

The jazz vocal art of Kurt Elling: lessons for South African singers

by

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CONTENTS

Keywords / key concepts	v
Abstract	vi
Chapter 1 Introduction	
1.1 Personal background	1
1.2 Background to Kurt Elling	2
1.3 Aim of the research	4
1.4 Research questions	5
1.5 Literature review	5
1.6 Research methodology	8
1.6.1 Personal experience	8
1.6.2 Internet	8
1.6.3 Personal contacts with Elling	9
Chapter 2 Introduction to Kurt Elling	
2.1 The early years	10
2.2 Elling's career after his Grammy award	11
2.3 Elling, spirituality and jazz	14
2.4 Elling as poet	16
Chapter 3 Jazz vocal styles	
3.1 The importance of the various jazz styles	19
3.2 Early jazz vocal styles	19
3.3 The swing era	21
3.3.1 Ella Fitzgerald	22
3.3.2 Billie Holiday	24
3.4 The bebop era	24
3.5 The 1950s to the present	27
3.6 Overview	30

Chapter 4 Teaching jazz vocalists	
4.1 Expectations of jazz vocalists	32
4.2 Responsibilities of jazz vocal teachers	33
4.3 Styles of teaching	36
4.4 Problems encountered	38
Chapter 5 Kurt Elling's art of improvisation	
5.1 Elling's influences	42
5.2 Scatting: Elling's approach	44
5.3 Transcriptions of instrumental compositions and their solos	46
5.4 Incorporating poetry into improvisation	48
Chapter 6 Kurt Elling's approach to teaching	
6.1 Individual lessons	51
6.2 Music, the body and dance	53
6.3 Teaching that which cannot be taught	55
Chapter 7 Lessons for South African jazz vocalists	
7.1 American and European approaches to teaching jazz vocalists	59
7.2 The state of jazz vocals in South Africa	62
7.3 Teaching jazz vocalists in South Africa	64
7.4 Cultural or ethnic backgrounds	66
7.5 Learning from comparisons	68
Chapter 8 Summary and recommendations	
8.1 Summary and recommendations	71
Sources	77
Appendix A: Interview with Kurt Elling	80
Appendix B: "Downtown"	83

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Abstract

The dissertation researches the contemporary jazz vocalist Kurt Elling. His background, performing career and successes are explored before his artistry as a performer and pedagogue are examined in detail. A personal Skype lesson and a personal interview form part of the research material. Elling's improvisatory art and his relationship with and opinions on scatting, and especially jazz vocalese are portrayed. To this end the author's transcription of Elling's vocalese based on *Downtown* (by Russel Ferrante) is included. Elling's influence, creativity, spirituality and infusion of poetry into jazz are also investigated in order to show how he inspires audiences and students alike.

The history of, and general descriptions of various jazz vocal styles are traced, whereafter the situation regarding the jazz vocal scene in South Africa is outlined. Local jazz vocal teaching in particular, and associated problems are discussed, and recommendations made. The author utilises her background as an accomplished performer and teacher to infuse these discussions with personal insights. Elling's opinions on how cultural and ethnic differences can inspire South African jazz vocalists are also delineated.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Personal background

I was born in 1967 in Austria and was introduced to jazz at a very young age by my father who was a musician himself at the time. Music was very important to the whole family and every member played an instrument. My formal music career started at the age of 19 when I enrolled at the Conservatory of Music in Vienna. During my studies I began to perform as a jazz vocalist with different musicians in various venues around the city. By the time I had completed my degree I had already gained considerable experience and recognition as a jazz singer in Austria.

I moved to South Africa in 1994 which opened a variety of new opportunities in my singing career. Working with musicians from different cultural backgrounds and exploring the music industry in South Africa has been an enlightening and fruitful experience. The outstanding vocalists that I have had the privilege to listen to and work with in this country have had an enormous impact on my approach to vocal performance. It has opened up new perspectives for my ideas on interpretation in general and in my approach to improvisation in particular.

My close collaborations with jazz/classical guitarist Jonathan Crossley provided a new adventure in re-conceptualizing songs that I have performed many times over the years, and it has inspired me to put them into different musical frameworks. The connection between us on stage is almost telepathic. Recently, the well-known conductor Richard Cock started to incorporate our programme into classical soirées. During these sessions Crossley performs classical pieces during the first half of the programme after which I join him for the second half of the concert where we perform jazz. For the last few concerts we created a style that is a combination of classical guitar and voice – performing certain parts of the lead melody in unison.

It was Jonathan Crossley who introduced me to the inspiring sound and extraordinary arrangements of jazz vocalist Kurt Elling. By listening to Elling's recordings I have developed an admiration for, and an understanding of, the beauty inherent in his unique interpretations of jazz standards.

I currently teach jazz vocals at the University of the Witwatersrand, while Jonathan Crossley teaches guitar there. Our work took us to Europe in 2010 where we were invited to perform at some of the leading jazz venues in Vienna and Prague. Due to the success of the 2010 tour we have been invited back at the end of 2011 to perform throughout the Czech Republic and Austria. Collaborating with musicians from abroad and absorbing different interpretations of jazz standards has inspired me to want to further investigate the contemporary trends in jazz vocalizing, and in particular the unique style and technique of Kurt Elling.

Besides Elling, the following jazz singers have strongly influenced my career: Ella Fitzgerald, Al Jarreau, Frank Sinatra and Carmen McRae. It intrigues me that I am the same age as Kurt Elling. Although we have had very different upbringings, and grew up on different continents (he in the US), many of the same singers seem to have influenced us both.

1.2 Background to Kurt Elling

It is important for creative musicians to keep an open mind and not to hesitate to take on musical challenges. I consider Kurt Elling to be one of the few contemporary jazz vocalists who enjoys challenges, who consciously investigates the style and techniques of his fellow musicians, both vocal and instrumental, and who constantly takes every opportunity to explore new territories.

Many singers who enter the recording industry for the first time generally tend to fall into a conventional or 'retro' category; they tend to sing the standard jazz repertoire with little invention beyond a certain limited personal 'flavour'. Elling constantly searches for new and creative nuances and he is not afraid to take on age-old arguments with regard to the nature and identity of jazz singing and the jazz singer. By combining imagery and quotations from a variety of writers with existing solos of famous instrumentalists, Elling provides new insights into the role of the jazz singer and invites listeners to become aware of the fact that he is not simply a singer, but a consummate lyricist too. It is very enriching for a singer to not only understand the lyrics of a song and to interpret them in her/his own way, but also to be able to write original lyrics. I strongly support Elling's view that one discipline (music making) feeds another (lyric writing).

Kurt Elling takes existing solos, from saxophonist Wayne Shorter for example, and adds words or scat phrases to them which then unlocks a plethora of musical possibilities. His success at doing this brings other artist's work to people who might not otherwise have heard of Wayne Shorter.

Listening to Kurt Elling has inspired me to do an in-depth study of him, his background, his musical style and his contribution to twentieth-century jazz, with the aim of opening the ears and minds of all jazz-lovers to his genius; and in doing so, bring to light and codify all the elements of his style that contribute to jazz and jazz pedagogy.

From a teacher's perspective transcribing instrumental solos is arguably the best way to learn jazz phrasing and improvisation, and even more understanding can be gained by adding one's own lyrics to a transcribed solo, as indeed Elling does. This is why I teach all my jazz vocal students to sing transcribed Charlie Parker or Miles Davis solos.

Improvisation is akin to thinking like a composer, but in real time with other musicians and in front of an audience. It is fascinating to see Elling's approach to improvisation and how he combines nuanced phrasing while holding long notes, without vibrato, until just

before the end. His vocal ability is truly phenomenal. On its own it is impressive enough for a male vocalist to have a range of four octaves, but add to this his warm baritone voice and it clearly demonstrates his astonishing technical ability and emotional depth. Elling's deft use of words to an improvisation – as opposed to syllabic scat-singing – gives the listener a deeper musical experience.

Creative jazz singers not only seek to entertain, but to share their art and capabilities with an audience. The most creative see the voice more as an instrument which can create new lines that have never been sung before. After all, the nature of music is personal expression through sound. This is the beauty of jazz: the creation of your own sound world, using improvisation to compose anew. Kurt Elling has mastered all these elements, and is an example for all budding jazz vocalists. This is why I firmly believe his ideas need to be brought to as wide an audience as possible.

1.3 Aim of the research

With the above backgrounds in mind, the aim of this dissertation is to research the following aspects of jazz, Kurt Elling, jazz vocal teaching in general, and jazz vocal teaching in South Africa in particular:

What similarities and differences are there between Elling and myself as two jazz vocalists who have been influenced by the same vocalists and instrumentalists? What, if anything, can be learnt from these similarities and differences?

What does Kurt Elling offer today's young listeners and performers from an educational perspective?

What are the pros and cons of formal jazz voice training, considering that Kurt Elling had no formal training?

From the teacher's perspective, what are the challenges that occur when teaching jazz vocals in South Africa?

What problems do South African students of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds have when studying jazz vocals?

1.4 Research questions

The above aims lead to the main research question:

To what extent can Kurt Elling be seen as an icon for young jazz vocalists in both performance and pedagogical contexts in South Africa?

During the course of researching the above question the following sub-questions will also have to be investigated and answered:

- In which ways can Elling's performances and recordings be instructive for jazz vocal students?
- In which way is Elling's particular approach to improvising instructive for students?
- How can vocal teachers benefit from Kurt Elling's pedagogical methods in assisting students with their problems?
- What is the state of jazz vocal education in South Africa?
- How can each South African jazz vocal student be moulded into a unique, well-trained, eclectic yet Afro-centric jazz vocalist?

1.5 Literature overview

A book that is central to this research is Kurt Elling's own book *Lyrics* (2007). It contains all his recorded writings to date. Besides providing bibliographical information and Elling's views on jazz, improvisation and voice production, numerous examples of his setting of lyrics to existing solos of jazz instrumentalists are provided.

An important pedagogical source is Michele Weir's *Vocal Improvisation* (2001). This book is designed for jazz singers and teachers of jazz vocalists. It includes interviews with leading jazz singers, including Kurt Elling. This publication is particularly relevant as it contains information on, and theories of improvisation, and exposes the viewpoints of various jazz vocalists. It sets out different approaches to developing jazz articulation. It also discusses in detail how the jazz vocalist can better connect with Bebop, as this is the foundation of all modern jazz.

P.F. Berliner's book *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (1994) documents the creativity exhibited by skilled jazz musicians when improvising. Their views on the art of improvisation are probed therein. This book brings to light a variety of approaches to jazz improvisation, and provides insight into the historical background of jazz improvisation.

Jerry Coker is an educator with wide experience who has developed jazz programmes for universities all over the US. His book *The Teaching of Jazz* (1989) resonates with me as both a teacher and student as it explores and demonstrates how to incorporate meaningful interpretation into the jazz learning experience. His views run parallel to both my ideas and Elling's principles, while providing alternative viewpoints.

J.E Berendt's *The Jazz Book: From Ragtime to Fusion and Beyond* (1992) gives a complete overview of both the development of jazz and the various elements that make up jazz as an art form. The information provided in various sections in the book is historically and stylistically insightful and relevant, especially the chapter on "The Vocalists of Jazz" which includes copious information on the most successful jazz vocalists which is important for understanding the roles that certain singers played in influencing Kurt Elling.

The Oxford Companion to Jazz (Kirchner 2000) contains 850 pages of articles by a variety of jazz writers, performers and researchers. The chapters (essays) by Albertson,

Friedwald, Lees, Siegel and Willard are particularly helpful in tracing the art of jazz vocalization throughout the 20th-century.

The *Down Beat* journal frequently publishes articles about Kurt Elling and his current performances both in the USA and internationally. It is an exceptionally well respected magazine within the jazz industry. It is a monthly and all articles are written by extremely knowledgeable writers. For example, an article by J. Karonsky entitled “Jazz, Blues & Beyond” that features Elling is found in issue 74:8 (2007: 32-36).

Jazz Podium is a journal similar to *Down Beat* but published in Germany. It is also issued monthly and often contains articles about jazz vocalists including Elling. It is intriguing and instructive to compare these two journal's reviews and articles on the same subjects. Specifically, an article by M. Wegner in issue 53:12 of *Jazz Podium* (2004: 8-9) contains rare insights into Elling's philosophies and techniques.

Kurt Elling's own website (<http://kurtelling.com/news/>) contains substantial information about his life, interviews by various journalists and colleagues, information about his recordings and articles published by and about him over the last ten years. I have utilised a number of interviews from original video recordings on YouTube that are linked to Elling's site.

A variety of websites have been identified containing information about Kurt Elling, including research into his life, his career, and his awards and nominations. Continual web-searches were conducted throughout the research period in order to access the most up-to-date facts and opinions.

All recordings made by Elling were either already in my possession or have been purchased; these have been utilised in the analysis of his vocal technique, scatting and style.

1.6 Research methodology

The dissertation includes and combines elements of the following research designs: Historical-descriptive research (Mouton 2001:170), Historical biographical research (Mouton 2001:172), Evaluation research (Mouton 2001:158) and Philosophical research (Mouton 2001:178).

1.6.1 Personal experience

My experience as a vocalist and educator has been important to this study due to the fact that I have been involved in both jazz performance and jazz vocal training for over twenty years, and thus have gained considerable insight, experience and understanding in this area. Having worked with countless different people of different ages, gender and nationalities has broadened my outlook as a teacher. I have made and collected notes from all the students I have taught over the years and this information has permeated much of this study.

1.6.2 Internet

As I used the Internet as a research tool I have included resources and articles from the World Wide Web. Kurt Elling's own website contains substantial information about his life, interviews, information about his recordings and articles published by and on him over the last ten years. Interviews given to various journalists and colleagues are documented here, and this will make it possible for me to transcribe some of these interviews from original video recordings on YouTube that are linked to his site. There are many websites that contain information about Kurt Elling and these have been utilised where appropriate. Wikipedia contains information about his life, his career, and his awards and nominations, but this resource was only used to provide links to other more 'respected' and accurate sites.

1.6.3 Personal contacts with Elling

Contact with Elling had been made prior to my writing this dissertation, and he expressed his willingness to be interviewed by me as part of my research. The questions were mostly open-ended in order to provide opportunities for elaboration and deeper questioning. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, I was not able to receive all the information that I had hoped to glean through the interview. In addition to this personal interview I participated in one of his masterclasses through Skype. The experience and insights I gained through this masterclass has contributed immensely to my understanding of his views, his philosophies, his pedagogical approach to teaching jazz singers, and his approach to music in general. These various resources have informed the discussions which follow.

CHAPTER 2

Introduction to Kurt Elling

2.1 The early years

Kurt Elling was born on the 2nd of November 1967 in Chicago to Henry and Martha Elling as the youngest of four children. His father, who was a Kapellmeister at a Lutheran church, exposed him to music from an early age. Throughout his elementary school career he sang in choirs and played violin, French horn, piano and drums. Even though it was seen by his instrumental teachers as unproductive for a high school student to sing in a choir, Elling continued with this passion, singing in the 'straight' classical style and learning counterpoint from the motets and cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach. For him the whole experience of being part of a choir was rewarding in terms of both experience and friendships.

Elling majored in history and minored in religion at the Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peters, Minnesota. During this time he carried on with choral work. He became part of a 70 voice choir and performed *a cappella* works from a variety of composers. This particular choir gave him the opportunity to travel and perform throughout Europe.

In 1989 Kurt Elling graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College to pursue a master's degree in philosophy of religion at the University of Chicago. This period was very significant for him in terms of his music career. Elling started to play jazz gigs once a week during graduate school. It became difficult for him to remain focused while having to read Kant and Schleiermacher during the day and express his need for making music in the evening. Elling remained a graduate student until January 1992. He was one credit short of graduation when he left.

Thereafter, working different jobs during the day to survive, Elling also made extra income from singing at weddings in addition to performing at clubs. He started to explore

improvising with his own lyrics and began to listen to jazz singer Mark Murphy, who exposed him to the poetry of Jack Kerouac.

In 1995, while Kurt Elling was still living in Chicago, he started collaborating with pianist Laurence Hobgood who is still today his accompanist and arranger. The regular amount of work that was available to him in jazz circles made him confident as a singer and he decided to start recording. After spending time in the studio, Elling and Hobgood were able to finish a cassette recording with nine songs. This recording was then sent to Bill Traut, a manager in Los Angeles, who finally gave it to Bruce Lundvall of Blue Note Records: before long, Kurt Elling was signed to the Blue Note Record Label. The 'demo' recording finally became the debut album *Close your Eyes* (1995) which was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Jazz Vocal Performance. Several albums followed, each being nominated for a Grammy Award. In 2009 Elling's album *Dedicated To You* finally won the Grammy Award for Best Jazz Vocal Album.

2.2 Elling's career after his Grammy award

After finally being recognised by the *National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences of the United States* in 2009 for *Dedicated To You*, Elling's popularity grew and his 'newcomer' audience accepted that familiar standards sung in familiar old ways was not Elling's style of interpretation. It soon became clear that with each new album Elling tries something unusual and extraordinary through his arrangements, compositions and choice of songs. This obvious commitment to the art form kept his audience and fan base guessing, and made the release of a new Elling album an eagerly awaited event.

In 2010, together with his long-term pianist and arranger Laurence Hobgood, Elling surprised his fans yet again when his next album *The Gate* was released. This time the album had a commercial feel to it because the album featured an unusual compendium of more pop-influenced songs that included compositions by artists such as Stevie Wonder, Herbie Hancock, John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Even with this production

Elling's fans remained loyal. Again, as was the case with all his previous releases, the album was nominated for a Grammy Award. It is testimony to Elling's artistry that he received a nomination from the Academy for every released album.

His latest release in 2012 *1619 Broadway – The Brill Building Project* has again been nominated for Best Jazz Vocal Album. It is arguably his most accessible recording to date. For this album he made selections from the huge variety of compositions that emerged from Manhattan's Brill Building on Broadway where composer-songwriter teams such as Goffin and King, Leiber and Stoller, and Bacharach and David created their massive catalogue of popular compositions. The great coup of the album is that Elling personalises songs and compositions lesser vocalists would never consider reinventing. It is exactly this willingness to explore and create that keeps the art of vocalese¹ alive. To wit: his rendition of 'Shopping for Clothes' written by *The Coasters* and arranged by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller in 1960 (Elling 2012: 2), shows Elling in comedic form, which is extremely unusual for the contemporary jazz singer in this day and age. His rearrangement of Sinatra's classic 'Come Fly With Me' is a triumph of reinvention as Laurence Hobgood takes the well-known jazz standard out of its familiar 4/4 rhythm and changes it into a 6/8 rhythm which makes the original composition almost vanish, resulting in a dynamic modern interpretation.

In an interview (Holden 2012: 36-38) Elling says of *On Broadway*, the title song from the album:

'On Broadway' was a challenge that I tackled because that has had a couple of very well-known incarnations. The key to any portion of the success has to do with a certain combination – a combination of the right new ideas for the song, whether it is a time signature or a bass lick like the one that we use on 'On Broadway'. You have to find that 'whatsit', as we call it, that new thing. Then you have to have the right execution of that initial idea. And that usually means

¹ Vocalese consists of the writing and performing of words over an instrumental composition or recorded improvised jazz solo. It is different from scatting where one uses nonsense syllables strung together. Vocalese is singing words to a pre-arranged tune which can quite often be about the composer of the song or the musician who wrote the particular solo section. The musician and singer who made this art form famous was Eddie Jefferson; his most well-known work was a rendition of Coleman Hawkins' 'Body and Soul' in the late fifties.

that Laurence and I get together and one or the other of us says, 'here's the idea – if this, then what is our extrapolation?' Then we hammer it out. The third element is the right combination of musicians, whether that's just my bassist and me or just Laurence and me, or whether it's the kind of combinations that you hear on our recordings.

It is exactly this combining and mixing together of different elements that has elevated Elling to one of the finest and most innovative jazz vocalists working in the business today. For Elling, jazz itself has always been a syncretic art form that has taken interesting elements from diverse sources into itself and transformed it into jazz material. His high aesthetic values and standards have kept his career flourishing and successful. On his website (Elling 2004) he has the following to say about 'success':

But what if we define success in a different way? I think that if we can let go of our fear and define success not in terms of record sales, audience numbers, and other bottom-line obsessions, but in terms of what is already great about jazz, then we will have given something truly important to those who follow us. For me, the definition of a successful jazz musician — the musician I want to be, and the kind of musician I revere most — is one who communicates his or her specific intellectual, spiritual and emotional life through articulate, passionate, *immediate* music. That's a jazz musician. Who wouldn't want to hear that? That's Keith Jarrett, Wayne Shorter, Maria Schneider, Terence Blanchard. That's Chick and Bobby McFerrin doing duets. It is where we find joy. If we define success in terms of what is already essential to our medium, then we will set the stage for successful players day in and day out — successful whether or not they make their living from playing. They will be successful because they will be fully developed *people* — articulate composers of their own lives.

There are not many jazz vocalists working today with such an impressive discography or with such a punishing annual concert schedule as Elling's. His unabated inventiveness and creative output over a period of almost twenty years has given him iconic status amongst jazz vocalists, musicians and audiences alike. His unwavering ability to stay true to himself, to his vision and to his art is tangible in everything he does, whether it is a recording, a live performance or in what he writes and says about jazz and life. This is what makes Elling almost unique. This is what makes him a true artist.

2.3 Elling, spirituality and jazz

Elling's spiritual side manifests itself strongly in his self-proclaimed belief in God and in his choice of writers and poets. For him jazz as a musical genre draws strongly from spiritual/traditional forms such as gospel and church music. Despite the fact that throughout its formative years jazz was seen as 'the devil's music' there has always been the perception amongst jazz musicians that the music has a certain spiritual quality to it. On his website Elling (2004) states:

And the Spirit in Jazz is not limited to Christian expression. Charley [sic] Mingus said simply, "My music is evidence of my soul's will to expand". (*Beneath the Underdog*, 1971) Dizzy Gillespie drew parallels between the developments of religion and Jazz: in both God raises up leaders to take humankind up to new levels of spiritual development. I have spoken with Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter – both of whom are long practicing Buddhists – and both feel that the music they make is in service to the mutual enlightenment of themselves and their listeners. Art Blakey, one of the Jazz world's greatest drummer/bandleaders, converted to Islam and called his band, "The Jazz Messengers", out of respect for the prophets recognized in Islam – Mohammed, Jesus, and Moses, and in reference to the fact that almost all the members of the first incarnation of the band were practising Muslims.

Elling believes there is a certain lack of mystery in our culture and a certain lack of respect for it too. For him the mystery in art is all part of the beauty in music and poetry. He nevertheless still feels compelled to provide some context to what he has created in order to help listeners understand his perspective and the source of his creativity.

Many jazz musicians have written explicitly about the spiritual side of their own work. One of the most famous spiritual jazz albums is John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. It was released on Impulse! in 1965 as a four-part suite: 'Acknowledgement', 'Resolution', 'Pursuance' and 'Psalm', and is considered to be a wordless 'prayer'. Another so-called spiritual jazz recording is the Duke Ellington trilogy *Sacred Concerts*. The first of these concerts was recorded live in 1965 for the opening of a new cathedral in San Francisco and was released under the title: *A Concert of Sacred Music*.

The process of learning to play and master an instrument and to develop improvisational skills can be compared with meditation as jazz improvisation require full consciousness of mind and body. Elling (2004) quotes saxophonist Wayne Shorter as stating that “music requires total involvement ... When you're playing, the music is not just you and the horn – the music is the microphone, the chair, the door opening, the spotlight, something rattling. From soul to universe”.

This ‘spiritual’ element is quite evident when Elling appears on stage; sitting in the audience watching him perform, his spirituality becomes quite tangible at times. His natural charisma, energy and belief in himself capture and hold the audience throughout his performance. It is an experience that unites rather than divides. His performance is elevating and uplifting. His interaction with the audience has, in the positive sense of the word, a kind of ‘preacher-congregation’ edge to it, as if one is witnessing something profound happening.

There is however a marked difference between singers who incorporate obvious religious messages in their performances and singers who convey messages that contain ‘life lessons’, which is more what Elling does in his communication with the audience. Listeners who are not so familiar with his music or even experience him for the first time in a live concert are stunned by his sheer energy on stage. Elling epitomizes power and assurance in his performance and it is impressive to see his musical communication with his fellow musicians on stage. Watching the audience leave after an Elling concert there is a tangible feeling that something powerful and compelling had just occurred. On his website Elling references a paragraph from the book *Erring* (1987) by religious philosopher Mark C. Taylor:

Enigmatical beauty ... beautiful enigma. Double-thing ... always duplicitous, never single. Disturbing, unsettling. We do not know what is real and what is not. Imprisoned in constant change, serious, solid men do not remain (undecided). They make up their minds and in doing so die. Shiftless fools and shifty drifters are neither imprisoned nor dead. They err aimlessly in a permanence composed of impermanence. Morning and evening, arising and passing away – endlessly form an ever-dawning festival. In this playful dance, players make gay the hallucinations in surfaces.

This quote shows to what extent Elling is fascinated and influenced by disparate philosophies and ideas which he then feeds back into his lyrics. It also shows how Elling is not afraid to shy away from complex ideas and notions in modern philosophy and contemporary notions of spirituality.

2.4 Elling as poet

In 2011 Kurt Elling released *Lyrics*, his collection of vocalese lyrics. This term ‘vocalese’ was first applied specifically to Jon Hendricks, who was a singer and lyricist during the 1950s and 1960s. Not all the lyrics published in Elling’s collection are pure vocalese lyrics, but all of the lyrics were written by Elling with the intention of being used for this unique art form. Elling does not see himself as a poet per se. When I specifically asked him if he sees himself as a poet during my interview with him in August 2012 he answered: “No, I have poetic potentials, but I mean I’m a jazz singer who writes lyrics.” In *Lyrics* (2011: 13) Elling goes further:

It is a challenge on multiple levels to bend and fit the English language to the shapes, gestures, and rhythms of modern and contemporary jazz music. I am grateful to the artists I follow for the ingenuity, wit, and vibrancy of their work and to the instrumentalists whose recordings inspire and provide platforms for my own writing. When I have written well, it has been because of them. The clunkers are all my own.

On his album *Live in Chicago* (1999: track 7) he wittily describes to the audience how in one of Vince Mendoza’s composition a lyric ‘came into being’:

When I first heard the piece I thought, what a beautiful melody, and I thought that the title of the tune was ‘Esperanto’, which of course is the universal language that they invented, so that we could all speak together at the same time. And so I came up with this whole lyrical idea and went to Pablo Neruda and I got all these excellent ideas for things, and then of course I finished the whole lyric and realised that the title of this tune was ‘Esperanza’, which is a Portuguese word for ‘hope’. Which is also cool, it works in the context of what he was going for I’m sure. But the redeeming value is this: when you write a lyric for a previously recorded tune, my lawyer tells me, and it’s time to record this tune, you have to think of a new title for the tune.

Words to “Esperanto” (Elling 2011: 42-43):

There's a secret that never dies
like a dance of hidden meanings
that we never apprehend.
There are questions just as old as time
and the answers that come
never quite make amends.
Even so, when you look at time
you can get a subtle feeling
of a way it ought to be.
Take a good look at your own real life
and you will see if you want
what you've gotten to be.
It's a hope, a sign, a measure of quiet rapture,
of love and what might come after.
It's letting go, and letting no answer be an answer.
How did smoke learn how to fly?
Where do birds go off to die?
How does coal sleep in darkness?
Do dreams live in apart-ness?
Is a number forever?
Where's the soul of the water?
How old is old November?
No one here can remember.
If I die, where does time go?
Do the bees feel vertigo?
To get love, is there potion?
Or is love only motion?
Holy lift, holy reading – holy gift, holy needing
Holy sound, holy waiting – holy spark, animating
Holy food, holy breathing – holy light, interweaving
Holy night, holy handwrite – holy flight, holy insight
Holy sun, holy brother – holy moon, holy mother
Holy dream, holy vision – holy scheme, holy mission
Holy one to another – holy me, holy other
Holy lives, holy blending – holy start, holy ending.

Elling displays an innate ability to sculpt lyrics from words. In composing a vocalese piece he follows his intuition first, but thereafter employs an intense and disciplined analysis of the words. Starting out with this intuition, the music itself inspires the transference of an emotion that he moulds into literal story telling. Elling also tries to adhere to a specific melody and rhythm, harmony or melodic structure (Heimbauer 2011: 8). Furthermore, Elling sees the influences on him of Luther's *Small Catechism* and the concept of traditional monotheism in a much more cosmopolitan or post-modern way. He creates a variety of connections between seemingly unconnected subjects that include Herman Hesse's *Siddartha* and *Damian*, as well as the poetry of Daisaku Ikeda and the ZenBuddhist influenced Beat writers of the 50s and 60s. Further influences include German writer Friedrich Holderlin, Aldous Huxley, Meister Eckhart and Simone Weil. The ancient tales of the *Baal Shem Tov*, the writings of Elie Wiesel, Jelalludin Rumi and Shams of Trebiz are just as important to him as the modern literary works of Ayn Rand, Saul Bellow, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Milan Kundera. His philosophical influences stem from Mark Taylor, Thomas Kuhn, Wittgenstein, Mircea Eliade, Hegel, Feuerbach and Kierkegaard. In an interview available on his website Elling states (Heimbauer 2011: 6-8):

Now, thankfully, I am more than the sum of my reading. I am an artist. I have had my own quiet version. For any discussion of my lyrics, one must ultimately look to the poets – for two reasons: The poets are the ones who enlighten and reveal visions while also inspiring a sense of awe and mystery. I am an artist – not a preacher, a philosopher or an academic.

Writing lyrics for Elling is a form of poetry. In his view it has to rhyme and follow a coherent form. Writing vocalese is therefore especially intense and challenging.

CHAPTER 3

Jazz vocal styles

3.1 The importance of the various jazz styles

Jazz, like all forms of art, is dynamic and constantly shaped by, and adapts to the social and historical changes that surround it. Jazz, specifically, thrives on change and innovation which provides it the ability to be perpetually new, creating new originality. It is therefore essential for every committed jazz vocalist to attempt at one time or another to be as unique as possible and to bring something new to the genre. Because of the constantly changing nature of jazz it is important for the novice jazz vocalist to study and understand the fundamental and historic differences between the various styles of innovative jazz vocalists, and what exactly sets them apart from one another.

3.2 Early jazz vocal styles

Of all the “classic” blues singers of the 1920s Bessie Smith was the most powerful and subtle. According to Kirchner (2000: 223) her majestic voice made most of her contemporaries sound gauzy by comparison, but there was more to her artistry than a powerful voice. She rendered her songs with a mesmerizing honesty which most people saw as a reflection of her offstage persona.

Ethel Waters, who was a colleague of Bessie Smith, was a major contributor to the fusing of black and white musical traditions into a hybrid art of jazz singing. She sang blues with optimistic vibrancy which was an expression of her indomitable nature. In Waters’ case, blues singing was underpinned a career that transcended racial, artistic and even national boundaries. (Kirchner 2000: 223.)

The blues became the foundation for early jazz, but there were several distinct ingredients that went into creating an approach to singing that was undeniably a form of jazz, rather than a jazz inflected form of blues. These included wordless singing that emulated instrumental timbre, more rhythmic wordless singing using syllables called “scat”, and amending both the rhythms and melodic lines of a song and its lyrics in the way a lead trumpeter, for example, would choose to re-shape a jazz melody.

All these different combinations first came together in the singing of Louis Armstrong, a cornetist influenced by singers who then applied his newly developed instrumental style to his own singing. Armstrong would recreate the sound of a cornet in the upper register of his voice, then, after a spectacular cornet solo he would trade phrases using his voice instead of his instrument.

The first significant jazz singers were female – women who had much in common with the “classic” blues singer, but who brought a more “instrumental” approach to their work. Alberta Hunter was one of the first “experimental” jazz singers. During recordings she would experiment with the nuances of delivery, which was not easy at the time of the early acoustic recording technology. She also included microtonal flattening of certain pitches. Some of her recordings would include Louis Armstrong in the line-up. It has even been suggested that, through working with her, he gained a more theatrical style of diction and presentation (Shipton 2001:572-576).

Annette Hanshaw was a significant but little-known transitional vocalist, who formed a link between Ethel Waters and the great swing era singers. She launched her recording career before her sixteenth birthday. In her finest work Hanshaw bypassed the stiffness of the theatricality of her contemporaries by incorporating blue notes and bent tones into a conversational style, which was made significantly more effective by improved microphone technology (Kirchner 2000: 64, 78, 220, 224, 235).

3.3 The swing era

In the 1920s and 1940s reorganization became the essence of a modern sensibility that found many expressions. It was a beauty born out of motions and not emotions. Jazz itself was an expression of motion in rhythmic terms. Swing is the work of a second generation of soloists who got jazz moving in a different direction. Jazz became caught up in an arms race of virtuosity that took the solo from folk art to popular art to the portals of high art. Speed, range, accuracy, elegance of phrasing and harmonic daring became the battlefields. (Kirchner 2000: 206-207.)

As soon as swing defined itself as jazz, the music faced its first real controversy. It was an argument that led to the first split in jazz culture. The purists believed that true jazz had to be traditional and small enough to fit onto a very small band stage (Kirchner 2000: 209). Bands of the swing era produced a much fuller sound than the sound produced by earlier Dixieland jazz bands. This resulted from the use of two to three times as many players. The tuba, which was a characteristic of Dixieland bands, was replaced by the upright or double bass. Because there were more players, swing music was organized in a homophonic construction, i.e. texture with a principal melody and harmony. This resulted in the music sounding less complex and more organized in its effect. And this started the trend for larger ensembles and the big band sound started to take over.

As the 1930s began, the Depression was continuing to bite, record sales fell, and the opportunities for jazz groups to work became limited, especially given the trend for larger orchestras. In New York the band of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway survived because of their consistent work at the Cotton Club. Louis Armstrong, similarly, did lengthy tours of one-nighters. Other big bands made a secure living at dance halls in larger urban centres. Outside the big cities, some musicians made a living playing in venues that hired smaller groups. (Shipton 2001: 316.)

There were aftershocks of the Depression in the record business as well. Disc sales dropped from an all-time-high in 1929 of 150 million units to less than 10 percent of that

figure in 1933. A small number of recordings serve to illustrate other aspects of jazz singing as it began to be developed by Armstrong and his contemporaries during the second half of the 1920s. In 1929, with the success of Armstrong's appearances in the revue *Connie's Hot Chocolates* in New York, he turned Fats Waller and Andy Razaf's song "Ain't Misbehavin'" into a hit and launched his career as a singer and entertainer as well as a trumpeter. His wordless singing of the 1920s developed through scat and instrumental imitation to the frenetic bebop vocals of Dizzy Gillespie and Joe Carroll in the 1940s.

In 1927 Duke Ellington used Adelaide Hall singing wordless vocals. She demonstrated this technique on Duke Ellington's recording of *Creole Love Call*, showing just how perfectly she could match the instrumental style of horn players. She recalled (Shipton 2001: 577):

I was touring with a show closing the first half of the bill, and Duke and his boys were opening the second half. One night ... I stood at the side of the stage to listen to Duke's music and he played this new number, and I started to hum. Duke heard me and he walked over and said, 'We're going to record together with you doing that,' and I said, 'But I don't really know what I was doing,' and he told me not to worry but just to do it.

Women played a more significant role during the swing era in the development of jazz singing than in any other area of early jazz. After Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, Adelaide Hunters and others, a new generation of major female singers emerged in the 1930s, with Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday being the two principal figures.

3.3.1 Ella Fitzgerald

Fitzgerald was born in Newport News, Virginia. Her parents separated soon after her birth and she and her mother went to Yonkers, N.Y. In her youth Fitzgerald wanted to be a dancer, although she loved listening to recordings by Louis Armstrong and Bing Crosby. She idolized the lead singer Connee Boswell, and made a statement at a later

stage, saying "My mother brought home one of her records, and I fell in love with it.... I tried so hard to sound just like her" ([wikipedia.org/wiki/Ella_Fitzgerald](https://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ella_Fitzgerald)).

When her mother died in 1932 from a heart attack, Fitzgerald's grades dropped dramatically and she frequently skipped school. Abused by her stepfather, she was first taken in by an aunt and at one point worked as a lookout at a bordello and also with a Mafia-affiliated group of people. When the authorities caught up with her, she was first placed in the Colored Orphan Asylum in Riverdale, the Bronx.

Fitzgerald's life was one of those archetypal rags-to-riches stories in jazz, but certainly the more poignant in her case as it turned out to be true. She was living more or less on the streets when she won a talent contest at Harlem's Apollo Theatre on November 21, 1934 (Gioia 1997: 133). She had originally intended to go on stage and dance but, intimidated by the Edwards Sisters, a local dance duo, she opted to sing instead in the style of Connee Boswell. She sang Boswell's "Judy" and "The Object of My Affection," a song recorded by the Boswell Sisters, and won the first prize of US\$25.00 ([wikipedia.org/wiki/Ella_Fitzgerald](https://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ella_Fitzgerald)). She lacked the dramatic nuances of Adelaide Hall or Alberta Hunter, but her musicality and the confidence with which she approached both the lyrics and the melody, and the naturalness of her voice was something new in jazz.

Fitzgerald was married at least twice. Her second marriage, in December 1947, was to the famous bass player Ray Brown, whom she had met while on tour with Dizzy Gillespie's band a year earlier. Fitzgerald and Brown divorced in 1953, bowing to the various career pressures both were experiencing at the time, though they would continue to perform together.

Fitzgerald was also notoriously shy, and musicians who performed with her would always talk about the famous jazz singer who rather sits in the kitchen during a break talking to the kitchen staff then mingling with the guests. Fitzgerald explained once, "I don't want to say the wrong thing, which I always do. I think I do better when I sing" (Redsugar 2011).

3.3.2 Billie Holiday

As difficult and complex as Fitzgerald's life appeared, it was as complicated for Billie Holiday. She was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania April 7, 1915. Insecurity, abuse and deprivation defined her childhood, and by the age of fourteen Billie was working with her mother in a Harlem bordello. The following year, when her mother would start working in the kitchen of Mexico's Harlem Speakeasy, musicians' favourite gathering place for jam sessions, Billie started to sing in the restaurant while walking from table to table to earn tips.

Musicians became aware of her incredible feeling for timing and unique phrasing. Soon after, Billie Holiday became the main attraction in most up-market clubs. Because of her unique ability to interpret lyrics, and the powerful and often profound message she had to communicate, she never eschewed the original words for scat syllables. Within her limited vocal range she delivered more musicality than any other singer.

Billie's personal travails were integral to her music. She wrote "Don't Explain" as catharsis for the pain of hearing her husband's excuses for coming home with lipstick on his collar. Two versions are on the Grammy-winning double CD package *Billie Holiday: the Complete Decca Recordings*.

She died in 1959 in New York City's Metropolitan Hospital with what was diagnosed as a liver ailment complicated by cardiac failure. (Kirchner 2000: 245-249.)

3.4 The bebop era

Musicians who were playing in big bands of Teddy Hill and Cab Calloway were searching for new sounds and the experience of playing in well-disciplined small groups. The transition from swing to bebop started with the arrival of Gillespie's small group. It was a clear signal that the long, stable predominance of swing as the universal jazz style was about to end.

While swing had a lot to do with chord progressions, the voicing and the arrangement of melodies, bebop changed the underlying elements of music – melody, harmony and rhythm – at a more fundamental level. Melody lines were full of fast and intense figures and most of the time uneven in phrase lengths. Substitute harmonies became increasingly common. For example, musicians would re-harmonize certain passages in existing songs by adding passing chords. In addition to the flattened fifth, the chords that extended beyond the octave would more frequently use the flattened ninth, eleventh and thirteenth, resulting in a more dissonant harmony.

Chord progressions in bebop tunes were often taken directly from popular swing-era songs and then reused to form the basis of a new and more complex melody, thereby forming new compositions. This practise became a central feature of the bebop style. The style made use of several common chord progressions such as in the blues (basically I-IV-V, but infused with II-V motion) and “rhythm changes”, which are chord progressions to the 1930s pop standard *I Got Rhythm* (I-VI-II-V).

The rhythmic background became more complex. The drummer was no longer left to add snare drum accents on the second and fourth “off” beat of each measure. And instead of using the bass drum on the first and on the third “on” beat, it would sometimes be used on all four beats with a sudden “off” beat accentuation in between (Shipton 2001: 438).

Billy Eckstine became the first lead vocalist of this era to put together an orchestra with Dizzy Gillespie. The line up of this orchestra featured the largest collection of young musicians who were interested in playing this new form of jazz: Charlie Parker, Budd Johnson, Dexter Gordon, Gene Ammons, Leo Parker (all saxophone), Howard McGhee (trumpet), Bennie Green (trombone), John Malachi (piano), Tommy Potter (bass), Art Blakey (drums) with Sarah Vaughan as the additional vocalist. This orchestra, organized by Gillespie, provided a perfect opportunity for these exuberant musicians to compile a library of compositions that reflected the new thinking in jazz (Kirchner 2000: 406).

In the late 1940s, vocalist Eddie Jefferson began writing lyrics to some of his favourite bebop and swing solos. Already in his thirties by then, Jefferson had been singing and dancing for a decade. He never had a strong voice but he could swing hard and was skilled as a lyricist. When James Moody recorded a catchy alto solo on *I'm in the Mood for Love* in 1952, Jefferson wrote lyrics for the solo and it became known as *Moody's Mood for Love* (aka *Moody's Mood*). Jefferson also wrote similar vocalese for Coleman Hawkins' *Body and Soul*, Miles Davis' *So What*, Cannonball Adderley's *Jeannine* and Charlie Parker's *Now's the Time*. He even managed to write vocalese for seemingly impossible-to-sing compositions such as *Freedom Jazz Dance* by Eddie Harris and *Bitches Brew* by Miles Davies (Kirchner 2000: 481).

Next to Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn and Billie Holiday, Anita O'Day was one of the principal swing era singers to embrace bebop. Her finest performances were recorded during the 1950s and she hit the peak of her career at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival. Her performance at the festival can be seen in the documentary *Jazz on a Summer's Day*. But by then O'Day was heavily addicted to heroin which led to a steady decline in her career and a near fatal overdose during the 1960s. She eventually recovered from her drug addiction and made a full comeback during the 1970s. She successfully performed as a solo artist until shortly before her death in 2006.

O'Day became most strongly associated with the "school of cool" because of the specific timbre of her voice. Her dramatic flair for improvisation and her vibratoless tone distinguished her as the central female singer in this new movement. O'Day always maintained it was the accidental removal of her uvula during a childhood tonsillectomy that left her incapable of vibrato and unable to sustain long phrases. This medical accident forced her to develop a more percussive style based on short notes and rhythmic drive, which can be heard in her live version of *Sweet Georgia Brown* recorded in 1958 (wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita_O'Day).

O'Day's style of singing and phrasing were early influences and inspirations for June Christy, who became successful with Stan Kenton's orchestra in 1945. Christy eventually left Kenton's orchestra in 1951 and went on to have a very successful solo career, recording steadily for Capitol Records and making the haunting *Something Cool* (1954) famous. Although Christy sadly lost interest in singing and eventually retired in 1965 at the age of thirty nine, she was a major influence on an entire generation of new cool-toned singers such as Chris Connor, Helen Merrill and Julie London (Kirchner 2000: 478-479).

Although bebop would continue to underpin most harmonic and improvisational thinking throughout the 1950s, the days of the "pure" bebop combos such as Charlie Parker's and Dizzy Gillespie's ensembles were over, and by early 1950 a more modified form of swing made a return. Composers and arrangers, like Stan Kenton, began to treat bebop as a stylistic resource and as merely one of many compositional options available to them.

3.5 The 1950s to the present

The period from the 1950s onwards was about the search for new directions in order to build onto, and to move forward from, the innovations of the 1940s. One of the most innovative and pioneering personalities in the history of jazz, Miles Davis, constantly searched for new sounds and ideas. In 1949 Davis recorded the groundbreaking *Birth of the Cool*. The arrangements on this album were strongly influenced by classical music. Through a new and innovative use of timbre, utilizing unusual instrumentation, it became one of the most important albums in the history of jazz.

This sound gave rise to the "cool" movement, as it soon became known, and it became the alternative to bebop. Musicians who up to this point had served as sidemen in prominent bebop groups, started exploring this new style of jazz.

Vocalists like Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan became famous as solo singers rather than front singers for big bands. During the 1950s and 1960s Fitzgerald constantly toured with the most well-known swing and bebop musicians of the era. The new harmonic and rhythmic changes that developed during the 1950s fundamentally influenced her approach to scatting. Her scat vocabulary became an orchestra of instrumental timbres. So much so that a few years before Fitzgerald's death in 1996 Frank Sinatra said of her: "If Ella were a musical instrument, she'd be the whole damn orchestra. Her pure and almost childlike voice is a melody unto itself. Never have such innocent sounds been set to music nor has such music sounded so effortless. Ella is a musical perfection" (Kirchner 2000: 241).

Ella famously recorded a series of albums between early 1956 and late 1964, each dedicated to one composer. *The Cole Porter Songbook* (1956) was the first recording in this series. Songbooks of Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart, Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern, and Johnny Mercer followed. These significant recordings were probably the most elaborate projects of her career (Kirchner 2000: 240). This songbook series represents some of the finest interpretations of jazz standards, and is now known as the *Great American Songbook*. This idea of using specific composers for individual recordings has repeatedly proven to be an excellent marketing ploy. For example, Kurt Elling's Grammy Award winning record *Dedicated to you* contains only compositions of John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman.

Sarah Vaughan had a voice strong enough to project operatic arias. In fact she longed for a modern opera to be written for her by Leonard Bernstein, but she could never gather the courage to ask him. But while her voice had strong operatic qualities she could also sing ballads in a deep, warm contralto voice and could effortlessly change to soprano during solos (Kirchner 2000: 244). It was Vaughan's strong voice, stretching over several registers that became her main asset. Various record companies competed to record her, leading to millions of record sales worldwide. In 1956 she recorded and

released one of her most notable records *The Complete Sarah Vaughan on Mercury Vol. 2*. By the 1960s she was much in demand by various symphony orchestras. In the early 1980s she recorded her inimitable version of *Send in the Clowns*, which was produced by her long-time colleague and collaborator, Bobby Shad who had his own record label. In 1989, a year before her death, the Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences awarded Vaughan a Lifetime Achievement Grammy Award (Kirchner 2000: 244-245).

Singers who associated themselves with the “avant-garde” jazz movement during the 1960s started to create their own style. The origins of avant-garde jazz lie in the innovations of the immediate stylistic successors to Charlie Parker. Based in New York City, musicians such as Charles Mingus, Miles Davis and John Coltrane introduced modal improvisation, experimenting with atonality and further dissonance. Vocalists began experimenting with wordless sounds. Spearheading this experimental departure were composers and lyricists such as Sheila Jordan, Betty Carter and Mark Murphy who strongly encouraged other singers to use different vocal techniques and rhythms. Needless to say, there are not many singer-songwriters that work in this challenging style of music, but Mark Murphy and Sheila Jordan frequently give classes and lead clinics in this field. Currently they are both jazz vocal lecturers at the University of Graz, Austria.

Over the last few years Cassandra Wilson, Diane Reeves and Dee Dee Bridgewater remain popular jazz vocalists, and all three of these artists have expanded their repertoires to include not only jazz but pop and pop-rock as well. The reason for this is to attract bigger audiences and to strive for larger record sales. Influenced by the big names in jazz, Reeves and Bridgewater have shown they are not only great jazz singers but consummate performers and entertainers too (Kirchner 2000: 486).

Since the 1950s jazz vocals have risen to such a high standard that vocalists can be regarded as having the same level of musicality as that of instrumentalists. The variety,

from jazz related cabaret, to pop-influenced jazz, to truly old style jazz vocals is enormous, and the incorporation of classical music influences has also become popular. Contemporary artists such as Kurt Elling, Kevin Mahogany and Allan Harris can be heard incorporating all these disparate styles and techniques on their various recordings.

3.6 Overview

It is quite clear that any genre of jazz is irrevocably connected to its period in time. A good example would be the boisterous style of jazz during the 1920s which reflected a new optimistic world after the darkness of World War 1: During the 1920s the Charleston became a very popular dance. Being a vigorous style of dancing, including new body movements, the style of dress had to change as well. The dresses became shorter and reflected the ability to move freely while dancing. Jazz encouraged people through its spirit and the improvisational feel of the music to become more uninhibited. This style of music was rejected by the older generation and therefore jazz music and jazz dancing were ideal ways for the younger generation to rebel against society. The most popular musicians of this era were Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke. Similarly attitudes governed the classic big band sound that had its origins in the years before and during World War II, as epitomised by the bands and sounds of Glen Miller, Benny Goodman and Count Basie.

During the more optimistic economic times of the 50s and 60s, an era marked by innovation in almost all disciplines (from art and architecture to fashion and design, science and technology) jazz followed suit. Jazz began to reflect the new freedoms born during this era. As with most other disciplines, jazz started breaking away from its traditional past and adopted a more free-form approach in order to shift boundaries. In fine art this rebellion could clearly be seen in the work of Jackson Pollock with its seemingly disorderly lines and curves, and in the compelling abstract works of Mark

Rothko. In jazz terms this new “Zeitgeist” is most obviously reflected in the works of first Charlie Parker and then John Coltrane.

The main reason why jazz remains popular and dynamic is its innate ability to be influenced by, reflect and adapt to the changes in the world. When listening to a modern jazz artist like Kurt Elling it becomes quite obvious that the twenty-first century jazz artist, should he or she want to survive in the contemporary market place, has to be open to experimentation with popular music influences. In Elling’s case it is not unusual to find Rhythm and Blues elements or even entire pop music compositions driving his arrangements. Nevertheless, Elling remains true to his jazz roots because the listener can still hear the influences of all the previous jazz eras in his performances. The main reason why jazz remains popular and alive is its ability to adapt to the world in which it lives.

CHAPTER 4

Teaching jazz vocalists

4.1 Expectations of jazz vocalists

“I don’t feel like I’m singing, I feel I’m playing the horn” (wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocal_jazz). This statement by Billie Holliday in the early 1930’s perfectly illustrates a major challenge for a jazz vocalist: to be seen as a *musician* and not simply as a singer.

A jazz vocalist treats her/his voice like an instrument, like a trumpet, a trombone or a saxophone. In fact, one often hears a vocalist refer to her/his voice as ‘my instrument’. The possible paradox of jazz singing lies in the fact that all jazz is often considered to have been derived from vocal music – such as the traditional plantation songs sung by slaves in the deep south of the USA – but jazz vocal improvisation is derived from instrumental music. It is extremely challenging for a vocalist to sing the same lines an instrumentalist makes with her/his instrument, but at the same time it is essential to be able to do this in order to be accepted as a jazz musician.

Al Jarreau became one the most successful and most frequently lauded singers of the seventies. He took his cues from Billie Holiday, Nat King Cole and especially from the vocalese-style trio Lambert, Hendricks and Ross (Berendt 1992: 382). When Jarreau sings his saxophone-like phrases he moves his fingers and hands as if he is playing an imaginary instrument. His throat reflects an entire orchestra of sounds. But, as all successful jazz singers have discovered, it takes a lot of hard work and many long hours of experimentation for a singer to become vocally as flexible as Jarreau.

Why then is it that the jazz vocalist’s reputation as a musician can at times be questioned? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that a singer has relatively quick access to her/his voice and, relying on this, can sometimes show a marked lack of interest in practising different techniques and in experimenting with improvisation. Jazz

instrumentalists must have an understanding of basic jazz theory and use this knowledge effectively, while many singers tend to rely heavily on their ears and sometimes have very little real knowledge of music theory. It is important for a jazz singer to have the same knowledge of music theory as any instrumentalist in order to be considered an equal both on and off the stage. It is therefore a fundamental requirement for a jazz vocalist to understand jazz terminology, be able to read music and fully comprehend jazz harmonies.

There is thus often a gap in the jazz vocalist's musical knowledge and education. In the past, a vocalist's 'intuitive' feel for jazz singing was often enough for a successful career to have been carved. Today the demands are greater. And this 'gap' in the fundamental training of jazz vocalists is slowly being redressed as more institutions all over the world offer jazz vocal courses with a focus on understanding and obtaining the fundamentals of the genre. The general standard of jazz vocals is on the increase and so vocalists are slowly but surely gaining more acceptance as musicians by instrumentalists.

4.2 Responsibilities of jazz vocal teachers

The understanding, and hence teaching, of jazz does not emerge overnight. Usually people who teach jazz successfully have exposed themselves to and within this genre for a long time. Teaching jazz vocals does not simply mean to exclusively work on voice technique; it also involves the integration of jazz theory into lessons in order to understand the important concepts driving improvisation. Without a sound theoretical knowledge of jazz it will be extremely difficult to succeed in teaching this specialised art form. Unfortunately, many teachers rely too much on their ability to sense/feel 'jazz notes', and it should be pointed out that such teachers will inevitably reach a point where this is not good enough for teaching it. A teacher of jazz vocals has to possess the skill, knowledge and ability to be able to explain and make the student aware of which notes she/he is singing in relation to each chord and each phrase of the song, otherwise it will severely limit the student's development towards meaningful improvisation.

A jazz vocal teacher should also advise a student which artists to listen to in order to bring about a better understanding within the student of the techniques inherent in this art form. As jazz music is constantly evolving it is very important for the educator to keep up with the development of jazz and to be continually on the lookout for new artists to expose the student to. Making the student aware of new vocalists on the jazz scene and discussing with them new forms of jazz plays a significant role in the growth and ultimate development of the student. The constant exposure to different musical genres will help the student mature during the learning process. Students studying jazz vocals should be keen to listen to different versions of the jazz standard that they might be working on at any given time, and then be encouraged to discuss the different interpretations of the standard with the vocal teacher in order to understand both the techniques and the melodic/harmonic structures different vocalists are using; then being shown how to get there themselves.

I implicitly believe the process of listening to recorded music during students' lessons is important and encourages them to expand their horizons. It is certainly inspiring and it creates an open mindedness within the student. Listening to a variety of interpretations during a lesson is a motivational tool and helps to develop a student's own unique vocal sound and style.

But it is equally important – and in fact essential – for students to find ways of motivating themselves too. Students have to learn to work independently right from the beginning of their studies and to not rely solely on the teacher's contribution and/or constant support. For example: It is the vocal teacher's responsibility to help the student to trust and develop her/his own instincts and experiment with their interpretations – especially when it comes to improvisation. Students should be made aware that once their studies are completed the vocal teacher will not be as available as during their studies.

A good jazz vocal teacher needs to be empathetic, possess good analytical abilities, demonstrate enthusiasm and has to have at least a modicum of charisma. The training of a jazz singer is a protracted process and requires consistent work from both student and teacher. However, it is the vocal teacher's responsibility to discover, draw out, develop and consolidate the individual qualities of a student's jazz voice. Keeping in mind that every voice differs, the basic tenets of jazz vocal technique can be learned relatively easily, but for the body's responses to catch up with the mind can sometimes take years. It is crucial for any jazz student to be able to develop an excellent technique and at the same time create her/his own sound colouration. Ultimately though the results stand in direct proportion to the time and effort the student is willing to invest in the development of her/his own technical skills, and in the development of her/his own jazz 'voice'.

It remains every teacher's duty to give the student a realistic insight of what to expect after the completion of their studies. The graduate should know it is not a "nine to five" job to become a successful professional jazz vocalist. It is therefore important for the teacher to explain to the student exactly what it entails to become a professional singer. This is where a teacher's personal experience in the 'profession' becomes a useful teaching tool: Students usually enjoy listening to a teacher's stories and personal experiences associated with "the jazz life". I personally remember every single story that my singing teacher told me during our lessons: her performances, rehearsals, incidents with other students or musicians and all the other musical experience she had over the course of her career.

Whether teachers are fond of the idea or not, it is a fact of teaching that emotions will always play a significant part in the student-teacher relationship. During the sometimes frustrating process of developing the growth of a professional jazz vocalist the vocal teacher has to sometimes allow students to let their emotions run free. It is quite common for a teacher to be confronted with a student's feelings and emotional outbursts. Therefore the teacher has to be able to work through it all with the student

with the utmost sensitivity and be able to reassure her/him that it is all part of the intense and often frustrating process of becoming a performer.

4.3 Styles of teaching

Teaching should be done by people who recognize that teaching is a skill, and are willing to devote the time and effort to continually hone that skill to the ultimate benefit of their students. Music teaching should be done by people who should, in addition to recognizing that teaching is a skill, love music, are capable performers, and are themselves devoted to being a perpetual and passionate student of music.

Jazz music teaching should be done by people who, in addition to all of the factors mentioned above, are uncommonly versatile and are devoted to continually learning the many new trends of a young, ever-changing highly creative musical style. As jazz is a highly creative style of music, it is often said that there are as many approaches to teaching jazz as there are teachers, and that the manner in which jazz is taught will vary from individual to individual and from situation to situation. Students of jazz therefore have a wide range of choices open to them because each teacher will be able to offer a slightly different approach in accordance with their skills, interests and experience.

The very nature of jazz allows students – even encourages them – to be creative and individual. A piece of classical music does not give the students the same degree of liberty in terms of interpretation, sound quality or dynamics. In jazz the notes are merely the beginning, a guideline, and the dynamics are open for the individual musician to interpret as she/he sees fit. The melodic content can be explored at will while maintaining the harmonic structure. A good example of this would be learning a jazz standard such as “*Bye Bye Blackbird*” where the first bar of the song is written solely in quarter notes. Not many jazz musicians would phrase it the way it is written. Some musicians might start on the upbeat to the first beat, or on the second beat. Observing students as they develop this creative or interpretive skill can be extremely rewarding.

There are, however, two main approaches to teaching jazz which have been passionately debated over for decades: Experiential and formal training.

There are on one hand musicians, even famous and well respected ones, who learned to play jazz through *practical experience*. This approach which favours practice over *formal theory* and training has always been and remains a guiding principle in jazz education. This ‘method’ of learning jazz usually involves key mentors in the form of apprenticeships (Kirchner 2000: 756) and the attempted copying of sounds and phrasing of other musicians while listening to their recordings. Following this principal some jazz educators firmly believe that *listening* to jazz is the best method of teaching jazz and that improvisation should come naturally, or that the student should simply trust and follow their ear and their musical “instincts”.

On the other hand there are those teachers and theorists who firmly believe the above-mentioned approach to teaching jazz can cause problems in terms of ‘musical understanding’, the reading of sheet music and in making the music articulate. Musicians have to be able to understand notated scores for lots of reasons. If reading music is problematic, any musician’s career will be extremely limited. In a big band environment for instance it is essential for both vocalists and musicians to be able to read a notated score. As a singer it is absolutely necessary to be able to look at a lead sheet and be instantaneously able to intuit the form, tempo, style and ‘intro and ending’.

The key to making a student feel secure in her/his approach to improvisation and in her/his general understanding of the music is to effectively combine these two approaches: Theory helps students to get to grips with how to construct a solo, and the development of the ‘instinctual’ or ‘listening’ aspect is important because it teaches students how to develop their ideas around improvisation and to become more comfortable with phrasing in jazz. For example, in situations of soloing the jazz vocal student has to learn the form of each song, the harmonies and if there are any key

changes during the song. Certain chord progressions form the basis of many jazz standards, and the student must learn to allocate them within the chord chart in order for improvisation to become more fluent.

It is important to evaluate and assess students thoroughly in order to find out their level of knowledge and therefore where to begin.

4.4 Problems encountered

At the start of every new student's period of study I ask the student to name as many jazz vocalists and/or instrumentalists as she/he possibly can. This may sound odd but it happens frequently that the jazz student doesn't know what their chosen music sounds like or even who the major exponents of the genre are, because some of the students have not been exposed to jazz at all. It is extremely important for the teacher to build this knowledge in a student in order to provide a solid grounding and understanding of the genre, and this part of the training demands a lot of dedication from the teacher in order to make it engaging to the student. Many students who sign up to a one-on-one vocal jazz program often become quickly disappointed with the process. I have seen how, with many students, the initial excitement quickly fades after being told to put more effort into the process.

An effective way around this problem is to teach a student how to manage their time more efficiently in order to achieve better results during the limited lesson time allocated to each student. Any good teacher should be willing to work with each student on a practical and theoretical study schedule. Such a schedule works to benefit both teacher and student.

Exposing a student to a wide variety of styles and artists should take up a fair portion of any practical module as it helps the student gain valuable insight and goes a long way towards developing a sense of dedication during the time allocated for actually working

on the student's voice. It takes time, but once the student is used to this kind of time allocation it makes it easier for the teacher to leave it up to the student to prove that she/he is disciplined and interested enough to make an individual contribution to each session. But extra effort or input from the teacher does not always guarantee the same commitment from a student.

In my experience, problems in the process arise when a student does not adhere to the practicing schedule as set out by the teacher. Students often become tempted to miss the odd one-on-one sessions for no valid reason and then make the mistake of thinking they can work through the material on their own without the teacher's guidance. Students sometimes demand make-up sessions with the teacher in order to make up for lost tutoring time. This stems from a general lack of discipline and commitment and from a flagrant disregard for the teacher's time and effort. A negative attitude or an over-blown ego on the part of a student can be just as destructive to the process as general laziness. A combination of these negative factors can make it extremely hard for the teacher to get across the necessary information to the student and to ensure a favourable outcome. It is therefore extremely important for the teacher to set strict boundaries from the outset so that the student may develop a sense of duty and discipline.

Yet there are certain differences between teaching a student in a formal (i.e. university) environment as opposed to in a private capacity. For instance, in a formal environment the theoretical module is covered by a separate lecturer which means that during the vocal (practical) lessons the vocal teacher is free to focus more exclusively on the practicalities of training the student's voice in the allotted class time.

In an informal environment the teaching time is inevitably split between teaching the private student both jazz theory and practical vocal technique. This effectively means there is less time for the vocal teacher to focus on actual vocal training than in a more formal environment. The result is that in a informal environment the process of training a

jazz vocalist takes much longer and inevitably demands more discipline and commitment from the student.

However (as mentioned in Chapter 4.2) students can run the risk of becoming too dependent on their teachers. It is therefore essential for the teacher to try and instil a sense of confidence in students in order to enable a student to ultimately be capable of performing without the presence of the teacher and thereby developing into a performer in their own right. This is why it is important to help students to develop both confidence and self motivation simultaneously because one inevitably feeds the other. If a student is able to motivate her/himself to practise according to a timetable in order to achieve a projected outcome within a certain time it will give the student a feeling of achievement and automatically increase the level of confidence. This process teaches students to work more and more independently of the teacher as they progress.

There is no real 'cure-all method' for teaching a jazz vocalist. Each vocal teacher should, and usually does, develop her/his own teaching method based on her/his particular experience in the field. It is this experience that affords the teacher the insight to recognise potential problems that might occur during the teaching process. However, many teachers claim to have 'the best' method of training a voice. But a method can only be considered as 'the best' if, and only if, it works best for the student. But it is ultimately the teacher's innate experience that will determine how to adapt the teaching method to the particular student's needs.

As Elling advises in his master classes, it is entirely up to the student how far she/he will go in the music industry. This will be a direct result of the amount of effort and commitment the student is willing to invest in order to make their resulting music as unique as possible. Elling's opinion on teaching is also that a teacher can only provide the student with additional ideas and recommendations in tandem with the structured course on offer, but that the ultimate outcome is up to the student. It is therefore not advisable to 'spoon-feed' students as it is imperative that they freely explore and

research material themselves. In South Africa, successful teaching is dependent on the teacher understanding the sometimes complex dynamics of South African society, and on being prepared to perceive students as individuals with contrasting and disparate backgrounds. Ultimately, a flexible approach to teaching each student is vital.

CHAPTER 5

Kurt Elling's art of improvisation

5.1 Elling's influences

During every singer's upbringing there are unique musical experiences which greatly influence their eventual music career. Elling is no exception. In an early interview (Elling 2010) he lists all the big name jazz singers and the various influences certain singers had on his own vocal style.

According to Elling the two biggest influences on his singing style are Mark Murphy (b. 1932) and Jon Hendricks (b. 1921). Both these singers have very different approaches to the way they sing; Mark Murphy is a more experimental and modern solo vocalist while Jon Hendricks became famous for his vocal ensemble Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. But both Murphy and Hendricks showed an advanced ability to marry poetry and lyrics to their music. This placing of lyrics or their own poems underneath solos was a technique or style that set Elling's imagination on fire. For Elling it was the way Murphy presented his unique style of singing through the reinvention of songbook classics by adding his unique phrasing, arrangements and vocal ability. But both these singers influenced Elling's intellectual approach to scatting.

Another famous singer that had a huge influence on Elling was Frank Sinatra, especially the natural way in which Sinatra phrased swing. Elling is a great admirer of especially Sinatra's live recordings such as *Sinatra at the Sands with Count Basie* (1966), *Live in Paris* (released 1994), and any one of the *Live Rat Pack* concerts. Sinatra had a unique way, a style of capturing an audience with his sound and showmanship not many jazz performers were and are able to emulate. Elling continually aspires to Sinatra's ideals.

But, according to Elling, the most masterful modern reinvention of a standard ballad recorded by a vocalist was "Spring can Really Hang you Up the Most" (1955) by Betty Carter. Elling states in an interview (allaboutjazz.com 2011) that Carter was "... the

paragon of jazz singer as total artist, total bandleader and total business manager-head.”

Elling’s own modern approach to phrasing has been influenced throughout his career by the above-mentioned important singers. To these can be added contemporary artists such as Al Jarreau. Jarreau would also, like Carter, modernise old swing standards. Elling’s arrangements and reinventions of standards and even more contemporary compositions have a meticulousness about them, which makes them easily accessible to a wide audience.

Elling has continually been open to many more musical influences other than jazz. For instance, there is a subtle tinge of blues noticeable in his recording: *Flirting with Twilight* (Capitol Records 2001). It is one of his icons, blues singer Joe Williams (1918 – 1999), who influenced Elling to explore this direction in his singing.

The blues has remained a constant as jazz evolved and jazz musicians applied more sophisticated ideas of rhythm and harmony. Therefore the structure and connection between jazz and blues remains constant; these two styles underpinning each other – something Elling often acknowledges.

Eddie Jefferson (1918 – 1979) was the first jazz artist who took an existing solo and wrote his own words to it. In one of his most famous recordings, *So What*, he combined the lyrics of publisher and lyricist Christopher Acemandese Hall with the music of Miles Davis in order to highlight his vocalese skills. This particular style has become a very popular art form in jazz and Elling, who included his own images and suggestion of words, took it, utilising his innate musicality, to the next level of jazz vocal improvisation.

When listening closely to Elling one can discern the influence of iconic female singers such as Ella Fitzgerald; especially on his recording of *Easy Living* (*Flirting with Twilight* 2001), a song Ella recorded in 1986 as a duet with guitarist Joe Pass. Even if Elling’s interpretation and arrangement of the song are much more modern, one can still hear elements that lead right back to Fitzgerald’s specific sensibility of phrasing and choice of notes. Another influence noticeable in this recording comes from Chet Baker (1929 –

1988). Baker was the minimalist (referring to a careful selection of notes) amongst the famous jazz musicians of his particular era. Although Baker had this ‘minimalist’ approach, the way he played infused every note with an evident power and intensity. It is Baker’s stretching of notes to the limit that comes through in Elling’s own improvisatory style.

However, one of the biggest musical influences in Elling’s life, one that echoes hugely in his music career, was the time he spent at the University of Chicago where he studied the Philosophy of Religion, a specialized academic category that lies somewhere between theology and philosophy. In the same interview where he answered questions about his music influences, he says about his Divinity Studies (Elling 2010) that it evidently “sharpened” his mind, his analytical thought and stimulated creativity in his way of writing. “Questions of Meaning” became relevant, and the course was a journey of deep exploration for him. To this day Elling is still part of the Divinity School’s Visiting Committee.

5.2 Scatting: Elling’s approach

Improvisation is may be considered akin to thinking like a composer; collaboration in real time with other musicians in front of an audience. Elling sees his approach to improvisation as both a concept and a technique. For him improvisation amongst jazz musicians carries the same responsibilities as those taken on by a composer – the decision to use many notes as opposed to fewer notes, high notes or low notes, fast notes instead of slow notes – decisions a composer has to make as well. The improviser makes the same decisions – just instantly, in the moment, and at the same time following his/her intuition should be part of the process.

But intuition alone is not going to be enough for a musician/vocalist in order to be as articulate as she/he wants or needs to be. Jazz is an international ‘language’ and like any language certain rules that apply that help make a person more or less articulate. In this way music have rules that musicians have to follow, apply and adhere to in order to understand each other while improvising.

It is instructive to take note of Elling's approach to improvisation, his combination of nuanced phrasing and holding of long notes without vibrato, until just before the end of a phrase. His vocal ability is truly phenomenal. A male vocalist that possesses a range of four octaves is impressive by anybody's standards, but add to this a warm baritone voice, an astonishing technical facility and emotional depth, and one is confronted with a unique artist. Elling's ability to incorporate words in an improvisation – known as 'ranting', as opposed to syllabic scat-singing – gives the listener a deep and extremely rich experience. His vocalese ability, taking an existing instrumental solo and writing lyrics to it, is equally impressive.

Vocalists have to make a solo both meaningful and accessible to the listener. Therefore, it is important to create a structure within the solo, which means the solo should have a beginning, middle and an end. For example: The beginning should have a motif that the musician should then explore in the middle section where the motif can be turned on its head, where it can be taken apart into smaller pieces or put together with bigger parts and then put back together again in the end section. A solo can be seen as taking the listener on a journey, from departure to arrival.

An improvisation should be an interaction with the rest of the band the vocalist is performing with. It can be seen as posing a question and receiving an answer, or perhaps as copying or echoing parts of the solo that another band member created or set up. The more stimulating or challenging the notes the vocalist chooses during a solo the more interesting it will be for the other musicians on stage to 'answer'. For example: while improvising the vocalist should try to explore by creating melodies over each harmony, through discovering more interesting notes to experiment with. This process is important in order to make the scatting process one's own. It is all about providing the audience with a clue as to why the vocalist chose to perform a specific song – and also for a vocalist to create something unique.

There are two different aspects to look out for while exploring and/or creating new melody lines. These are the intuitive and the analytical aspects. Elling's approach is to listen to employ both of them. The musician's or vocalist's analytical side wants to know

all the notes that already belong to a certain chord, which notes between the first and the second chord are the same and their relation to each other. The intuitive side will hear or sense melodies immediately. These ideas form the foundation of the solo. It is the analytical side that will then expand these melodies and incorporate the more “interesting notes”, as Elling refers to them.

Every time the vocalist solos over a chorus the body develops a kind of muscle memory and a mental musical gesture which automatically gets stored and remembered. After continuous practicing this process will become second nature because of a growing muscle memory ability.

Our mind understands much more of the structure of music than we think. We don't focus enough on our mind's innate abilities because we take so much for granted, like listening to a melody and accepting it the way it is written. Jazz musicians have to continually consciously search for new ideas and be willing to leave their comfort zone. For example: the musician/vocalist has to try and create a combination of unique and individual notes that perhaps nobody else played or sung before. For this to happen the musician has to make a conscious effort and should not constantly revert to their comfort zone where old ideas are rehashed or repeated.

Elling's view of improvisation is to incorporate elements that affected your life such as melodies that we remember from our childhood, music we grew up with, traditions from our cultural backgrounds – our personal life experience as such. All these influences can and will almost certainly make the creation of a solo the musician's own and therefore unique.

5.3 Transcriptions of instrumental compositions and their solos

With nearly every album that Kurt Elling has released to date one can find sleeve notes describing instrumental compositions and solos. His album *Man in the Air* (2003)

contains compositions by Pat Metheny, John Coltrane, Josef Zawinul, Herbie Hancock and Bob Mintzer. In the sleeve notes Elling writes:

In this Project I am trying to address a broad array of experiences – not just of romantic love, but also of a human being coming of age, sensing the transcendent through the romance, grappling with G-d thoughts, hope and absurdity, with meditation, regret, death, wondering at failure, at renaissance and joy, and finding quiet oasis at the end. For me, the finished work is like a walk through an aural art gallery.

In some pieces, like “In The Winelight” or “The More I Have You,” the lyrical intent will appear more straightforward. In others, as in “Time To Say Goodbye” or “A Secret I,” I think the meanings are revealed as one moves through the pieces, coming into themselves only after the songs are complete.

On closer listening some settings present more than one possibility. Is “Minuano” about the excitement one feels coming home to a lover? Or is “Minuano” the song of a lonely spiritual disciple feeling quickened, sensing his guru’s imminent appearance after a long absence? Are the guru and the lover the same person?

I am deeply grateful to the musical composers and the guardians of the original instrumental versions of the work recording. I especially and respectfully thank Alice Coltrane for allowing me to record the lyrics I wrote for “Resolution.”

On his following album *Nightmoves* (2007) he explores existing solos again and turns them into new masterpieces through the use of his own lyrics. The track “Where are You”, for example, is based on Dexter Gordon’s phrasing of the original melody from Gordon’s 1962 recording of the song on the album *Go*. “Leaving again” is based on Keith Jarrett’s untitled improvisation from his 1994 box set, *Keith Jarrett at the Blue Note: The Complete Recordings*. “Body and Soul (A New Body and Soul)” is based on Dexter Gordon’s improvised melody from Gordon’s 1976 recording of the song on *Homecoming: Live At The Village Vanguard*, and “I Like The Sunrise” is based on Von Freeman’s improvised melody from Freeman’s 2002 recording of the song on *The Improvisor* (Elling 2007: 11).

Elling’s approach of creating words to fit existing solos is nothing new and has been done before by Eddie Jefferson and Jon Hendricks. But it is Elling’s choice of solos and

the preciseness of his vocal ability that unlock a plethora of new musical possibilities (Elling 2009). Through doing this Elling brings other artist's work to people who otherwise might not have heard of, say, Wayne Shorter. Therefore, listening to Kurt Elling becomes a journey of double education.

Looking at it from a teacher's perspective, the transcription of these instrumental solos on Elling's recordings with the incorporation of his words is an accessible way for students to learn jazz phrasing and improvisation. A phrase in a solo, like a sentence in a conversation, is made up of small pieces or fragments which can be pieced together in a variety of ways to produce similar but unique ideas. So articulation then becomes especially important when dealing with technically difficult passages. Kurt Elling's articulation is at once clear, profound and subtle and makes him, along with his individual way of phrasing, a unique performer. Transcriptions are a great way to analyse and learn phrasing, but more importantly they help you learn the building blocks from which to construct your own ideas. As jazz can be considered akin to a 'language' you have to learn the words and rules before you try to express your ideas.

5.4 Incorporating poetry into improvisation

Elling is constantly searching for new creative nuances and is not afraid to let arguments arise regarding the nature and identity of jazz singing and singers. By incorporating imagery and quotations from a variety of writers into existing solos of instrumentalists, Elling provides new insights into the role of the singer in jazz and invites listeners to become aware of his ability to be not just a singer, but also a lyricist. It is very important for a singer to not only understand the lyrics of a song and to interpret them in her/his own way, but also to be able to write original lyrics. I strongly support his view of one discipline (music making) feeding another (the writing of lyrics).

A good example of this can be found on Elling's Grammy-winning album *Dedicated To You* (2009). On the track called "A Poetic Jazz Memory", Elling narrates the story of two jazz musicians driving together to a recording session in March 1963. In the story they exchange their experiences, get to know one another because they have known each

other for only a short period of time. When they arrive at the studio they record everything in one take and eventually drive home again. One of them was John Coltrane the other Johnny Hartman. This wonderful story-song written and narrated by Kurt Elling and arranged by his pianist and co-producer, Laurence Hobgood, has a fervent yet light feel to it. However, it is Elling's phrasing and colour that invites the listener to engage with the story even more.

On his website (Elling 2009) in a section titled "Spirituality, Poetry & Jazz: Some Thoughts Driving the Jazz Singer", Elling mentions his upbringing in an Orthodox Lutheran milieu and its influences on his lyrics. Here he writes about the poets who had an impact on his style of writing:

But while I respect and cherish that heritage as an artist and a maturing person, I refuse to be bound or imprisoned by it. For one to understand the trajectory of my lyrics one must place the influence of Luther's small catechism and, indeed, the concepts of traditional monotheism in a much more cosmopolitan and dare I say, post-modern array of influences. One must make a web that includes Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha and Demian as well as the poetry of Daisaku Ikeda, and the Buddhist-influenced Beat writers. One must include the Wisdom Literature of the Desert Fathers alongside the German mystic Friedrich Holderlin – also Aldous Huxley, Meister Eckhart and Simone Weil. One must remember the tales of the Baal Shem Tov and the vital despair writings of Elie Wiesel right alongside the gentle hopefulness of the Sufi mystics Jelalludin Rumi and Shams of Tebriz. Then there are the literaries: Ayn Rand, Saul Bellow, Marquez and Kundera. And the philosophers: Mark Taylor, Thomas Kuhn, and Wittgenstein; also Mircea Eliade and Hegel and Feuerbach AND Kierkegaard.

Now, thankfully, I am more than the sum of my reading. I am an artist. I have had my own quiet vision. For any discussion of my lyrics, one must ultimately look to the poets – for two reasons:

The poets are the ones who enlighten, and reveal visions while also inspiring a sense of awe and mystery. I am an artist – not a preacher, a philosopher or an academic.

Lyric writing is a form of poetry. It must rhyme and follow a coherent form. In the sub-category of Jazz and vocalese writing, that means the composition of words to fit the melodic contours and rhythms of a modern musical art form that is exhaustingly challenging.

Looking at Elling's list of poets and philosophers who influenced his writing, it is clear that he was and continues to be inspired by these writers with their tendencies to be variously analytical and with strong idealistic ways of thinking. Some of these writers display a variety of musical influences in turn. For example, Milan Kundera studied musicology and musical composition and is well known for musical references in his texts. Hermann Hesse also had an enormous love for music which is described in detail in his book *Musik*. This book also contains poems, letters and short stories all on the theme of music. In his books *Steppenwolf*, *The Glass Bead Game* and *Gertrud* music or even musical characters form important facets of the stories. The combination of these writers and music make an extremely powerful statement.

It is not by accident that Kurt Elling is called *The Jazz Poet*. It is important for a lyricist to be comfortable with emotions in order to comfortably describe and explain all the different facets of loneliness, anger, love and loss that make up a life. In his version of "*Body and Soul (The New Body and Soul)*" Elling reinvents the lyrics and makes them his own as he sings about real love. In his vocalese one can hear that Elling is a consummate musician and lyricist in tune with himself as it were, at ease with his emotions, and not too timid to speak out and to merge words and music, inculcating fine shading; the whole being loaded with emotion and meaning.

CHAPTER 6

Kurt Elling's approach to teaching

6.1 Individual lessons

Kurt Elling does not regularly offer private singing lessons, but I recently had the rare privilege of organising a one-on-one singing lesson with him via *Skype*. For the purposes of the lesson I had to prepare one jazz standard (including the improvisation) and provide my own accompanist.

The first question Kurt Elling asked me was: “Why have you chosen to become a jazz person?” Then he asked me to define the “concept behind jazz”. These two questions are fundamental but it is incredibly important for the student to identify the purpose behind her/his study and to develop a grounded understanding of the idea behind jazz.

Then, before I was even allowed to sing, Elling focussed on my posture. I have since realised that he always emphasises the sheer importance of correct body posture. According to him the student has always to stand while singing. He believes singers sometimes sing flat (often approaching the note from below), especially when improvising, because they do not stand upright and are therefore not grounded enough.

Once my posture was established Elling moved straight on to improvisation. First he questioned me about the preparation I had done on my chosen jazz standard and then asked me to sing it to him. Elling listened with extreme concentration to every phrase while making notes.

His advice started with the head of the standard and the dynamics of the exchange between my accompanist and me. His philosophy is to work your way through and

explore every single chord; to break the head of the standard down into smaller sections and to decide what it is that attracts you in any particular chord within the broken down part, which notes to select to play/sing over this chord and then eventually craft your own melodies, while using various dynamics, over it. Once you've done that with a chord for a substantial time you can then move on to the second chord and explore it in the same meticulous way as you did with the first one. The next step is to join the chords together. The idea is to explore each and every chord in this way, to take the entire song apart, to look at the dynamic choices and to eventually put it all back together again. At this point Elling advised me to notate the newly created melodies that came out of this process of deconstruction. The challenge is always to make it sound different to the original melody.

After this process he urged me to repeat the new melody with good pitch and good breath support while attempting to incorporate the newly discovered dynamics in a way that feels perfectly natural. As soon as the first chorus sits comfortably, the second chorus can be attempted. If the approach in the first chorus was more melodic, the approach in the second chorus then has to have a more pointy or angular movement or feel to it. The objective is to ensure that every chorus has a different approach and a different feel. The vocalist should understand how to change the original melody rhythmically, melodically and emotionally, and should thereafter be more confident with the entire build-up of the improvisation. In order to liberate oneself to that level of musicianship the vocalist has to slow down the entire process, assess her/his rhythmic, melodic and theoretical ability at that given point and then continue working from this point onwards. He believes that trying to rush this process is a common problem with most musicians – especially when they start learning to improvise. But rushing through this process can lead to a lot of frustration later on.

One of the teaching techniques Kurt Elling demonstrated during the lesson was how to encourage the student to change the original melody using the existing lyrics of the jazz standard in order to inspire the vocalist to start the improvisation. Elling explained:

The accompanist has to play the chord changes for the lesson's prepared song in a medium to slow tempo. The singer then has to sing the lyrics in the correct order without skipping any words. I will then count the vocalist in through putting up my hand. When I take my hand down she has to stop singing immediately. The accompanist will carry on with his playing. When I raise my hand again the singer has to come in with the lyrics where she stopped. This is going to be difficult because I will wait sometimes several counts [bars] and therefore the lyrics will not appear in the place where they usually appear. This means the vocalist is forced to create a new melody with the existing words because if the singer would carry on with the existing melody it would not work with the accompanist's chord progressions. It is the singer's challenge "a la Betty Carter" to make a coherent statement with this exercise.

His advice on practicing and working as a duo is that the vocalist has to be able to provide the accompanist with as many ideas as possible. It is not the accompanist's duty to try and get the most creativity out of the singer. The singer has to offer as much creative inspiration for the accompanist as possible. The duo should then reach a point where they can feed off each other and the result should then be musically much more solid, dynamic and rich. It is important to be as innovative as possible within the small setup of the duo because when the vocalist has finished the solo the accompanist has to be inspired for her/his solo in turn.

It is essential for Elling that all jazz musicians find a justification for why they choose to perform a specific song and what it is they can add to it in order to make the song individual or unique. Only once a performer has found this individuality will it make her/him unique – and therefore stand out from the rest.

6.2 Music, the body and dance

Byron Pulsifer, a motivational and fiction author from Canada states (www.inspirationalquotes4u.com): "Behind every successful man is a woman of patience, encouragement and dedication." I suspect this old saying has had a deep significance in Kurt Elling's life and career. Jennifer, Elling's wife and manager, is a

professional dancer for the *Tyego Dance Project*. It is well known that she has inspired Elling to combine his poetry and music with dance performances. The production *Steppenwolf Traffic: The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing* (1999) at the *Steppenwolf Theatre Company* in Chicago is an example of how she combined Elling's poetry with dance, song and instrumental solos. Howard Reich (1999) wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*:

As its title suggests, "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing" merges music and motion, but it would be unfair to describe this evening merely as a collaboration between Elling's first-rate jazz band and various members of the Tyego Dance Project. Because spoken word, subtle lighting design, fluid stage direction and a heady spirit of improvisation also play key roles as the evening touches on more aesthetic forms than one generally encounters in a week's worth of concertgoing.

Elling's obvious and inherent need for probing, and talent for creating something new is reflected in every one of his disciplines and multiple talents. His poetry, vocal ability (as a singer or performer of poetry), arrangement and compositional skills, and his abilities as a teacher are inseparable. But it is his exposure to dance through his wife that is clearly visible in his body movements when he performs. In his view, the singer has to conduct the melody as if it comes out of the movement of the body rather than from just the voice. The vocalist should visualize or perhaps even think of her/himself as painting or drawing the melody in the air with the hands, to simultaneously 'paint' or 'draw' what is being sung. If the student notices a certain recurring movement it is a certain sign that she/he is not engaging with a song with enough physical variety. The vocalist should therefore be continually attentive to the movements.

Elling explained to me that there are analogous physical gestures in music. Certain choreographers are more inventive and successful than others because they can sense which physical movements or gestures are most appropriate to convey the sense, feeling or meaning of a score. These choreographers can then bring those gestures to life through their dancers.

Elling's contends that owning your physical space as a vocalist is immensely important because a performer has essentially nothing to hide behind – there is simply the singer before the audience. It is therefore essential for the vocalist to own the space during rehearsals and performances. The vocalist's energy needs to be honed in order to become free enough to “move around a room, to paint and to flourish and to sparkle”. If the singer is not comfortable enough in her/his own body in order to dance or to move freely to the music being sung, it will become, in Elling's opinion, a much less interesting experience for both the vocalist and the audience. As a singer you have to embody the melody, and physically occupy it. The more time a vocalist spends working on the music in this way the more it will help her/him to become aware in an all-encompassing way. Becoming aware of physical movements, by learning to really listen to the accompanist, exploring rhythmic patterns and changing dynamics will eventually lead to an infinitely more interesting experience for both the vocalist *and* the listener.

All Elling's suggestions are obviously methods and techniques he has honed and practised himself over many years. His fundamental belief is that one has to become conscious of the musical process and to slow down this process, to break it down in order to reach a creative goal.

6.3 Teaching that which cannot be taught

According to Levine (1995: 7) a great jazz solo consists of “one percent magic” and ninety nine percent that is musically explainable, analyzable and classifiable. In order to reach this point of mastery, one has to study and understand musical theory.

However, I believe the ratio between “magic” and “the explainable” as set out by Levine should be adjusted so that the two elements are of more equal importance. The so-called “magic” (which in this context stands for emotion, reaction and interpretation) is for a lot of principal jazz vocalists a leading element in the performance. Students should

be made aware of the fact that it is the magic, the emotion and the interpretation that causes an audience to react and experience the song.

Here Elling is possibly the perfect modern exponent because of his highly poignant and unique interpretation of jazz music. His accomplishment as a teacher is enhanced by the fact that he has had no formal vocal training. Perhaps this is why his approach to teaching the technical side to jazz vocals is insightful and clear, and a student who hasn't had much exposure to formal jazz terminology will still be able to understand his advice.

However, the philosophical advice the student might receive from Kurt Elling is something completely different because it is indelibly rooted in life and life experience. It might only be possible for a young student to fully understand his philosophical advice and how it connects to the music much later in life. In my experience this is what makes Elling different from most teachers; he has a unique philosophical approach, knowledge and vision, something he might arguably have come across during his divinity studies. He has a great flair for integrating all his experiences and views into his teaching. Any student who can gain information from lecturers who have life experience and wisdom and who, like Elling, can actually clearly convey this experience can count themselves fortunate. This kind of knowledge is something that seldom, if ever, appears in text books and is rarely found in teaching methods, which is possibly one of the positive aspects self-taught musicians, as opposed to academics, can provide students with. For example: Academic institutions across the world tend to teach students according to a set, specific method. This means that a music student at an academic institution will only be exposed to one specific method; they are seldom encouraged to investigate others that lie outside the parameters of the method being taught at that institution. Self-taught musicians usually gain their knowledge from a variety of sources, methods and individuals which can produce more innovative approaches to creating music.

During my lesson with him, Elling was also keen to explain the importance of local aesthetics. By this he meant South African history for example, and how it can be integrated into the jazz aesthetic here. He believes that every knowledgeable and experienced teacher should realise that if a student has nothing to say in the musical context or has no real message to bring to an audience, then it will be extremely difficult for her/him to succeed in a music career as a solo artist. Elling is very curious by nature and therefore eager to incorporate interesting cultural aspects such as different dialects or anything else that makes a country (in this case South Africa) different from where an existing jazz standard was composed. For example, “Body and Soul” was composed by Johnny Green in America. Elling told me that when performing “Body and Soul” in South Africa one should attempt to incorporate some African elements into the song.

Every country has its own past and history. Consequently teachers can and should remind the student of important historical events and thereby possibly plant the seed for new inspirations. Great creative ideas often grow from hundreds of misplaced or seemingly unrelated ones, and will eventually unlock the path to a student’s individual creative potential. However, the student needs to understand that there are no “bad” or “wrong” ideas in music, and that all ideas are potential building blocks for better ideas. How the student understands, assimilates and reflects this philosophy should eventually show in her/his presentation as an artist, and as a teacher Elling constantly reminds us of the importance of this aspect of the teaching process.

When it comes to “teaching that which cannot be taught” – meaning experiencing, as a student, the individual influences inculcated in every teacher that will automatically come through in the process of teaching – Elling is especially adept at inspiring the student. As an artist he makes the student feel that anything is achievable if a basic self belief or confidence is in place. When Elling himself demonstrates the corrections he suggests to improve the student’s performance, something magical happens to the line or phrase the student presented to him only seconds before. It is essentially Elling’s sharp intellect and deep knowledge as a jazz person that makes his specific approach to singing look

and sound utterly effortless. He makes the knowledge he imparts during the lesson easily accessible to the student so that any student will feel encouraged and enthusiastic rather than intimidated about the next step in the learning process. A student can only gain this kind of inspiration from a teacher or mentor who is wholly dedicated and absolutely interested in the growth and eventual achievement of the student.

As a teacher Elling constantly attempts to encourage students to learn from their so-called mistakes, from “wrong” notes, while still taking risks within a solo. While doing this he makes the student aware that taking a risk within a solo is not really risk-taking as such, but merely part of the journey towards discovery, and that making “mistakes” during the rehearsal process is simply part of the learning curve that will ultimately lead to the discovery of brand new approaches to a solo. But it is also essential that the student understands clearly that it is all part of the process of gaining courage and confidence and that making so-called mistakes does not necessarily mean she/he has failed on some level.

Ultimately every teacher has different attributes, abilities and combinations of talents that they bring to the table – organizational skills, orderliness, performance abilities, insight, creativity, an ability to inspire, aural abilities, a philosophical and educational vision, sensitivity, etc. All or any combination of these talents, skills and influences inevitably make every teacher unique. So far in my career, Elling ranks as the most unique teacher I have ever encountered because he possesses an almost perfect combination of all these different talents and expertise; and he knows how to put them to use in a teaching environment in order to inspire.

CHAPTER 7

Lessons for South African jazz vocalists

7.1 American and European approaches to teaching jazz vocalists

The formal teaching of jazz vocals had its beginnings in America and only moved to Europe, with the exception of England, once high schools had introduced English as a subject to a generation of continental students. In a European context jazz offered a more radical approach to singing as it gradually became more accepted at different institutions as an alternative field of vocal study.

In her essay *The Role of Jazz in Austria: Aspects of the Current Jazz Scene* Christa Bruckner-Haring (2011) states:

In Austria, a country deeply steeped in musical history and famous for its classical composers like Mozart, jazz had no problem gaining importance. Since the end of World War II jazz has begun to play a significant role within the music culture, and especially in the two biggest cities Vienna and Graz jazz scenes evolved rather quickly. Once jazz in Europe was academically institutionalized for the first time at the “Akademie für Musik und darstellende Kunst Graz” (now “University of Music and Performing Arts Graz”, abbreviated “KUG”) in 1965, the status of jazz in Austrian musical life was assured.’

European singers took very rapidly to the specifics of this new jazz curriculum and quickly started to produce very fine jazz vocalists. Scandinavian countries especially started producing jazz singers who would favour more the traditional and purist approach to jazz, possibly because educational institutions in Scandinavian countries were more open to English and the developments and innovations English-speaking countries produced, especially innovations in the jazz and popular music fields.

Ultimately, the interest in studying jazz vocals in Europe increased dramatically and jazz singing started to attain the same recognition in teaching institutions as classical singing.

Both disciplines involve an intense and demanding form of vocal training coupled with a large amount of theoretical knowledge.

Today, teaching jazz in America and Europe is available in a variety of different degree programmes. Students who are involved in jazz performance have numerous opportunities to concertize, participate in master classes, study privately, and to pursue independent projects. They also have the opportunity to participate in academic courses from a vast selection of music department curriculums that encourage the study of the historical, social, theoretical, stylistic, and creative issues that pertain to the jazz idiom.

Many universities in both Europe and the US offer both bachelors and masters degrees in Voice Performance with an emphasis on jazz. Students who commit to these studies are exposed to a wide range of theoretical subjects and practical performance classes, however music history, arranging, jazz theory, composition and jazz improvisation are the main focus points in these courses as these aspects are important for the edification and education of jazz vocal students. Bigger universities in the US even offer courses in Vocal Health. These courses are directly linked to the vocal music departments and can be accessed any time by students if any problems occur. To my knowledge these departments are not yet as developed in Europe as they are in the US and are therefore not as accessible to vocal students.

Jerry Coker in his book *The Teaching of Jazz* (1989:36) sets out a basic list of crucial jazz courses proven effective at several leading universities:

- History of Jazz

- Jazz Theory (chord/scale nomenclature, chord progression tendencies and ear training)

- Analysis of Jazz Styles (transcribing and analyzing improvised solos)

- Jazz Piano (for pianists and non-pianists)

- Jazz Improvisation

- Jazz Composition (melody and progression writing, study of models)

- Jazz Arranging (small and large ensembles)

Junior Recital (jazz)
Advanced Improvisation
Jazz Pedagogy
Senior Recital (jazz).

Coker also emphasises that jazz ensembles, large and small, should be taken in every term throughout the yearly curriculum.

The free exchange of students at music faculties is an important aspect of music courses at universities in Europe and the US. This exchange means that students train with their main lecturer but integrate with other instrumental lecturers in order to acquire different insights and approaches to improvising, experience different philosophies, and obtain as much diverse knowledge as possible through experiencing a wide spectrum of ways in which to study jazz. The result of significant exposure of students to a wide variety of music genres in western society and institutions of learning can clearly be seen in the high standard of musicians these institutions produce. A factor which comes into play is that most learners acquire a basic knowledge of music which includes scales, chord structure and basic rhythms as well as the history of music. The result is that this basic knowledge of music learned at school level raises the standard of basic musical understanding by the time an individual enters a university course.

Most jazz vocal workshops in Europe and the US are both reputable and highly regarded. Musicians from all over the world attend these courses and the yardstick is set extraordinarily high. These courses allow students the opportunity to attend workshops and to integrate with the top jazz musicians of that specific country as well as with foreign artists. Because of the large number of participants and attendees at these workshop sessions students have the opportunity to exchange ideas and knowledge, and to network with both other music students and experienced and sometimes famous jazz musicians. These workshops can have an immense influence on the development of young musicians in general.

The participation of students from a young age in the music programmes most western countries offer in schools, from pre-primary to high school, makes a huge difference in the level of a musical culture. This exposure to different musical genres can inspire young students to at least consider the study of music, including the study of jazz.

7.2 The state of jazz vocals in South Africa

Jazz is still a very popular form of music in South Africa, particularly within the African population where it has become a symbol of glamour and sensuality. If, in the past, jazz was seen as the shady music of an underclass, it has now become the trendy lavish style of music for a new privileged class. Jazz singers in particular have to fulfil a role within this new society, a society that has forgotten where the music actually originated. Consequently, today's jazz singers are being glamorised by audiences as 'representatives' of a perceived forgotten era when an idealistic or more innocent world view is believed to have existed. Today, jazz singers have been glamorised to become 'representatives' of a lost era when an idealistic or more innocent world view still held water.

The famous South African jazz musician Pops Mohamed once said in an interview (Ansell 2004: 236):

For me, South African jazz is about people. It's about their struggles, their everyday lives.... Listen to Zim Ngqawana, he plays and expresses himself so that you could almost cry. If you listen to Kippie Moeketsi – the wailing of the saxophone – you know the guy's trying to make a statement. That's what our jazz is about.

Unfortunately this statement refers only to a small percentage of jazz artists. The reality is that to survive in this industry most artists have to become part of, or subject themselves to the "glam and glitz", the corporatisation of music. On the one hand jazz musicians have to be 'grateful' for the existence of this "corporate job creation", on the other hand the artist has to attempt to be a strong individual so as not to lose her/his

self-worth and creativity. This kind of “corporate entertainment environment” can be soul destroying and musically bland and unexciting, but if a musician can see it as a possible opportunity to be financially stable and a place to explore her/himself musically then it is possible to create a stimulating and creative working environment.

Looking from a more developmental or growth angle there is indeed a vigorous movement and interest from within the younger generation of musicians towards jazz. Upcoming singers are learning to communicate with other musicians on a musical level by going to clubs and jam sessions where there are opportunities to offer their talents. This can sometimes be a challenging and long-term process. The very nature of jazz and its unique interaction between musicians does however make the exchange of ideas and exposure during these sessions much easier for any new vocalist. Most young and upcoming jazz vocalists are either projecting a strong African element in their music or some very strong rhythm and blues components. However, this upcoming generation of vocalists have not had enough exposure to jazz, due to the fact that there are not nearly enough live venues in either the cities or in traditional rural areas. This sad reality does not only have a negative effect on the jazz listener it also affects the performers themselves. The lack of live venues around the country does however not necessarily mean there are no exposure opportunities for budding talents. A fair number of jazz vocalists seem to be returning to their roots: church music and gospel choirs. This tendency for young vocalists to return to what they know is clearly observable amongst my own students at the university.

There are some extraordinary jazz vocalists working in South Africa: Siya Makuzeni, Abigail Peterson, Emily Bruce and Melanie Scholtz. Each one possesses an exceptional and notable voice colour and unique phrasing, clearly influenced by avant-garde jazz, bebop and/or classical music. There seems to be a quite a number of strong jazz vocalists in Cape Town. Interestingly, the Cape Coloured community has produced a large number of superior singers in different genres. The unique timbre and their voice

colour have produced famous soloists such as Sathima Bea Benjamin, Jonathan Butler and Vicky Sampson.

Looking at the more traditional jazz singers who were until recently vigorously active on the music scene, it is quite discouraging to realize that not many are no longer around. Thandi Klaasen, Dorothy Masuka, Abigail Khubeka and Sophie Mgcina are properly the only traditional jazz singers left in this country. Singers like Letta Mbulu and Sathima Bea Benjamin left during the apartheid era. Mbulu is still living and working abroad and only occasionally returns to perform in South Africa. Benjamin (1936 – August 2013) is only recently deceased. These vocalists are South African icons and students of music have to be made aware of these powerful ladies of jazz, of their upbringing, their struggles, and of the messages inside their music. It is unfortunate that these vocalists' live appearances have inevitably decreased tremendously over the last few years due to their age and other personal circumstances.

Yet, because there is always a movement within the circle of jazz vocalists in South Africa with singers leaving the country for a while, foreign singers arriving and staying for a period of time, the delight of listening to excellent vocalists is available, albeit sporadically.

7.3 Teaching jazz vocalists in South Africa

The interest in learning jazz vocals in South Africa has grown immensely over the last few years. Institutions offer more flexible programs in music with a wider variety of subjects available therefore providing a more realistic opportunity of finding work within the industry. Jazz vocal training has become one of the most sought-after modules on offer at a number of music departments at universities in South Africa. Here vocal students are not only exposed to jazz vocal training but can also record their voices in studios and learn how to operate these facilities. The more knowledge a singer has

about music in general the more it will make her/him versatile, and thus able to function successfully within an increasingly complex industry.

There are a variety of challenges that one has to bear in mind when teaching music. Students who study jazz vocals generally come from diverse backgrounds. There are students who have had a sophisticated education including a fair amount of exposure to different styles of music, while on the other hand, there are students who come from rural areas and have not had the privilege of a high quality education. To bring these students up to the same level after four years of tertiary training is extremely challenging – and can sometimes be frustrating.

However, because of all the natural talent latent within a large number of vocal students it is extremely rewarding for the teacher. Jazz phrasing seems to be instinctive and fairly uncomplicated for some of these students and I attribute this natural talent to the diverse rhythms and inherent within African songs and music, and often absorbed from a very young age. It definitely does create a certain openness to rhythm and rhythmic patterns, and a much better awareness of meter. Students who have been exposed only to pop music or to classical music will find it much more difficult to grasp the feel for jazz.

At the beginning of every academic year, students flock to university or other music educational programs with an innate misconception of jazz vocals. It takes some time, explanation and listening material to change this misconception. Students quite quickly become aware of how important the study of jazz is for any other popular form of music, and of how much it can influence the phrasing of pop songs in a constructive way. Only a small percentage of singers who study jazz vocals still perform jazz after finishing a degree course, but the vocal abilities and musical understanding the other, more popular vocalists gain through the study of jazz vocals is decidedly enriching.

Compared to Europe and the US there is probably a much lower success rate as far as producing university qualified performing jazz vocalists is concerned, but the

backgrounds of these singers are obviously very different in this country compared to that of their European and US counterparts.

In my experience, teaching jazz vocals in South Africa is extremely rewarding as I receive a lot of appreciation and gratitude from most of the students. Because I had my formal training in Europe, vocal students take great interest in my stories of European institutions and in anecdotes of my live performances in Europe.

I have however encountered one difficulty that seems to reoccur on a regular basis. Jazz vocal students come to their weekly singing lesson, ensemble work and adhere to their weekly rehearsal times. But, unfortunately, over the weekends a number of students participate in church choirs might perform the entire weekend at their places of worship singing in wrong ranges. This can eventually strain their voices. This is a significant predicament for students who are at the beginning of their vocal studies. As a teacher it is extremely important not to cross personal and cultural boundaries such as religion, but a few such incidents over the last few years have made it necessary for me to make students aware of this dilemma. During my introductory lesson I make it clear to them, in a very sensitive manner, that God will not punish a jazz vocal student for not attending church choir practise.

7.4 Cultural or ethnic backgrounds

The 'state of music' in Africa represents an ideal state in the sense that it embodies human relationships as they ought to be, where the conflicting demands of individuality and the group, of authority and subordination, of the dead and the living, of mutual respect, and of self- and group expressions are in a perfect balance. Life itself, however, is not perfect, so music can act as a model for the relationships of life. That this is not an empty philosophical statement is clearly reflected in the fact that few social occasions in Africa are without music. Many events take place entirely by means of music. (Herbst et al. 2003: 81.)

The above quotation shows the significance of music in African culture in general. Music is a part of life for people in Africa and South Africa. This is further emphasised by Ballantine (2012: xiii):

For many people in South Africa in their fifties and older, singing in choirs at school was a given. Learning to read music, albeit basic tonic-solfa notation written on a big brown sheet hung on a chalkboard, was part of the landscape. This was more so for people in rural and peri-urban areas. For the urban-dweller, going to tea-meetings (*amatimiti*) and engaging in other recreational activities meant they were at 'risk' of being exposed to various kinds of 'evil' or unsophisticated music, especially at the turn of the twentieth century.

The missionary's emphasis on Christian choirs, combined with the traditional vocal music of South Africa gave rise to a mode of *a capella* singing that blends the style of Western hymns with indigenous harmonies. Ladysmith Black Mambazo are probably the foremost and most famous exponents of this tradition. This form of vocal music is the oldest traditional music known in South Africa. It was performed communally, accompanying dances or other social gatherings, and involved elaborate call-and-response patterns.

South Africa has produced some of the most memorable voices from the African continent such as the elevated warm alto of Miriam Makeba, the vibrant sound of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, and countless others. All this vocal virtuosity does not come as a surprise as different ethnic groups have for centuries all celebrated life in all its diversity and glory with song. Several South African artists started their singing careers in mission school choirs or in church (Barlow & Banning 1995: 10).

Jazz continued to be played in South Africa during the years of severe repression, with groups such as The African Jazz Pioneers and singers such as Abigail Kubheka and Thandi Klaasen keeping alive the mbaqanga-jazz tradition that had livened up Sophiatown. Cape jazzers such as Basil Coetzee, Robbie Jansen and Hotep Idris Galeta developed the infectious Cape style.

The 1980s saw the appearance of Afro-jazz bands such as Sakhile and Bayete, marrying the sounds of American fusion and ancient African patterns with considerable commercial success. Others, such as the band Tananas, took the idea of instrumental music in the direction of what became known as "world music", creating a sound that crossed borders with a melding of African, South American and other styles.

In more recent years, important new jazz musicians – such as Paul Hanmer, Moses Molelekwa and Zim Ngqawana – have taken the compositional and improvisatory elements of jazz in new directions, blending it with today's contemporary sounds while drawing on the older modes to provide the country – and appreciative audiences abroad – with a living, growing South African jazz tradition.

There is great diversity in South African music. Many black musicians who sang in Afrikaans or English during the apartheid era have since begun to sing in traditional African languages and out of this a unique cross-over style called Kwaito developed. A key cross-over artist was Brenda Fassie, a black vocalist who became famous with an English language song called "Weekend Special" (1983). More famous traditional musicians who started mixing different styles of music include Ray Phiri, Stimela and Sibongile Khumalo. Johnny Clegg, the so-called 'White Zulu', performed African-influenced contemporary popular music, while the Soweto String Quartet deliver classical music with a distinct African flavour.

7.5 Learning from comparisons

"Jazz is an African American music" (De Veaux and Gidding 2009: 54). When comparisons are made between South Africa, the United States (US) and Europe using the parameters of education, culture and a general exposure to influences from inside and outside these societies, it is not surprising that there are some tangible differences in how jazz vocals are practised in these disparate societies. The fact that jazz became popular at more or less the same time in these societies serves to highlight the respective differences in progress and developments in jazz. In this way the almost cold

or 'precise' nature of the European aesthetic, the dynamic mix of cultures through immigration to the US and the eclectic ethnic make-up of South Africa reflect strongly in the music and singing in these disparate societies.

In the European jazz context the methodical and systematic nature of approaching things can, in some cases, lead to the stifling of a student's own identity and creative instincts because they might be regarded as 'incorrect' in the context of the standards set in some music institutions. Although Europe has in the past produced and still produces wonderful jazz musicians and vocalists, European jazz is still marked by a certain technical control and 'preciseness' that can, in some respects, make it sound almost rigid. If one compares the renowned American jazz vocalist Diana Reeves and the Polish jazz singer Urszula Dudziak (who eventually emigrated to America) one can clearly hear the difference in their individual approaches to jazz and feel the differences in their cultural backgrounds. I also believe if the jazz pianist Joe Zawinul (1932-2007) had not moved from Austria to the US in 1957 his music career would have been very different because his experimentation with electronic instruments would have not been as readily accepted in his country of origin as it was in the US at that time.

I believe what lies at the heart of this European jazz aesthetic is Europe's strong connection to and history of both socialism and psychoanalytical thinking. This way of thinking and doing things led to more conformist philosophies and to a general distrust of free flowing ideas which in some cases can stem the development of dynamic new ideas in music and individuality in vocalists.

In contrast, the spirit of the US is one of free thinking, exploration, boundless creativity and free expression brought about by the wide cultural influences that came to it through mass immigration. The United States is therefore in general a more liberal society and it is no accident that jazz originated there.

Countries with diverse ethnic and cultural influences will inevitably have at their core a more dynamic and vibrant cultural and artistic life, and will – as in the US – provide a more free and interesting environment for the development of dynamic musical and vocal ideas and styles.

What makes South African music especially exciting and dynamic is that the country has drawn inspiration not only from Europe and America, but also from its very own diverse ethnic roots. The unique cultural diversity in South Africa has produced and still produces the most extraordinary jazz singers who sound very different from their European and US counterparts.

One of the most renowned international music institutions in the world, Berklee College of Music in Boston has caught on to this unique South African style and have been auditioning vocalists in Cape Town for their music department in Massachusetts. An eminent institution such as Berklee would not scout for talent in this country if they did not consider South Africa as an untapped pool of raw talent. But it is exactly this 'rawness' in some South African singer's voices that attract people from other countries to offer these individuals opportunities to study for international degrees.

In Kurt Elling's case, the freedom and confidence so evident in his voice and his music illustrate his open-minded and unimpeded approach to music. In his interview he clearly states how much he loves to explore new cities, new places, to meet new people and to learn the views and ideas of the places they live in. All this information is then fed back into his music in various ways, shapes or forms.

CHAPTER 8

Summary and recommendations

8.1 Summary and recommendations

Music plays a big part in most people's lives, be it in rural areas and communities or in the cosmopolitan urban context of cities. Both these extremes in environment, as elsewhere in the world, are found in South Africa. In rural areas especially, music holds an important position in traditions and heritage, and forms a significant cultural marker as far as rural ethnic identities are concerned. In cities people are constantly exposed to music in their homes or in their cars via radio, television and the internet which provides instant access to all forms of music. In fact, it is extremely hard to imagine any urban area without music emanating from everywhere.

However, as an urban-dweller, born and educated in Europe, living and teaching here it is clear that South Africa has many challenges when compared to Europe and the US and how the education system seems to work in so-called First World Countries.

It always makes it somewhat easier to enter a degree program in order to finally become a professional musician and vocalist if music education starts at formal school education level as it does in Europe and the US. Because this kind of music education unfortunately does not generally occur in South Africa at school level it tends to create an immense problem for students who register for a music course at South African universities. Music education is not usually part of the general syllabus in government schools, and it is often not affordable to people to attend music lessons on a private basis. Therefore music educators at universities have to create foundation courses that compensate for this obvious gap in the South African schooling system. Wits University, for instance, offers a bridging course for students who lack a background of basic musical knowledge and understanding. Each South African university has its own way of coping with this 'gap' in musical education.

I have over the past six years as a lecturer observed how, at the end of the intense Foundation year, students' theoretical understanding of music and practical music knowledge improves to the level of any other first year music student.

Because I strongly believe in a good education program, I designed a dynamic and easily adaptable jazz vocal syllabus that takes into consideration every student's social and educational history, music experience and her/his unique listening and vocal skills, and I use Kurt Elling's recordings quite extensively in order to further my students' understanding of jazz vocals and its dynamics. Listening to Kurt Elling and analyzing his approach to scatting and phrasing has also widened my own way of thinking about music and the process of creating music, and it helped me to conceptualize a good programme (or syllabus) for students who want to learn how to sing in a jazz style. As a lecturer I introduce my students to the particular sound and music of Kurt Elling as, in my opinion, he is the most innovative, interesting, dynamic and creative vocalist working in jazz today.

By comparing all his recordings from the early nineties onwards, it is easy to track his own development and progress as a musician and how his style and his creativity have changed and evolved over the years. Using Kurt Elling's recordings as examples for vocal students makes it easier to explain when certain musical and/or technical voice issues arise during lessons, utilising his approach to overcoming a particular problem. I find that by pointing out Elling's brilliant and clear articulation and his unique tonal and vocal technique I can inspire jazz vocal students to strive toward a mastery of this unique genre.

A very important aspect of learning to sing jazz is how to improvise over chord progressions in songs. Elling's own approach to improvisation is to take on the same responsibilities as those taken on by a composer. The work or task of every jazz musician is to improvise intelligently and coherently. In order to achieve this one has to

develop a firm understanding of the theoretical aspects of music. Following your own intuition as a vocalist is important but it has to be combined with the understanding of and adherence to certain musical rules just as a composer has to. This is why students must explore transcribed solos from accomplished instrumentalists – such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, amongst many others – in order to learn how to successfully and meaningfully improvise.

In this regard, listening to Elling is extremely helpful for vocal students because Elling has constantly used existing solos from famous instrumentalists, adding his own poetry or words to them. Furthermore, Elling's incorporation of poetry in his music and arrangements and strong influences of writers such as Hermann Hesse, Marquez, Kundera and Rumi and philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Hegel and Feuerbach makes him the unique jazz musician he is. He is one of very few artists who use this unique artistic combination of music and poetry called 'ranting'. Elling's clarity and precise placement of notes and words is what makes his music accessible and easy to listen to, yet is at the same time highly creative. It is precisely this accessible dynamic in his music that helps to cultivate this specific technique in students.

A disadvantage of living in South Africa is that South African music students are not generally exposed to live jazz as often as their counterparts in Europe and the US where there is a much greater variety of both local and international jazz performances to choose from. South Africa, because of its geographic location, is far away from the touring circuits of Europe and the US and therefore musicians of a truly international standard all too rarely make it to perform in live venues in this country.

However, I believe because students and the general public are spoiled for choice as far as access to concerts in Western countries are concerned, they tend to become blasé and as a result feel less inclined to attend these concerts than their counterparts in South Africa where people are starved for entertainment of an international standard.

This means that international jazz concerts are sold out whenever they are held in South African cities.

Kurt Elling tours Europe extensively every year and with comparatively cheap ticket prices and ready access to public transport one could choose to attend his concerts a few times each year. Because access to transport for most people in South Africa is problematic and not easily affordable, people have to rely to a great degree on lift schemes or taxis as most live venues are not serviced by cheaper public transport options such as bus routes or trains. Despite the afore-mentioned 'starvation', this lack of accessibility greatly hampers access to live jazz concerts, and to music venues in general. Live jazz, specifically in Europe, remains a big attraction for young people because it is so accessible.

Black teenagers in South Africa grow up listening mainly to Rhythm and Blues, Rap music through radio, television and the internet, and quite often Gospel music because of their strong traditional affiliations to the church. The latter provides music educators at university level with the challenge of exposing students to jazz and its history as much as possible within an extremely limited time period.

As a teacher in the South African context with its diverse cultures, it is therefore important to keep in mind the background, heritage or 'roots' of every individual student. Elling spoke at length about this during our singing lesson via Skype, and of the absolute importance of individuality and how essential it is that one goes back to one's roots. He said every musician has to find some justification for why she/he wants to start a career as a jazz singer in the first place, and why a particular jazz standard should be performed in a particular way once all these factors are carefully considered. Some ideas will come from working on specific new melody constructions while other elements may stem from a singer's personal history and cultural background. This I find true specifically in South Africa with its unique cultural aesthetic and diversity because there is so much of this diversity one can draw on and bring to or incorporate into the

interpretation of jazz standards in order to make them new and dynamic, and, ultimately, South African in flavour.

It is also Elling's belief that these cultural dynamics is what a vocalist needs in order to create a sound as natural and unique as possible – a statement I strongly agree with. All these factors are extremely important for any jazz musician to consider seriously otherwise the improvisation will in all probability sound generic.

After researching Kurt Elling's background, it became clear how his involvement and interest in choral music presented him with a style of recitative singing as found for example in the Narrator passages in the *Matthaeus Passion* by Johann Sebastian Bach. One can clearly hear the influence of these spiritual pieces in some of his arrangements of jazz standards.

Because students generally often seem to have strong religious affiliations in South Africa, Kurt Elling's background in church music appeals to these students and therefore makes it easier for them to access, study and understand. In my experience South African students can easier identify with an artist who studied a combination of Theology and Philosophy and decided to become a jazz singer than with a vocalist who has no other connection to jazz other than to a basic love for the genre.

It is always easier for a student to study and to understand jazz vocals if the student is exposed to good source material to listen to under the guidance of a knowledgeable and experienced tutor. South Africa has incredibly naturally talented young singers that need to explore their talent but who often do not have ready access to music education from an early age. Seen in this context it is not a mystery why and how the US can produce singers of the quality of Kurt Elling. Music education should start at primary school education level and include music appreciation and theory as part of the syllabi. State schools simply do not have enough money in their allocated budgets to pay for music teachers much less to provide proper facilities and equipment. Only independent and

some government schools have the capacity to provide students with a good basic music education. The three major art forms are all linked (in Arts and Culture) and I strongly believe that ideally students have to be exposed to all of them in some depth in order to achieve a good basic education. Watching a play or going to a good art exhibition is of huge importance for the general development of children and young people.

Would it be possible to produce a singer such as Kurt Elling in South Africa? Yes, in my opinion it is definitely possible - if better provision is made for greater exposure to and involvement in the arts in the public school system. Most facets are already in place. For example English, which is for all intents and purposes an 'international language' – and the '*lingua franca*' of jazz vocals – is already being taught. The ability to speak English places South Africans in a good position to communicate with the rest of the world. Then there is also the immense pool of natural vocal talent that this country has to offer. There are indeed some private and semi-state educational institutions that already fulfill certain criteria to develop this talent in young people but it remains an aspect of general education that should be readily provided by the South African government to all students across the country. And of course there is the huge diversity of musical influences that South Africa innately has that must be encouraged and tapped into.

South Africa is a proud nation that values artistic brilliance and it is at basic education level where the creation of future artists, singers and musicians should start. But this process needs much stronger support and commitment from government. Only then will South Africa be able to produce an artist of the calibre of Kurt Elling.

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Appendix A:

Interview with Kurt Elling: 24th of August 2012, Rosebank Hotel Johannesburg

1. What is your earliest musical memory? Can you remember what your reaction was when you heard jazz for the first time?

KE: My earliest musical memory is working in church and probably singing along with hymns. That kind of thing.

1.1 With your father?

KE: Yes, and probably with the choir. I don't know if I actually have a specific spark of jazz memory.

2. Did you connect with jazz right from the beginning?

KE: If I liked it yes. I mean I didn't know what I was doing, but it felt like it.

3. How do you choose your repertoire and what musical elements are you looking for when making repertoire choices?

KE: A lot of the decisions were just intuitive. You do things because you connect with them in a certain way. For some things, like the *Brill Building Project*, we had to do a whole lot more homework and historical work and then we had to search for things within that ground if that would make sense. For the *1619 Broadway* I had to make sure that all the compositions came from the Brill Building and I had to know who wrote on them and that kind of thing, to make sure that there was a legitimate connection because of the concept.

4. - Talking about singers in general – why does the study of harmony form such an important part of a vocalists training?

KE: The study of harmony is just one of the many elements of music itself, that have to be mastered because the homework of a jazz musician is the ability to improvise intelligently and coherently. In order to do that you have to understand what notes are in the chord and how many beats there are and how certain kinds of

phrases are going to fit or not. Harmony is just one of a kind of a whole play of things that have to be taken into account.

5. How do you see the role of harmony? How does harmony inform a vocalist's performance?

KE: How does it inform? You are going to make choices if you understand even just on an intuitive level what's happening in harmony, then you are going to choose more interesting notes and have more music to play.

6. Having transcribed many solos, what are the compositional elements that make a good solo in your view?

KE: Well you know, a beginning, middle and an end. Surprises, elements that are signature, that belong to that soloist, evidence of historical digestion and clarity.

7. As a vocalist, what in particular have you learned from your transcriptions of instrumental solos?

KE: Most of the things that I have learned come through the music. If we would have a chalk board or something like that, that might be one way to compare and contrast my solos with the solos I have studied. It comes through the music more than any kind of discussion that we could easily have in a hotel lobby.

- 7.1 And you obviously choose the solos because you connect with them?

KE: Yes, emotionally yes.

8. You have been collaborating with Laurence Hobgood for many years now. Do you think this partnership has helped shape your own sound and style over the years?

KE: Yes of course. We write the arrangements together and that is perceived as ... the sound of the record. When we go out and play together, that's a full experience. It's not just a singer, it's the full band and Laurence and I are at the crossroads of the band. All the compositions that we had, and experiences ... everything.

9. Do you view yourself as a poet?

KE: No, I have poetic potentials but I mean I'm a jazz singer who writes lyrics.

10. What have you learned about the art of performance from being active as a performer over the years?

KE: Increasingly how to just be myself.

11. What is your impression of Johannesburg, the little time you have spent here?

KE: I haven't had much time....

11.1 Have you been to Africa before?

KE: No, it's my first visit. It's like any country that you go and visit. You see the city and it's not really the nation. That's kind of just as true as New York versus the rest of America. As it would be Amsterdam and the rest of Holland.

11.2 You were spotted walking in Braamfontein!

KE: I naturally just walk around; I don't mind just walking around. I am familiar with cities. I read in the paper before I came down you should check out Diagonal Street. It has got all this and this and this and I spoke to the young lady who works there at the desk (pointing in the lobby to the reception). So how far away is Diagonal Street and she said to me "I wouldn't go there". So I said, how far away? "Oh it's very very far away from here and it's not very safe for you. I wouldn't go there myself". So I said wow, ok and then I asked the driver who took us to the venue: So how far is Diagonal Street? He said "Oh, it's just over here, you should do it". Yeah ok. So that's the guy you should talk to.

So you are writing your Masters?

ME: Yes

KE: Alright man, well I hope that you've got what you needed.

ME: I have got so much information about you from your website.

KE: I try to make it available.

Thank you Mr. Elling!!!

Appendix B:

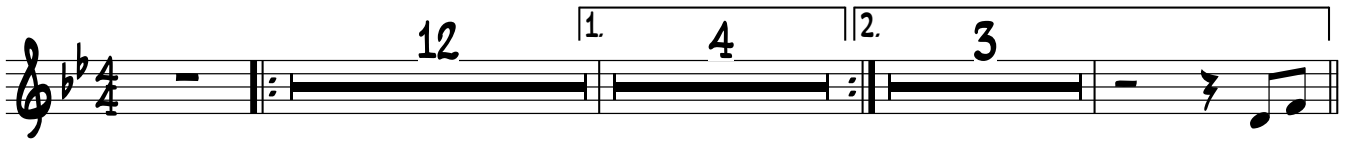
“Downtown” by Russell Ferrante – Transcribed by Edith Klug.

Politics (1988) is the sixth studio album from the jazz group Yellowjackets (founded in 1977). The album was awarded "Best Jazz Fusion Performance" at the 1989 Grammy Awards. “Downtown” was composed by Yellowjackets’ keyboard player and pianist Russell Ferrante. One can find elements of post-bop in this composition, as demonstrated by the fast and concise melody line.

“Downtown” appears on Kurt Elling’s album *Live in Chicago*. It was Elling's first live album, recorded over two nights in 1999 at Chicago's Green Mill jazz club. Elling’s version inspired me to transcribe the entire melody line and to perform it as part of my recital repertoire, improvising from bar 106 onwards.

VOCAL

12 1. 4 2. 3



22 Bb^6 $G7(b9)$ Cm^7 F^7 Fm^7 Bb^7



28 $Eb^{\Delta}7$ Ab^{11} Bb^7 G^7 Cm^7



33 F^{13} Dbm^7 Gb^{13} Cm^7



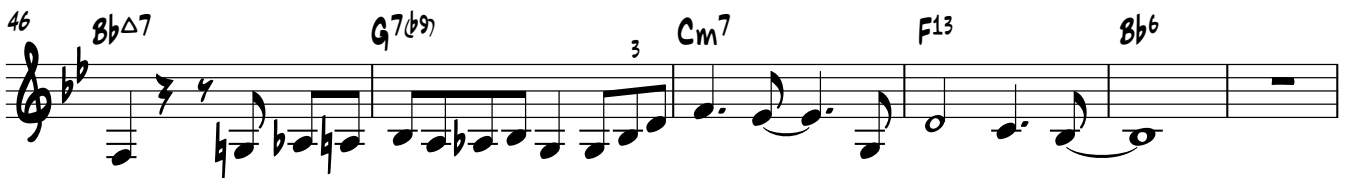
37 F^7 $Bb^{\Delta}7$ $G7(b9)$ Cm^7 F^{13}



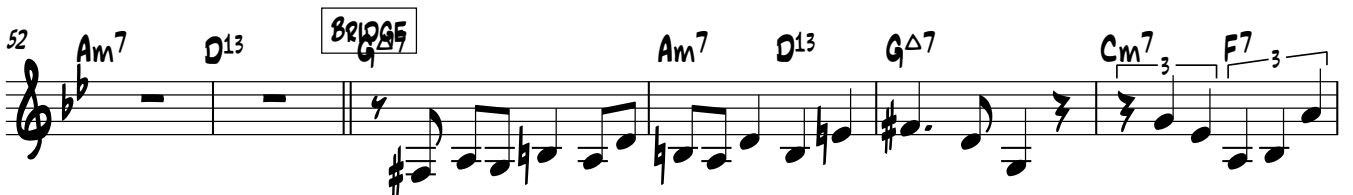
42 Fm^7 Bb^{13} $Eb^{\Delta}7$ Ab^9



46 $Bb^{\Delta}7$ $G7(b9)$ Cm^7 F^{13} Bb^6



52 Am^7 D^{13} 8 7 6 5 $G^{\Delta}7$ Am^7 D^{13} $G^{\Delta}7$ Cm^7 F^7



58 $Bb^{\Delta}7$ Ebm^7 Ab^9 $Db^{\Delta}7$ Cm^7 F^7 $Bb^{\Delta}7$



2

VOCAL

63 G^7 Cm^7 F^7 Fm^7 Bb^{13}



68 $Eb\Delta^7$ Ab^{11} $D\emptyset^7$ $G^7(b9)$ Cm^7



73 F^7



79



84



90



94



99



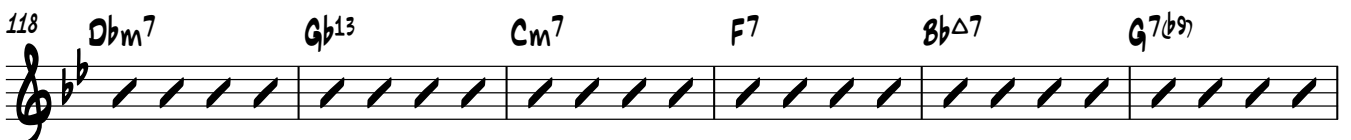
106 Bb^6 $G^7(b9)$ Cm^7 F^7 Fm^7 Bb^7



112 $Eb\Delta^7$ Ab^{11} Bb^7 G^7 Cm^7 F^{13}



118 Dbm^7 Gb^{13} Cm^7 F^7 $Bb\Delta^7$ $G^7(b9)$



124 Cm7 F13 Fm7 Bb13 EbΔ7 Ab9

130 BbΔ7 G7(b9) Cm7 F13 Bb6

136 Am7 D13 GΔ7 Am7 D13 GΔ7 Cm7 F7

142 BbΔ7 Ebm7 Ab9 DbΔ7 Cm7 F7 BbΔ7 G7

148 Cm7 F7 Fm7 Bb13 EbΔ7 Ab11

154 Dø7 G7(b9) Cm7 F7 8