“Like I Said, Not Everybody Who Comes to Sing is Always a Vocalist”: An Exploration of Vocalist Participation at Jam Sessions

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... 3

Introduction .................................................................................................................... 4

Jam Sessions .................................................................................................................. 4

Perceived Personality of Musicians .............................................................................. 8

Methodology .................................................................................................................. 12

Observations .................................................................................................................. 13

Participation .................................................................................................................. 14

Interviews ....................................................................................................................... 15

Data Analysis ................................................................................................................. 16

Findings .......................................................................................................................... 16

Vocalists are Not Welcome at Jam Sessions ............................................................... 17

Vocalist Stereotypes ..................................................................................................... 20

Vocalists Lack Musicianship ......................................................................................... 20

Vocalists are Divas ......................................................................................................... 23

Vocalist Challenges ....................................................................................................... 27

Vocalists Diminish the Opportunity to Play ............................................................... 27

Vocalists are Difficult to Accompany .......................................................................... 29

Vocalists Stereotypes and Challenges: A Communicative Practice ......................... 33

Discussion of Findings .................................................................................................. 37

Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 39

References ....................................................................................................................... 40
Abstract

This ethnographic study of a well-known jam session in Chicago examines the prevalence of vocalist stereotypes and how they are manifested communicatively in this context. Supplemented with insights provided by a variety of jazz musicians through a series of eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this field study identifies two stereotypes and two challenges associated with jazz vocalists: (a) vocalists lack musicianship, (b) vocalists are divas, (c) vocalists diminish the opportunity to play music, and (d) vocalists are challenging to play with. Due to these stereotypes and challenges, vocalists are typically unwelcome at jam sessions and tend to be viewed unfavorably by instrumentalists in this context. This over-arching attitude not only characterizes the interactions between vocalists and instrumentalists, but speaks to the competitive nature of jam sessions more broadly.
There is an unspoken, yet widely acknowledged dichotomy between vocalists and instrumentalists, particularly in the jazz community. In jazz, the musicianship of vocalists is often underestimated and in some cases, explicitly challenged. This relationship is particularly interesting in the context of jam sessions—Highly improvisational, fluid, and unpredictable settings in which musicians gather to play music recreationally. Historically, vocalist participation in these contexts is minimal. Given their association with commercial, big band music and their general lack of improvisational skills at the time, vocalists typically refrained from engaging in these settings. As jazz has evolved, the nature of jam sessions has arguably changed. However, vocalist participation in these settings remains relatively limited, even when it is explicitly supported and encouraged. While this is partially due to the negative presumptions associated with vocalists, the lack of vocalist participation in these settings speaks to the competitive nature of jam sessions more broadly. Venues where musicians are still expected to prove their musical worth, jam sessions constitute settings where the challenges of accompanying vocalists are heightened, placing instrumentalists in a highly vulnerable, uncomfortable position as their musicianship is called into question.

**Jam Sessions**

Jam sessions are recreational gatherings where musicians are invited to “sit in” and play a variety of indeterminately selected songs with other musicians (Cameron, 1954). In these settings, musicians typically perform without musical scores and without a specialized conductor to coordinate their performances. Often times, they have never met before nor played together in different contexts. In this way, jam sessions differ greatly from traditional musical settings in which the performing group is fixed and the music is more or less scripted (Berliner, 1994). In
contrast, jam sessions constitute an open, porous performing space where, in principle, any
musician is able to ‘sit in’ and contribute (Gooley, 2011).

Depending on the musician(s) running the session, its degree of formality of varies.
Whereas informal sessions are relatively flexible and unstructured, formal sessions are more
organized and systematic. The former tend to be scheduled spontaneously, while the latter occur
at regularly held intervals at pre-determined times and locations, such as the jam session at
McCarthy Tavern.

At formally structured sessions, the house band—a group of musicians that typically host
the session—plays a set roughly 45 to 60 minutes in length. Following their set, musicians in the
audience are invited on stage to “jam” with other musicians in attendance. This occurs in a
variety of ways. Some sessions, for instance, require attendees to sign up by writing their name
on a list, while others require attendees to introduce themselves to the session leader and
formally state their intention to play (Lippincott, 1968). Musicians invited to participate
collaboratively determine which tune they would like to perform and the key they would like to
perform it in (Cameron, 1954). Most of the time, the tune selected is known by every musician
about to participate. In instances where this is not the case, a brief stylistic, harmonic description
of the tune may be provided or the musician unfamiliar with the tune may be asked to postpone
their participation. Musicians continue to alternate in this pattern until the conclusion of the
session.

Jam sessions became prominent during the early 1940s amidst the transition from Swing
to Bebop. An organized space where musicians could gather to collaborate and experiment
musically, these spaces allowed musicians to play a style of music that contrasted significantly
with the popular, big band jazz of the day (DeVaux, 1997; Ellison, 1953; Gleason, 1958; Gooley, 2011). In this way, jam sessions constituted spaces where jazz was played not for the general public, but semi-privately for the aesthetic preferences of the performers themselves (Cameron, 1954). This allowed jazz musicians to liberate themselves from the responsibility of catering to the needs of a public audience, forming a closed circle that casual listeners were allowed to peer into and admire, but not enter or criticize (Gooley, 2011). This liberated musical environment contributed largely to the development of Bebop during the late 1930s and early 1940s, where jam sessions became an integral aspect of the jazz community and the music played at this time (Ellison, 1953).

During the Bebop era, jam sessions functioned as venues where “real” jazz musicians played “real” jazz—music infused with complex, highly dissonant harmonic structures, melodies, and rhythms, and played at remarkably fast tempos (Gleason, 1958; DeVaux, 2002). Specifically designed to test the limits of the jazz musician as an improvisor, this demanding musical environment fostered remarkably intense competition among musicians. Due to their highly competitive nature, sessions during this time were often referred to as “battles,” “competitions,” (Gooley, 2011) and “cutting sessions” (Ellison, 1953; DeVaux, 2002). To participate in these settings, musicians had to assert their musical prowess, demonstrating they possessed the musical talent, skill, and knowledge to play effectively with other qualified musicians (Cameron, 1954). Those incapable of doing so were “cut” from the session by being warded off or, at best, coldly tolerated (Gooley, 2011).

Due to the rejection of popular swing music and the emphasis of Bebop during this time, vocalist participation at jam sessions is historically minimal. This is due, in part, to the role of
vocalists during the Swing Era. During this period of jazz history, vocalists gained prominence by routinely performing with big bands. While this gave vocalists the opportunity to integrate themselves into the jazz sphere, it also caused them to become associated with popular, commercial jazz music, which was frowned upon by “real” jazz musicians (Pleasants, 1958). In this way, jazz vocalists embodied the very institution jazz musicians were attempting to exclude from jam sessions. Thus, by rejecting the presence of commercial, big band music at jam sessions, musicians inherently rejected vocalist participation in these settings as well.

Moreover, during the Swing Era, vocalists typically performed the melody at the beginning and end of the tune, while instrumentalists in the big band took turns improvising in between. As a consequence, very few vocalists improvised. This is important to consider in the context of a jam session, particularly during the Bebop Era, where improvisational mastery was not only admired, but expected (DeVaux, 1997). Musicians incapable of meeting this standard of improvisation were openly dismissed and prevented from participating in these settings. In this way, jam sessions were historically unwelcome and inaccessible to jazz vocalists, many of whom did not partake in improvisation, especially at such a demanding, musically complex level.

Over time, the competitive nature of jam sessions and their accessibility to vocalists has arguably changed. Today, for instance, jam sessions serve as venues for learning and experimentation. Affording the opportunity to develop musical ideas before a peer-based audience, jam sessions constitute educational spaces where prospective jazz musicians can develop their musicianship by gathering immediate pedagogical feedback (Scott, 2004). Additionally, musicians can develop and refine their skills in these settings by experimenting with new techniques, gaining familiarity with the genre, and playing with more experienced
musicians (Gooley, 2011). However, the nature of jam sessions in contemporary contexts remains largely unexplored. Failing to address pertinent issues regarding how sessions function and lacking input from the musicians who participate them, current research on jam sessions reflects relatively decontextualized perspectives on this performative practice as a whole (Pinheiro, 2014). This study aims to gain a better understanding of the current nature of jam sessions by exploring how vocalist participation not only occurs, but is characterized in these settings as well. To understand how vocalist participation may be regarded in this context, the way vocalists are perceived as musicians (in general) is considered.

**Perceived Personality of Musicians**

Over the past few decades, the personality and perceived personality traits of musicians has been examined by a variety of psychological and socio-psychological scholars (Davies, 1978; Builione & Lipton, 1983; Lipton, 1987; Dyce & O’Connor, 1994; Cribb & Gregory, 1999; MacDonald & Wilson, 2005; Rentfro & Gosling, 2007; Cameron et al., 2015). Initially, scholars in this line of research were interested in the distinct personality traits of musicians as a whole (Csikzentmihalyi & Gretels, 1973; Kemp, 1980; Kemp, 1981a; Kemp, 1981b; Kemp, 1982a; Kemp 1982b).

In general, these early studies suggest the personality characteristics of creative groups, such as musicians, are determinant factors in the decision to pursue creative performance (Kemp, 1981b). Personality is viewed as a set of certain, intrinsic qualities that pre-dispose musicians, as well as other creative performers, to develop an interest and pursue an “occupation” in the arts (Csikszentmihalyi & Gretel, 1973). This notion is reinforced in a series of studies conducted by Kemp in the early 1980s, which ultimately suggests musicians possess a distinct pattern of traits
necessary for musical performance (Kemp, 1982a). While the importance of these traits may fluctuate and/or be augmented by other qualities, there is an underlying, stable group of primary factors associated with musicians that persists. This work suggests that the nature of being a musician in terms of lifestyle, cognitive style, work habits, etc. necessitates a particular set of psychological qualities (Kemp, 1981a).

In addition, research indicates the self-reported personality of musicians varies depending on the instrument as well as the genre of music they play (Bell & Cresswell, 1984; Marchant-Haycox & Wilson, 1992; Dyce & O’Connor, 1994; Gillespie & Myors, 2000; Benedek, Borovnjak, Neubauer, & Kruse-Weber, 2014). In terms of instrument type, for instance, vocalists are reported as being more extraverted than instrumentalists, who are typically identified as being introverted (Kemp, 1980; Kemp, 1982b; Marchant-Haybox & Wilson, 1992). Additionally, personality differences between string players (viola, violin, cello, bass, etc.) and brass-players (trumpet, trombone, tuba, etc.) have been identified as well (Builione & Lipton, 1983; Bell & Cresswell, 1984). Overall, these differences suggest there are slight deviations in the overarching personalities of musicians depending on the type of instrument they play.

These deviations are also apparent across musical genres. Self-reported personality data, for instance, indicates rock and country musicians tend to be more arrogant, dominant, extroverted, open to experience, and neurotic (Dyce & O’Connor, 1994; Gillespie & Myors, 2000). Additionally, jazz musicians are shown to possess a higher level of ideational creativity and tend to be more open to new experiences than classical musicians (Benedek, et al., 2014). So, while the core personality of musicians is arguably fixed, there appear to be slight variances depending on the type of genre played. In general, while these disparities have occasionally
emerged, research demonstrates these deviations are relatively small (Bell & Cresswell, 1984; Cribb & Gregory, 1999; Cameron et al, 2015).

Scholars have also examined the perceived personality differences of musicians (Sergeant & Thatcher, 1974; Davies, 1978; Builione & Lipton, 1983; Lipton, 1987; Dyce & O’Connor, 1994; Cribb & Gregory, 1999; Tarrant, North & Hargreaves, 2002; MacDonald & Wilson, 2005; Rentfrom & Gosling, 2007; Cameron et al., 2015). Unlike studies of self-reported personality differences, these studies assess the perceived personality differences of musicians depending on the type of instrument they play. These studies demonstrate there are not only stereotypes associated with certain instruments, but that these stereotypes are pervasive as well (Cribb & Gregory, 1999; Rentfrom & Gosling, 2007; Cameron et al, 2015). Indeed, the stereotypes associated with different musicians are not only robust and clearly defined (Rentfrom & Gosling, 2007), but expressed by all types of musicians, regardless of their position in the band or ensemble as well (Cameron et al, 2015). The earliest study exploring the perceived personality differences of musicians examined the stereotypes associated with string players and brass players. In this study, the string players described brass players as being “slightly oafish and uncouth,” while brass players described string players as being “oversensitive and touchy” (Davies, 1978). These stereotypes were later echoed and expanded upon in a study where string and woodwind players were seen as being intelligent, feminine, and introverted, while brass and percussion players were seen as being sexual, masculine, and extroverted (Lipton, 1983).

Additional research in this area also demonstrates stereotypes are highly salient among vocalists. In comparison to instrumentalists, vocalists are typically perceived as being more
extroverted (Kemp, 1980; Kemp, 1982b; Marchant-Haybox & Wilson, 1992), neurotic, disagreeable, and careless (Cameron et al., 2015) as well as emotional, difficult, unreliable, and conceited (Wilson, 1984). In this way, vocalists tend to carry more negative “baggage” from a social-perceptual sense, than other types of musicians, often calling their musicianship into question.

In the context of jazz, these differences have also been identified between rhythm section instrumentalists (drums, bass, guitar, piano, etc.) and “front line” players (saxophonists, trumpeters, trombonists). Whereas the former are described as cognizant of the overall musical interaction, the latter is seen as being more preoccupied with their own improvisational solo (MacDonald & Wilson, 2005).

Interestingly, these perceptual patterns emerge despite the relatively slight differences found in the self-reported personality tests of the musicians studied. This suggests that perceived personality differences are not necessarily indicative or reflective of actual, measurable differences in personality. In this way, “musicians ‘are what they play,’ but this is mostly in the realm of social perception rather than personality itself” (Cameron et al, 2015). Furthermore, it may be that personality does not necessary serve as a prerequisite for musicians, but rather, is developed over time through the alignment of personal self-image with the perceived characteristics associated with a particular instrument or musical group (Tarrant et al, 2002).

To explore how these stereotypes are manifested in jazz, an ethnographic study of McCarthy Tavern—a well-known jam session in Chicago—was conducted. Supplemented with insights provided by eight jazz musicians in a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this
study investigates the stereotypes associated with jazz vocalists and how they are expressed communicatively in this setting by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1: Are there stereotypes associated with jazz vocalists?
RQ2: If so, what are these stereotypes?
RQ3: How are these stereotypes enacted communicatively?

Methodology

To determine the extent to which vocalists are welcome at jam sessions and identify the stereotypes associated with them, a ten-week ethnographic study of a jam session held at McCarthy Tavern was conducted. A small restaurant located in Chicago, Illinois, McCarthy Tavern hosts a well-known professional jazz jam session every Monday night from roughly 9:00pm to 1:00am. Boasting a cozy, intimate atmosphere, McCarthy’s features a small, ground-level stage along the main wall in the center of the restaurant. On the stage, a baby grand piano, drum set, and bass are typically set-up. To the left, a black, metal railing separates the stage from a set of wooden tables and metal chairs situated into rows. To the right, tables and chairs draped in white cloths are organized neatly in the dining room. A handful of high tables with metal stools are situated between the stage and the bar. The audience typically sits here, bleeding into the tables on the right of the stage as necessary.

Acting as a participant observer in this setting, I collected data by (a) observing the interactions between vocalists and instrumentalists at this jam session and (b) participating in the jam as jazz vocalist. To supplement this observational data, a series of eight, semi-structured interviews with a variety of jazz musicians were conducted as well. The data collected through these methods was coded and analyzed using generative criticism.
Observations

Every Monday from June 19 to August 28, 2017, I regularly attended the jam session at McCarthy Tavern to collect observational data. To ensure I observed the entire session, I arrived by 8:30pm; a half an hour before the session is scheduled to start. I stayed until the conclusion of the session, which typically occurred around 1:00am. After attending the jam session a total of ten weeks, this resulted in approximately 45 hours of observational data.

For the first three weeks, I recorded my observations by taking extensive hand-written notes in a small notebook. To protect the privacy of research participants, these notes were later transferred to an electronic word document, which was stored in a password-protected folder on my personal laptop. While recording observations in my notebook, musicians were noticeably less comfortable interacting with me—they would only engage in a few minutes of conversation before politely retreating to another table. Aside from finding my behavior in this setting unusual, which many of them explicitly stated, they often cited leaving so as not to disrupt my research. Noting how this method of data collection distanced me from research participants, I decided to alter my approach.

The fourth week I attended McCarthy Tavern (July 10, 2017), I began recording observations I found particularly important in a note-taking application on my phone. This approach allowed me to take notes less frequently and more conspicuously, providing me with more time to interact and develop meaningful relationships with research participants. To ensure the depth and breadth of my observations remained the same, I recorded myself verbally describe all the observations I made during my commute home. Using the notes on my phone as well as the audio-recordings, I recorded a detailed account of my observations in an electronic word
document. To ensure the information was as accurate and nuanced as possible, the observations were typed the morning immediately following the jam session. In total, this process yielded 63 pages of observational data (single spaced in size 12 Times New Roman font).

**Participation**

To gain a greater understanding of what performing at McCarthy Tavern as a jazz vocalist is like, I also participated in the jam session myself. A vocalist in the process of receiving a Bachelor of Arts in jazz studies, my knowledge of and previous experience in jazz enabled me to participate effectively and meaningfully in this context, albeit at a novice level. To ensure I was adequately prepared to participate, I compiled a list of twenty jazz standards from the Great American Songbook I practiced and felt comfortable performing. I also selected tunes that are common in the jazz vernacular and have straightforward forms (32-bars, typically AABA) to ensure they were well-suited to the challenges of participating at a jam session.

In the ten weeks I attended McCarthy Tavern, I participated as a vocalist a total of four times. To ensure I understood the nature of the jam session before partaking in it myself, I waited to perform until the third night I was in attendance. Following this initial performance, I continued participating by performing a different jazz standard every other time I attended. Each time I participated, I choose a song from the list of standards I prepared. The table below provides information about each standard I performed, as well as the key and style it was played in. Typically, I tried to chose songs that contrasted with those previously performed, increasing the variety of musical styles played at the jam session.
I also conducted a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight jazz musicians I met at McCarthy Tavern. To ensure a diverse range of perspectives were included, musicians of various ages, genders, races, and instrument types were interviewed. The age of participants ranged from early twenties to late sixties. Of the eight participants interviewed, one was female and seven were male. Additionally, one was African-American, one was Hispanic, and six were Caucasian. Participants interviewed played a variety of instruments including drums, bass, piano, guitar, saxophone, and voice.

Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone, depending on the availability of the research participant. In total, four interviews were conducted in person and four interviews were conducted over the phone. For each interview, research participants were asked a series of open-ended questions that examined their overall experience as jazz musicians as well as their participation at jam sessions and experience playing with jazz vocalists. The length of interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 1 hour and 10 minutes. To ensure the personal statements, views, and beliefs of each interviewee were captured as accurately as possible, interviews were recorded using an audio-recorder. These recordings were then transcribed into an electronic word.
document, which was later used for data analysis. In total, this process yielded 104 pages of interview transcriptions (single spaced, size 12, times new roman font). In all, roughly 36 pages were subject to analysis.

**Data Analysis**

To identify patterns in both the interactions between vocalists and instrumentalists as well as their experiences playing at jam sessions, the data collected through this study was coded into similar groups using generative criticism. Based on Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory approach to qualitative inquiry, generative criticism is a form of data analysis used to cultivate an understanding of cultural artifacts. It involves nine steps: (1) encounter a curious artifact, (2) code the artifact, (3) search for an explanation, (4) create an explanatory schema, (5) assess the explanatory schema, (6) formulate a research question, (7) code the artifact in detail, (8) search the literature, (9) write an essay (Foss, 2004). By using inductive, open coding, similar topics, themes, and ideas related to vocalists were identified in the recorded observational and participatory data, as well as the interview transcriptions. Observations and/or statements reflecting similar topics and themes were then grouped together based on their shared characteristics. This ultimately led to the identification of several relevant themes regarding vocalist stereotypes and how these stereotypes are expressed communicatively in the context of this jam. Challenges associated with vocalists were identified as well.

**Findings**

This analysis reveals several issues regarding the participation of vocalists at jam sessions and the nature of jam sessions as a whole. First and foremost, this study indicates vocalists are not welcome at jam sessions and are generally viewed unfavorably by instrumentalists in these
contexts. Two stereotypes associated with vocalists that support this finding emerged: (a) vocalists lack musicianship and (b) vocalists are divas. Each stereotype explains why vocalists are typically unwelcome and received with skepticism at jam sessions. In addition, two interesting challenges related to vocalists also emerged: (c) vocalists diminish the opportunity to play music and (d) vocalists are difficult to accompany. While these themes are not stereotypes, they reveal additional insight into the relationship between vocalists and instrumentalists, as well as the nature of jam sessions more broadly. Finally, a communicative pattern regarding the treatment of vocalists at McCarthy Tavern emerged. This repeated behavior not only demonstrates how vocalist stereotypes and challenges are embedded in the interactions between vocalists and instrumentalists at jam sessions, but how these settings continue to be venues for competition among musicians as well.

**Vocalists are Not Welcome at Jam Sessions**

Overall, this study indicates vocalists are still not particularly welcome at jam sessions. Interestingly, this sentiment was not explicitly apparent in the observational data collected at McCarthy Tavern. At McCarthy’s, vocalists would not only regularly participate in the jam session, but were frequently featured in the house band as well. At least one vocalist (aside from myself) performed each week I attended. Additionally, a vocalist was featured in the house band three of the ten times I made observations. Initially, this behavior suggested vocalists may participate in jam sessions more than previous research indicates. However, this notion was quickly dismissed by the musicians I interviewed, each of whom clearly expressed that McCarthy Tavern represented a rarity in this regard—an exception that proves the rule.
When asked about vocalist participation at jam sessions, seven interviewees explicitly stated vocalists not only refrain from participating in these settings, but are often not welcome. With the exception of Christian, a white, male vocalist in his late-sixties, this sentiment was expressed by every musician interviewed for this study. When asked whether or not vocalists typically participate at jam sessions, John, a white, male pianist in his mid-sixties stated:

“No, I think most jam sessions I’ve noticed they really don’t like singers. I mean, I could tell you that. I know that for sure. In fact, I was talking to someone last night that’s having a jam session on Memorial day […] and they don’t want any vocalists. Vocalists can attend, but no vocalist will be sitting in. They’re not gonna let any vocalist sit in.”

As indicated by John, session leaders not only discourage, but intentionally prevent vocalists from participating.

While this comment constitutes a relatively extreme example, other interviewees expressed similar sentiments. A few, for instance, noted that many jam sessions lack the equipment necessary for vocalists to participate. Commenting on this tendency, Keith, a white, male guitarist in his early-twenties stated, “I’ve gone to jam sessions where they didn’t even have a microphone or anything set up. They were not prepared to have a vocalist play.” While this may occur because session leaders are genuinely unprepared to accommodate vocalists (since they typically do not attend jam sessions), this practice inherently presents a barrier to participation. Regardless of intent, neglecting to provide the equipment necessary for vocalists informally discourages and prevents their participation. As a consequence, vocalists may refrain from performing because they feel unwelcome and inconvenient, not because they are genuinely disinterested in going.
This sense of “unwelcomeness” is also fostered by the wariness and skepticism vocalists are often encounter at jam sessions. In his interview, Marcus, a black, male saxophonist in his early twenties commented on this attitude, stating:

“At least in my experience and certain vocalists that I’ve talked to, they tried, then stopped going to certain jam sessions because they don’t like them. They’re looked down upon because they sing, which is really stupid, but unfortunately, that’s what some people think.”

Due to the dismissal they are often met with, vocalists often feel unwelcome and discouraged from participating. As a result, they tend to refrain from attending sessions to avoid the (mis)treatment they receive when they do. This sentiment was expressed by Lydia, a white, female vocalist in her mid-twenties who disclosed, “I will admit, I’m not necessarily a frequent jam session attendee, but I’ve definitely been to different jam sessions in the city and have done that for the last couple years.” To clarify, I asked, “Why don’t you go to them that much? Is there a reason for that?” To this, Lydia replied:

“I kind of think that jam sessions are awkward because of a couple things. One, I do think that—because being a singer—they’re a little bit less singer friendly. For example, some places might not even have a microphone set up. Then you’d have to bring your own and somebody would have to set it up for you. Then it just kind of makes you this special guest, which you’re not trying to be. You’re just trying to do what everybody else is doing. And then I also think that—Well, and I have some other stories, too, but I guess being a singer… Well, I remember one place I went to, which is a different place than [McCarthy’s], is that I went up there to the band who was going to be playing the tune. I
introduced myself and I was like, ‘Oh yeah! So I’ll be singing this tune,’ and then one of the guys just rolled his eyes at me as soon as he heard that I was a singer because people just kind of have that stigma. […] So I think just feeling like it’s a bit of an awkward place again because it’s kind of more instrumental focused.”

Due to the treatment she has received at jam sessions—from not having access to equipment to being met with indifference and hostility when she does—Lydia no longer feels comfortable partaking in them. To avoid these “awkward” situations, she refrains from attending jam sessions, despite the fact she enjoys meeting and playing with other jazz musicians in these contexts. This may explain why many jam sessions continue to have little to no vocalist participation—the wariness, skepticism, and in some cases, hostility vocalists are met with discourages them from attending. However, it does not necessarily explain why this aversion toward vocalists exists in the first place. As interviewees continued to describe vocalist participation at jam sessions, the reasons for this unwelcomeness gradually began to surface.

**Vocalist Stereotypes**

Although the reason vocalists are unwelcome at jam sessions was initially unclear, two stereotypes explaining this attitude emerged as interviewees were encouraged to elaborate further: (a) vocalists lack musicianship and (b) vocalists are divas. These stereotypes provide further insight into the unique relationship between vocalists and instrumentalists.

**Vocalists Lack Musicianship**

The first stereotype that emerged through this study is that vocalists lack musicianship. Five of the eight musicians interviewed for this study mentioned this stereotype. In general, these interviewees described vocalists as having little to no practical and theoretical knowledge of
music. They described vocalists as lacking the ability to sing music correctly in terms of pitch (singing the melody in tune), rhythm (singing notes on time and in the appropriate style—swing, even-eight, bossa nova, funk, etc.), and form (singing in the appropriate order/structure). This sentiment was expressed in a particularly memorable way by Seth, a white, male bassist in his late sixties. He illustrated this stereotype by sharing a couple jokes instrumentalists occasionally tell about vocalists:

“You know there’s a singer at the door, right? She can’t find her keys. Something about she doesn’t know where one is. You know the thing about here’s how we’re gonna do this song? We’re gonna play in four-four and then on the eleventh bar we’re gonna go into seven for two bars and then we’re gonna change key. The singer’s like, ‘I can’t do that!’ and they’re all like [the band], ‘Well, you did last night!’ You know, the singer star who has all the theatrical trappings of being a celebrity. The only thing missing is they’re not a musician and in order to sing you have to be a musician. There are millions of great singers who are musicians! Some of them don’t show up to jam sessions. The music becomes a minor part of what they’re doing and they’re dealing with professional musicians who don’t wanna deal with a non-musician trying to be a celebrity. And so there are jam sessions who don’t have singers because they’ve stereotyped every singer into this thing.”

Blissfully unaware of pitch, form, and rhythm, vocalists are frequently seen as lacking the musical knowledge, skill, and experience necessary to contribute meaningfully to the music performed at jam sessions. This behavior is regarded as insulting and disrespectful by many instrumentalists, the majority of whom believe the entire purpose of a jam session is to play,
share, and respect the music. In their eyes, an individual who cannot contribute meaningfully to the music should not be allowed to play. Elaborating on this sentiment further, John offered the following explanation:

“The only problem with letting singers sing at jam sessions is that occasionally you get like—like I was talking about earlier—the girl who likes to sing in the shower who has no experience on the band stand and that brings the whole session down. I try to keep it at a high level and that levels it a bit, especially one of these singers who doesn’t know the structure of the song, who doesn’t know the song is AABA and here’s the bridge. I’ve worked with some singers who come in, I do the first A, she sings the chorus, and then I play a solo on the first A and I’m ready to do the second A and all the sudden she comes in on the bridge! You know, that kind of stuff. And it does happen!”

This view was echoed by Victor, a hispanic, male drummer in his early thirties:

“I would say the problem with vocalists is that not everybody who comes to sing to a jam session is a vocalist. There’s a lot of people—everybody thinks they can sing so sometimes they get a lot of people who are not professionals who come and sing horribly. Maybe in a way that would be more horrible than some of the worst drummers that you will see in a jam session.”

To clarify what Victor meant by “horribly” I began to ask a follow-up question, “Horribly as in…” when he abruptly interrupted me and said:

“As in they have no idea what they’re doing! As in they think they know the song, but they don’t actually know the song. They don’t know the form. They sing out of time. They sing out of pitch. They don’t know exactly what to do when people are improvising.
I’ve seen that happen. So that’s an example of someone who doesn’t know really what they’re doing. And I guess those types of people give vocalists a bad rep, you know? I say any professional vocalist is welcome to a jam session, but it can be a tricky terrain to navigate because of those prejudices that might exist toward vocalists. Like I said, not everybody who comes to sing is always a vocalist”

By failing to know the form, key, and style of songs, and/or by singing them poorly in terms of pitch and rhythm, vocalists are seen as having little to no basic knowledge of music. This lack of musicianship is frustrating for many instrumentalists because it makes vocalists more difficult to play with (because they are prone to making mistakes) and is often regarded as disrespectful and insulting. When a musician participates at a jam session, they are expected to have the skills necessary to contribute in a meaningful way. While the level of musicianship required often varies depending on the musicianship of the others in attendance, the principle remains the same. If the musical knowledge a musician possesses is notably less than their peers, they are expected to refrain from playing. Choosing to play in spite of this fact is considered highly insulting. Not only does it demonstrates a lack of self-awareness, it indicates that the opportunity for one musician to play is more important than the experience of every other musician attending the session. As a consequence, many instrumentalists are often skeptical of vocalists in this setting.

**Vocalists are Divas**

Furthermore, vocalists are stereotyped as divas. Five of the eight musicians interviewed for this study mentioned this stereotype. These interviewees described the role of vocalists as unique in comparison to the role of instrumentalists. By having the ability to deliver the melody, sing lyrics, and communicate directly with the audience, vocalists are generally seen by the
audience as not only separate from, but more important than the rest of the band. In this way, the vocalist is seen as the main event, while the instrumentalists are there to accompany. Not only does this inherently divide instrumentalists and vocalists, it contributes to the notion vocalists are “celebrities” and “stars” as well.

By constantly being center stage, many interviewees suggested vocalists develop inflated egos, causing them to act in ways that are considered conceited, inconsiderate, and disrespectful. James, a white, male drummer in his mid-fifties who has been playing jazz professionally in the Chicago-land area for a few decades, described this phenomenon in his interview:

“A lot of singers are more high-maintenance. When you’re a singer, you’re it. I mean, a singer is the center of the stage. They’re the main thing. When you’re an instrumentalist, you’re part of a group and we’re all in this together. Now, a leader of the band is a little bit more like that, right? But they’re still an instrumentalist along with all the other instrumentalists. But when you’re a singer, all eyes are on you. You’re the star. I think a lot of singers—male or female, male singers are just as prone to this, they’re just as much this way in my experience—there’s a higher likelihood that there’s a much a bigger ego and much bigger ‘I’m it!’ kind of thing.”

Constantly in the spotlight, vocalists presumably believe they play a role that is more important than their instrumental counterparts. Rather than view instrumentalists as their equals, vocalists tend to treat instrumentalists like accompanists. In this way, the status of vocalists is elevated; They are the celebrities, the stars. Instrumentalists, on the other hand, are merely there out of necessity; they are ordinary and dispensable. This dichotomy creates a power difference between vocalists and instrumentalists, placing vocalists in an inherent position of superiority. With this
elevated sense of worth, some of the interviewees suggested vocalists begin to believe and act as though they are more valuable and important than the rest of the band, an attitude many find frustrating.

This notion is described by Seth, a white, male bassist in his late sixties, who discussed how the role of vocalists has evolved historically in jazz, eventually giving way to the notion vocalists are “stars” and instrumentalists are the musicians who accompany them:

“In our culture singers have become almost overly important. In the big band day, in the early big bands, there weren’t singers and if and when they had singers they were like an anomaly. It was like kind of a throw away and the singer would sing a couple tunes and it was not that big a deal. Frank Sinatra and some other people changed all that, where all the sudden the singer became the draw and the singer became a big deal and became somewhat of a star. So then there’s people being celebrated. Celebrities. There are celebrities who are celebrated for being celebrities. Vocalists who wanna be celebrities and who don’t know. They think they can sing and now that’s become almost stereotypical.”

This view was mirrored by Lydia, a white, female vocalist in her mid-twenties, who described the following regarding the role of vocalists:

“I mean, you could probably go back to even big bands and things like that. You obviously have these classic singers who were just these incredible musicians like Sarah Vaughn and Ella Fitzgerald and anybody sort of in that realm, but I think that you also have a lot of people who were just a special guest who would just come up and be the soloist and sing a big number with the band. Then that’s always associated with, ‘They’re
the star!’ And so it’s also sort of this they’re like the front person. They get a certain level
of attention that the rest of the band isn’t getting and things like that and so I think that
over and over again perpetuates the idea of stardom or sort of being like a diva. So I think
that’s one thing within that”

The transition from “guests” to the “main event” during the Swing Era altered the relationship
between vocalists and instrumentalists. By gaining recognition as the center of attention,
vocalists gradually began to fulfill a role regarded as inherently more valuable than their
instrumental counterparts. In this way, the value of instrumentalists is diminished; it does not
matter who is playing the piano as long as the piano is being played. Conversely, the value of
vocalists is heightened. This elevated status has contributed to the notion vocalists are superior to
instrumentalists, often causing them to act in an egotistical, conceited manner.

Together, these stereotypes provide further insight into the treatment of vocalists at jam
sessions. Perceived as musicians who not only lack basic musical knowledge, but exhibit
egotistical behavior as well, vocalists are frequently regarded as incompetent and inconsiderate.
As a consequence, they are often met with skepticism, wariness and in some cases, hostility,
especially when interacting with other musicians for the first time. This is particularly
challenging in the context of a jam session, where musicians are in constant flux. Unfamiliar
with the vocalists they encounter, instrumentalists are invariably influenced by the negative
stereotypes they associate them with. Frequently, this causes instrumentalists to treat vocalists in
a disdainful, disapproving manner, establishing the sense of unwelcomeness many vocalists
continue to feel when attempting to participate.
Vocalist Challenges

Beyond these stereotypes, vocalists pose genuine challenges to instrumentalists at jam sessions. Specifically, this study suggests that: (a) vocalists diminish the opportunity to play and (b) vocalists are difficult to accompany. Each represents a challenge instrumentalists typically encounter when playing with vocalists due to the inherent nature of their instrument (voice), rather than preconceived notions about their personality and character. Overall, these challenges provide additional insight into the fraught relationship between instrumentalists and vocalists, as well as shed light on the nature of jam sessions more broadly.

Vocalists Diminish the Opportunity to Play

The first challenge is that vocalists diminish the opportunity to play at jam sessions. Four of the eight musicians interviewed expressed this challenge, describing the repertoire vocalists like to perform as relatively easy and unexciting in comparison to the repertoire called by instrumentalists. Rather than request challenging tunes at fast tempos with complex harmonies and rhythms, vocalists often perform standards from the Great American Songbook. These tunes, despite being staples in the jazz vernacular, are typically regarded as “easy” in comparison to more contemporary or instrumental tunes. Consequently, many instrumentalists find them limiting, particularly in the context of a jam session where they are specifically attempting to challenge themselves musically. In his interview, James, a white, male drummer in his mid-fifties reflected this idea:

“When you go to a jam session, musicians, they wanna really play and really play meaning play faster tunes or more freer tunes or more looser things and when a vocalist sits in, it’s typically a standard that’s slower, mellower. A LOT of singers want to sing
ballads. You know? Like that. And typically when a singer sings, they sing and then there’s one little short solo and then they sing again. Typically. So when a singer sits in it feels like you’re not gonna get to really play more. I think some musicians feel that way.”

By calling tunes with slower tempos and conventional chord progressions, many instrumentalists believe vocalists diminish the opportunity to test and expand musicianship.

Additionally, instead of playing several fast, challenging tunes, instrumentalists must sacrifice time from the jam session to allow vocalist participation. This sentiment was also expressed by John, who admitted, “Sometimes let’s face it. You’re playing some hot stuff up there. You’re playing a Coltrane tune, some hardcore be-bop and then a singer kind of comes up with a cutesy tune of some kind.” Vocalists are often perceived as choosing repertoire that instrumentalists not only find unchallenging, but frustrating to play as well. This notion was expanded upon further by Marcus, a black, male saxophonist who said the following regarding the tunes vocalists typically call at jam sessions:

“Instrumentalists think like, ‘Oh…’ I mean, especially with the songs that they [vocalists] wanna play. Like a lot of singers sing more the songbook, the American songbook, more standards, especially sometimes songs that some instrumentalists don’t know. So I feel like they [instrumentalists] just avoid that. They don’t wanna deal with that and they think, ‘Oh, they’re just singers. They can’t scat or anything. It’s not like they’re contributing to anything. They’re just singing lyrics.’”

In this way, the repertoire vocalists often choose to sing is related to and reinforces the first stereotype identified through this study: vocalists lack musicianship. By choosing to play tunes with conventional changes, straightforward melodies, and “cutesy” lyrics, vocalists not only
diminish the opportunity to play challenging music, but also reinforce the notion they are not proficient enough to play music that requires a higher level of musicianship. This merely adds insult to injury. Not only are instrumentalists frustrated by vocalists’ lack of musicianship, they are forced to accommodate it by sacrificing time they could have spent playing more sophisticated tunes.

**Vocalists are Difficult to Accompany**

An additional challenge for instrumentalists is that vocalists are difficult to accompany. In their interviews, five of the eight research participants mentioned this theme, describing vocalists as challenging to play with due to their need to change keys. In the context of a jam session, where lead sheets are uncommon, changing keys requires instrumentalists to transpose chord changes in their head. This is a difficult skill to master, especially for younger instrumentalists in the early stages of their musical career. This issue is explicated further when vocalists ask to play in keys that are “less” conventional (E or B for instance). Transposing to these keys is difficult for instrumentalists, who are more familiar with playing tunes in other keys (typically those with flat key signatures). This view was expressed by John when describing his personal experiences playing with vocalists:

“The reason I became an accompanist to vocalists is because finally got my shit together. When I was in my early twenties I was critical of singers and then I realized that I was just not confident to work with them because to work with a singer you’ve gotta know tons of tunes. And you also have to know how to play in any key. It’s kind of a pain in the ass, to be honest, but they’ll call something in Gb or B and it kind of bothers me. I’ll think, ‘Why can’t you just do it in C or Bb instead of B, you know? It’s not that far away
and it’s a little easier.’ But I still don’t mind. I can do it. I’m not going to play as good in odd keys, but it’s good to challenge yourself.”

Due to the amount of tunes an instrumentalist must know, as well as the keys they must be able to play in, the level of musicianship required for instrumentalists to confidently play with vocalists is arguably greater than the level of musicianship required to play with other instrumentalists. As a consequence, many instrumentalists may dismiss vocalists due to their own musical insecurities.

This sentiment was expressed by Lydia, a female, vocalist in her mid-twenties who described some pushback she has experienced due to the keys she has asked instrumentalists to play in:

“I also think too with the keys—and this is just my own personal thing—sometimes I guess I feel self-conscious or I feel bad or like I called this key and these people are giving me crap about it, but I just don’t care anymore about it because as a singer this is what my instrument is and it’s important for me to be able to choose something that reflects my ability. So, I feel like if people are ever giving you grief about your keys that’s just their own personal baggage. It’s nothing that has to do with you”

Physically limited by the range of their voice, vocalists change keys in an effort to present themselves and the music they are performing as well as possible. Instrumentalists, on the other hand, not only have the ability, but are also expected to play any song in any key. Those who are unable to do so may feel insecure about their musicianship and thus, express an unwillingness to play with vocalists.
Interestingly, while this issue was described as a source of frustration among many instrumentalists, interviewees also expressed how this reason is unwarranted. More specifically, if an instrumentalist lacks the musicianship they need in order to accompany a vocalist, they are the ones at fault, not the vocalist. Noting this attitude, Keith, a white, male guitarist in his early twenties explained:

“I’ve been told if you’re going to play with a singer you’re just going to have to know how to play this song and transpose it because not every singer is going to be singing in a voice. They’re dealing with literally the flesh and bone and that’s it. And for me to say, ‘Oh! I can’t play in that key,’ it’s almost kind of like… First of all it’s just like, ‘Wow! You’re being a dick.’ Of course I can play it. I can play it in all twelve. Maybe not effectively, but I should be able to. I mean, my instrument has the ability to do that.”

Due to the expansive range of their instruments, instrumentalists are expected to play different tunes in a variety of keys. Vocalists, on the other hand, are not. While this notion may seem unfair, it is generally accepted by musicians due to the nature of the voice, which is inherently limited in comparison to instruments. Being able to transpose a tune to a different key is considered a basic skill for instrumentalists, especially those who constantly articulate the chord progression of the song (pianist, bassist, guitarist). Instrumentalists who fail to do this are perceived as lacking the musicianship necessary to adequately accompany vocalists. In this way, it is not exclusively the vocalists’ musicianship that is called into question—it is the musicianship of the instrumentalists themselves. This view was expressed by Seth, a white, male bassist in his mid-sixties who described the following:
“I was on a gig the other day where the singer wanted to do something in D and the piano player said, ‘Let’s do it in Db.’ It’d be easier for him. It only moves the singer a half step, but I’m thinking, ‘If that’s her key, play it in her key! She called the key. Play it!’” Now sometimes singers call keys and don’t realize that not only Db would work for them, but Db might work better, if they haven’t done their research. But sometimes a singer really wants to sing in D because if they sing in Db there’s one low Ab and they really just can’t quite get it. If it’s an A then they’re way more comfortable. So just give her the D, man!”

As reflected through Seth’s story, being able to transpose keys comfortably and effectively is a skill instrumentalists are required to have and those who lack it are considered musically inept. As a consequence, instrumentalists incapable of transposing on the spot often express an unwillingness to play with vocalists due the their own insecurities. Rather than admit they are unfamiliar with a tune or incapable of transposing keys, instrumentalists tend to dismiss vocalists instead. By discouraging their participation, they are able to avoid this situation entirely. In this way, the notion vocalists are difficult to accompany inhibits their ability to participate comfortably at jam sessions.

Together, these themes provide further insight into the relationship between vocalists and instrumentalists, particularly in the context of jam sessions. Coupled with the vocalist stereotypes identified through this study, these themes help explain the interactions between instrumentalists and vocalists observed at McCarthy Tavern. More specifically, the way vocalists are treated in this setting, despite being vocalist friendly, are invariably impacted by the stereotypes and challenges associated with vocalists. While these stereotypes and themes can be used to explain
several behavioral patterns that emerged at McCarthy Tavern, there is a particular practice—
selecting specific musicians to accompany vocalists—that is especially salient.

**Vocalist Stereotypes & Themes: A Communicative Practice**

Through the observational data collected in this study, an interesting communicative
practice emerged: Whenever a vocalist participated in the jam session, John, the session leader,
would specifically select certain musicians accompany them. I witnessed this practice on several
occasions, but was unsure why it was happening until after I observed an exchange between John
and Victor, a drummer playing in the house band that evening. Coupling these observations with
the insights I gathered through the interviews, I gained substantial insight into this practice, why
occurs, and how it not only reflects, but simultaneously reinforces the stereotypes and themes
associated with vocalists, despite the fact that McCarthy’s jam is explicitly viewed as welcoming
to vocalists.

During the seventh week I attended the jam session at McCarthy Tavern, I spent a
majority of the evening sitting with and talking to Victor, a drummer from Mexico City who has
been playing professionally in the Chicago-land area for several years. While we were watching
the jam session together and occasionally engaging in small bursts of conversation, John, the jam
session leader approached our table. He firmly placed his hand on Victor’s shoulder, leaned in,
and asked him if he would be willing to play on the next tune. Jenny, a vocalist who occasionally
attended the jam session, was going to sit in and John wanted Victor to accompany her. Victor
nodded and said that he would be willing to play, but asked whether John was sure. Noticing the
other drummers at the venue, Victor questioned whether or not going up before they had the
chance to play was appropriate, especially since he had played in the house band earlier that
night. John quickly reassured him, explaining how the other drummers there, while more than capable of playing, were not necessarily accustomed to accompanying vocalists. He said he felt more comfortable asking Victor—a drummer who he believed was capable of supporting a vocalist—to play with Jenny instead. Again, Victor nodded and agreed to play with her. Pleased with this response, John left to sit with Jenny until she took the stage.

After John left, Victor turned to me, laughed, and made a light-hearted joke about having to go up and play again. Having noticed this same kind of behavior at previous sessions, I decided to ask Victor about this practice. I smiled and initiated the conversation by noting how I had observed John engage in that type of behavior before. Not only did John ask specific musicians to play with the vocalists, I noticed that he tended to play piano with them as well. Victor shrugged and said he was not surprised. Intrigued by his response, I asked why he felt that way. He responded by saying, as John mentioned, not all instrumentalists are “good” at playing with vocalists. More specifically, he noted how many instrumentalists will play too loud, get lost in the changes due to a key change, or be thrown off by the vocalists’ phrasing and presentation of the melody. Strong musicians who are comfortable and familiar playing with vocalists are often better at accompanying them.

To illustrate this belief, Victor began describing the style of the drummers we had heard earlier that night. The first drummer he pointed to I had seen at McCarthy’s a few times. Victor commented on his style of playing, noting how he was very “heavy-handed.” If this drummer were to accompany a vocalist, Victor argued, this style of playing would drown them out, potentially causing the tune to fall apart or simply sound bad. Victor then nodded his head toward another drummer and pointed out how he lacked a strong sense of time. This would make
playing with anyone difficult, Victor admitted, but would be especially troubling for a vocalist. Before finishing his explanation, the song that was currently playing ended and John motioned for Victor to come up to the bandstand. Victor apologized and quickly excused himself. In addition to Victor, Jenny was also accompanied by John, the session leader, as well as the bassist who had played in the house band earlier that evening. In other words, the session leader had selected the musicians he deemed capable of playing with this vocalist.

Although I did not realize the significance of this practice at the time, it demonstrates how the stereotypes and challenges identified in this study are embedded and manifested in the interactions between vocalists and instrumentalists at jam sessions. Additionally, despite John’s sincere effort to ensure that vocalists not only participate, but also feel comfortable participating, this practice indicates how these stereotypes and challenges ultimately indicate vocalists are unwelcome in these jam sessions, albeit to a lesser extent at this one.

At McCarthy’s, when a vocalist wants to participate they are not merely included in the line-up according to when they came to the session (first-come-first-serve, like other instrumentalists). Instead, John waits and tells them when they can play. This not only limits vocalists’ ability to participate, but immediately differentiates them from their instrumentalist counterparts. Vocalists are not simply rotated in and out of the session like every other musician; they are explicitly told when they will be allowed to participate. While John may do this to ensure vocalists are included in the first place, this practice both reinforces and reflects the stereotype that vocalists are divas. Regardless of their desire to be treated this way, vocalists cannot participate in the jam session until John invites them to play. This action automatically distinguishes vocalists from every other musician at the jam session. By taking the time to invite
them to the stage, John inherently communicates vocalists are more important. They do not wait their turn in the line-up; they are intentionally introduced to the jam session by the session leader. Overall, this behavior reinforces the notion that vocalists are special because they receive “special treatment.”

In addition to monitoring vocalist participation, John chooses specific musicians to play with them as well. Typically, these musicians play or have played (at previous sessions) in the house band. This is significant because house band musicians are hired and paid to perform at McCarthy’s. They tend to possess a higher level of musicianship than musicians who merely attend the session of their own volition. The intentional use of musicians that are “higher-quality” and thus, better equipped to accompany vocalists, emphasizes the notion vocalists are challenging to play with. If vocalists were not more difficult, higher quality musicians should not need to accompany them. Thus, by selecting which instrumentalists are best-suited to accompanying vocalists, John unintentionally reinforces this presumption.

Additionally, the purposeful selection of “high-quality” musicians may also reflect the stereotype that vocalists lack musicianship. Although this motivation cannot be determined through observation alone, it is possible John selects high-quality musicians to accompany in the event that the vocalists are incompetent musicians. In essence, the high-quality instrumentalists act as an insurance policy. By ensuring the instrumentalists who accompany the vocalists are high-quality, John preemptively prevents issues that may arise due to vocalist incompetence. If the vocalist sings the melody or rhythm incorrectly, or messes up the structure of the tune, the instrumentalists accompanying them have the skills necessary to manage these issues, which is
an ability many less-experienced instrumentalists arguably lack. Consequently, the selection of high-quality instrumentalists also reinforces the stereotype that vocalists lack musicianship.

Finally, the intentional selection of which instrumentalists can accompany vocalists inherently restricts the number of times each musician attending the jam session is “allowed” to participate. When vocalists are routinely accompanied by the house band, other musicians cannot participate. This underscores the notion that vocalist participation not only restricts the number of instrumentalists who have the opportunity to play, but the number of times they will be able to play as well. This notion is expressed clearly in Victor’s initial hesitation to accept John’s request. By accompanying Jenny, Victor immediately recognizes he is diminishing the opportunity for other drummers to sit in, a realization that concerns him. The complaint that vocalists diminish the opportunity to play is thus affirmed when only certain instrumentalists are invited to play with vocalists.

Discussion of Findings

The stereotypes and challenges that emerged through this study not only underscore, but explain why vocalists are often met with aversion and skepticism, even in settings where vocalist participation is encouraged. Perceived as musicians who not only lack basic musical knowledge and skill, but boast egotistical attitudes as well, vocalists are generally regarded as poor, incompetent musicians who think too highly of themselves. This perception is explicated further by the inherent challenges playing with vocalists presents. Expected to play an array of jazz repertoire in a variety of keys, instrumentalists arguably require a greater level of musicianship to accompany vocalists adequately, let alone well. In this way, playing with vocalists inherently calls the musicianship of instrumentalists into question, which is particularly troubling in the
context of a jam session—settings that are not only improvisational, fluid, and unpredictable, but appear to remain highly competitive as well.

While recent literature suggests jam sessions have gradually shifted from venues of competition to venues of learning, the present study suggests competition continues to remain a defining feature of these settings. In fact, this feature was described by six of eight the musicians in this study. Marcus, for instance, noted the following:

“Sometimes you go to jam sessions and there’s a lot of vibing going on. People will sort of put other people down. I’ve seen it recently. This past Sunday a guy got up and was like, ‘Yeah, there’s a lot of drummers here, but I bet you none of them can play.’ And it’s like, c’mon, dude. Everybody’s here to come and learn.”

This view was echoed by John, the session leader at McCarthy’s who stated:

“Musicians play for musicians. At a jam session, that’s who you’re playing for. You’re trying to show what you’ve got to the musicians, not to the audience because the audience is doing nothing for you. But musicians you get other jobs from and that’s what it is. It’s sort of like a contest and a pianist gets in there and you want to out do that pianist so you try a little harder and vise versa. That is something in jam sessions that may not be advertised as such, but knowing the human being and the ego a human being has… I’m a realist and I see this happen constantly.”

In this way, jam sessions continue to be venues for competition. This makes instrumentalists less open to including vocalists not only because they are perceived as musically inept, but because their participation inherently heightens the stakes in these settings as well.
The hesitance and in some cases, hostility instrumentalists express toward accompanying vocalists, not only reflects the aversion toward them, but highlights the discomfort many instrumentalists feel when placed in these situations. Unsure of their ability to rise to the occasion, this study suggests instrumentalists dismiss vocalists due in large part to their own musical insecurities. Rather than admit they are uncomfortable or incapable of accompanying vocalists, instrumentalists attempt to avoid these situations by informally discouraging their participation. Had the competitive nature of jam sessions changed, this behavior would arguably be less pervasive. Instead of indicating musical incompetence, the inability to accompany vocalists would be regarded as a learning opportunity. As a consequence, it would not be embarrassing or frustrating to admit. This study, however, suggests the opposite continues to be true. By openly expressing an inability to accompany vocalists, instrumentalists invariably acknowledge a lack of musical competence—an admission that is particularly troublesome in a setting where proving musical worth continues to be salient.

**Conclusion**

Overall, this study demonstrates vocalists continue to be unwelcome at jam sessions, even in settings where their participation is openly supported and encouraged. While this largely a reflection of the stereotypes and challenges associated with vocalists, it is also indicative of the competitive nature of jam sessions more broadly. Settings where musicians are still expected to prove their musical worth, jam sessions continue to remain difficult places for vocalist participation. Even in vocalist friendly environments, the mere inclusion of vocalists not only heightens the challenges of playing at a jam session, but raises the stakes as well, due to what has been and continues to be a venue for competition.
References


