Torch Singing

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Torch Singing

Performing Resistance and Desire from Billie Holiday to Edith Piaf

STACY HOLMAN JONES

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1

Interpreter of Lies

Listening to the female singing voice is a . . . complicated phenomenon. Visually, the character singing is the passive object of our gaze. But, aurally, she is resonant; her musical speech drowns out everything in range, and we sit as passive objects, battered by that voice.

—*Carolyn Abbate, "Opera; Or, the Envoicing of Women"*[1]

[She] pushes certain notes so they almost go flat. I'm not sure this is tasteful. And yet I wait for it to happen, and I might even stop the record and put the needle back to hear that note again—the doubtful note—because the world is alive with recognitions and quickenings when I have established a relation to such accidents, when I am not the victim of what I hear, but its willing accessory.

—*Wayne Koestenbaum,* The Queen's Throat[2]

Love's signs . . . are deceptive signs which can be addressed to us only by concealing what they express: the origin of unknown worlds, of unknown actions and thoughts which give them a meaning . . . . The interpreter of love's signs is necessarily the interpreter of lies. [Her] fate is expressed in the motto: to love without being loved.

—*Gilles Deleuze,* Proust and Signs[3]

In this text, I imagine myself an interpreter of love's signs, of the torch singer's refrain: to love without being loved. In this text, I ask whether loving without

being loved is the torch singer's *destiny*—an unalterable (dis)course; source and means of her destruction, her ruin. I ask whether another interpretation is imaginable—the torch singer as naysayer, as critic, as the voice of resistive and radical possibilities. I wonder whether I can hear concealed thought and action and untold delight sung under the cover of a torch tune.

In this text, I imagine that torch singing is a complicated phenomenon—more than a woman voicing the familiar tune of her own (and other women's) victimhood. I hear a woman singing "My Man," the quintessential torch song:

It cost me a lot
But there's one thing
That I've got
It's my man. . . .
Two or three girls has he
That he likes as well as me.
But I love him!
I don't know why I should,
He isn't good
He isn't true
He beats me too,
What can I do? . . .
Oh my man I love him so
He'll never know
All my life is just despair
But I don't care. . . .
What's the difference if I say
I'll go away
When I know I'll come back
On my knees someday
For whatever my man is
I am his forever more.[4]

I hear scores of women singing this song over and over again. I could see these singers and hear their song passively, purely the objects of my musical affection. I could turn away from my own reflection and the images of other women. I could assume torch singing is apolitical, inconsequential in the dis-

courses of politics. I could also choose to believe that the radical potential of performance is not an either/or proposition—that musical politics exists along a continuum from overt protest to covert commentary. I could ask whether performances whose critique is sounded furtively—underneath and within lyrics that batter down women's voices—can be easily ignored or dismissed. If it is possible for a singer to critique the lyrics she sings, I could hear how torch singing claims the composing voice to sound the first notes of resistance, of change. I could understand why so many women are singing "My Man." And if I can imagine these things, I can't wait to see—and hear—what happens.

I begin again, imagining myself a careful listener, waiting for the accident to happen—an embellished phrase, a muted laugh, a doubtful note, a fulsome pause, a wink and a sigh. At the scene of these accidents, I am alive with recognitions and quickenings, no longer the victim in (and of) a sad story and a violent, wanting narrative. I am a willing accessory. I become witness to another story, privy to hidden—though not silent—ironies, indiscretions, and interruptions voiced inside sweet and sleepy melodies.

I imagine, too, that I am not the passive spectator battered by a voice, but an active contributor to a boisterous musical dialogue. In the space between music and language, torch singing is an invitation, an opening to desire. I move with the music and an audience, remaking myself in the electricity of emotion and connection. In the distance between key signatures and the arc of a lyric, torch singing is a becoming, a provocation to participate that doesn't erase antagonisms and contradictions. I speak inside the music, adding my voice to a cacophony that sounds the promise of possibility within a standardized form. I envision points of contact that complicate the easy opposition of spectators and performers, emotion and intellect, action and passivity, love and politics. Instead of hearing love's signs as a woman's violent mistake—as her willing deception and passive fate—I hear an opening for critique; an active search for hope. I hear music for torching, deeply inside history and alive with unforeseen pleasures.

I imagine a text that performs like the music I listen to—a narrative that moves and changes with each repetition of a note, a line, and a song. I create collages of ideas and fragments of feeling that evoke the voices and politics of torch. I assemble these collages and fragments as I experience them—here and now, there and then, within and outside the music. Like my listening, my interpretations are iterative and itinerant, full of gaps and pauses and fits and

starts. Like the multiple verses on torch singing, my interpretations are layered compositions that can be played on several frequencies. One recounts my experience and understanding of torch singing. Another plays back the music as I hear it—sometimes in a rush, sometimes slowly, note for note. Another traces the contours of my desire for performers, stories, performances, fleeting moments. Another adds to and talks back to discourses on torch singing in a delayed transcript of asides and footnotes. Listening to these multiple, layered narratives presents a complicated phenomenon. It requires an active imagination, a feel for when to interrupt one story to tell and hear another, and a willingness to open up spaces of pleasure and critique within a standardized form. If I am the interpreter of love's signs—the interpreter of lies—this text is a deception of my own imagination. But this text, like torch singing, makes no sound without an audience. It needs a witness to see her own reflection and the images of women. It needs a listener to hear the voices of critique. It needs an accessory willing to join the dialogue. Imagine a text that asks you to imagine your own interpretations and make your own improvisations, variations on the theme.

WITNESSES

1. Carolyn Abbate, "Opera; Or, the Envoicing of Women," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie, 254 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

2. Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon, 1993), 21.

3. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Braziller, 1972), 9.

4. Albert Willemetz and Charles Jacques, lyrics for "My Man," trans. Channing Pollock, music by Maurice Yvain, in *The Great American Torch Song*, 114 (Miami: Warner Bros. Publications, 1996).

2

The Scene of Desire

The metacommunicative . . . extrapersonal address may . . . be aimed at a vacant chair or at a space that is not occupied. In such cases, we can often infer that some absent member is being addressed, or else some figure of the past.

—*Albert E. Scheflen,* How Behavior Means[1]

She would place her right palm over her heart. This gesture is . . . generally recognized, even when it occurs without comment, as an indicator of sincerity.

—*Scheflen,* How Behavior Means[2]

Sometimes in my mind I imagine myself physically handing somebody in the audience a key. Once they have the key, I feel that they will follow me anywhere.

—*Patricia Barber, quoted in Friedman*[3]

All political action takes forms that are designed to obscure their intentions or to take cover behind an apparent meaning. . . . Precisely because such political action is studiously designed to be anonymous or to disclaim its purpose, infrapolitics requires more than a little interpretation. Things are not as they seem.

—*James C. Scott,* Domination and the Arts of Resistance[4]

Alice is seeing red. The theater is voluptuous and desperate in crimson curtains and candy apple carpets. She was early tonight and had to stand in the rain until the house was open. Once inside, she walks slowly, carefully avoiding the near run that the others use to stake out tables in front of the stage. Instead, Alice scans the room and chooses a table to the left of center, in front of the piano. She pulls out the red vinyl chair in front of her and another next to her and sits down to wait. A waitress nods at Alice. No, she doesn't want to place a drink order, thank you, but is informed that there is a two-drink minimum all the same. Alice says, "I'll wait until my husband arrives."

The singer paces barefoot in the dressing room, her dinner growing cold. The airplanes and hotels and promotional appearances and packaged meals and wake-up calls and untouched cocktails and questions and turn downs and lobby sales—all of it—make her behave like a caged animal. The only thing that keeps her here is the anticipation of being on stage, the music, the audience. On stage, she is *playing.* Open, vulnerable, and exposed? Yes, and *alive.*

Alice watches the crowd rush and burst into the room. She looks into the faces of men and women—some older than her, almost all of them white—and wonders if they see her. Wonders, too, if they will take the two remaining chairs at her table and sit with their backs to her. She watches for his face—a man, yes, but not her husband. She'd asked him to come because she knew he would like the music. She was sure he would feel moved as she was the first time she saw the singer perform. Sure, too, that in the singer's voice they would hear their stories speak together, that an understanding and perhaps an explanation would pass between them. Alice looks at the empty chair beside her and imagines all of these things.

The crowd is growing steadily larger, their talk rising up from white tablecloths and glasses of champagne. Ushers move in and around the tables down front, asking, "Is this seat available? How about that one?" and pairing couples into small groups of strangers. An usher asks Alice if the seat next to her is available. Alice shakes her head. He asks about the two seats opposite her. "Yes," she admits, "those seats are available." Then Alice asks, "May I take a picture before the show begins?" She holds up a disposable camera in a cardboard box and shrugs. She says, "I know photography is prohibited during the show, but I've never been to this historic venue" (Bimbo's 365 Club, Home of Dolphina, the Girl in the Fish Bowl, since 1931).

The usher says, "You'll have to talk to the house manager. I'll send her over."

The house manager arrives with a smile, asking, "What can I do for you?"

Alice says, "I wonder whether I might take a picture before the show begins? I'd really like to have a photo of a place with such history. I won't take any others after the music starts."

The house manager looks out at the crowd. She says, "I don't think now is a good time. If the other patrons see you taking a photo, they might get the wrong idea, and, well, we can't have that."

"I understand. It's just that I'm writing a book about these kinds of places and the performances they stage—a book about torch singing to be exact—and a photo of this venue would be great to include."

The house manager looks out at the crowd again. "I *am* sorry. Maybe you could come back, when the club is closed, and take your photos then?"

"It wouldn't be the same without the people here, without the anticipation."

"I'm sorry," she repeats, then disappears into the crowd.

The steady stream of people has dwindled to a few late arrivals, here and there. Alice searches their faces, but doesn't see the man she is waiting for. It is almost time for the show to begin. She stares at the ceiling and wills him to walk into the red room. Alice lowers her eyes and looks at the empty chair next to her and knows that tonight she will be alone with the music.

The lights dim and the applause begins. The singer takes the stage, but it is dark and Alice cannot see her. But she hears the singer's fingers on the piano. The first few notes send the applause to a fever pitch and the lights come up. The singer is barefoot and dressed in black. She sits at the piano and plays, then sings, "Just for a thrill . . ."[5]

Alice takes notes while the singer performs. She watches the singer bend over the keys, hair falling over her face. She sees the singer listen to her bass player and drummer, hands behind her back. She hears the singer hum and call out over their solos, the pleasure of the music deep in her throat. She closes her eyes, throws her head back, wide open. She puts her hand over her heart and beats out the music. Her graceful fingers tap at throat and voice. Alice looks at her own fingers grasping the pen, white with effort. She sees dark ink mottled and bleeding into a glowing napkin. And when the singer returns her fingers to the keys, Alice reaches for her own heart and closes her eyes. She sees the empty chair and tries to imagine that the man who is not her husband

is sitting next to her. Even in her thoughts the chair remains empty. All Alice can see is the singer with her hand over her heart, though this time her fingers are curved and each time she moves them to tap out the beat she beckons Alice to her, to the piano and the music and the nakedness of the sound in her throat. And Alice says, "*Yes.*"

The solo complete, the theme reasserts itself and Alice opens her eyes. She sets to work noticing, noting. The singer has Edith Piaf's hands, flying in the air, hovering over the music and words, fleshing out the story. She has Sarah Vaughan's range and daring in the piano, racing up and over and through the scale, tone on tone. She has Billie Holiday's voice, full of the promise of emptiness. She has Lena Horne's subtle feel for melody and Barbra Streisand's appreciation for drama. And the singer winks like k. d. lang, singing "She's a Lady," words intact, range complicit with the male narrator so that the singer and the song's possibilities are incisively opaque.

And the singer has something else: an intellectualism that makes Alice smile as if an inside joke has passed between them. When the singer says she likes "French philosophy" and "deconstructive obscurity,"[6] Alice answers that she, too, likes Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. Alice says she remembers Baudrillard saying something about our deepest desire: the desire to give responsibility for our own desire to someone, some*body* else.[7] She thinks Baudrillard called this desire an "ironic investment in the other," a strategy of expulsion—of "philosophers and people in power"; of the "obligation of being responsible."[8] Alice knows something of the desire to be irresponsible and indecisive, to turn over her desire to someone or something else—the empty chair, the singer, the music, French philosophy. She wonders about the irony of this desire—irony as a play of opposites, of contradictions, of connections to and separations from subjects and emotions, of an irreverent style. The irony she wonders about is a desire to know oneself by abandonment to the other and at the same time talking back to those who would tell us how to be responsible lovers. It is an explosion of ideas and categories from the inside out, from behind and below and around the beat. And Alice wonders about being here, thinking of Baudrillard and listening to the singer and desiring her in and through the music—all the while knowing that this is an illusion and still seeing some hope and humor in this abandonment. . . . And then, in an instant, a flash, an opening, Alice understands that *this* is the art of torch singing. It is a remaking of the torch song—that sentimental bal-

lad of unrequited love, victimhood, and the pleasure of pain. Alice understands that *this* is what her story is about. The torch song speaks to Alice and talks back to itself and love and victimhood. The torch singer says look closer, read between the lines. Lean in and listen to the backbeat, variations on a theme. Things are not as they seem.

Alice is seeing red. The music speaks to her in the public space of intimacy; the singer calls to her—beckons her—into herself and out into the world.[9] Alice takes the key. She blinks and looks around. She sees the others here, with her, listening and desiring and moving. And Alice follows.

AND FOLLOWS . . .

1. Albert E. Scheflen, *How Behavior Means* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1974), 130.

2. Scheflen, *How Behavior Means*, 132.

3. Patricia Barber, quoted in Michael Friedman, "Patricia Barber on 'Modern Cool,'" *All about Jazz*, November 1998, www.allaboutjazz.com/iviews/pbarber.htm (accessed April 12, 2001).

4. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 200.

5. Lilla Hardin Armstrong and Don Raye, lyrics for "Just for a Thrill," Todd and Sharon Peach website, n.d., www.thepeaches.com/music/randb/JustForaThrill.txt (accessed June 3, 2005).

6. Patricia Barber, "Company," *Modern Cool*, Premonition Records, 1998.

7. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. with an introduction by Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 215.

8. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 215.

9. Will Friedwald, *Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond* (New York: Da Capo, 1996), 126. This line is drawn from Friedwald's discussion of Billie Holiday. He writes, "Billie Holiday's art is the kind that takes you deeper inside yourself and ultimately out again."

3

Sing Me a Torch Song

Such is the anxious desire of the book. It is tenacious too, and parasitic, loving and breathing through a thousand mouths that leave a thousand imprints on our skin, a marine monster, a polyp.

—*Jacques Derrida,* Writing and Difference[1]

The sounds of pain, lust, ecstasy, fear, what one might call inarticulate articulacy: the sounds, for example, of tears and laughter; the sounds made by soul singers around and between their notes, vocal noises that seem expressive of their deepest feelings because we hear them as if they've escaped from a body that the mind—language—can no longer control.

—*Simon Frith, "The Body Electric"*[2]

WRITING

The singer wakes when she wants. She is not on the road and relishes her time at home. She listens to music and drinks coffee and listens to more music. Maybe she goes out for groceries or dinner with friends; maybe she takes in a concert or two. She does some serious daydreaming. She sits and waits. She is writing, playing around with rhythm and melody, making tricky musical puzzles play underneath easy lyrics.

At home, away from the road, she reads that her work is about desire and loss and contemporary culture. She reads that she is *frighteningly intimate,*

deep in the distance.[3] She reads that her songwriting is ironic and agrees, not because her work would be lost without it, but because the form demands it.[4] She knows, too, that the irony in her work is not romantic—it's not self-righteous superiority masquerading as humility.[5] Her work is humbled by what it critiques; it reaches for the kind of irony Kenneth Burke wrote about—yes, she's read Burke. What is that line? Here: "True irony, humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him from within. . . . True irony-and-humility . . . [is] simultaneously both outside . . . and within" us.[6]

Maybe she should have told the interviewer this, so later when she is asked why she is doing standards now, she could say that at this point in her career, singing standards won't cast her as only or simply a ballad singer or put her material in opposition to her musicianship. That she is ready to do standards because she can get some distance from the songs, so she won't be seen as a gold digger or the victim of romance in the age of feminism.[7] That when she sings these songs, it's clear they are *performances*, not unadulterated confessions or markers of some fixed, fastened identity. Or maybe she just should have said she is ready to record standards because she knows how to perform the ironic possibilities of her material—the "inevitability" of victimhood as a strategic moment of reversal.[8]

The singer thinks and reads and listens to music and sits and waits. And the singer writes.

BATHROBE[9]

I am writing, too, and I enjoy being home, drinking coffee, and listening to music. I like wearing my pajamas most of the day. I believe I have better ideas when I'm wearing my bathrobe. I have long thought this, though I admit feeling a pang of pleasure when I read Madeline Grumet's tribute to her bathrobe as a costume for her writing self, her dramatis persona.[10] I take her words and refashion them to fit my own robed image: *My robe is a red cocoon. After a while words fly out of it.*[11] I do not like sitting and waiting, though that is part of wearing a robe all day and hoping for words to come. It is part of what I do. I am a writer, but not of songs. I am an ethnographer, a teacher, and, sometimes, a performer. I am a woman, a feminist, a music lover—though I am a terrible singer, even out of my bathrobe and in the shower. I am not a Dead-

head or a folkie or an opera queen. I am a . . . well, there's not really a word for my kind. I rifle through jazz and blues and pop/rock sections, looking for my music. I cruise the vocalists. I listen to show tunes and sound tracks on the in-store headphones. I am after the ballads, the woman-done-wrong songs, the doormat lyrics, the weepy violins: "Stormy Weather," "Mean to Me," "The Way We Were," "My Man." I love these songs, even though I know they're bad for me—bad for women.[12] I love them like the woman who loves the man who leaves her—who beats her, too—what can I do? I carry a torch for these songs. I am a torcher.

And I am Alice, though Alice is also someone else, a character in a story I am writing about torch singing. I need Alice in this story because she is both me and not me, just as the woman in a torch song is both the woman performing the song and someone else. I chose Alice because, like me and the woman in a torch song and like the singer, Alice ran into texts—into books and poetry and song—in order to find herself.[13] In order to find what gender and bodies, desire and language, might be and might become.[14] I need the empty chair and the man who is not my husband and philosophy in this story, too, because they are characters who want to have a say in and about torch singing. I am telling you this story because I have long loved torch singers and because I believe that these women—these singers of suffering—are telling their listeners to look at them and to look at themselves and to see a different sort of understanding and set of possibilities. I also believe this story is another chapter in the tale of how artists and audiences use music as an everyday form of resistance, an evocation of how lived experience and politics intersect to "exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives."[15] This story is a fiction and an auto/biography, an analysis and an argument, an irony and a literal rendition, a scrapbook and a fan letter. It is, above all, a torch song. And in my robe, in writing, I believe I can sing.

PAYING YOUR DUES

I find Tammy Weis on an Internet search for "torch," and am transported to her homepage and a head shot meant to recall the 1930s—black evening gown, opera-length gloves, red lipstick, long blond hair rolled and waved, a microphone like a tiny skyscraper clutched in her hand. Announcing her arrival is a disc jockey and music critic who proclaims, "If velvet had a sound, it would sound like

Tammy Weis." I see that she's scheduled to play on Saturday at Starbucks as part of an International Jazz Festival in Vancouver. I wonder why this jazz diva is playing at Starbucks and not on the festival stage, but it is, after all, a large and international festival. I drive from Seattle to Vancouver Saturday morning and arrive just in time to catch the performance. I pick up a program for the festival's activities and attempt to look up the performance in the program, but there is no mention. Weis's name does not appear in the program. Anywhere.

The Starbucks is small—only a counter and three tables. Where will the stage be? I wait in line with the other customers and when I reach the register, I ask when Weis is scheduled to go on—it's now noon and there's no sign of a performance about to happen. The cashier looks confused. She asks me to wait while she finds the manager because he's the person who usually books these kinds of things. When the manager appears, he tells me that they have no performances scheduled today. He doesn't know anything about Tammy Weis. I am disappointed. I leave the Starbucks and decide to take in some of the shows happening on the outdoor stages. It is a beautiful, sunny day in Vancouver and I want to take advantage of it.

As I'm walking up Water Street in Vancouver's Gas Town, I see Weis's photo outside The Comedy Store. There's a barker outside inviting passersby into the venue, and I ask him what time Weis is going on. He says 2 p.m. I look at my watch. It's 1:45. I go inside.

The Comedy Store is a stark contrast to the bright day. I go downstairs, into a space dark and cool to the touch. There are only a handful of people here—the barker; a bartender; a waitress; a man caressing (not smoking, just caressing) a cigar at a table along the back wall; a woman I recognize from the website photo as Weis who says, "Check, check," into a dead microphone; and a man wrestling to plug an electric keyboard into an outlet in the lighting system. I shrug and pull out a chair.

The waitress comes by and asks if I want a drink. I ask for a soda. A man and a woman with two young children come in and sit at a table beside me. They ask the waitress what's going on here and are informed that Tammy Weis is set to perform in a few minutes. The man and woman debate about whether to stay while the children wiggle and squirm. They decide to get back outside. They leave and I wait.

Once the keyboard is plugged in and the microphone is working, the show can begin. She wants to start by singing "Take the A Train" for us and

she does. She also sings "It's Only a Paper Moon," "Route 66," "Summertime," and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." She is a proficient singer, her voice rising up and over the piano, carrying the lyrics with her. Nearly all of the arrangements are up-tempo, making even the saddest of her selections feel optimistic; a celebration, rather than a lament. She smiles out at the crowd—all five of us—and hurtles herself into the performance. Though she's very understated—very still—save the staccato snapping of her fingers and her occasional calls of appreciation to the keyboard player. I think of Billie Holiday's sparse delivery—a cock of the head in time with a chord change, a slow blink, a limp-wristed snap of fingers made with a hand that seemed tethered to her waist. Weis has a semblance of this style, though on her it beats in front of the music, pulling the melody and lyrics along. When she discovers her sunglasses still perched on her head during "Fly Me to the Moon," she coolly removes them and places them on the stool next to her, though her face betrays the flush of embarrassment. She is working hard, and the effort shows in her smile. Toward the end of the hour-long set, Weis announces the release of her new record, *Legacy*. It is a tribute to her mother, who loved to sing these songs but never got the chance to record them. So Weis lives out her mother's dream, singing in a Vancouver basement room to the waitress, the bartender and the barker, the man caressing a cigar, the keyboard player, and me, paying her dues.

BEGINNINGS AND CONTEXTS

Beginnings are like this—learning about genre and theory and technique and then putting your own spin on things. Putting things in context. Discovering your *sound*. Working in dark, cool spaces looking for the light of day. These are points of departure strikingly similar for the torch singer and the woman who wants to write about her work. My point of departure is tied up with the elusive practice of torch singing—is it a genre of music? A style of performance? A type of narrative? The signature material of certain performers?[16]

How is the torch song situated in history? In story? When did the torch song and torch singing become "popular" music? How is torch singing connected to performers, venues, and listeners? Connected to culture and politics? Billie Holiday said she found her sound by listening to recordings of Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong and then feeling her way through the music.[17] I begin by