

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

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Essay by Cary O’Dell



The Boswell Sisters



Original label

In their classic 1931 song “It’s the Girl,” the Boswell Sisters (Connie, Martha and Vet) swing and rock faster and more thoroughly than just about any male or male group of the period, in fact, more than many of the rock stars of the eras to come. Chalk it up to the group’s nearly peerless harmonies, rapid singing style, and their numerous tempo and key changes.

It doesn’t hurt that it’s a darn cute and catchy song, too, one filled with clever wordplay and a beat that fluctuates between swing and the blues. There’s even a nod to “scat” late in the number. “It’s the Girl” is a surprisingly pro-woman song as it lists out the things that don’t bring you half the pleasure as a pretty girl on your arm. Its opening lyrics go:

*It isn't the paddle, it's not the canoe,
It isn't the river or skies that are blue,
It isn't the love dreams that bring joy to you,
It's the girl, oh, it's the girl!*

Two of the Boswell Sisters were born in Kansas City, Missouri: Martha in 1905, Connie (later spelled “Connee”) in 1907. Youngest sister Helvetia (“Vet”) was born in 1911 in Birmingham, Alabama. All three were raised in New Orleans in a family that was heavily musical. Mom, dad, an aunt and an uncle all sang together in a quartet. At a young age, all the girls were encouraged to master musical instruments, eventually taking up sax, banjo, piano, cello and violin. The trio began singing together in their early teens and quickly gathered an area following via their appearances at church, school events and over local radio.

Area radio appearances soon brought the attention of Edward King of Victor Records. In 1925, he cut five songs with the group. Later, the girls were with Okeh Records and later still, most successfully, with the Brunswick label.

Early on the girls perfected their unbelievably close harmonies in numbers like “Baby” (1930); “Heebie Jeebies” (1930); “Shout, Sister, Shout” (1930) (soon to become their theme song); “Crazy People” (1932); and “Everybody Loves My Baby” (1932). One of their most prophetic hits was “Rock and Roll” from 1935; it’s about the ocean. The Boswells even had their own national radio show several times a week, first with NBC in 1930 and then with CBS from 1931 to 1933.

The group's appeal and relatively quick ascent to the top of the charts can be ascribed to their unique vocal style, a blend of voices so flawless it has to be heard to be believed. As has been noted, "They merged harmony, rhythm and feeling to produce a musical togetherness that has been imitated but never equaled." In his book "Jazz Singing," author Will Friedwald wrote:

The Boswells start with three gorgeous voices that sound even better when raised together. If you listen to isolated bars of a Boswell performance, you'll hear these three separate lines whenever they want you to, while at other times they mesh into one indistinguishable ensemble. The standard road map of their voices, which makes the claim that Vet sang the high parts, Martha the low ones, and Connee assuming the lead and solo voices doesn't always work since the blend is so flexible the sisters don't have to stay in the same place.

Along with their remarkable "blend," Boswell recordings also customarily contain other signatures including variations in "the beat," the time signature of the tune. Certainly this is evident in "It's the Girl" which seems to skip through entire genres during its three minutes and 16 second duration.

Maxene Andrews of the Andrews Sisters said of the trio, "The Boswells took the idea of jazz and did it vocally."

Throughout the 1930s, the Boswell Sisters were widely successful commercially and critically acclaimed. During the course of their career, they were able to work with the crème de la crème of musicians including the Dorsey Brothers, Red Nichols, and Don Redman.

The style of the Boswells was epically influential. In their wake would be a whole host of harmonizing sister acts (the Andrews, the McGuires, the Pointers) and other vocal groups including dozens of do-wop groups of the '50s and '60s and a plethora of later day so-called "boy bands" who have based their recording success on smooth-as-glass harmonizing. Meanwhile, almost every notable singer of every era since the Boswells has acknowledged them as an influence. They include Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee, Harry Belafonte and the great Ella Fitzgerald.

Despite their widespread success, in 1936, the Boswell Sisters ceased. Martha and Vet both got married and traded the show biz life for hearth and home. Sister Connee however continued on as a highly accomplished solo act. As a soloist, Connee continued many of the Boswell traditions, including various musical experimentations. Said one critic, "Connee's style was a clean break from the on-the-beat and rather formal style of pop singing in vogue before her arrival; her swing and sure sense of time were and continue to be a big influence on female singers."

Connee would go on to sell 75 million records in a career that stretched well into the 1950s. Interestingly, throughout her life, Connee was confined to a wheelchair due to either polio or a severe accident she suffered in childhood (stories differ). To conceal her disability, with or without her sisters, Connee was always strategically photographed or carefully draped in her stage gown.

Connee Boswell passed away in 1976. Her sister Martha passed in 1958 and Vet died in 1988. Long before their demise however, the Boswells were already the subject of a major cult following. Thanks to the web, their fan base is as strong today as it ever was with the various internet devotionals including the elaborate Bozzies.org built around their work and legacy.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).