dianne Reeves, Dee Dee Bridgewater) and even fewer born after 1970. When I began this undertaking, there were only three artists I planned to include who were under forty (that description then applied to myself as well): Diana Krall, Kurt Elling, and Audra McDonald. By the time you read this, all four of us have traveled past the forty-year mark. At the very last minute, I decided to add an essay on Harry Connick Jr.—I figured that after doing twenty-four albums over a twenty-year period he

deserved a little attention—and I also added a few briefer comments about other boy crooners of a similar disposition.

The focus is on the middle, not so much the contemporary, and equally less so the beginning. The process known as acoustic recording was the only game in town for the first thirty-five or so years of the life of the new industry and entertainment medium called the record business—which is a long time. (By comparison, the age of the long-playing vinyl record lasted only thirty years, from 1955 to 1985.) I haven't devoted any essays to artists who spent the entirety of their careers in this prehistoric period, which ended in 1925 with the introduction of the electrical microphone. However, I do give space to many singers who started in the teens and early twenties and then just kept going, hitting their stride in the electrical era: Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor, Cliff Edwards, Nick Lucas, Gene Austin, and Marion Harris. (Harris may be the exception: She kept recording until 1934, but did the bulk of her best work before 1925.)

Within the parameters of those considerations, the artists included in this book were not chosen by consensus or committee, but entirely by myself and Bob Gottlieb. By necessity, I'm sure that I've left out some significant artists; as it was, the book kept growing and growing—every time we turned around, either Bob or myself had thought of someone else who deserved some kind of coverage. After I had finished a first draft of the essential 150 or so “core” essays, Bob suggested that I write five essays about the iconic American vocal stylists who worked in areas outside of the songbook: Bessie Smith (blues), Mahalia Jackson (gospel), Hank Williams (country and western), Elvis Presley (rock 'n' roll), and Bob Dylan (and I admit that it isn't quite so easy to identify Dylan by a strict musical genre and put it between a pair of parentheses). Since the emphasis is on songbook-centric artists, these artists are primarily meant to be representative of their fields.

But even once decisions were made about the artists to be profiled here, space still remained an issue: There simply wasn't room to write everything that needed to be said about every performer worth talking about. When we started this project in early 2001, we were using David Thomson's *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* as a model and originally intended our entries to be as short and to-the-point as Mr. Thomson's. However, as I started writing it became clear to me that brevity was not going to serve our purposes well—thus the pieces kept getting longer and longer, eventually taking the form of full essays rather than condensed encyclopedia entries. Even given the overall length of the present work, it was impossible to write as much as I wanted, particularly on bigger figures like Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae. On the other hand, I'm very happy that some artists with smaller but important careers—Joe Mooney and Jeri Southern, for instance—were given more attention than I believe they're ever received before in any previous book. (I am also delighted to report that my opinions and appreciation of such neglected figures as Nellie Lutches and Johnny Desmond have gone way up since covering them for this book.)

As with my previous books, so many individuals have contributed to both the form and content of this one that their names could easily be on the front cover. Being too selfish to allow that, I will restrict myself to thanking them here. I am especially grateful to the “specialists,” those individuals who have spent copious amounts of time researching one artist or group of artists and who have shared their information, opinions, recordings, and other materials with me—people like Tony Sachs (Buddy Greco), Jonathan Cohen (Jon Hendricks and Lambert, Hendricks & Ross), David Torreson and Ivan Santiago (Peggy Lee), Bob Conrad and Tom Bumbera (Buddy Clark), Chris Bamberger (Fred Astaire), Barbara Rosene (Ruth Etting, Annette Hanshaw), James Coffrey (Sheila Jordan), Dr. Ruth Prigozy (Dick Haymes), Ken Crossland (Perry Como), Tim Brooks (the entire acoustic era), Rob Waldman, James Kaplan, and Michael Kraus (Frank Sinatra). The gentlemen (and lady) of the Toast of New York collective—John Leifert, Peter Doyle, Steve Ashley, Steven Abrams, Henry Schmidt, Paul Lindemeyer, Dan Levinson, Merle Sprinzen, David Garrick, David Lennick, Dave Dawes, Dave Dixon—deserve special credit for helping provide sound files and factoids regarding virtually every vocalist of the twenties and thirties. Special thanks also to Gordon Anderson of Collectors’ Choice Music (www.ccmusic.com) for providing me with a box of CDs to listen to.

Thanks also to Shannon McCarty and Rob Vrabel for editorial help. Rob and Chris Bamberger, Randy Skretved, and David J. Weiner deserve special credit for going through stacks of manuscript (thank you, Google Docs) and helping me eliminate mistakes. At the last minute, Dan Langan and Bob Porter—experts, respectively, on Broadway and the blues—volunteered to go through sections pertaining to those genres and sent me much-appreciated reams of feedback. Ken Bloom and Larry Maslon were also a big help on theatrically oriented artists.

About those mistakes: The history of jazz and popular music remains rife with conventional wisdoms, received myths, and tales that have taken on the guise of credibility—as well as half-truths that have often taken the place of the real thing. I’ve made every effort not to perpetuate canards and assorted herrings (red or otherwise), but have probably added plenty of mistakes of my own. (A note on song titles: as Bob learned when he compiled his highly recommended anthology *Reading Lyrics*, it’s often impossible to get a definitive version of a song title—particularly if question marks, commas, or exclamation points are involved. Often the same song will be spelled or punctuated differently from one performance to the next, or the sheet music cover will differ from the recording, and just as often the title of the same performance will be spelled differently on the 78 rpm, LP, and CD release. Yes, I do have a CD somewhere in which Richard Tauber does a song from an operetta identified as “White Whores Inn.”)

The person Bob and I most need to thank is his assistant, Sarah Rothbard; her impressive organizational skills—and angelic patience—were exactly what were needed to get the manuscript to the finish line. I repeatedly make a

point of telling her that we couldn't have finished the book without her. Sarah always answers back that any reasonably well organized person could have done as well. But, just this once, she is wrong.

Around the time I started work on this project, I had lunch with one of my oldest friends, the jazz trumpeter and critic Richard Sudhalter. His now classic history *Lost Chords* had only recently been published, and I remember chiding him about how it couldn't possibly have taken ten years to write a book—even a magnum opus like *Lost Chords*. God has obviously punished me for this offhand remark; karmic balance has been restored, because it has taken me a full ten years to see this book through from start to finish. I began work on this project in 2001, after *Stardust Melodies* went into editing. In 2002, shortly after work on this book began, I started writing for *The New York Sun*, and, over the seven years of that newspaper's existence, I did roughly seven hundred columns on jazz and cabaret. This book was written, for the most part, while I was doing two columns a week for the paper. At the end of 2008, the *Sun* set (as pundits punned at the time), and I was lucky enough to find a new home at *The Wall Street Journal*, which has been keeping me off the streets ever since. (God bless Rupert Murdoch.) Throughout 2009 and through the summer of 2010, Bob and I spent many, many long days editing and revising, trimming and expanding the manuscript and, in particular, updating the essays on living artists. At one point, we considered restricting this book to “historical” artists, which generally meant those no longer living (or, if still alive, were no longer active) or born before a certain year (say, 1950). That, however, would give the false impression that this is a dead art form, rather than a living, breathing, vital music actively performed by thousands of contemporary artists. Accordingly, we have included a smaller number of younger and currently active artists, even though the downside was that their essays had to be constantly updated—some of the sections on younger performers have been revised four or five times.

I hope that the book in your hands is only the first of many editions. It's a dream of mine to revisit and update it every six or seven years—whatever the traffic will allow—and that, like the wonderful Thomson work, it can be something of a perennial. I hope to keep revising it, to update the sections on those artists who are still alive and active and to rediscover vintage performers who may have fallen through the cracks the first time around. As big as this book is, at a certain point we just ran out of room. Sometime after the last minute, I was planning to do an essay on the brilliant and chronically neglected Marilyn Maye when Altie Karper (the equally brilliant and much-appreciated managing editor of Pantheon) firmly put her foot down and told us we had neither the time nor the space to add anyone else. (So don't complain to me—talk to Altie!) Apologies to the fans of David Allyn, Ernie Andrews, Shirley Bassey, Eva Cassidy, Alan Dale, Francis Faye, Earl Grant, Gogi Grant (no, they weren't related), Rebecca Kilgore, Nancy Lamott, Julius