

Miss Lee Morse: The First Recorded Jazz Singer

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Lee Morse was born Lena Corinne Taylor, on November 30, 1897, in Union County, Oregon. Growing up in Kooskia, Idaho, she developed a confident, relaxed, totally unique singing style which defies classification as blues or country. Discovered in 1920, she appeared on Broadway in 1923 and her extremely successful recording career

began with Pathé-Perfect in August of 1924. From 1927 to 1933 she recorded with Columbia. She died in relative obscurity in Rochester, New York, in 1954. It is the purpose of this paper to show that Lee Morse was the first recorded jazz singer.

What Defines a Jazz Singer?

The general consensus is that Louis Armstrong was the first “jazz singer.” There seems to be no consensus on who the first female jazz singer was. Arguments have been made for Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and others. What is a jazz singer? Scott Yanow published “The Jazz Singers The Ultimate Guide” in 2008. Using his own criteria, he identified his “521 Great Jazz Singers”(1), The Columbia Dictionary defines, “jazz singer”: *“a singer whose vocal technique is similar to that of a musical instrument, and whose singing has a strong jazz feeling, chiefly imparted through phrasing, melodic improvisation, and rhythmic subtlety.”*(2) What was considered to be a jazz singer in the 1920s does not meet this definition. A Twenties “jazz singer” could get by mainly with the “strong jazz feeling.” That generally meant being loud, “hot” and syncopated.

Louis Armstrong is credited with bringing “swing” to the mix. He also showed that “hot” wasn't always needed and what jazz phrasing could do. He also could improvise with his voice as he did with his horn and turn his voice into an instrument. For our purposes we will accept any singer who did those things and see who of those was the first to record. We will use Scot Yanow's list -- which Lee Morse is on-- as a starting point, and see what it reveals about the chronology of singers in the earliest days of jazz.

Her Voice

By any definition Lee Morse had a remarkable voice. This was apparent even to the reporter covering the music beat in Kooskia. In the issue of December 17, 1914, the Kooskia Mountaineer reported "Miss Lena Taylor, daughter of Judge and Mrs. P.J Taylor, is a vocalist of a rare type. She has a deep, rich voice of peculiar timbre, that with cultivation, is capable of doing great things. She is a general favorite throughout the entire region, and wherever heard."(3)

She made a similar impression on the reporter covering the touring company of Hitchy Koo in 1923. " . . . It is safe to say that Miss Lee Morse, the girl with a wonderful voice will be voted by a nine-tenths majority as the most satisfying, enjoyable, and all around favorite in the large company. It is hard to describe her voice. She accomplishes a low register and a volume which equals in tone a male bass singer, yet her voice has a feminine quality, a richness and sweetness which no male voice could produce. Her high register is as sweet and soft pretty, more so, than most female voices. She covers the entire range with surpassing ease . . . it seems impossible that such volume, such power and such lingering sweetness could all be produced by the same vocal chords . . . She is a sweet, dainty, ever smiling sort of girl whose appearance in no way suggests the voice of magical sweetness and range which she owns."(4)

The Phonograph Monthly Review said this in their May 1929 issue: "Lee Morse (is) heard in [Susianna](#) and [Main Street](#) in 1752-D. Why Miss Morse's fame is not universal is hard for me to understand, for she is surpassed by no one in this type of

singing. She indulges in a few artless yodels here, but she is one of the few who can get away even with yodeling. [Susianna](#) is a particularly good song."(5)

Her Style

Lee Morse's "few artless yodels" have cast a long shadow, when it comes to the problems modern jazz historians have had attempting to classify her place in history. In 1996 jazz historian Will Friedwald wrote "Many collectors enjoy the country-influenced singing of Lee Morse, but no matter how hard I try to like her, she always comes off as an irritating yodeler, who makes no sense, musically or otherwise", implying that yodeling and jazz singing are mutually exclusive activities. Scott Yanow said of her "Although as much of a torch singer as a jazz vocalist, Lee Morse in the 1920s adapted her style to jazz and was backed by top players. She had an unusually deep voice, a southern accent, a wide three-octave range, and the tendency to punctuate her hotter vocal choruses with some yodeling."(1)

There are problems with accuracy in both Yanow's and Friedwald's criticism. For example, although Morse occasionally affected a southern accent for a specific song, such as [Yes, Sir, That's My Baby](#) (1925), most of her singing shows no accent at all. She did record a few torch songs, such as, "[I'm Doing What I'm Doing For Love](#) ," and "[Moanin' Low](#) " (both 1929), but they were a small part of her 200 recordings. A larger problem with their criticism is mis-use of the term yodeling. Lee used a variety of vocal effects. It is convenient, but lazy and misleading, to group together these disparate effects and call them yodeling.

Here is a dictionary definition:

Yodel - Singing without text or words, in which the play of timbres and harmonics is emphasized in the succession of individual, nonsensical vocal-consonant connections (such as 'jo-hol-di-o-u-ri-a'), which are also 2) connected in a creative way with the technique of continuous change of register between the chest voice and the (supported or non-supported) falsetto (or head) voice. 3) The tones, often performed in relatively large intervallic leaps, are either connected to one another in a legato fashion during the continuous change of register (register break), or are additionally broken up in traditional styles with the use of glottal stops.(7)

I have listened to 170 of her 200 recordings. The closest thing to a real yodel were two short vocal effects on, "[Let A Smile Be Your Umbrella](#)," recorded on January 23, 1928 and on the October 23, 1928 record, "[Don't Be Like That](#)."

The dictionary definition stresses the words legato, continuous, connected and "glotto stops." Lee's "yodel" passages are mostly staccato. There are few continuous runs of notes. Her most common effect is repeated low to high falsetto notes done in a rhythmic way with breaks between each low-high note. They remind me of coyote yelps I heard at night falling asleep as a child in bucolic Yacolt, Washington. I'm sure Lee heard them in Kooskia. For this paper I will use the term "yips" to describe these staccato almost yodel-like effects. They are substantially different from the yodeling that would become popular in the 1930s through the recordings of Jimmie Rodgers, The Sons of the Pioneers, and other Western groups.

"[Mail Man Blues](#)," from Lee's second recording session on October 7, 1924, used yips at the ends of choruses, a form very similar to what Jimmie Rodgers began using

two years later on his famous Blue Yodel records. The main difference is that Rodgers clearly yodels. “[Blue Yodel](#)’ (Victor 21142) became in many respects the seminal record for white blues. It almost certainly sold over a million copies.” At the time of his death in 1933 Jimmie Rodgers was widely known as “America’s Blue Yodeler.”(8) The fame Jimmie Rodgers won as a yodeler seems to have caused Lee Morse to be viewed as the female Jimmie Rodgers and has obscured the fact that Morse’s use of the vocal effects predates Rodgers. In fact, Mailman Blues is the first blues record composed by a women who also accompanied herself on guitar.

Lee also used straight ahead scat singing on many records as well as a sort of musical sighing with extended wordless musical notes. On a majority of her records, the second chorus of a song would differ from the first both in phrasing and in melodic improvisation. She also had a natural grasp of what the dictionary definition called “rhythmic subtlety.” Specifically Lee could sing off the beat, ahead or behind, change tempos, and employ double-time and stop-time. All done in a natural and relaxed manner.

In studying her recordings I paid special attention to the vocal effects and specific jazz usages. The numbers are:

Total number of sides: 170

With Yips: 31

With Scat Singing: 17

With Musical sighing: 12

Improvisation: 39

Jazz effects: 91

The use of yips was most prevalent at Pathé and during her first two years at Columbia. Of all the Pathé recordings she used yips on 29% of them. During her first two years at Columbia it was 25%. In 1929 and 1930, she employed no yips at all. In 1931 she used yips to a very nice effect on the February 20 recording of "[Walkin' My Baby Back Home](#)." That was the only time yips were employed in 1931 or in any of her recordings through 1933.

The recording industry suffered greatly during the Depression. Record sales dropped from 104 million in 1927 to 6 million in 1932. Many artists chose not to record at all.(9) Lee was in the recording studio twice in 1932 and once in 1933. She released four sides in each of those years. She didn't record after that until 1938, when she cut six sides for Decca (though only four of them were issued).(10) "[Careless Love](#)" has a nice blues/jazz vocal. "[Sing Me A Song Of Texas](#)" uses yips. Her final recording session was again for Decca in May and June of 1950. She cut four sides with an organ/guitar/piano/drums combo.(5) Lee's voice is fine and she uses both her low and high range. The organ dominates the sound. Her own composition "[Don't Even Change A Picture On The Wall](#)" was a local hit in Rochester, New York, where Lee was living at the time.(4)

Was Lee Morse a Jazz Singer?

Her Pathé recordings from 1924 through 1926 show her understanding of jazz and blues from the very beginning and her experimentation with vocal effects clearly shows she is trying to use her voice as an instrument. Almost all of her records featured a

commercial song on the “A” side and a Lee Morse composition, both words and music, on the “B” side. She often accompanied herself on guitar, ukulele or piano. When backed by jazz bands she would occasionally play the kazoo. The first recording on which she was backed by a band was, “[Everybody Loves My Baby](#)” (the flip side was her own composition, “[Better Shoot Straight With Your Mamma](#)”), recorded on November 28, 1924. It was released as “Miss Lee Morse and Her Blue Grass Boys.” Both are straight ahead 1920's jazz brightened by Lee's unique singing.

On the same recording session as “Mailman Blues,” Lee hum/scatted a complete chorus on the tune “[Bring Back Those Rock-A-Bye Baby Days](#).” On the song “[Me Neenyah \(My Little One\)](#),” her fourth recording of 1925, and on her own composition, “[Mollie, Make Up Your Mind](#)” (3/17/27), among several others, her wordless vocalizing is stylistically similar to Adelaide Hall on the first part of the the famous Duke Ellington record “[Creole Love Call](#),” recorded October 27, 1927. (10)

In 1927 Lee began to record for Columbia, where she made her first electrical recordings. All of her Pathé records were acoustic. Acoustic records used horns instead of microphones. Her voice, with the low register (she was listed on the labels as Miss Lee Morse to avoid gender confusion), was well suited for acoustic records. The electrical process was a much more sophisticated system which showed off her entire dynamic range. Her second Columbia recording session on 3/16/27 produced a most remarkable record. The “A” side was the pop tune, “[My Idea Of Heaven \(Is To Be In Love With You\)](#).” On the “B” side was not a Lee Morse composition. Instead she took a pop tune and turned it inside out. The song was, “[Side By Side](#),” written by Harry

Woods. Lee took the jaunty song and slowed it down. Accompanied by her own guitar she made the song personally her own. She changes the feeling of the tune by flatting the third and sixth notes in the C scale. At the beginning the second chorus she changed into C-minor for the first 16 bars before going back to C-Major at the bridge. Even today it sounds startlingly modern.

From the first the, Columbia recordings show an accomplished jazz singer. The Blue Grass Boys backing her were comprised of the best white jazz musicians available. From late 1926 through 1928 the group featured Red Nichols, Miff Mole, Earl Oliver, Larry Abbott, Jimmy Johnston, Tom Stacks and Harry Reser, among others. In 1929 the group included Jimmy Dorsey, Tommy Dorsey, Manny Klein, and the excellent drummer Stan King.(10) On January 16, 1930, Benny Goodman backed her for the first time. He performed on 24 of her records in 1930 and 1931. The wonderful guitar player Eddie Lang is also on all the 1930-31 records.(11) The remarkable thing about these records is the way they swing and how much Lee was more than just the singer. She was part of the band. She doesn't scat or use yips, with the exception of "[Walkin' My Baby Back Home](#)," but is more of a modern jazz singer. She is seemingly comfortable at any tempo. Her improvisations are musically hip. As a body of work, her records of 1930 and 1931 show an artist in full command of her gifts.

The Earliest Recorded Jazz Singer?

The book, "*Louis' Children American Jazz Singers*," by Leslie Gourse states the commonly held theory that all jazz singing starts with Louis Armstrong.(12) Although Louis recorded as an instrumentalist in 1923, he didn't record as a singer until November

17, 1924, three months after Lee's first recording session in August of that year.(10)

Excluding blues singers, the number of other singers from that era who could be truly considered a “peer” of Lee Morse (from Scot Yanow's list of 521 jazz singer) is in truth, surprisingly short: Vaughn DeLeath, Cliff Edwards, Ruth Etting, Marion Harris, Nick Lucas, and Don Redman.

The best jazz singer among them was Don Redman. He first recorded as a singer in April of 1924.(10) As clever a singer as he was, his skills as an arranger, composer, instrumentalist and band leader far out shone his rather limited singing voice. His main forte was being able to talk-sing a variety of songs, of which, “[Shakin' The African](#) ,” is an excellent example. Cliff Edwards' greatest fame came from giving voice to the character, “Jiminy Cricket,” in the 1940 Walt Disney film, Pinocchio, where he introduced the song [When You Wish Upon A Star](#) . He recorded under the name of, “Ukulele Ike,” first recording in 1919, and was, along with Lee Morse, the most popular recording artist for Pathé in the mid Twenties. He *was* a jazz singer by 1920's standards but moved more into the realm of pop singing during that decade and never reached the full definition of being a more modern jazz singer. Ruth Etting was an immensely popular singer in the Twenties. John McAndrew wrote "Ruth Etting was not a jazz singer, but she could have been a good one, as her grasp of the idiom, her tasteful phrasing and occasional improvising lifted many a sickly song out of mediocrity and charmingly counter-pointed the sessions with jazz musicians as a base."(12) That same criticism could apply to Marion Harris. She was a wonderful singer who first recorded in 1916. She is credited with being the first woman to record a song that included “jazz” in

the title, "[When I Hear That Jazz Band Play](#)," in 1917.(1,10) She did advance the art of jazz singing with a more relaxed style than the "coon shouters" who were her peers. She did not advance as a jazz singer much further than that, and stayed with a style firmly rooted in the Twenties. Vaughn DeLeath and Nick Lucas were certainly popular singers but neither could be defined as jazz singers.

The following singers listed in Yanow who recorded prior to Lee Morse were black female blues singers of the early Twenties. They were: Ida Cox, Rosa Henderson, Maggie Jones, Virginia Liston, Sara Martin, Lizzie Miles, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, Mamie Smith, Trixie Smith, Eva Taylor, Sippie Wallace, Ethel Waters and Edith Wilson.

Only a few of them have any significant body of work performing non-blues songs. A majority of them recorded exclusively in the Twenties. Most of the others cut very few records in the Thirties. The exceptions are Bessie Smith, Eva Taylor, and Ethel Waters. Bessie Smith is universally accepted as the greatest of the classic female blues singers of the Twenties. She also occasionally did non blues songs. Her vogue faded by 1930 when she recorded only eight sides. It was down to six in 1931 and none in 1932.(13) She did continue to perform, recording four excellent sides in 1933, and may have reinvented herself as a jazz singer if not for her untimely death at the age of 43 in 1937.(1)

Eva Taylor was equally comfortable doing blues or Tin Pan Alley tunes. She continued recording into the 1930's, but she did not advance her style out of the Twenties. Ethel Waters clearly qualified as a jazz singer in the early 1920's, but by the

middle of that decade she seemed to purposely move toward the mainstream, regressing as a jazz singer instead of advancing.

We are left with Lee Morse. What finally separates her from those who recorded before her is that she alone moved past the Twenties style of jazz singing to develop the hip and swinging style we associate with more modern singers. Although stylistically different she could swing a ballad at a slow to medium tempo, such as, "[You're Driving Me Crazy! \(What Did I Do?\)](#)," or, "[I Still Get A Thrill \(Thinking Of You\)](#)" (both 1930), just as Billie Holiday or Lee Wiley would do later. She was equally adept with a quicker tempo such as "[Old Man Sunshine, Little Boy Bluebird](#)" (1928). At a fast tempo she could coast along riding the rhythm with a laid back vocal, such as "[I've Got Five Dollars](#)" or "[It's The Girl!](#)" (both 1931), that is akin to Ivie Anderson, Connee Boswell, or Anita O'Day.

The basic facts of Lee Morse life defy credulity. She came from a virtual wilderness in rural Idaho, where she developed her unique style of singing. She moved away from Idaho at the age of 23 and was in a New York recording studio at age 27. Decades before it became the fashion she was a Singer-songwriter. Her song Mailman Blues in 1924 was the first blues record composed by a women who also accompanied herself on guitar. She worked with the musicians Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Jimmy Dorsey before they went on to be among the brightest stars of popular jazz music in the Thirties and Forties. Years before the word became popular, Lee Morse was hip. She was also the first such "hip" singer to record.



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