

Tilo Hähnel, *a Brief Portrait of: Mahalia Jackson*, May 30, 2012
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«Voices & Singing in Popular Music in the U.S.A. (1900–1960)»
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«Voices & Singing in Popular Music in the U.S.A. (1900–1960)»*

a Brief Portrait of:

MAHALIA JACKSON

Tilo Hähnel

Abstract

Often, Mahalia Jackson is called the «Queen of Gospel Music». Her style had an influence on many Gospel and R&B singers, and even today's artists refer to Mahalia Jackson when they sing ornaments, grace notes and melismas. When Mahalia Jackson should be described with three words, these would very likely be *Embellishment*, *Unconventionalism*, and *Intensity*. Her ornaments, grace notes and runs are indeed the most important characteristics mentioned in literature. She put emphasis on the transition of notes, often with a small upward jump, followed by a run downwards and a backward run until she reaches the next main tone. However, her ambitus was not strikingly large and rarely exceeded a tenth. Her phrases were short and she did not care about whether or not she takes breath within a sentence or even within a word. Besides those untrained characteristics, the listener will hear a powerful deep voice, which is able to scream, whisper, speak and vibrate depending on the dramaturgy of the song.

1 BIOGRAPHY

Born on 26th of October in 1911 in New Orleans, Jackson's Childhood was hard. Nevertheless, Jackson was fascinated by the voices of recordings, especially those of Enrico Caruso and Bessie Smith. Jackson not only listened to Smith's recordings, but she also tried to imitate her voice by singing along with the record. When she moved to Chicago in 1927, she had already sung in choirs. In Chicago she joined

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the Gospel Quartet of the Greater Salem Baptist Church. Her southern singing style, which was associated with Blues, did not match everybody's taste, but this did not mean that her singing style was outstanding from the beginning. As Heilbut (1997) writes, Jackson was influenced by the so called «Gospel shouters», of which Willie Mae Ford Smith may be the most influencing one. Since many southern African Americans moved to Chicago, the fact that someone had a southern singing style was not special.

In Chicago she met Reverend C. L. Franklin, the father of Aretha Franklin who will be influenced by Jackson later. The most important turn came when Jackson was discovered by Thomas Dorsey. With him she became a star in Chicago and made her first recordings with the new decca label. «God's Gonna Separate the Wheat from the Tares» sold many copies in the south (Heilbut 1997), but it was nothing compared with later recordings (Darden & Darden 2008, Friedwald 2010). In the late 40s she moved to the African-American Gospel label Apollo records, where she made her most respected recordings, including «Move on Up a Little Higher», «Dig a Little Deeper in God's Love» and «Amazing Grace». After she moved to the label Columbia, Jackson became an international star. She performed at jazz festivals in Europe, had her own radio show in 1954 and in 1959 she was the first African-American with an own TV show. Her career was not without difficulties: the African-American community felt betrayed because of her white audience and the money she earned. Today, the Apollo recordings are still referred to as the most important, purest and most authentic recordings. Throughout her entire life she resisted any offer to sing blues or purely entertain people. One exception might be a concert with Duke Ellington, who asked her several times to perform with him. Finally, he arranged a Gospel song to convince her. In the late 60s she suffers several heart attacks and was weakened. She gave her last concert in Germany in 1971, and she died in 1972.

2 EMBELLISHMENTS

Mahalia Jackson shows a large repertoire of embellishments. The following Sections give some examples of her way to sing melismas (i.e., different tones over one syllable), grace notes (i.e., the application of a few distinct tones before the main tone at the beginning of a syllable) and glides (i.e., the continuous transition between different pitches), and of her vibrato style. As Figure 1 shows, the passage between melismas and glides is rather fluent: the continuous and stepwise transition between different pitches is mixed in phrases and even within a glide she can hold a distinct pitch for a very short amount of time.

2.1 AMAZING GRACE NOTES AND MELISMAS

The virtuosity of Jackson's melismas lies in the dramaturgy. A look at the transcription of «Amazing Grace» (Figure 5) at page page 9 shows how she increases

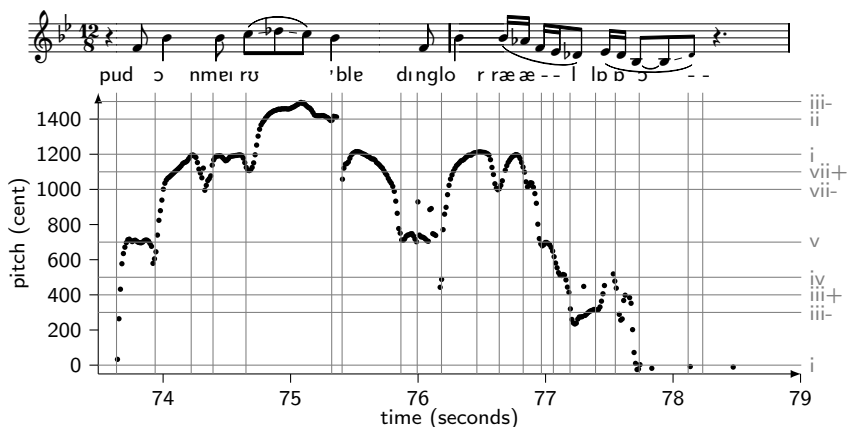


Figure 1: ► Mahalia Jackson. «Move on up a little higher», text line: «Put on my robe (but) in glory». Jackson glides between the minor seventh (vii-) and the octave (i). On the last syllable of «glory» she applies a melisma that resembles a huge glide from the octave down to the minor third. But she precisely includes small «steps» on distinct pitches (vii-, v and iv). On the vocal *u* in «robe» she glides towards the minor third and back as if she bends her voice like a guitar string, which is a technique known from blues guitar playing.

the number of grace notes and melismas towards the center of the tune, where the text is about the «lost wretch», which is the singer's self. There, she sings at the highest pitch, too. At the end of long tones, Jackson often sings melismas including 4–7 notes. Ornaments at the beginning of a tone include less tones, mostly a single grace note that can hardly be distinguished from a glide. Nearly each tone she sings is included in the pentatonic scale.

2.2 GLIDES AND QUASI-BENDING

Another typical phenomenon is the way she starts long tones. Very frequently Jackson starts with an intense glide up to the final pitch, followed by a stable pitch with an intense vibrato.

A closer examination of the song «There's no friend like Jesus» uncovers that Jackson even uses glides and vibratos as a motif that she varies throughout the song according to its dramaturgy. Figure 4 at page 8 shows that she first repeats a glide-vibrato combination precisely, introducing this combination as a motif. Then, successively, she varies it. Before the final inversion of the glide slope and a complete variation, she repeats the motif again.

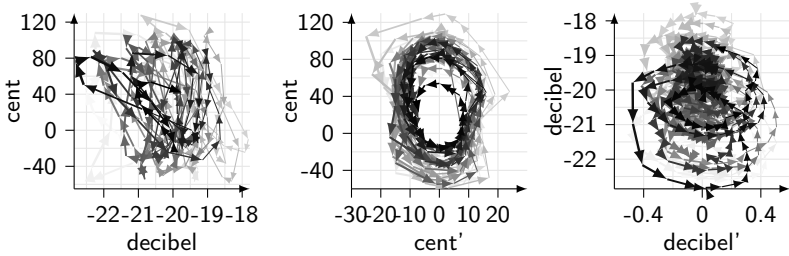


Figure 2: ► Mahalia Jackson, «Amazing Grace». A four-second vibrato at the word «sweet», (starting at the 39th second). The pitch-vibrato is much more regular than the volume-vibrato. The arrows show the direction of the time line and get successively darker with time.

2.3 VIBRATO

Jackson's vibrato has a frequency of about 6–7 Hz, which is normal and even «beautiful» in the sense of Seashore (1947). The ambitus of her vibrato covers more than 200 cent in total, which is quite large. Furthermore, one finds that the pitch vibration is much more regular than the volume-vibrato, which can be seen when looking at the derivative of the vibrato: Figure 2 shows three plots of a 4-second vibrato. On the left side the volume is plotted against the pitch. Although one can suggest some tendency towards a circular movement, this dependency between the amplitude and pitch vibration is not regular. The central picture plots the derivative of the pitch (i.e., the slope of the pitch) onto the pitch itself. Here, the pitch and its slope change regularly throughout the whole distance of 4 seconds. When the volume in decibel is plotted against its derivative, there is also a circular movement, but it is far from being as regular as the middle plot. The conclusion is that the vibrato is in first place a regular pitch vibrato.

3 UNCONVENTIONALISM

Jackson's unconventionalism is due to her short phrasing and the way she (not) follows the text. However, the term unconventionalism refers to a strict view on singing, and a view that is based on a classical understanding. Gospel lacks this view.

3.1 PHRASING

Most obviously, Jackson's phrasing is short. Often, she breathes within a phrase and even between syllables. In «Amazing Grace», recorded in 1947, she breathes two times within the first word «A-ma-zing» (see transcription in Figure 5 at page 9). When considering that the breath is defining the phrase length, Jackson's phrases are indeed very short. But since every phrase has its own climax, Jackson has more

abilities to reach a climax. She uses this possibility to put more emphasis on the melismas and grace notes.

3.2 TEXT AND GOSPEL SINGING

The fact that Jackson does not sing the text of the song as it is written, might seem unconventional from a classical viewpoint, for Gospel music is improvised in a general sense. Moreover, Gospel became a music for a solo voice, which could show even more improvisation. Furthermore, the audience knew the lyrics and songs. The term unconventionalism must therefore be handled with care when it comes to lyrics and improvisation. From the viewpoint of traditional church music in the 1930s—a European understanding of choir singing that also applies to spirituals as sung by, e.g., the Fisk Jubilee singers—, Gospel style was unconventional. However, since there was a large scene of gospel shouters in Chicago and many vocalists performed the so called «Dorseys» (Waterman 1951) there. Amongst those musicians it was a common sense that

... gospel song is rarely performed as written.¹

In essence, Mahalia Jackson was one of many gospel singers that all performed unconventionally. At the turn of the century, gospel was an unconventional style of worship-singing. It became a style—and therefore a convention—of its own.

4 INTENSITY

Jacksons has a powerful voice, but only if she wants to show it. There is no general setting at all. However, when she gets loud, she mostly uses her full voice. The power of her voice is nevertheless a prominent characteristic, for she shows intense dynamics and roughness in her greatest hits «Move on up a little higher» and «Dig a little Deeper». Figure 3 at page 7 shows some spectrogram views of the high frequency content in Jacksons voice during her shouts and growls in «Dig a little Deeper». Together with her short breath this extreme exhausting rough sound can easily be associated with a deep involvement in the song and an ecstatic expression, which may also underline the impression of «authenticity» a listener might associate with her voice.

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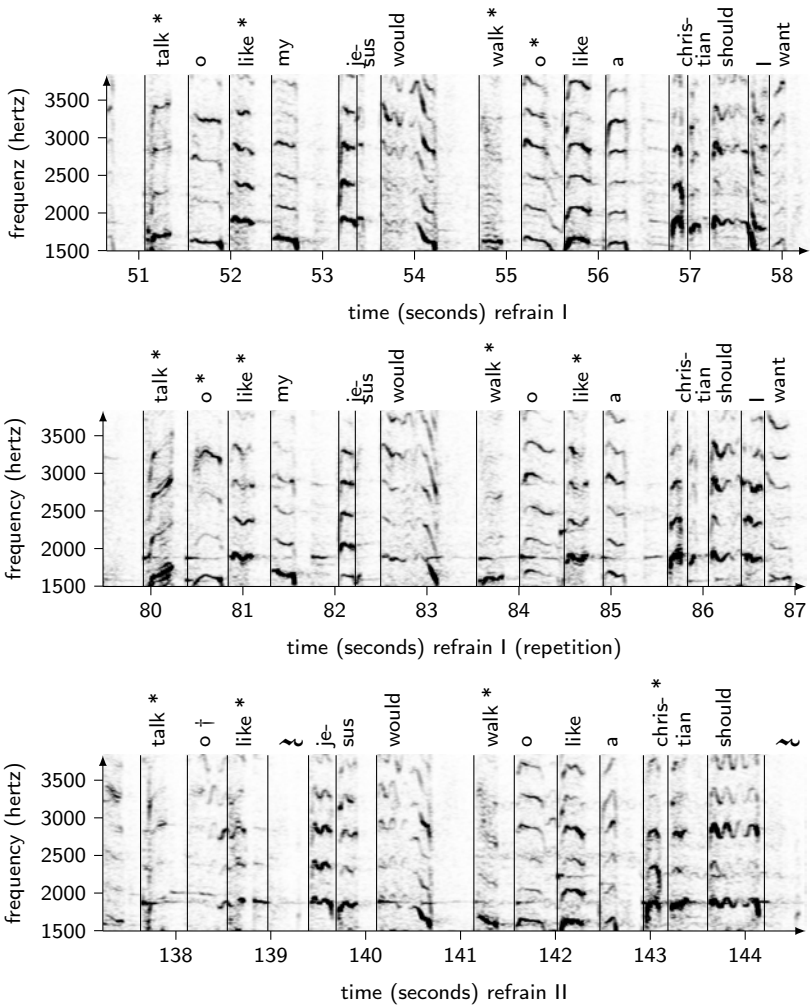


Figure 3: ► Mahalia Jackson. «Dig A Little Deeper». Text line «Talk ...». In the course of the song Jackson's voice becomes raspier, which can be seen in the energy that occurs parallel to the normal harmonics (type a = *) and in a decrease of energy of harmonics (type b = †), since the energy is distributed more equally across the frequency range, like a transient noise, which normally happens at consonants.

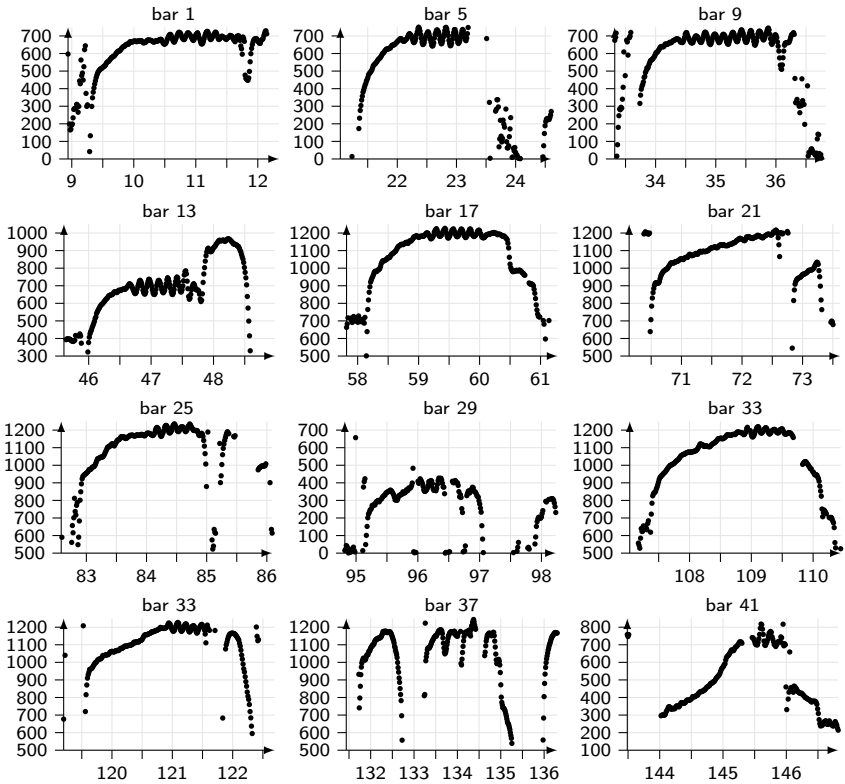


Figure 4: ► Mahalia Jackson. «There is no friend like Jesus». The plots show the glides, with which Jacksons begins each stanza. All plots display the pitch frequency in cent (vertically) above the key note, and the time in seconds (horizontally). The pitch axis have the same vertical measure of 750 cent and a horizontal range of one measure plus the one preceding triplet. Frequently, she applies a marked glide, the slope of which decreases with time. At the final pitch she starts a vibrato. Exceptions are measures 21 (a linear glide until the end of the tone) and measure 41, at which the slope of the glide increases. Measures 29 an 37 are exceptions, for Jackson varies the beginning completely.

3.7 0.87 4.03 3.91 1.3 3.39
 A - - ma - zing grace,
 o - - me-is - hen greis,

3.38 1.0 5.6 1.02 2.1 0.53 2.57
 how sweet the sound
 ho-u sui ðe sa-a-aun

3.42 0.49 2.69 3.85 1.31 3.15 0.73 3.12 1.18 2.65
 that saved a wretch li - ke me
 ðe seft uo wra-tʃ lə - kə mi

3.26 0.92 2.44 3.21 1.65 1.89
 I once was lost
 e ʊ'entʃ u'e lɔ

2.61 0.73 3.66 2.6 0.7 2.71
 but now I'm found
 bɔet nɔ e'm fə-e-ʊn

2.94 0.85 2.75 2.67 0.54 2.35 0.74
 was blind but now
 wɔs blɛɪnd bʊt nɔw lɔe

6.12 2.14 2.12 1.04 6.34
 I can see
 e cən si

Figure 5: Transcription of Mahalia Jackson's «Amazing Grace» as performed in the alternate Version.