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The linking of aural and visual experience is a commonplace for popular entertainment. In the early twentieth century, however, radio and phonography mediated between performers and mass audiences in a way that temporarily did away with, or at the very least superseded, visual representation. In the final years of this auditory primacy, a young singer emerged who now presents something of a popular-culture paradox: a woman once called 'the most imitated singer of all time,' whom few now can picture either in sound or vision.<sup>2</sup> From the time of her first releases in the early 1930s, Connie Boswell's remarkable vocal talents quickly become the standard to which all other jazz singers aspired; for instance, her influence on the young Bing Crosby is unmistakable, and more than once Ella Fitzgerald claimed that Boswell was the only female model for her own singing style.<sup>3</sup> More than just a vocal innovator, Boswell also had a unique gift as an arranger, her authorial voice translating the lingua franca of Tin Pan Alley into a language all her own. But despite the fact that Boswell's vocal legacy is heard every time a singer affects a Southern accent or phrases with instrumental inflections, her physical presence has been effectively erased, and her story remains untold in most histories of jazz.

Boswell's erasure from the chronicles and canons of popular culture could at least partially be a matter of timing: the height of her popularity, when dozens of avowed Boswell imitators populated the variety circuits and when fans caused riots outside theaters in the hope of glimpsing her and her sisters, occurred at a time when the parameters of stardom were only just beginning to be redrawn by the impact of the fledgling talking-picture industry. The construction of the musical celebrity in the popular imagination was necessarily piecemeal; as they reached and formed relationships with their public primarily through non-visual

## 'Who Told You That Lie?': Picturing Connie Boswell

Laurie Stras<sup>1</sup>

media, singers were first and foremost disembodied voices, to which a visual image needed to be attached in order for an identity to be fixed. Such images were mediated to the mind not via the eye but via the ear, told through commentary, lyrics, and the music itself. Radio, arguably the most intimate medium of the pre-television era, effectively brought the experience of live performance into the homes of its audiences, allowing and even encouraging them to 'construct fantasies about ... the people they were listening to.'<sup>4</sup> Phonography, although not a live medium, had an alternative, equally powerful attraction; it brought celebrity performance into the control of the listener, who could relive the same fantastic, relationship-cementing experience repeatedly at will.<sup>5</sup> Visualization was crucial to the way early-twentieth-century audiences listened, not only because, as Susan J. Douglas explains, radio disrupted (if only temporarily) a dominant visual culture, but also because 'when sound is our only source of information, our imaginations milk it for all

1 Material for this paper was first presented at the 'Picturing' Women symposium held at Bryn Mawr College in March 2004. Versions have also been presented at 'Console-ing Passions,' *The International Conference of Feminism and Television, Video, New Media, and Audio*, New Orleans 2004; and at the *Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society*, Seattle 2004: I am grateful to the participants in all three sessions for their generous and helpful comments. In particular, I would like to thank Bruce Raeburn, curator of the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, Michele Hilmes and Vet (Chica) Boswell Minnerly for invaluable information and assistance, and my editor Susan Shifrin for her comments on earlier drafts.

2 Gary Giddens, *Bing Crosby: A Pocketful of Dreams: The Early Years, 1903–1940* (Boston, New York and London: Little Brown and Co., 2001) 516.

3 For Boswell's influence on Bing, see my own 'White Face, Black Voice: Race, Gender and Region in the Music of the Boswell Sisters,' *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1:2 (2007), 207–55. For her influence on Fitzgerald, see Stuart Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald* (London: Indigo, 1996) 10–12.

4 Timothy D. Taylor, 'Music and the Rise of Radio in 1920s America: technological imperialism, socialization, and the transformation of intimacy,' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 22:4 (2002) 437. For a fuller discussion of the role of radio in shaping the public imagination, see Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination ... from Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Random House, 1999). The issue of fantasy relationships with celebrity singers is examined in Allison McCracken, "'God's Gift to Us Girls": Crooning, Gender, and the Re-Creation of American Popular Song, 1928–1933,' *American Music* 17:4 (1999) 365–95.

5 Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987) 46: 'a record is a sculpted block of time, repeatable at the owner's whim ... A cello is already a time machine, taking its listener to a place outside time. The phonograph is also a time machine ... the listener operates it himself and can take a spin as often as he pleases.'



it's worth, creating detailed tableaux that images, of course, preempt.' She also notes that 'hearing something rather than seeing it allowed you to hold something in reserve that was just yours, your own distinctive image and vision.'<sup>6</sup> Visualization may have been particularly important to the creation of female celebrity; in 1920s America, attitudes to the disembodied female voice were decidedly negative, and succinctly summed up by a Detroit radio station director: '[Women] need body to their voices.'<sup>7</sup>

Listening to Boswell was also to imagine her in performance and that image, however constructed by the context imposed by song or the radio setting, was deeply personal to each who heard her. Yet even before any lyrical content, musical association or verbal description fixed in the listener's imagination a visual impression of the singer, the 'grain' of her voice could tell of her body in a way that provided a physical focus for that fantasy relationship.<sup>8</sup> In Connie's case, her voice told further of a radical persona whose outward physical characteristics were as difficult to pin down as her musical ones; the sound of her voice did not affix easily to one side or the other of inter-war America's socially inscribed binarisms. Her preferred range was lower than many male singers of the time, and in the early days of her radio career she was frequently mistaken for an African American.<sup>9</sup> Her strong New Orleans accent and her performance style,

6 Douglas, 28, 31.

7 Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997) 142.

8 'The "grain" is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. If I perceive the "grain" in a piece of music and accord this "grain" a theoretical value (the emergence of the text in the work), I inevitably set up a new scheme of evaluation which will certainly be individual – I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic – but in no way "subjective" ...' Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice,' in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (eds), *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 299; originally published in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977) 179–89.

9 Vet Boswell remembered that when the sisters first toured in Europe, promotional material had been issued in France depicting them as black women; Vet (Chica) Boswell Minnerly, personal interview, 28 October 2002. Connie's tessitura (the range in which she normally sang) was comfortably lower than that expected from a classically trained contralto. She was not, however, wholly unique in this: 'My impressions during the first week of my visit to this remarkable country were ... that one is only able to distinguish between male and female crooners upon at length realising that the women have deeper voices than the men.' Spike Hughes, 'Radio Methods In America,' *Melody Maker* (10 June 1933) 3. The trend may have

marked by its inflections of blues and 'hot' jazz, coupled with the lack of Euro/American mannerisms in her delivery (such as an omnipresent vibrato or a nasally produced 'flapper' tone) and a corresponding presence of a black-identified 'affective vocal quality' – that which Ronald Radano ascribes to the African-American 'vocal practices of singing, storytelling, and preaching' – were unprecedented for a white female pop singer.<sup>10</sup> Without an accompanying visual image these traits, especially her accent and her jazz styling, were enough to suggest 'blackness' to the average listener; furthermore, her expertise in the new hot jazz placed her conspicuously, and incongruously, in a man's world.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, as a radio personality, Boswell was not a complete visual myth to her audience. For those unable to see entertainers in live performance, radio fan magazines provided a different kind of mediated access: verbal accounts and visual representations in the shape of interviews, photographs, and drawings informed the listener's mental constructions of the singer's physical presence.<sup>12</sup> Boswell was a beautiful woman, and as such her face adorned many magazines from the outset of her stardom; yet her body presented challenges to the norms of public display and admiration of the female form, and her image was necessarily constructed to reflect something other than the 'naked' truth. Boswell had contracted poliomyelitis as a child of three and had been almost completely paralyzed from the waist down. Vigorous physical therapy from her mother had allowed her to regain some movement, but her legs remained severely impaired. However, while those who worked with her

been influenced by limitations of technology, as 'sopranos accustomed to projecting their voices on a stage often blew the tubes on radio transmitters' (Douglas, 87). Singers, therefore, might concentrate on using the less powerful register in their voices; for men, the tenor and for women, the contralto.

10 Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 14–15. I discuss more fully the implications of the Boswell Sisters' 'sounding black' in 'White Face, Black Voice.'

11 For Southern accents as racial markers, see Sarah Madsen Hardy and Kelly Thomas, 'Listening to Race: Voice, Mixing, and Technological "Miscegenation" in Early Sound Film,' in Daniel Bernardi (ed.), *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 415–41. The evolution of a system of signification recognized as 'black music' is traced in Radano. The 'otherness' of women in early jazz is explored in a number of fine texts, particularly Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: 'All-Girl' Bands of the 1940s* (Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2000).

12 The role of fan magazines in the creation of stardom, the physical description of stars, and the development of the relationship between star and fan is examined in Marsha Orgeron, 'Making It in Hollywood: Clara Bow, Fandom, and Consumer Culture,' *Cinema Journal* 42:4 (2003) 76–81.



could not ignore her physical limitations, which necessitated the use of a wheelchair for all but the briefest self-support, strenuous efforts were made to conceal them from her audience.

Boswell began to speak out about her disability mid-career, in what seems like a strategic move to unburden herself from the deception; however, the uncompromising visual honesty linked to this confession lasted for only a brief period. For the most part, through various degrees of ingenuity in photography and stage management, and eventually cinematography and technology, she was made to appear to function as a nondisabled woman. Yet even without manipulation and assistance, Boswell was able to present an image to her audience that reassuringly did not admit of physical difference. Through her lyrics and rhythmic delivery, she was physically normalized; she danced and strolled in song, encouraging her listeners to visualize her in movement. Moreover, her duets with Bing Crosby conjured powerful images of domesticity and conventional coupledom that belied the realities of living with disability in the years between the wars. But perhaps most effectively, she used the persona of the Southern belle as a fluid but socially comprehensible framework for her deception, an identity based on an exaggerated masquerade of etiquette and femininity that renders all other markers of difference unreadable, allowing her to be both what she was and what she was not.<sup>13</sup>

Three main theoretical approaches to the cultural manifestations of difference underpin this essay: Rosemarie Garland Thomson's exposition of disability as a social and cultural construction; Tara McPherson's analysis of the belle; and Marjorie Garber's work on transvestism.<sup>14</sup> All three studies are concerned with discourse, with the truths and the lies that are told by or understood from cultural representations, be they visual, verbal or (ultimately) musical. The various states of disembodiment, mis-embodiment, and re-embodiment; the relative degrees of honesty and deception with which Connie was represented – and misrepresented

– during her career and her lifetime; and the discourses manipulated in the telling of her story are examined here. In particular, this essay examines how efforts to mask Connie's disability visually and verbally are undercut by an unspoken, but no less telling, musical rhetoric.

In her analysis of the 'rhetorics of disability' in popular photography, Thomson notes that being stared at is 'one of the universal social experiences of being disabled.'<sup>15</sup> That some representations of Boswell promoted alternative truths might be seen as a conscious deflection of the hard gaze, and her manipulation of racialized and gendered discourses a way of preventing engagement with disability. However, like images of disabled people, Boswell's arrangements – with her trademark structural and melodic fragmentation of songs – invite listeners to focus on disfigurement, and persuade them to listen to aberration with a mixture of awe, distance, and recognition. As such, her radical musical persona mirrors her physical body and a discourse of disability mediates her music, re-siting her mis-embodied voice and telling a tale of difference through the innovation of jazz.

Connie Boswell's first success came as the lead singer in a hot-jazz vocal trio, the Boswell Sisters (Figure 8.1). The sisters hit the big time as the Depression hit America, propelled from hard graft on minor vaudeville circuits to international stardom in a matter of months. They were acknowledged by their peers to be among the finest musicians of their day, and their freewheeling, intricate arrangements and extraordinary rhythmic drive set them apart from other entertainers. The message of their music was almost always upbeat and even funny as they used the newest sounds of swing to interpret popular songs. Ella Fitzgerald's biographer, Stuart Nicholson, sums up their style and Boswell's arranging technique:

In the space of a three-minute arrangement she might completely recast a tune by altering its harmonic framework, change its rhythmic characteristics with up to six or seven tempo changes, insert completely new interludes of her own, and introduce an infinite number of highly original vocal devices that might include the 'instrumental' use of voices, scat singing, and elements of blues and gospel music. The Boswells were so far ahead of their time that the breakthrough quality of their art is still apparent from their recordings today.<sup>16</sup>

13 Rosemarie Garland Thomson notes that femininity is 'inextricably entangled' with disability in Western culture: 'historically the practices of femininity have configured female bodies similarly to disability. Foot binding, scarification, clitoridectomy, and corseting were (and are) socially accepted, encouraged, even compulsory cultural forms of female disablement that, ironically, are socially enabling.' Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 27.

14 Thomson, 1997; Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003); Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1992).

15 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,' in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (eds), *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 347.

16 Nicholson, 11.





Figure 8.1 The Boswell Sisters, ca. 1932, publicity still, photographer unknown. Collection of the author.

The three sisters, Martha (1905–58), Connie (1907–76), and Helvetia (known as Vet; 1911–88) grew up in the multi-ethnic community of New Orleans. They learned their craft almost from infancy, encouraged by their mother and father. Vet later attributed their parents' enthusiasm for group music-making at least partially to Mrs. Boswell's self-devised program of holistic therapy for Connie.<sup>17</sup> The family home resounded with many different musics, from string trios (as performed by the girls themselves: Martha on piano, Connie on cello, and Vet on violin) to four-part harmonizing by the adults (mother, father, aunt, and uncle), and their father's stride piano. Although the sisters had initially thought to become a professional chamber trio, by their teens, the pull of jazz had become too great; Martha learned stride, Connie took up the saxophone, and Vet opted for banjo and trombone.<sup>18</sup> The girls also sang, but their singing was almost entirely confined to popular genres. Accounts of their childhood abound with (possibly apocryphal) stories of the girls persuading the (black) hired help to teach them gospel and blues, inviting black musicians into their home and going out to the black theaters on the weekends to hear 'authentic' black performances.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the early 1920s, the sisters performed in concerts, at dinners and on the new local radio stations, mixing semi-classical instrumental numbers with so-called 'syncopated music,' both sung and played.

Advertisements and press notices in this period tend to underscore both the sisters' youth and their class (and hence also their ethnicity), but even more frequently the texts emphasize physical agency above all else, thus encouraging audiences to envision the girls actively engaged in performance. A handbill produced to promote the Boswells' debut on New Orleans' first professional radio station on 20 May 1925 announces: 'The Boswell Sisters / those three clever little New Orleans school / girls

17 Vet Boswell Jones, interview recorded in 1982; Lou Dumont (presenter), 'The Boswell Sisters,' in *First Ladies of Radio*, Totem Records CD-42 (n.d.).

18 Brief biographies/critical assessments of the Boswell Sisters appear in Will Friedwald, *Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices From Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond*, 3rd ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996) 154–73 and Richard M. Sudhalter, *Lost Chords: White Musicians and their Contribution to Jazz, 1915–1945* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 369–75.

19 The last of these situations can at least be corroborated by contemporaneous social practice. The weekly 'Midnight Frolic,' a show specifically designed and put on for whites, was highly popular in the South. At the Lyric Theater the girls would have been able to see many of the great blues singers of the 20s, as well as numerous vocal trios and quartets: Lynn Abbott, "'For Ofays Only': An Annotated Calendar of Midnight Frolics at the Lyric Theatre,' *The Jazz Archivist* 27 (2003) 1–29.



who have just made the new Victor Record: / "I'm Gonna Cry" / and / "Nights When I Am Lonely" / No. 19639 – 75¢ / Composed, Arranged, Played and Sung By Themselves.<sup>20</sup> A photograph picturing the three teenagers accompanied this announcement; readers would know by their apparently close ages that the family were of sufficient class and economic standing to be able to afford to pay for the education of three girls simultaneously. A few weeks later, a report links their agency more directly with 'taste' (again indicative of class), stating: 'The engagement of the Boswell Sisters at the Strand theater is regarded as significant, because it is a recognition of the merit of "syncopated" music, when well sung and played, by a theater that has always stood for the best in music.'<sup>21</sup>

The statement implies that the girls had begun to perform more jazz than classical tunes; it simultaneously problematizes the repertoire and excuses it by evoking its competent performance by young ladies. A third notice, a review of the Boswells' national-circuit vaudeville debut at the Orpheum in August of the same year, effectively combines notions of knowledge, competence, and innocence with femininity, novelty, and cultural superiority, specifically embodying these qualities within the sisters themselves:

They are, as most Orleanians know, clever girls with several new ideas in jazz harmony to expound, and with the equipment to expound them. With a new group of songs, delivered with inimitable naivete [*sic*], they scored several encores and a final bow, the latter being demanded by a crescendo of applause rising over the efforts of Emile Tosso and his orchestra.<sup>22</sup>

The protective tone of these notices hints at a civic pride in the youngsters. At this early local stage, Connie's disability does not figure as an issue to be revealed or concealed – she is already visually familiar to her audience, the sisters' appeal stemming from the juxtaposition of youth and virtuosity, rather than the exoticism of the freak show.<sup>23</sup> The girls are described as more precocious than attractive, their bodies – their 'equipment' – pubescent sites of wonder rather than mature objects

of desire. Furthermore, their class, whiteness, ingenuity, and their performance of 'inimitable' femininity are distinctively (if nascently) suggestive of the Southern belle – a trope that became increasingly important to the Boswells' public persona as their popularity breached state boundaries.<sup>24</sup>

The image projected by these notices at first consideration appears at variance with the one conjured by one of the two Victor sides, 'I'm Gonna Cry (Cryin' Blues),' written by Martha and sung as a solo by Connie.<sup>25</sup> The song has its stylistic roots in vaudeville blues, and Boswell delivers it in a fashion clearly intended to reflect the 'mama,' complete with blues pitch inflections, guttural growls, moans, and sobs. The gestural, stereotyped 'blackness' of the vocal delivery – as created by the hypervocalization of emotion and a blackface diction that rhymes *go* with *mo* – combines with the lyrics to imply a mature, racialized sexuality: for example, in the couplet 'I ain't no Queen of Sheba, I don't dress fine / but I'm the kind of mama that's home any time.'<sup>26</sup> However, while this sexuality is performed, it is not yet embodied; it exists in what Barthes calls the *pheno-song*: 'all the phenomena, all the features which belong to the structure of the language being sung, the rules of the genre, the coded form of the melisma, the composer's idiolect, the style of the interpretation ... everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression ...'<sup>27</sup> The teenage Boswell sisters tell of the mama, but do not personify her; they may be able to speak her musical and performative language – fluently even – but the skillful masquerade is precisely a product of that youthful precocity admired by the local New Orleans press.

In the fall of 1928, the sisters embarked on their first vaudeville engagement, a minor Midwest tour that was not normally considered suitable for women artists (as Vet Boswell later remarked, 'What did [the agent] think we looked like – three ducks, or something?').<sup>28</sup> Although Connie's disability was easy enough to disguise in her performances with her sisters – she always performed seated at or on the piano with Martha – it is still remarkable that they managed to negotiate the small-town

20 Boswell Sisters collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, New Orleans; my thanks to Bruce Raeburn for allowing me access to the collection.

21 *New Orleans States* (7 June 1925).

22 David McCain, liner notes to *Boswell Sisters Collection, Volume 4*, Nostalgia Arts NOCD 3022 (2001).

23 America's fascination with the freak show, the cultural display of 'prodigious bodies,' is examined in Thomson, 1997, 55–80.

24 The trope of the Southern belle, as it operated in the 20s and 30s, is examined in McPherson, especially pp. 39–65.

25 'I'm Gonna Cry (Cryin' Blues)' (Martha Boswell). Victor 19639 (1925); reissued on *It's The Girls*, Living Era CD AJA 5014 (1982).

26 On blackface vocality see Hilmes, 87–93.

27 Barthes, 295; Barthes draws his terminology from Julia Kristeva's theoretical binary, the pheno-text and the geno-text.

28 Dumont, 'The Boswell Sisters.'



circuit, gaining acceptance from agents and theater managers who would watch them arrive, Vet and Martha carrying Connie in a 'fireman's lift' to the door.<sup>29</sup> Arriving in California at the beginning of 1929, the sisters continued in local vaudeville, but also sought more permanent and stable employment in radio and film. Throughout this year and the next, the sisters' reputation grew exponentially; initially employed for 'sustaining' slots in between networked radio programs and as off-screen voices for several films, they made their first coast-to-coast broadcast on 30 July 1930.<sup>30</sup> By February 1931, the Boswell Sisters were in New York, having secured a contract with the Brunswick recording company, and with the main network broadcasters, CBS and NBC, vying for their contractual fidelity. Their new popularity can be measured by their inclusion on CBS' first scheduled television broadcast on 21 July 1931, in a program that also featured Kate Smith (almost certainly the most popular female star of radio at the time), the mayor of New York, and George Gershwin. Although this was only a local broadcast, New York was still the most important national center for the entertainment media, and the girls were chosen ahead of a host of well-established radio and stage performers to represent the best of the city's musical talent.

Perhaps because the Boswells' rise to fame was so rapid, with so little opportunity for exposure to the national audience in live performances, there is evidence at this time of an urgent need – both on the part of the audience and the industry – to establish some sort of visual identity, and indeed a cultural niche, for the sisters. In the last stage of their apprenticeship, learning the new electrical technology that encouraged them to use their voices more naturally, the Boswells – and Connie in particular – had developed a freedom of vocal production that allowed the grain of their voices to emerge. Yet this very stripping away of the hypervocalization of the stage performer – one layer of the vocal masquerade – created a new difficulty for audiences: the erroneous interpretation of socially inscribed markers. The New Orleans drawl that created diphthongs of all vowel sounds and softened all plosive consonants; the increased expressiveness of the sisters' voices when singing at normal speaking volume and pitch (both considerably lower than the cultivated and acculturated female singing voice); and their strange and jazzed-up approach to musical material, all accentuated by the intimacy of electrical reproduction and transmission, gave the audience the impression that they were listening to African-American performers. Now physically and musically more mature, the Boswells'

29 Vet remembered that they were too poor to be able to afford a chair for Connie; the modern folding wheelchair was not patented until 1932.

30 David McCain, liner notes to *Boswell Sisters Collection, Volume 5*, Nostalgia Arts NOCD 3023 (2001).

voices could have been more confidently heard as embodied; and by eschewing the conventions of popular singing and owning their voices as they were 'naturally' produced, the sisters created a minor crisis for the radio audience, who needed a mental picture on which to fix their fantasies. In his book *Jazz Singing*, Will Friedwald quotes a desperate letter from a listener: 'To Whom It May Concern: I should like to know if the Boswell Sisters are white or colored. I am asking you to settle a long argument to the above question. I'm thanking you in advance, Herbert A. Bailey Roxbury Mass. October 17, 1931.'<sup>31</sup>

As confusing as their vocal production might have been, the anxiety it caused their listening audience could not be mitigated simply by the audience's viewing pictures of the sisters. To their new public, the Boswells' dark eyes and hair and their membership of the New Orleans jazz community might have indicated African-American heritage, and to some they may have looked no whiter than some black entertainers celebrated for their ability to 'pass' on stage. Far from aiming to dispel the potential disquiet, publicity material and press coverage issued early in the girls' national career appear to play on the ambiguity, with headlines such as 'Girls Want It Known That They Are Creoles' and 'The Boswell Sisters Are Three-Quarters French.'<sup>32</sup> The sisters seemed to take an active role in perpetuating the confusion, perhaps even enjoying it, for their arrangements in these years seesaw frenetically between established black and white styles. For instance, one of their signature tunes, always sung at the beginning of a new broadcast, was 'Heebie Jeebies,' a song that in 1930 already held canonical status via Louis Armstrong's 1926 recording.<sup>33</sup> In the sisters' (and later her own solo) version, Connie inserted a half-time verse of her own composition, invoking the sound of the 1920s blueswomen, and towards the end cheekily imitated Armstrong's own vocal interpolations.

Together with their prodigious musical abilities and 'hot' inclinations, the Boswell Sisters' perceived racial ambiguity made them a unique

31 Friedwald, 154.

32 The first of these is from the *New York Evening World*, early in 1931; cited in David McCain, liner notes to *Boswell Sisters Collection, Volume 3*, Nostalgia Arts NOCD 3009 (2000). The second is from a radio annual issued in either 1931 or 1932; taken from a scrapbook compiled in the 1930s, currently in the author's possession.

33 'Heebie Jeebies' (Boyd Atkins), Okeh 41444 (1930), reissued on *The Boswell Sisters Collection, Volume 2*, Nostalgia Arts NOCD 3008 (1999). For a fuller discussion of the Boswells' version of this tune and its relationship to Armstrong's recording, see my 'White Face, Black Voice.' For the importance of this tune to the establishment of the jazz vocal canon, see Brent Hayes Edwards, 'Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat,' *Critical Inquiry* 28:3 (2002) 618–59.



commodity for the music industry of the early 1930s. In particular, they held all the qualities prized by the most powerful, and perhaps the most far-sighted, executive in the recording business: the head of recording at Brunswick, Jack Kapp.<sup>34</sup> For several years before the Boswell Sisters' appearance, Kapp had searched for a way of tapping into the appeal of 'race' music for the white audience – he had tried cleaning up the sexually charged music of black artists on his Vocalion label, and had put considerable effort into trying to sustain and then revive interest in blackface performers and minstrelsy. However, none of these strategies was wholly successful, possibly because of the increasingly obvious constructed-ness of the product to consumers who were simultaneously becoming increasingly interested in authenticity. With the Boswell Sisters, and later with Connie as a solo performer, Kapp (perhaps unwittingly) stumbled upon a group of musicians who were not only 'authentic,' but who also fitted an as yet commercially unexploited persona – the Southern lady – who could logically absorb and reflect a range of exotic longings and differences, encompassing nostalgia, race, gender, class, and regional otherness.

The deliberateness with which the Boswells' public image was controlled and manipulated is best demonstrated by the contrasts between the everyday, possibly disposable representations of them circulated in the printed media and those constructed in recorded and broadcast material. Pictures of the sisters in magazines and newspapers portray them as both fashionable and fashioned, clearly up-to-date in their choice of clothes and hairstyles. Although sometimes photographed in matching, glamorous stage outfits, they appear in many more casual portraits and snapshots in which the only coordinated aspect is their hair (although this may simply have been a practical consideration, as their coiffure for a photography session could be retained for an evening performance). These infinitely varied, cosmopolitan images contrast with the artistic scheme imposed by the sisters' music industry masters, always heavily inflected with intimations of their Dixie origins.

Once under Kapp's control at Brunswick, the Boswells were launched upon a recording schedule that emphasized a Southern-themed repertoire. Many of their releases in 1931 and 1932 were in this category: 'Roll On, Mississippi, Roll On,' 'Got The South In My Soul,' 'An Evening In Caroline,' and, of course, 'Heebie Jeebies.' Even those numbers that ostensibly had nothing to do with the South were likely to feature Connie's lowdown, preaching gospel style. Their first film, a short entitled *Close Farm-ony* shot in 1931, relied on an established white Southern stereotype, the rural

farm worker, for the sisters' characterization, dressing them in overalls and seating them on hay bales (even disguising the piano in hay).<sup>35</sup> The following year they appeared in the first of Vitaphone's *Rambling Round Radio Row* series of Hollywood-focused short films. Again, their Southernness is underscored: this time through the musical material (a song called 'Lou'siana Waddle') and through their spoken dialogue, which clearly showcased their heavy accents. An alternative, more elegant but equally Southern-identified image was used for their appearance in Paramount's feature-length star vehicle *The Big Broadcast of 1932*. Dressed in white organza gowns, with gardenia corsages on their shoulders, they are introduced as 'those three little girls from New Orleans.'

Although not entirely a secret, throughout the Boswell Sisters' collective stardom – that is, between 1931 and early 1936 – Connie's disability was deliberately downplayed, at her own request. Some journalistic reports may mention it as a fact in passing, but feature articles tend to steer well clear, instead producing semi-fictitious, 'inspiring' accounts of the girls' rise from abject poverty to radio fame.<sup>36</sup> A collection of typescript press releases dating from around 1933, complete with blanks to be filled in regarding date and place of appearance, shows that the Boswell administrative team, if not the sisters themselves, contributed to the regular rewriting of their personal histories. Only one of the eleven, the longest, refers very briefly to a 'siege of infantile paralysis' in Connie's teen years. The detailed chronicles of the sisters' 1933 London visit in the music trade magazine *Melody Maker*, which gave the British press its first opportunity to describe the girls first-hand, genteelly avoided the issue, even when relating the story of the sisters' having been mobbed at the Palladium while attending a Duke Ellington concert, and of their hasty escape from the crowd of autograph-hungry fans.<sup>37</sup>

The rhetoric adopted in photographs and visual representations of

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35 The image corresponds to the yokel look chosen by white New Orleans bands in vaudeville fifteen years earlier; see Sudhalter, Plate 1, for a picture of Tom Brown's 'Band from Dixieland' in 1915, dressed in hillbilly garb. According to Chica Minnerly, this film shoot was not an altogether happy experience; Boswell Minnerly, personal interview. Martha, particularly, objected strongly to having to hold a duck.

36 One journalist who regularly wrote about the sisters, Adolph Meise of the *New Orleans States*, was overtly protective: 'and Connie fights continually to keep the public from knowing her affliction – in fact I have yet to find a person who is conscious of her handicap after having met her – she just doesn't promote such thoughts ...' 'Black Outs,' *New Orleans States* (6 December 1931).

37 'The Boswells – In Person – Famous Sisters Here At Last,' *Melody Maker* 10:6 (1933) 11. The paper also shows a photograph of the sisters being mobbed as they got into their car taking them away from the venue.

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34 For Connie's opinion of Kapp's commerciality, see Friedwald, 171–2. Kapp's role in and influence on the American popular music industry is comprehensively discussed throughout Giddins.





Figure 8.2 Advertisement for Brunswick record company, 1932. Collection of the author.

the sisters is necessarily slightly more ingenious. Although Connie's impairment was only visible in movement, thereby only really an issue for live performance and motion pictures, a visual rhetoric of vitality was commonplace in celebrity photography, and attempts were made to conform. Overwhelmingly, either she is pictured sitting with her sisters or the shots are cropped to show only their heads and shoulders. However, there are other pictures that show the sisters in the middle of some sort of playful activity, such as a football huddle or a California beach scene. These photographs suggest sport and movement that in reality would have been difficult, if not impossible, for Connie. In this respect, public portraiture of Connie mirrors the attitude taken at the same time by Franklin Delano Roosevelt towards his own public image, which constructed both visually and verbally a nondisabled health and vigor. Although his disability was no secret, he never allowed himself to be photographed or depicted in his wheelchair.<sup>38</sup>

Even more remarkable are the ways Connie is normalized or fantasized in advertisement cartoons or animations. A trade magazine advertisement for Brunswick artists in 1932 includes a full-length caricature of the sisters standing in performance (Figure 8.2). The 1932 Fleisher animation *Sleepy Time Down South*, produced for Paramount, mixes footage of them singing in their normal formation with fully mobile animated figures, all three identically drawn as Betty-Boop-type images. MGM's *Toyland Broadcast of 1934*, which parodies a whole host of radio personalities including Boswell collaborators Bing Crosby and the Mills Brothers, features the 'Doll Sisters,' who perform a dance routine singing a song about the Mississippi moon. But perhaps the most bizarre of these animations is the 1935 Krazy Kat cartoon *The Hot-Cha Melody*, distributed by Columbia, in which Crosby, Kate Smith, Rudy Vallee, and the Boswell Sisters are all caricatured. Crosby, Smith, and Vallee all emerge from the grilles of valve radios to perform, exposed from head to waist. The Boswells, however, become the radios themselves; only their faces emerge, and they perform a short dance with their radio bodies. The other artists are caricatured through physical mannerisms as well as musical, vocal, and facial features – 'Kate Smith' gesticulates broadly with open arms, and 'Harry Mills' cups his hands around his mouth to form a trumpet. In the absence of any instantly recognizable performative gestures derived from the Boswells' live act, the cartoonists were obliged to create animations that performed movements appropriate to a 'sister act,' drawing on a cultural norm to fill in an otherwise obvious gap.

In the spring of 1936, at the height of their popularity, the Boswell Sisters disbanded, officially because of the recent marriages of all the

38 Hugh Gallagher, *FDR's Splendid Deception* (Arlington VA: Vandemere Press, 1994).



sisters – and Vet's as yet unannounced pregnancy. Commentators have speculated whether the real reason was because of Kapp's intensifying interference in their creativity, which had grown from simply selecting their material to introducing an arranger to their recording sessions, effectively preventing the sisters from having any musical control over the finished product. Kapp's keen eye for the commercial was frequently blind to what made a performance original, and his overwhelming regard for the work as written by the composer (and owned by the music publishing companies) made him adamant about how far he was prepared to let his artists go in the way they jazzed up their material, exhorting them always to 'stick to the melody.' The sisters' free-associating arrangements had brought them into conflict with Kapp on a number of occasions, as is borne out by comparisons of takes of the same song that were rejected and accepted by him. However, Friedwald has also suggested that Connie may simply have wanted to get on with a solo career, and her sisters' marriages provided a convenient excuse for the break-up. The underlying reason may be the most prosaic – throughout their stardom, the girls frequently avowed their intention to devote themselves solely to marriage if and when that occurred.

When Kapp signed the Boswell Sisters to Brunswick, he also signed Connie on a solo contract, but his artistic strategy for her alone differed crucially in terms of the material he chose for her to record. Instead of highlighting her Southern origins, he increasingly kept her away from the blues or any song that hinted at minstrelsy's vocabulary and instead gave her much more standard dance-band fare, foxtrots and ballads, although (unlike her closest comparators Mildred Bailey and Lee Wiley) she was never regularly employed as a band 'canary.'<sup>39</sup> This only occasionally gave her an opportunity to swing and none at all to scat; she was pitched professionally against other white female singers whose careers were determined more by their Broadway reputation (for instance, Ruth Etting and Ethel Merman) or their radio dominance (Kate Smith and Jessica Dragonette) than by their musical imagination and prowess. Yet even amidst these constraints, Connie's idiosyncratic attitude to her material prevailed, especially on her earlier recordings – aficionados of 'hot' singing called her 'the one and only.'<sup>40</sup> As Ella Fitzgerald later said, 'When I was a girl, I listened to records by all the singers, white and

black, and I know that Connee [*sic*] Boswell was doing things that no one else was doing at the time.'<sup>41</sup> Her solo arrangements still change key and feel, though with nothing like the frequency of the sisters' sides, and she skillfully alters melodies and rhythms in the second choruses of tunes to match both the feel and the riffs of her accompanists. Her irreverent approach to the beat – now languid, now strict – disrupts even the least formal of arrangements, but the effect (such as that on her recording of 'Carioca' from 1934, where the band keep impeccable time against her) is not to suggest rhythmic incompetence, but rather to provide an expressive counterpoint to the precision of the music's pulse.<sup>42</sup> She places syllables with the same intent as a dancer might place her foot, seemingly physically involving and synchronizing her voice with the dancing couple she describes.

Almost as soon as the Sisters had retired, Connie began to record with Bob Crosby and the Bobcats, an octet specializing in an updated New Orleans sound, which Duke Ellington called 'a truly gut-bucket band with a strong blues influence.' The Bobcats also accompanied her first solo dates.<sup>43</sup> The sides cut with the Bobcats are the first of Connie's solo recordings on which her lowdown blues sensibilities really come to the fore, and they mark a subtle shift in her solo repertoire, the lyrics hinting strongly at Dixie and Ole' Caroline. However, Kapp did not transfer his enthusiasm for Southern-ness as a marketing 'hook' immediately and wholesale onto Connie's solo career; instead, he created a new forum, pairing her in a vaudevillian duet with his other major star, Bob's brother Bing. Connie had already formed a close professional relationship with Bing, with whom the sisters had recorded in 1932, and on whose weekly, networked show they appeared regularly from 1934. Bing duetted with many partners, but his musical relationship with Connie was one of the first and most durable of his career. Between 1937 and 1954, they produced at least nine recorded sides and dozens of radio broadcasts together.<sup>44</sup>

The cosy and comfortable nature of the Crosby/Boswell interaction on

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41 Nicholson, 12. Connie began spelling her name 'Connee' during the war, giving as her reason that she would forget to dot the 'i' when signing so many autographs during her visits to veterans' hospitals. Her decision may also have been influenced by a residual weakness in her right hand caused by polio.

42 'Carioca' (Gus Kahn, Vincent Youmans, Edward Eliscu), Brunswick 6871 (1934), reissued on *Heart and Soul: Connie Boswell 25 Hits 1932–42*, Living Era CD AJA 5221 (1997).

43 Giddins, 509, 16.

44 Throughout 1940 and 1941, Connie was a member of Bing's regular comedy-and-music team on his Kraft Music Hall program on NBC.

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39 The solo recordings made by Connie in the early 30s that strongly reflect Southern-ness (or an assumed blackness) are normally those on which she is a featured vocalist with an established band; for instance, 'Washboard Blues' and 'Carolina' with the Casa Loma Orchestra, and a New Orleans medley with Red Nichols' Orchestra.

40 Leonard G. Feather, 'Fans and Fancies: A Statistical Survey of Rhythm Club Opinions,' *Swing Music* 1:3 (1935) 60.



record is noticeable not only in their musical and vocal empathy, but also in the spoken (and unscripted) asides – an essential feature of almost all Bing's duets that allowed him to showcase his 'Tambo and Bones' ad-libbing talents.<sup>45</sup> Clearly as quick-witted as her partner, Connie spars with him naturally; as a co-star later put it, they sound like 'two old friends that met accidentally on the street,' or, closer still, like a long-established romantic couple.<sup>46</sup> With Connie, Bing could also indulge his Southern fantasies. He calls her 'Miss Constance' or 'Sister Constance'; she returns with 'Brother Bingstance' or 'Brother Bington.' He matches her accent and vowel sounds accurately, and when the lyrics require – as in the gospel 'Yes, Indeed!' and 'Basin Street Blues' – the ad-libs are packed with minstrelsy's garbled grammar. But where Boswell and Crosby excel is in creating and exploiting intimacy with the listener, both on and off the microphone. At the beginning of 'Basin Street Blues,' for instance, Connie is heard just in the background inviting Bing to 'pull up a chair.'<sup>47</sup> They bring the entire performance landscape alive by drawing the musicians into the relationship with the audience, frequently addressing or referring to them by name and reminding the listener of the band members' humanity and individuality.

Perhaps the best example of their intimate artistry comes in the 1939 side '(Ho-dle-ay) Start the Day Right.'<sup>48</sup> Unusually for a Crosby/Boswell duet, there is no ad-libbing over the introduction – a harmonized reveille on muted trumpet – and one is instantly aware that this is not to be one of their rib-poking swing numbers. The verses describe a couple's morning routine of waking, opening the windows of their bedroom, dressing, drinking coffee, and leaving for work. Connie's tone is understated, as if she is singing under her breath while doing something else, and Bing's is gentle and throaty, as if he had just woken up. Both sing considerably behind the beat, making them sound even more sleepy and relaxed. Bing begins his solo lines somewhat off-microphone, creating a sense of space between the singers, gradually moving in as the couple unite for breakfast. On the second chorus, the ad-libbing begins; whistling

and humming take the place of the odd line of lyrics, but others are changed to bring the listener right into the couple's bedroom banter: '[Boswell] Back to the window, up with the window, down with some air / [Crosby] off with the slippers, on with the shoes and then comb your hair,' becomes (spoken), '[Boswell] Whaddayou say we get some of that ... air? [Crosby] Come on, rugged, comb your hair.' The white-picket-fence domesticity of the lyrics is enhanced by the waltz tempo (which later becomes a swung four-in-a-bar). The listener is left with the impression of a couple dancing around their cottage, stretching and bending at the window, and whirling out of the kitchen door. Only after considering the image in the light of the singers' actual identity does the listener realize that all the song's movement – in tempo and in lyrics – would have been impossible for Connie.

In late 1937, Connie recorded what was to be her biggest solo hit with the Bobcats. The song, 'Martha,' was an adaptation of Friedrich von Flotow's 'Ah! M'appari tutt'amor' from the opera *Martha* – an aria familiar to listeners from Enrico Caruso's recordings thirty years earlier.<sup>49</sup> Connie sings what was the standard English translation of the text but swings it four-in-a-bar; the band adds a stop-time shout 'Oh, Martha!' in the instrumental solo section, and cheerfully joins in the singing on the final strain. Although apparently he had initially come up with the idea of swinging an 'oldie,' and Connie had faithfully stuck to the melody, Kapp was furious at the outcome. Connie reported that he 'nearly fainted' at the playback, shouting that the record was a 'desecration.'<sup>50</sup> The only way she could convince him to release the record was to agree to take out a full-page advertisement in *Variety* absolving him of all responsibility should it fail to achieve commercial success.<sup>51</sup>

The Crosbys' part-time, brotherly stewardship of Connie in the late 1930s in some ways may have shielded her from some of the crueller effects of striking out on her own. Already a star and a familiar face to her audience, who would have constructed her through fantasy radio encounters over a period of years, she had nonetheless to create herself anew. Although her solo recording career dovetailed with the Sisters', she had not cultivated a separate image that included live solo appearances until just before the group disbanded. The creative and physical demands

45 Crosby's duetting style is examined in Giddins, 513–17, especially 516–17, which deal with his duets with Boswell.

46 Fred Allen, on 'Philco Radio Time,' ABC Network, 4 June 4 1947; reproduced on Connee Boswell, *On The Air* (Redmond Nostalgia, n.d.).

47 'Basin Street Blues' (Spencer Williams), *Command Performance No. 31* radio broadcast, 30 August 1942. Issued on *Connie Boswell: They Can't Take These Songs Away From Me*, Jasmine Records JASCD 386 (2001).

48 '(Ho-dle-ay) Start The Day Right' (Al Lewis, Maurice Spitalny, Charles Tobias). Decca 2626 (1939), reissued on *They Can't Take These Songs Away From Me*.

49 'Martha' (Friedrich von Flotow), Decca 1600 (1937/8), reissued on *They Can't Take These Songs Away From Me*.

50 Friedwald, 81.

51 Kapp had had a similar reaction to one of the Sisters' arrangements, 'The Darktown Strutters' Ball,' recorded in 1934. Long thought to be lost or unissued, a 78 surfaced in the 1980s in Australia, apparently the only place he would allow it to be released.



on a solo singer were considerably different from those on 'harmonists,' as the sisters were called, in what was essentially a variety act; and, crucially, her physical impairment had not yet been exposed on stage. Moreover, it was not only the public who had mis-embodied Connie's voice in their fantasies, as she herself recalled: 'Producers who knew me only from radio or recordings would call and ask me to audition for a show. I'd go over and as soon as they saw me in a wheelchair they'd freeze. It hurt. Really hurt.'<sup>52</sup> Potential employers had to weigh how much they wanted to capitalize on a woman they knew to be a prodigious musical talent and a considerable box-office and sponsorship draw, against how much they wished to compromise or negotiate production values that Connie could not physically realize.

Connie had to find a way of reconciling her impaired ability to fulfill these new demands with the expectations of her as an established star. Her predicament, as one who had achieved high cultural status while simultaneously concealing a disability, is summarized in Thomson's study of the disabled figure in American culture:

A disability's degree of visibility also affects social relations. An invisible disability, much like a homosexual identity, always presents the dilemma of whether or when to come out or to pass. One must always anticipate the risk of tainting a new relationship by announcing an invisible impairment or the equal hazard of surprising someone by revealing a previously undisclosed disability.<sup>53</sup>

An unexpected, additional pressure came in January 1938, when Eddie Cantor helped Roosevelt launch the March of Dimes appeal for the new National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. Entertainers countrywide were enlisted in projects to raise money for the appeal; Connie and Bing cut a version of 'Alexander's Ragtime Band,' which was introduced by Cantor. The side was backed by a medley; Bing chose 'Home On The Range' while Connie sang, perhaps somewhat ironically, 'True Confession.'<sup>54</sup> It has been commented that the March of Dimes was 'a cause close to Connie's heart,' making it a natural choice for her patronage.<sup>55</sup> This may be, and it is true that she subsequently headlined on the annual radio appeal show until 1942; however, she was still unwilling to speak out

publicly as a person disabled by polio.

The huge success of both 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' and 'Martha' in the spring of 1938, with the concomitant demands for personal appearances, may have pushed Connie to a point at which she felt that she had to come clean and discuss her disability publicly. In May 1938, an article appeared in the *New York Post*, celebrating her courage in the face of disadvantage and comparing her favorably with FDR.<sup>56</sup> In July 1938, she was pictured on the front cover of *Down Beat* in her stage wheelchair, and the following month, an article (almost verbatim from the *Post* piece) entitled 'Boswell Would Refuse Cure for Paralyzed Legs to Help Economic Cripples!' was printed in the same magazine. Speaking of her rhinestone-studded chair, she admitted,

It's quite a contraption ... . When I was with my sisters, we used to be seated on the stage at the piano when the curtain went up and we stayed there until it went down. I didn't want to use a wheelchair then because I was afraid to arouse sympathy. I wanted to win out strictly on merit. But now that the trio has broken up and I've made a name for myself, I don't care anymore.<sup>57</sup>

The statement reveals more than a simple determination not to play the sympathy card; Connie was 'afraid.' If one views her deception as a form of cross-dressing, of assuming the opposite identity in a culturally inscribed binarism, Connie may not have been just levelling the playing-field by assuming a nondisabled identity, but could also have been reacting to what Marjorie Garber calls 'the anxiety of economic or cultural dislocation, the anticipation or recognition of "otherness" as loss.'<sup>58</sup>

In the article and in interviews for many years afterwards, Boswell claimed that her paralysis was due to a childhood accident, that she had broken her back by being thrown from her friend's wagon against a telegraph pole; however, after her death, Vet confirmed that polio had been the cause of Connie's disability. There is evidence that Connie genuinely believed that the virus on its own could not cause 'infantile paralysis,' and that some form of accident must have been involved in

52 'Look Applauds Connee Boswell,' *Look Magazine*, 4 February 1958.

53 Thomson, 1997, 14.

54 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' (Irving Berlin). Decca 1887 (1938); reissued on *Bing Crosby: His Greatest Hits of the 30s*, Living Era CD AJA 5394 (2001).

55 Edward Chase, liner notes to *Connie Boswell: Moonlight and Roses*, Flare Records, ROYCD 223 2001.

56 'She Wins her Victories Without the Army: She Has Made a Good Thing of Life in a Wheel Chair,' *New York Post* (9 May 1938).

57 'Boswell Would Refuse Cure for Paralyzed Legs to Help Economic Cripples!' *Down Beat* (August 1938) 8.

58 Garber, 390.





Figure 8.3 Portrait of Connie Boswell, ca. 1943, in program for Curtain Time. Collection of the author.

order for the condition to develop.<sup>59</sup> Her reluctance to admit to disease may have had its roots in the prevalent attitude toward disability in pre-civil-rights America. Within the moral framework that structured American society in the Depression years, seeing disability as a curse or as the just deserts for some past evil provided 'a psychological safeguard against the intolerable randomness of experience.'<sup>60</sup> A pathological cause for paralysis was more suspect than an accident caused by children at play (an 'Act of God' rather than the result of human infant carelessness); and since mothers also tended to be blamed for their children's afflictions, in proposing an alternative 'truth,' Boswell may well have been deflecting reproach from her family.<sup>61</sup>

Whatever her fears may have been, up to this point Boswell's solo career does not appear to have suffered inordinately or immediately from her disability. A full recording schedule buoyed up by weekly radio appearances kept her in the public's eyes and ears until the end of 1941. However, with the United States' entry into World War II on 8 December 1941, her career suffered one of its first major setbacks. Although she wished to join the entertainment tours organized by the USO, Connie was not allowed to do so because of her dependency on a wheelchair, which she was told represented a safety risk to herself and to those who would travel with her. While arguably less gifted but more mobile singers such as Dinah Shore grew in popularity with the troops overseas, Connie was limited to visiting veterans' hospitals stateside, 'showing by her example that a physical disability did not have to mean the end of the road.'<sup>62</sup> In other words, she was not to be a Forces Sweetheart, but a consolation to those whose celebrity fantasies may have been shattered by contemplating a lifetime of injury and disability. At the same time, the Crosby brothers became less available to her; Bob

59 Marge Ryter, oral history, recorded by Jan Shapiro, 23–24 June 1989; Boswell collection, Hogan Jazz Archives.

60 On the 'just-world' theory for disability as a sign of divine retribution, see Thomson, 1997, 36. The random and abjectifying effects of the Depression would have intensified the search for justification of misfortune.

61 For an examination of mother-blaming and disability in inter-war America, see Janice Brockley, 'Martyred Mothers and Merciful Fathers: Exploring Disability and Motherhood in the Lives of Jerome Greenfield and Raymond Repouille,' in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (eds), *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); for the consequences for one family of defying medical regimes in the care of a sick child, see Emily K. Abel, 'Hospitalizing Maria Germani,' in Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (eds), *'Bad' Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998).

62 Hemming and Hadju, 69.



Crosby signed up for military service immediately once the United States entered the war, and Bing was becoming increasingly occupied with both his film career and his own USO tours. Further misfortunes affected the careers of all American musicians; the War Production Board all but banned the use of shellac in April 1942, and the strike by the American Federation of Musicians in August of the same year lasted until September 1943.

At some point in 1943, perhaps because there was no recording work available, Boswell joined a West Coast revue, *Curtain Time*, headlining with another sibling star forging a solo career, Chico Marx.<sup>63</sup> Inside the printed program there are several photographs of Connie, including a full-page portrait of her in a slightly off-the-shoulder white satin gown with roses along the neckline, her curly long hair loose over her shoulders and adorned by a large white bow – an image that clearly references Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind* (Figure 8.3). The front of the program is a cartoon of the two entertainers, Chico playing a grand piano with Connie perched on top. Somewhat incongruously, she is pictured in a short cocktail dress with shapely, elongated legs crossed at the ankle (Figure 8.4). The fiction of the cartoon is unlikely to have extended to the stage production, however; by this time Connie was again making an effort to normalize her appearance in live performances, using a custom-made brace to hold herself upright independently. The contraption fit under a full-length gown and was mounted on ball bearings, so that she could be propelled by the hand on and off the stage, and even engaged in modest dance routines.<sup>64</sup> Some years

63 The program is undated, but it can be located between 1943 and 1946; as Connie was broadcasting regularly from New York in 1944 and 1945, it is likely to be 1943.

64 Boswell Minnerly, personal interview. Mrs. Minnerly has kept the brace for her Boswell Museum of Music, in Springfield, NY.

Figure 8.4 Front cover, program for *Curtain Time*, ca. 1943, featuring Chico Marx and Connie Boswell. Collection of the author.





later, she explained that the reversion to disguise was a result of a negative reaction on behalf of the audience and promoters:

When for a time I wasn't getting booked, I wanted to know why. I found out that the getting on and offstage was a pretty painful-looking procedure. People came to night clubs to enjoy themselves, to have fun. They wanted to get away from trouble. I could understand that well enough and that's why I went to work to smooth out my entrances and exits. ... That's how I dreamed up the skirt-covered wheel chair I use for my appearances. It's high, the wheels are fast and it facilitates everything. People don't have to look down at me. You start losing your audience when you're in a low wheel chair.<sup>65</sup>

In *Swing Parade of 1946*, one of her last feature films, Connie is shown using the brace and performing seated in two different numbers.<sup>66</sup> In 'Stormy Weather,' a dark, full-skirted gown hides the brace, but in 'Just A Little Fond Affection,' she is seated on a wrought-iron bench in front of a large 'pond' surrounded by flowers and lights. On the left there is a sundial to enhance the garden imagery. She wears an off-the-shoulder white gown, with a massive skirt that completely obscures the bench seat, and her hair is gathered on either side of her ears, decorated with gardenias and left loose to fall on her shoulders.<sup>67</sup> Constructed as the Southern belle, like Scarlett O'Hara Connie performs a femininity and fragility that hide a steely core – a transgressive combination that manifests itself also in the choice of a 'man's song' ('Just A Little Fond Affection' was at the time associated only with Buddy Stewart). Her other song, 'Stormy Weather,' is itself a transgressive choice, for it was most closely associated with African-American entertainers Ethel Waters and Lena Horne; however, the belle in this case also seems to subsume the appropriation of race-identified material.<sup>68</sup> For Connie,

acting the belle gave her access to a mode of dress that could obscure her mechanical support, and to a repertoire that extended beyond the white band-canary's traditional material. But it also engaged both her and her audience in a kind of pact, for the 'strategic femininity' that constitutes the belle was and is understood as a social masquerade.

It is perhaps ironic that the seated performance of 'Just A Little Fond Affection,' which allows Connie's foot to be seen tapping under her skirt, looks more natural than the emotional, stand-and-deliver 'Stormy Weather.' Although the brace allows her to perform upright she cannot move below the waist, and her animated hand gestures do not entirely detract the gaze from her lower body. This performance and its viewing exemplify the dilemmas faced by Connie and her audience, throwing into relief the various contradictions and paradoxes that underpin her post-confession career. Feminist film theory posits that the female entertainer, the woman on the screen – particularly a show-girl as defined by the narrative – connotes an erotic 'to-be-looked-at-ness' and invites the (male-perspective) gaze.<sup>69</sup> Such sexual objectification is fundamentally incompatible with the 'asexual objectification' frequently experienced by disabled women – the notion that disability precludes sexuality and even beauty.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, Connie's attempts to make her disability less visible while she conformed more closely to show-business ideals (that is, performing standing) actually run the risk of making it more noticeable, as the lack of lower-body movement makes her performance appear awkward and somehow peculiar. As the song progresses, those familiar with her biography could find their eyes being drawn to the site of her disability, and gradually the gaze would become a stare, thus rendering the socially acceptable pleasure of beholding a female entertainer into the socially unacceptable (yet still ultimately pleasurable) practice of ascribing aberrance and wondering at it unbidden.<sup>71</sup>

65 'Connee Boswell Now Nation's Most Successful Cripple,' *Boston Sunday Post* (25 February 1951).

66 Phil Karlson (director), *Swing Parade of 1946* (USA: Monogram Pictures Corp., 1946).

67 Boswell's situation in a stylized garden scene reinforces the Southern belle image; see McPherson, 39: 'If ... the southern lady was a key image around which the South constructed (and still constructs) its postbellum identity, this lady was (and is) most often situated within a particular southern landscape.'

68 McPherson, 45; McPherson sees Southern 'white femininity as a crucial element of the imagined plantation home, and thus of the maintenance of racial oppression; ... the plantation mythologies of the early twentieth century were almost always populated by the requisite "happy darkies," content to labor in

the cotton fields and big houses of "dear ole" Dixie.' Thus the construction of the Boswells as Southern belles implies a natural white ownership (and hence appropriation) of all things black.

69 Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

70 Thomson, 1997, 25.

71 Thomson, 2001, 347: 'Gazing ... differs from staring in that it usually encompasses the entirety of the body, even as it objectifies and appropriates that body. Staring at disability, in contrast, intensely telescopes looking toward the physical signifier for disability.' See also Thomson, 1997, 31: 'Stigmatization not only reflects the tastes and opinions of the dominant group, it reinforces that group's idealized self-description as neutral, normal, legitimate, and identifiable ...'



It is at this level that Boswell's assumption of the belle persona becomes not only understandable, but also vital for the preservation of her relationship with her audience. The exchange between a performer and an audience operates along the same lines as any social relationship; the dynamics of exchanges between nondisabled and disabled people have certain characteristics that also manifest themselves in a performer-audience interaction. Thomson explains:

The interaction is usually strained because the nondisabled person may feel fear, pity, fascination, repulsion, or merely surprise, none of which is expressible according to social protocol. Besides the disconcerting dissonance between experienced and expressed reaction, a nondisabled person often does not know how to act toward a disabled person: how or whether to offer assistance; whether to acknowledge the disability; what words, gestures, or expectations to use or avoid.<sup>72</sup>

For Boswell and her audience, the figure of the belle, at least in part, could provide a solution. Already established as a masquerade of exaggerated femininity and etiquette, the belle as acted by Connie triggers an unstated agreement with her audience that she is performing something she both is and is not. As she makes an effort to conceal her disability she relieves her audience of discomfort, and in turn the audience may read her act of concealment as a generous act of etiquette. But that very generosity is part of her identity – she is, after all, a Southern woman – so the audience can simultaneously engage in the fantasy and pretend that there is no fantasy in the first place.

After the war, Connie did not disappear from public view but her career fluctuated erratically. Throughout the late 40s, she appeared on only a relative handful of radio and television shows and made no records. Yet a *Cosmopolitan* feature from October 1951 places her among America's 'Eight Best Girl Singers,' rating her above jazz icons Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, Anita O'Day, and Dinah Washington, and popular stars Lena Horne, Doris Day, and Judy Garland: 'All of these singers have their points but ... none is as gifted as, for example, Connie [sic] Boswell ... It is one of the ironies of the music business that Miss Boswell ... is without a recording contract, while the Fran Warrens and the Teresa Brewers and all the others of their ilk continue to turn out side after dreadful side.'<sup>73</sup> By the mid-1950s, she was recording again, although

producing albums rather than singles. Her post-war discography continued to accentuate her Southern identity, from her recording of 'Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah' with Bob Crosby and her landmark album with the Original Memphis Five, to the joking, almost parodic, Foghorn Leghorn interjections in her half-spoken, half-sung dialogue with the Paulette Sisters on 'Who Told You That Lie?' ('Ah say, somebody told you ...').<sup>74</sup> Her last major engagement was playing another Southern lady, 'Savannah Brown,' in the 1959 TV series *Pete Kelly's Blues*, starring opposite William Reynolds.<sup>75</sup> She died of cancer in 1976.

When I asked Connie's niece Chica why she felt the Boswells have been so effectively erased from jazz and pop music history, she said, 'Because they were white and because they were women.'<sup>76</sup> It could be that disability was the third strike of marginalization against Connie. Once acknowledged, her disguised disability may have constituted a negative presence – present by its absence, but present just the same – calling into question not just the normality of the image she projected, but also of those against whose more 'perfect' images her own was measured. In the belle she found a social discourse that mitigated the discomfort, allowing for doubled vision and for two conflicting 'truths' to be displayed at once. Nonetheless, eventually Connie's musical persona was subsumed beneath more acceptable models for pop and jazz icons – the white male Crosby and the black female Fitzgerald – and her fictionalized physical image merged with the undistinguished and indistinguishable portraits of dozens of swing canaries.

Like the images that erased evidence of her disability, Connie's singing frequently told of a fantasy physique, mis-embodying her voice in the form of a Latin dancer, or a black woman, or a 'normal' housewife. However, I would argue that Connie's disability was, as in Thomson's words, 'always ready to disclose itself.'<sup>77</sup> Connie's success, first with the Boswell Sisters and later on her own, can at least partially be theorized by invoking Marjorie Garber's evaluation of the attractions of transvestism

74 'Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah' (Allie Wrebel, Ray Gilbert), Decca 23478 (1946). *Connie Boswell And the Original Memphis Five in Hi-Fi*, RCA Victor LPM-1426; reissued on RCA CD 74321609952 (1998). 'Who Told You That Lie?' (Bee Walker, Jack Segal, Eddie Cantor), Decca 18881 (1946); reissued on *They Can't Take These Songs Away From Me*.

75 The role appears to have been created for the series (and for her?), as it does not figure in either the radio series or the feature film that preceded the television series.

76 Boswell Minnerly, personal interview.

77 Thomson, 2001, 347.

72 Thomson, 1997, 12.

73 George Frazier, 'Eight Best Girl Singers,' *Cosmopolitan*, October 1951. The other seven are Ella Fitzgerald, Lee Wiley, Mildred Bailey, Edith Piaf, Kay Starr, Ethel Merman, and Mary Martin.



as the working out of a 'category crisis'.<sup>78</sup> In their wild arrangements, Connie and the Sisters played out the tensions between many opposites at a time when America had reached what Garber would call 'an epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity': the borders between black and white, male and female, vocal and instrumental jazz, highbrow and lowbrow, the urbane North and the reactionary South are all tested and blurred in the Boswells' music. But Garber further proposes that transvestism also functions as 'a sign of overdetermination – a mechanism of displacement from one blurred boundary to another ... indicating the likelihood of a crisis somewhere, elsewhere'; so Connie's manipulation of gendered and racialized discourses could have arisen from her daily conflict with an even more fundamental cultural binarism that shaped her life – that of disability and nondisability. On the other hand, by adopting such diverse discursive positions and by dissipating the cultural focus among so many categories, the sisters may have also been providing many layers of protection for Connie's ultimate otherness.

There are still more tangible ways of locating Connie's disability in her creative output. Like race and gender, disability is a culturally embedded construct; and like any discourse of difference it should be possible for it to manifest itself in any cultural expression – even in music. It is possible that Connie's disability may have helped her and her sisters gain a unique perception of normality and aberration that allowed them to treat their musical material with greater abandon than did their peers. Furthermore, like images of disabled people, Connie's recordings, both alone and with her sisters, invited listeners to identify and focus on disfigurement, their structural and melodic fragmentation of songs providing the prime expressive mode for their categorical mayhem. Many years later, Connie said, 'I'm sure that to the average ear we must have sounded like little green people from outer space.'<sup>79</sup> Connie's 'disfiguring' approach to her musical material did not always meet with approval, as evidenced in Jack Kapp's reaction to her 'Martha.' Moreover, the composer of the sisters' first Brunswick side, 'Whadja Do To Me?', was reported to have complained, 'Whadja do to

my song?''<sup>80</sup> These reactions were not confined to those who had to deal professionally with the products of the Boswells' creativity. Just before the sisters became nationally known, a Washington woman wrote to the San Francisco station that employed them, 'Why don't you choke those Boswell Sisters? How wonderful it would be if they sang just one song like it was written. Really when they get through murdering it, one can never recognize the original.' Another from Oakland wrote (neatly giving her disgust a racial tone, as well), 'But please, please, if you are going to keep those Boswell Sisters tell them to change their stuff and quit that squawking and harmonize a tune. All my friends say the same thing. They call them "savage chanters" and tune them out.'<sup>81</sup>

Taking the analogy between Connie's recordings and images of disabled people one step further, we may begin to consider them according to Thomson's taxonomy of four 'visual rhetorics of disability' that 'illuminate how and what the [images] intend to persuade their audiences to believe or do':

the *wondrous* mode directs the viewer to look up in awe of difference; the *sentimental* mode instructs the spectator to look down with benevolence; the *exotic* mode coaches the observer to look across a wide expanse toward an alien object; and the *realistic* mode suggests that the onlooker align with the object of scrutiny.<sup>82</sup>

The reactions these modes seek – awe, benevolence, distance, identification – are also common goals for musical representation. In a musical rhetoric, Thomson's modes still tell and persuade without linguistic cues. The first and third, which rely respectively on virtuosity and quasi-erotic appeal, are particularly relevant to the appreciation of the embellishment and improvisation characteristic of jazz; in Connie's musical output, it is fairly clear how her disfiguring approach might inspire awe – through its sheer accomplishment and range – and suggest distance – through the cultural disjunctions between the original material and the finished product.

Of course, the equation of images of disability with jazz may appear less pertinent and even problematic when one considers that the valuing of creative invention and interpretative ability is common to many cultural arenas, and jazz criticism does not tend to see alterations of the musical object as aberrations – in fact, quite the opposite. But jazz was not always heard in the same way as it is now. Connie rose to stardom in

78 Garber, 16: 'one of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture is to indicate the place of what I call "category crisis," disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social or aesthetic dissonances ... By "category crisis" I mean a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another.'

79 John Lucas, 'Another Boswell Chronicle,' *Jazz Journal* 27:2 (1977) 5.

80 Friedwald, 169.

81 McCain, liner notes to *The Boswell Sisters Collection*, Vol. 5.

82 Thomson, 2001, 339, 346.



an age when the value and propriety of jazz, socially and culturally, was still being fiercely debated, and it had yet to be argued as an art form.<sup>83</sup> In many circles, jazz was perceived as aberrant and unwelcome, and the Oakland woman's reference to 'squawking' colloquially expressed what some music critics said at the time about commercial 'melodic' jazz such as that propounded by Paul Whiteman, let alone the hot dance music of New Orleans and New York. Its sounds were labelled 'grotesque' and its rhythms 'contrary to natural laws,' even to the point of being claimed to be indicative of pathology, clearly aligning jazz to deformity and physical deviance.<sup>84</sup>

But despite the potential for criticism and censure, the Boswell Sisters, and later Connie on her own, were ultimately beyond reproach as musicians, technically and intellectually. Furthermore, they were seen by those who marketed them as the conduit through which America's listening habits would be changed. For Kapp, they embraced both the black and white traditions, and they were credited by New York's most powerful entertainment agent of the 1930s and 40s, Cork O'Keefe, as the women who made 'real' jazz commercially viable.<sup>85</sup> They were instrumental in creating a new popular sound, and Connie herself, as noted before, was fundamental in constructing the sound of the female popular singer. Communicating through what Alain Locke later called 'the characteristic musical speech of the modern age,' like Thomson's photographers, they used rhetorical strategies that persuaded their listening audiences to experience and accept difference via a set of familiar relational values.<sup>86</sup> Problematizing musical images of Connie through McPherson's, Thomson's and Garber's analytical models allows a better understanding of the reception of early jazz's otherness as not simply a matter of race or class. Heard (and seen) in this way, Connie's voice may finally come to be rightfully embodied, telling of an alternative physicality that, like the music it made, embraced a complex and fluid combination of biological, aesthetic, social (and even political) differences.



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83 For a varied collection of source material related to the reception of early jazz, see Robert Walser (ed.), *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); particularly Chapter 12, 'The Jazz Problem,' 41–54.

84 Vincent Lopez, in *The Etude*, 1924, reprinted in Walser, 48.

85 Boswell Minnerly, personal interview.

86 Locke, Alain, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington, DC: The Associates In Negro Folk Education, 1936), quoted in Walser, 79.