

ON THE BOOKSHELF

"Queen of Bebop: The Musical Lives of Sarah Vaughn"

By Elaine M. Hayes

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She was one of the greatest jazz singers of the 20th century, a voice so well-controlled and so flexible that she sang like a trumpet or sax. The story of this highly-acclaimed musician is told here in a vibrant manner that befits her enormous talent. It is not too hyperbolic to call "Sassy" a genius. As a well-trained amateur musician myself, Sarah Vaughn's voice was like no other in its time. She had exquisite tone, "full and rich like velvet or oozing honey yet agile and supple", a simply beautiful voice with a four-octave range which she could fly effortlessly. She thought like a jazzer, a bebopper, with lightning-quick lines, completely new melodies improvised on the spot.

Sarah grew up singing in the church, and was an excellent pianist and organist, too. She became a part of the Newark, NJ jazz scene as a teen. Sarah was seen as a worthy peer by other iconic musicians who would change musical history: Billy Eckstine, Ella Fitzgerald, John "Dizzy" Gillespie and Charlie "Bird" Parker. Sarah was hired as second pianist and later vocalist with the Hines band in 1943. They traveled all over the country, and faced racism everywhere they went. It was particularly obvious in the South; every trip had a new series of indignities. Conditions were miserable, and after the 1943 tour, Gillespie left the Hines band to form a new one, the world's first bebop band, and he hired Dizzy, Bird, and Sassy. After a successful partnership, she later played and sang with Count Basie.

She was treated like a lady by her bandmates, but she still did have romances. (Sadly, none of her marriages or love affairs brought her much lasting happiness.)

A constant problem professionally for Sarah was getting a record released. Most producers wanted her to sing the blues, thinking that's all audiences wanted black women to perform. But Sarah Vaughn could not be held to one style of music. Her talent and her imagination were too big. Mitch Miller of Columbia never understood her abilities and wasted her great talent on bad, racist novelty records or strings-laden ballads. She never quit trying new things, and found great joy in singing with orchestras in concert settings late in her life. Check her out on youtube.com to hear and see her hits from the late 1940s and 1950s as well as her later musical work. It's all great.

Check her website, www.elainehayes.com.