

# “It’s the Girl”—The Boswell Sisters with the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra (1931)

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Essay by David W. McCain (guest post)\*



*The Boswell Sisters*



*Original label*



*Sheet music*

The date was July 8, 1931. The place was New York City.

A trio of sisters from New Orleans named Martha, Connie and Vet--the Boswell Sisters--arrived at the studios of Brunswick Records to record a song titled “It’s the Girl,” written by Abel Baer and Dave Oppenheim.

During the Great Depression records were not selling well. Vet Boswell described the Boswells’ recording sessions as “icing on the cake,” explaining that radio and stage appearances were far more financially lucrative. Recording artists at this time were paid a flat rate with no royalties. Radio quickly established the Boswell Sisters as household names in America during the Depression, but records spread their fame abroad. When the Boswell Sisters toured England and Holland in 1933 and 1935, it was their recordings which made them a top box office draw.

By the date of their recording “It’s the Girl,” the Boswells knew who to request as their accompanists. Only four months earlier at their very first session for Brunswick (March 19, 1931), a house orchestra comprised of Bob Effros (trumpet); Tommy Dorsey (trombone); Jimmy Dorsey (clarinet); Arthur Schutt (piano); Dick McDonough (guitar); Joe Tarto (string bass) and Stan King (drums) had accompanied the Boswell Sisters on “Whad’ja Do To Me?” and “When I Take My Sugar to Tea.” This recording was released as Brunswick 6083. Vet Boswell recalled that after the first run-through of this session, the Boswells received a standing ovation as well as cheers and whistles from “the boys” who accompanied them.

“Whad’ja Do To Me?” was written by Milton Ager. After Ager heard the recording, the songwriter asked the Boswells, “Whad’ja do to my song?”

“It’s the Girl” and “It’s You” were released as Brunswick 6151, with the label reading “Boswell Sisters Accompanied by the Dorsey Brothers.” The musicians on this date were Jack Purvis (trumpet); Tommy Dorsey (trombone); Jimmy Dorsey (clarinet); Joe Venuti (violin); Eddie Lang (guitar); Joe Tarto (string bass); Stan King (drums) and Martha Boswell (piano).

Milton Ager’s question was fair and understandable, for not only did Martha, Connie and Vet harmonize in a way that the public had never heard before, the sisters also did their own arranging. Their string trio foundation of classical training (Martha on piano, Connie on cello, Vet on violin) combined with a New Orleans jazz and swing feel which became known as “the Boswell Sound” and “Boswell Rhythm.” For their popular and jazz numbers, the trio performed with Martha on piano, Connie on saxophone and Vet on banjo. A popular song sung in “that Boswell manner” was lifted from the earth of the as-written sheet music to the jazzy and stellar stratosphere of a Boswell Sisters arrangement, which was the product of the combined harmonic and imaginative genius of the three sisters. The creative originality of the Boswell Sisters remains not only unsurpassed but also has never been duplicated.

As CBS Records and Sony Music producer/archivist (and winner of six Grammy Awards) Michael Brooks noted in 1982: “Like every successful act they had imitators by the score, but no one came close to duplicating their unique blend of rhythm, harmony and phrasing.”

In 1972, author Ken Barnes praised the Boswell Sisters in his book “Sinatra and the Great Song Stylists”: “It wasn’t until the advent of the Boswell Sisters that girls achieved musical equality. Martha, Connie and Vet (Helvetia) were three youngsters from New Orleans who could sing hot choruses with the best of them, and usually recorded in company with leading jazz musicians. It is possible to regard them as the inspiration of every girl trio for the next twenty years, and though their singing and swinging style was often emulated no other group possessed their affinity, their intuitive musicianship.”

The three sisters generically described their sound as “passing harmony.” In strict trio terms, Martha and Connie carried the lower notes and Vet’s natural range was much higher. Each sister described how they worked together:

Martha: If we sang according to orthodox music traditions, Vet would be the high voice or soprano, I would be the middle or alto and Connie would be the low or contralto. But we don’t sing in the orthodox musical way. Instead, when we sing as a trio we achieve an unusual and unorthodox effect by deserting our own particular tone and singing in another tone. We call that blending. If you know anything about music, for example, you know that a soprano is rarely able to hit a low “C” note effectively, but Vet can do that when we sing as a unit thereby producing an effect which is out of the ordinary and accounts for our own peculiar type of individuality. Blending and cross-blending of voices achieved by a desertion at various times of the tones in which we would normally sing is an important factor in the production of the thing you have heard called “Boswell Rhythm.” This blending takes varied forms. Sometimes all three of us will strike a crescendo in the same tone. At other times we achieve a cross-blending effect as when the soprano sings contralto and the contralto sings soprano. If we sang out of tone separately it wouldn’t be so good, but doing it together produces the blending effect that goes over.

Vet: The three of us, we never had a particular part like tenor or alto or melody. Whatever voice suited the arrangement; which one could get up there first, the highest or the lowest, we just left it that way. We always made our own arrangements; we'd sit down and Martha would play it on the piano. And we just sort of faked it, whichever one the note seemed to fit the voice better, we left it that way. We never had a set tenor or alto. Connie and I used to sit down and figure out the arrangements; Martha never was much on that; she played the piano, but she didn't like to bother arranging. She'd go and take a little cat nap while Connie and I finished up the number. And we'd bring her back and she'd get in on it.

Connie: The method we use is rather quaint, and I know will amuse you when you hear about it. We learn our songs backwards! That is to say, we start at the end of the chorus and work back to the beginning. None of our arrangements are written out; consequently we prefer to sing with string bass and guitar accompaniment played by performers who can "fake" after they have heard us sing the song over a few times. Once we learn a song we never forget the arrangement of it. The country is now full of singing sister acts such as ours, and most of them, for the purpose of salesmanship, say they are "Another Boswell Sisters." These imitations have not worried us very much, and I'll tell you why. They would get a lot farther if they sang in a style of their own! We ourselves, as far as we know, do not imitate anyone, and I firmly believe that if our imitators were to work on new and original lines we would have far more to fear from them as serious opposition.

Martha Boswell was usually the pianist at recording sessions. Vet Boswell's daughter, Chica Minnerly, described Martha's piano accompaniment as "the fourth voice" of the trio.

The trio's arrangement of "It's the Girl" exhibits a common Boswell trademark: altered tempos. The recording begins with the trio in full harmony sung at a fast pace. Connie slows it down with a soulful solo passage before the musicians and the sisters ride the song out to a breathless finale with a minor chorus. Vet Boswell explained that she heard songs in a minor key, and she stated that minor choruses were usually her contribution to the trio's arrangements.

In 2014, Bette Midler honored the Boswell Sisters by recording a CD tribute to the famous female singing groups entitled "It's the Girls." Midler recalled:

One of the first records that ever landed in my life was a 78-rpm record of the Boswell Sisters that someone had discarded. . . I played it endlessly. Those girls not only sang, they swung! It was hard to hear who was singing lead, they switched parts effortlessly and often...what a joy! The Boswells led the way. I first heard the Boswell Sisters when I was a little girl, maybe I was 4. A friend of my mother's gave my mother a record player and two record albums of 78s. One was "It's the Girl" and the other one was "River Stay Away From My Door." There was something about the sound of the Boswell Sisters. That record was the beginning of my musical life.

*Originally from New Orleans, David W. McCain currently lives in Newark, New Jersey. His research on the history of vocal harmony groups led him to meet Vet Boswell at her home in Peekskill, New York, in 1977 which began a close friendship. McCain worked with Vet's*

*daughter, Chica Minnerly, and Vet's granddaughter, Kyla Titus, on the biography "The Boswell Legacy," which was self-published in 2014 and is currently available on Amazon.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Library of Congress.

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Website: [theboswelllegacy.com](http://theboswelllegacy.com)

Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/TheBoswellSisters](https://www.facebook.com/TheBoswellSisters)

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**AND ESPECIALLY**

Helvetia George Boswell Jones (better known as Vet Boswell). All love to you, dearest Vet.