

Tilo Hähnel, *a Brief Portrait of: Ethel Waters*, October 4, 2012
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«Voices & Singing in Popular Music in the U.S.A. (1900–1960)»
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a Brief Portrait of:

ETHEL WATERS

Tilo Hähnel

Abstract

«Sweet Mama Stringbean», as Waters was called in her early years, was a vaudeville star. Her singing style comprised a variety of vocal sounds and timbre, which she used to characterise the role she played on stage. She was able to scream and growl, but the most prominent features were a clear voice with a huge vibration, a clear pronunciation as well as an ironic and humorous approach to vocal expression. Her way to play with her voice seemed to be fun even for herself. Ethel Waters introduced many songs that became standards in the jazz repertoire, therefore she was one of the pioneers in jazz singing, too.

1 BIOGRAPHY

Waters was born on 30th October, 1886 in Chester, Pennsylvania. In 1917 she entered the vaudeville stage and became famous in 1921 with her first recording «Down Home Blues». Her success was also a success for the record label Black Swan and was followed by a great tour through the US with Fletcher Henderson and Black Swan Masters. As a vaudeville star, Waters sung Blues and also recorded popular songs with the Columbia label since 1925 after Black Swan went bankrupt. The reason for the focus on popular song might be based on the fact that Columbia already had its blues star: Bessie Smith. Smith as well as her musical mentor Ma Rainey were a great inspiration for Waters. During the 1920s and 1930s Waters, also known as «Sweet Mama Stringbean», performed as main actress in musicals

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like «Africana», «As Thousands Cheer», and «Mamba's Daughters», which she presented on Broadway and on tours. Waters sang at the most prominent clubs, like the Plantation Club and Cotton Club, and with the most prominent bands, like the orchestras of Duke Ellington and Count Basie. Many songs she recorded became jazz-standards later, for instance, «Dinah», or «I Got Rhythm». Waters acted in musicals on stage but also in musical-films. In 1929 she played in «On with the Show» and in 1943 in «Cabin in the Sky». After that, Waters continued acting in movies but concentrated on speaking parts only. She died on 1st September, 1977 in Los Angeles (Bogle 2011).

Beside Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Waters was influenced by comedians like Al Jolson. With her wide repertoire of vocal expression, Waters can be seen as a link between these early singers and the next generation of musical stars like Lena Horne and jazz singers like Ella Fitzgerald.

2 SINGING STYLE

Waters displays a flexible and rich repertoire of vocal techniques, such as glissandi, different vibrati, scat singing and a mixture of singing and speaking, which are described briefly in the following sections.

2.1 GLISSANDI

Her glissandi cover large intervals and are comparatively slow. She shows a prominent downwards-glide at the end of tones, and, a streamline-like shaped combination of an upward and downward-glissando, as one can hear in her recording of «Dinah» in 1925 (see Figure 1 on page 3).

Waters also shows marked gliding between tones in «Am I Blue» (1929), with which she puts emphasis on the blues character of the composition.

2.2 VIBRATO

Waters' vibrato mostly exceeded an ambitus of a major third, but she was able to vary it depending on the character she wanted to deliver. In «May Be Not At All», she sings the same part three times. Before the second and third time the listener can hear her announcing that she will sing like Clara Smith and Bessie Smith. Table 1 on page 4 summarises the means she uses to convey these different characters. The vibrato speed was constant throughout the recording, but the pitch intensity is clearly different.

2.3 SCAT SINGING

In her recording of «Guess Who's in Town» from 1928 she sings a scat passage with rather unusual syllables, which stress the playful approach of her interpretation. This passage is dominated by many [jʌ] and [ʊə] and nearly includes only offbeats. Two years later, in «I got Rhythm», Waters sings scat too, but now with a greater rhythmic complexity as well as with the use of more common syllables, like [dɛp].

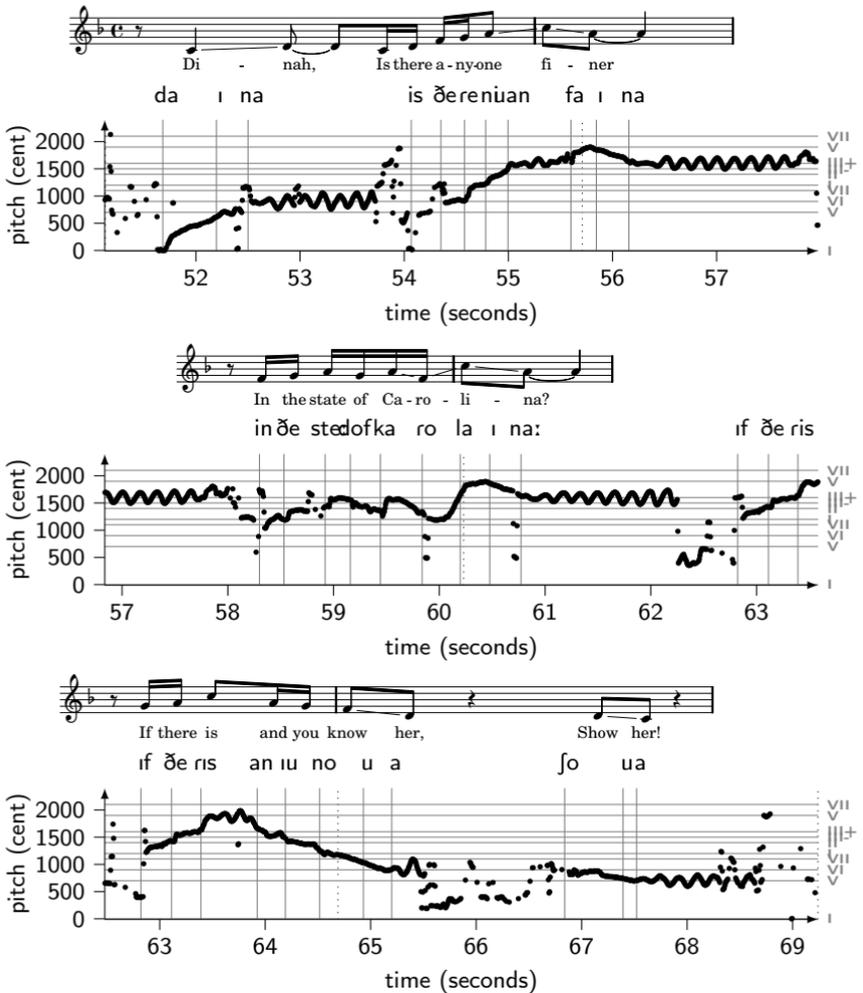


Figure 1: Ethel Waters.«Dinah». ► pitch curve of the first chorus. Vertical dotted lines indicate bars, the cent scale refers to the tone f.

Feature	Ethel Waters imitates		
	(Ethel Waters, part 1)	Clara Smith (part 2)	Bessie Smith (part 3)
tempo	110 bpm	110 bpm	70 bpm
larynx	mid position	up	down
twang	medium	strong	weak
rasp	sparsely	growls at the start	growls at the start
speaking	fast	very fast, vigorous	slow
vibrato	ca 6.5 Hz	ca 6.5 Hz	6–7 Hz
	150–400 Cent	100–300 Cent	50–200 Cent
glissandi	frequently down-wards	short	long upwards at the beginning

Table 1: Ethel Waters. In «May be not at all» she sings in three different styles, each of which she announces before orally.

2.4 SINGING AND SPEAKING VOICE

Her performance is dominated by a kind of acting. Therefore, she uses speech and a close to speech quality in her voice. When she sings «Birmingham Bertha» in 1929, Water not only sings this song, she acts Bertha out, playing a singing and speaking Bertha who not only switches between singing and speaking, but also morphing her voice smoothly from speech to singing within seconds as it is shown in Figure 3 on page 5.

Guess Who's in Town

I Got Rhythm

Figure 2: Ethel Waters. two segments of scat-passages taken from ► «Guess Who's in Town» and ► «I Got Rhythm».

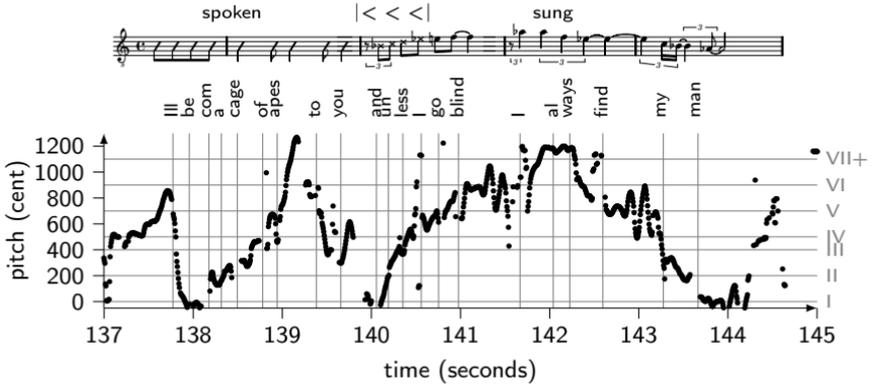


Figure 3: Ethel Waters. «Birmingham Bertha». ► smooth transition between spoken and sung voice.

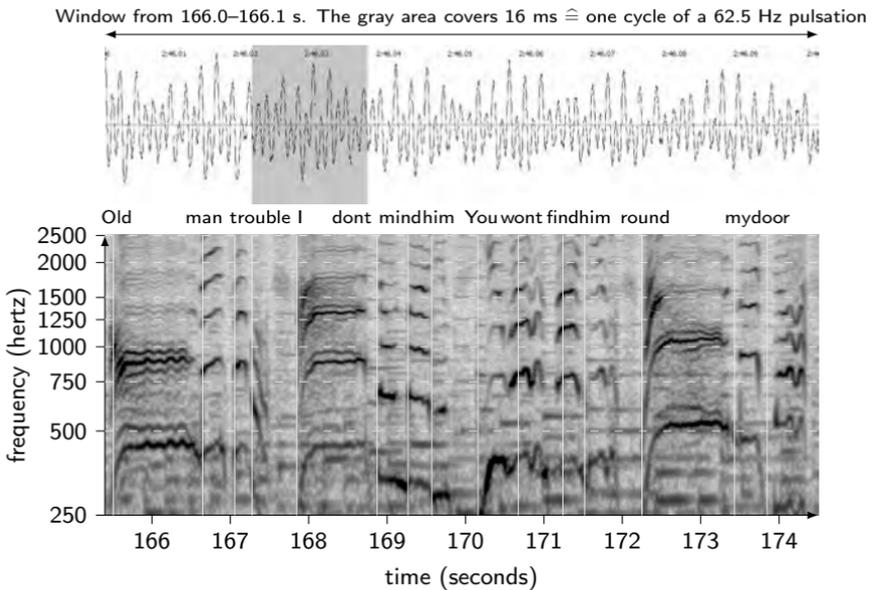


Figure 4: Ethel Waters. «I Got Rhythm». ► extreme rasp. The subharmonics in the spectrogram result from an amplitude-modulation, which is shown above as a wave view of a 100ms window.

3 WATER'S VOICE

The flexibility of her voice also refers to the timbre. Usually, Waters sings with a clear, fundamental-dominated sound, but she can also apply a sharp rich twang sound, e.g., in «May Be Not At All» (1925). However, due to a node on her vocal folds, her voice was sometimes involuntarily raspy and may be some breathy parts (e.g. in the scat passage in «Guess Who's In Town») are also due to these nodes, which she got replaced in 1929 (Pleasents 1974).

3.1 RASPINESS

Beside the physiological disturbances caused by the node, Waters used rasp as an effect, which one can clearly distinguish from her normal voice. An exceptional instance of her rasp can be found in her recording of «I Got Rhythm» (1930), in which she imitates a damped brass sound. The intense rasp can be seen in Figure 4 on page 5. The spectrogram shows subharmonic frequencies between the overtones. These subharmonics are caused by an amplitude modulation. This modulation can also be seen in the upper part of the Figure. The frequency of the signal is constant, but the amplitude modulates regularly with a frequency of approximately 62.5 Hz.

3.2 ARTICULATION

Although one might notice accents and slang, Water's articulates lyrics clearly by stressing consonants. a salient example for the stage voice is the rolled «r» as she used it in her first recording of «Dinah» in 1925. She did not roll it throughout the piece but when stressing it.

References

- Bogle, D. (2011), *Heat wave : the life and career of Ethel Waters*, HarperCollins, New York.
- Pleasents, H. (1974), *The Great American Popular Singers*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., London.