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It was everywhere. The It I refer to was popular culture colliding with perceived social norms such as male/female sex roles and male dominance. Mass media were spreading new themes, new ideas, new ways that challenged customs and practices. New cultures and norms butted up against centuries of tradition. Thought leaders worried. Preachers in pulpits railed against immorality and daringly transgressive sexual identities.

Am I describing 2025? No. My point of departure is 1925. I refer to the Jazz Age, when music developed by African Americans seized hold of the hearts and minds of all Americans and people around the world to become the popular music of the day. But I do not wish to talk to you about jazz. Rather, I want to talk to you about the device that served as the intermediary between musician and audience, between performer and listener. I want to talk to you about the microphone, a tool used both to amplify sound and to record it. It is a tool that today is omnipresent, and which has wrought enormous change in our lives. The microphone has changed our music, our communication, our social relations, our politics, and myriad other facets of our lives. The microphone brought change to American society in the 1920s.

For our guests here tonight, let me note that the Literary Club has in recent years struggled with the microphones we employ for our gatherings. As the Club typically meets in a relatively small room is amplification even necessary? Blasts of deafening feedback used to plague meetings. The advent of Zoom streaming during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed virtual gatherings but greatly complicated matters. The Club recently spent a lot of money on amplification equipment. While members now afar off may participate, we are now reliant on but also limited by microphones both for amplification and dissemination. Microphones have changed the Literary Club.

But, again, tonight I do not wish to talk to you about microphone speaking. Rather, I want to talk about microphone **singing**. Since the advent of recording devices in the nineteenth century singers have recorded their voices in performance. Perhaps you have heard those tinny, strange-sounding recordings from the turn of the twentieth century. They are from a bygone era. 1925 was the moment of change. In 1925 improved microphones emerged. And almost immediately, the way popular singers sang changed. The development of microphones capable of capturing the subtleties of song had a transformative effect on the art of singing, especially popular-music singing.

Let me give you some background. In 1877, working independently of each other, several inventors developed what are called carbon microphones in which granules of carbon vibrate as sound waves pass over them. This kind of microphone was used up to the early 1920s. Also in 1877, inventor Thomas Edison developed what he called the phonograph, a device that mechanically etched or impressed grooves onto a surface to record sound. First cylinders and then flat discs were used. We know them as LPs, which have made a come-back in recent years. Rapid developments occurred that improved sound replay, but the carbon microphones picked up only a narrow sound spectrum. That's why when you hear recordings from the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth centuries loud brass instruments predominate. Players huddled around microphones encased in horns or bells and blasted into them as loudly as possible, and singers did the same. Opera stars like Enrico Caruso or popular performers like Al Jolson practically shouted into the microphones.

During this period, scientists identified and experimented with electromagnetic or radio waves through space. In the 1890s an Italian inventor, Guglielmo Marconi, worked on transmitting telegraphic messages wirelessly, gradually developing methods to send signals over long distances. Others worked on similar problems so that by the 1900s voice broadcasts occurred

using carbon microphones. Warring armies soon employed radio in World War One, and shortly thereafter, first in the Netherlands and later around the world, commercial broadcasts occurred. KDKA in Pittsburgh in 1920 was the first commercial radio station in the US. The 1920s witnessed a “radio craze” as home-made and commercially available radio sets became common in US households. Corporations established national networks that broadcast via local affiliates coast to coast. Soon millions of listeners tuned in to radio broadcasts. As well, since the turn of the twentieth century Americans bought millions of music recordings made with carbon microphones. Sales of recordings exploded in the 1920s as Americans bought Victrolas and other home playing devices.

In the early 1920s, rival teams of engineers developed microphones to improve radio broadcasting, aiming for less background noise and capturing greater sound frequencies. Starting in 1925, their new electric microphones began to be used in radio stations and recording studios. Singers also began to use the improved mics in dance halls and ballrooms to amplify their voices. Use of these sensitive microphones produced profound changes in singers’ performance, which in turn have had profound impacts on culture and society.

All that serves as background to my topic, which is how popular singers changed how they sang in response to the introduction of the new, more sensitive microphones. In reporting this phenomenon I am indebted to an excellent article by independent scholar Paula Lockheart published in the journal *Popular Music and Society* in 2003. Lockheart points out that before microphones popular singers in music halls, vaudeville acts, and Broadway shows sang with orchestras or bands in a pit below or behind the stage. They had to project their voices over the orchestra to the back of the hall. They needed strong voices. Successful “pre-microphone” singers included blues singers Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and vaudeville performers Sophie Tucker, Al Jolson, and Jimmy Durante. In the 1910s as dancing habits changed dance-hall bands developed

into ballroom orchestras. Soon their performances began to be broadcast live by radio to home listeners. These ballroom orchestras began to add singers who used megaphones to project to listeners in the hall.

In 1925 these band singers began to use the new electronic microphones. Instead of projecting to the backrow of the hall or ballroom, a singer sang to the microphone right in front of them. This allowed them to sing very lightly. This kind of microphone singing was considered by some to be more “natural” singing. However, “natural” is a subjective judgement. The difference is in how the vocalization is produced: using the whole body to sing versus using only a type of head voice. Thus, by using a microphone singers with small voices could be heard. Also, singers whose voices work only in a narrow range—not very high, not very low—could thrive. The term “crooning” was applied to this way of singing using a limited, small, weak voice.

Lockheart notes that some of the well known and established popular singers of the day had a hard time adjusting to the microphone. She points out that vaudeville star Al Jolson, for one, felt insulted by the suggestion that his large, powerful voice needed amplification. Microphone singing requires adjusting down to the mic, shrinking the voice, developing a rapport with the device, not with the musicians around you or the space in which you are singing. All this requires lots of practice with the mic. She quotes top big-band singer of the 1940s Frank Sinatra to say: “Many singers never understood, and still don’t, that a microphone is their instrument.”

In the late 1920s, as the new electronic microphones took off and dance bands employed more singers in their radio broadcasts and ballroom appearances, new singing stars such as Nick Lucas, Gene Austin, and Morton Downey emerged and rose to popularity. Many of these singers had high voices. One who achieved enormous popular success was Rudy Vallée, a name generally forgotten today except as the comic foil in Preston Sturges’ classic Hollywood screwball comedies

of the 1940s. Vallée, born Hubert Prior Vallée in 1901, attended the University of Maine before transferring to Yale. A saxophone player, he took time off from school to play in the house band of the Savoy Hotel in London. He returned to his studies and played saxophone in Yale bands and graduated in 1927. He formed his own band, taking the stage name Rudy and naming his outfit Rudy Vallée and the Connecticut Yankees. He and the band became popular with 1928 broadcasts in New York and New Jersey. In the following year he signed with national broadcaster NBC to perform over the airwaves coast to coast. He starred as the host of *Fleischmann's Yeast Hour*. The program was a smash hit.

Historian Alison McCracken of DePaul University in Chicago has studied the cultural impacts of popular singing and singers in the 1920s. In her book, *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture*, she pays special attention to Rudy Vallée, the quintessential microphone singer and first pop-music idol. During his high school and college days as a saxophone player he tried and failed to sing in front of a band. His voice wasn't very good. It was puny, easily overwhelmed by the instruments. But by forming his own band he put himself out in front of the band. He relied on the new microphones. For the radio show he led the band and sang and announced. McCracken posits that Vallée studied carefully the copious fan mail he received. He then crafted his performances on the radio and in ballrooms to give the audience exactly what they wanted.

What the audience wanted was copious amounts of emotion. Vallée gave it to listeners, using his puny voice to sing softly, caressingly, through the microphone to his listeners. Writes McCracken, "Vallée adapted the soothing, conversational style of the crooner and tried to infuse his songs with as much 'emotion and feeling' as the lyrics seemed to warrant." Radio microphones afforded him intimacy with the audience, "evaporating the usual physical boundaries between the performer and the audience." McCracken writes: "Vallée gave the voice sex: he held the microphone close to him and yearned into it." She analyzes the fan mail that Vallée received for his

microphone singing. Women fans responded passionately to his overt sexual appeal. Men wrote to thank him for showing them how to be better suitors. Couples wrote to thank Vallée for enhancing their lovemaking.

McCracken also analyzes gender roles in Vallée's performance as a microphone singer. The crooner as embodied by Vallée, she writes, was the passive male counterpart to the independent and aggressive female "flapper" who so shocked society of the day. He yearned, he pined, he rued and lamented. He waited for his lady love to make her move. The woman was in charge. When she rejected him, he was crushed. Vallée's popularity with women was enormous because he put them in the driver's seat. By doing so Vallée broke the rules for male/female gender roles. McCracken also highlights his homoerotic image. While Vallée was straight, he and his marketers clearly aimed to broaden his appeal. McCracken's book is full of Vallée's ads and publicity photos that have not-so-subtle homoerotic undertones. Popular music and Hollywood films of the 1920s in general were filled with same-sex hints, winks, and nods.

In the early 1930s a popular backlash to the crooner set in, led by men unnerved by Vallée's and other singers' perceived passivity. Men also grew uncomfortable with the homoerotic undertones. In 1931 a man in a concert audience threw a grapefruit at him. Clerics and others protested in newspaper op-eds both the clear sexual themes—both hetero and homoerotic—and the fact that the male in them was passive. In the early 1930s a national debate erupted about crooner's voices and masculinity, or the lack thereof. Again, this was the result of the singer singing lightly and intimately into a microphone. Changes happened. NBC producers and advertisers adjusted *The Fleischmann's Yeast Hour* by making Vallée less the exemplar of an alternative masculinity and more a musical host for a procession of guests. The adjustment worked as the radio show lasted for ten years.

Vallée had risen to national prominence at the start of the Great Depression, when massive unemployment struck the land. Vallée's and other popular singers' style of singing emotion-laden songs of yearning and inadequacy reflected the mood of many men who could no longer provide for their families. The early 1930s featured many sad songs sung in the light, high, crooning way.

Pop idols invariably lose popularity. Vallée was supplanted in the affections of listeners by Bing Crosby, another crooner in the same mold. Crosby had started out as a singer for the Paul Whiteman orchestra in the 1920s and made a splash in 1931 in Hollywood in a musical short. He soon had a nightly fifteen-minute-long CBS radio show. Due to the popularity of his later films people perhaps forget that Crosby started out under much the same sort of questionable-masculinity cloud as Vallée. His publicity machine worked hard to fend off the same accusations of effeminacy that plagued other singers.

Importantly, McCracken highlights a significant technological development that coincided with Crosby's rise to stardom. In 1931 two leading sound technology corporations developed new microphones that made a huge difference in amplification and recording of singers. At the beginning of 1931 Western Electric came out with an omnidirectional microphone, picking up sound in all directions. This mic provided a frequency boost at the lower end of the vocal range; voices sounded lower and richer. Months later RCA came out with a directional mic, meaning a mic that picks up sound from a narrower place. This directional mic was also more sensitive, affording greater frequency and dynamic range. As well, when a singer cosied up and sang close to the mic it picked up greater vocal resonance. It gave the singer a warmer and fuller sound.

The music and film-industry adoption of this technological refinement in microphones came to Crosby's rescue. By 1932 these new mics were in widespread use in radio and film studios and for amplification in dance halls. The directional mic became standard for singers (and remains

so today). At this time, with microphone singers under attack by cultural critics for being effeminate, Crosby lowered the range of his singing, singing less in the higher tenor range and more as a baritone. He sang less emotionally wrought texts, with the notable exception of the great Depression-era song, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" recorded in 1932. Hollywood's image machine produced a PR campaign about his manly personal life to reassure his male following. This occurred while Hollywood began to enforce its production code, which cracked down on depictions of sex and sexuality, and gangster violence in the film industry. Crime would no longer pay. Gay characters almost disappeared from the screen. Before that, Hollywood showed all sorts of men's and women's sexualities. But most importantly, the new microphones picked up Crosby's voice's lower range and gave it more fullness and richness. Crosby began to be seen as singing "naturally," how a regular guy, one who pursued women aggressively like a real man, would sing. Still, his voice was small and he used the microphone to amplify it. He continued to sing lightly and intimately. The newly introduced directional microphone enhanced the impression of vocal intimacy. The microphone was Crosby's instrument. He played the new microphone to great success for many years. The lower-pitched, less emotional, more masculine Crosby became the standard for popular male singers for years to come.

Another singer with a voice very similar to Crosby's emerged at about the same time. Russ Columbo had dashing good looks and a light, baritone voice that very effectively sang the emotional songs then in vogue. He broke into Hollywood at about the same time as Crosby and was poised for stardom. But he died from an accidental gunshot wound.

As the Great Depression dragged on, new musical fashions emerged. In the mid-1930s swing music became all the rage. Swing was a cheerier respite from the sometimes-lugubrious songs of the early 30s. Big bands changed their sound to perform swing in dance halls and

ballrooms. Male and female singers were regular adjuncts to these bands. Swing music reached its peak in the early 1940s during World War Two.

The male big-band singers of the late 1930s and 40s were prime practitioners of microphone singing. They followed in the Bing Crosby mold. They murmured into the microphone, imparting sweet messages of romance, singing songs of love and courtship. Many of the bands featured very young singers, some still in their teens. Their voices were still juvenile and required amplification to be heard over lush orchestrations featuring large brass sections, rows of saxophones, and loud percussion.

Two of the top performers in this mold were brothers Bob Eberly and Ray Eberle, who sang for rival big bands. Bob Eberly started singing with the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra in 1935 at the age of 18. When Tommy Dorsey left to form his own band Bob remained with Jimmy Dorsey, with whom he continued until 1943 when Eberly was drafted into the US Army. He spent the war touring with an army big band. Younger brother Ray Eberle started singing with Glenn Miller's big band in 1938, also at the age of 18. Both brothers possessed light, baritone voices that expressed well the mild, romantic themes of the songs that made Jimmy Dorsey and Glenn Miller's bands popular and commercially successful. Their recordings demonstrate how amplification superimposed their light, boyish, smooth singing over the brass and reeds. They never could be heard otherwise. They embodied the "boy next door" image: the polite, decorous, well-behaved youth acceptable to young girls and their protective mothers.

Frank Sinatra was perhaps the most famous big-band singer of the era and the heir to the Rudy Vallée/Bing Crosby crooner style of popular microphone singing. Born in 1915, he grew up hearing Vallée and Crosby over the radio and learned from their style of vocal production. Perfecting his craft in the late 1930s, first in a men's singing quartet and then singing solo on various radio

stations in New Jersey and New York, Sinatra entered the limelight when he joined the Harry James big band in 1938. He jumped ship to the Tommy Dorsey band the following year. There he became a national star. The songs he sang with Tommy Dorsey feature a feathery light vocal production, creating a pleasant, intimate effect, as if the singer were only inches away, whispering songs of desire into the ear of the listener.

The sometimes-dark themes of Depression-era popular songs were no more. The commercially successful big bands of the early 1940s catered to teenagers' demands for danceable music and easily whistled tunes that weren't weighted down with deep thoughts. Sinatra's light, smooth, effortless, whispering delivery stirred the bobbysoxers to paroxysms of ecstasy. He was the singer of burning love songs yet not too aggressive. He was safe and non-threatening. This unaggressive characteristic of the big-band singers was a holdover from the crooner era of ten years before. Sinatra topped the charts as girls bought sheet music and recordings and shelled out for concert and dance-hall tickets. He left dictatorial Tommy Dorsey in 1942 to sing independently, bouncing from one lucrative gig to another. In keeping with the unaggressive boyish image, in the late 40s he made three Hollywood musicals that typecast him as a sexual neophyte whose voice cracked when around women. In all three movies he was pursued by an aggressive woman played by Betty Garrett. Again, this was an echo of the Vallée characterization of the microphone singer as passive and unaggressive sexually. Sinatra was successful for a few years until his popularity plummeted. Starting in the early 1950s he reinvented himself as a Las Vegas singer with a different vocal production: not so intimate, jazzier, no longer boyish-sounding. The recordings from this period are those most familiar to Sinatra fans. Gone was the sound of young infatuation. Here was the vocalization of alcoholic weariness and brooding. The voice cracks now with booze and cigarettes. Sinatra remained the masterful microphone singer, controlling his more mature sound effectively.

Another popular singer of the 1940s and 50s did not fit the standard vocal mold of the immature boy performer. Vaughn Monroe, born in 1911, started out as a trumpeter in dance bands but fulfilled his ambition to sing out in front. Beginning in 1940 he formed a band and performed as its singing leader. His voice was darker, richer, fuller, much more mature sounding, no doubt the product of his Camel cigarette habit. He sounded like a grown-up, not a boy. But if you listen to the recordings or watch the film clips he still works closely with the microphone. The singing is calm, restrained, controlled, often hushed. He rarely lets go. As a youth he wanted to sing opera but his voice lacked the necessary size. Compare his voice to those of operatic baritones of his era like Lawrence Tippett, Leonard Warren, or George London, voices that roared with power and filled concert halls without amplification, and you realize how small Monroe's voice was. Only when you compare his darker voice to those of the wan, anemic, standard-issue boy singers of the other big bands does his voice sound hefty.

Swing music peaked during World War Two, but big bands persisted and remained a feature of popular music in postwar America. While bobbysoxers screamed for the likes of the Eberle brothers and Sinatra, Vaughn Monroe seems to have cornered the market catering to married women, women with sexual experience. The songs he sang in the post-war period reflected a grown-up ethos. They celebrate the joys of married life and domesticity as the GIs returned home, married, and settled down, and women were forced to leave their wartime factory jobs and return to domestic duties. His repertoire was about home life. One of his hit songs, "Ballerina," even rebukes women who choose career over marriage. They will regret it later, we are told. In this way, Vaughn Monroe seems to have been the exception that proves the rule about the strange, anomalous standing of male microphone singers in popular music of the 20s, 30s, and 40s.

The rise of microphone singing amid the wide-open Roaring Twenties a century ago produced unanticipated consequences. Amid an era of greatly relaxed social norms, commercial

radio presented a new kind of lover, one who was ardent but passive. Men who sang the popular songs of the day into microphones created an illusion of romantic fervor without being dangerous. They manufactured light vocal effects that, matched with shimmery words of adoration and hungry longing, drove girls and women crazy but didn't threaten them. Starting in 1925, improved microphones enabled male singers to cultivate passivity and gentleness verging on effeminacy that challenged cultural norms. Women could go batty over them in safety. But men grew wary and societal backlash set in. Pop singers adjusted by singing lower in their voices and taking advantage of the improved microphones of the early 30s to highlight masculine depth and resonance. This pop-music adjustment coincided with Hollywood's heightened self-regulation of portrayals of sexuality and violence. Self-censorship preserved both Hollywood's and commercial broadcasting's financial viability for decades to come.

So, the next time you turn on your radio to listen to pop music of whatever era, consider the role of the microphone in the performance, production, and dissemination of that sound. Be mindful of how the sound was made and how the use of a mic changes the way the singer sings, how it alters the relationship between singer and other musicians, between performer and listener, and how sound technology has influenced society and culture through the years. Brother, can you spare a thought for the mic?

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Recordings of Singers Mentioned in the Essay

"E lucevan le stelle," from *Tosca*, Enrico Caruso, 1904 (remastered)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3TjEoAXzJ9E>

"See See Rider Blues," Ma Rainey, 1925, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he9T0R0OCIA>

"April Showers," Al Jolson, 1921 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1Z0odJj00>

"Baby Won't You Please Come Home," Bessie Smith, 1923

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCrtErmipXE>

"Some of These Days," Sophie Tucker, 1926, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijmpTIN3HRI>

"My Blue Heaven," Gene Austin, 1928 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkWba2sX3xA>

"I'll Always be in Love with You," Morton Downey, 1929

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvLdiSi9C8o>

"Tip-toe Thru the Tulips," Nick Lucas, 1929 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OB5BXYWW0

"I'm Just a Vagabond Lover," Rudy Vallée, 1929 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eb36JID2jRA>

"You're Just Another Memory," Rudy Vallée, 1929 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiqclXgAFBQ>

“Prisoner of Love,” Russ Columbo, 1931 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmUGy-GYXs8>

“Just Friends,” Russ Columbo, 1932 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdbLcadV5UU>

“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” Bing Crosby, 1932
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jQTWS26BVA>

“When the Blue of the Night Meets the Gold of the Day,” Bing Crosby, 1932
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVI9FGKmoHo>

“The Breeze and I,” Bob Eberly, 1940 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUIn7lNwo2Y>

“At Last,” Ray Eberle, 1942 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajsptiTBpQ4>

“Serenade in Blue,” Ray Eberle, 1942 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGAgEy02kRk>

“Imagination,” Frank Sinatra, 1940 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzQJXbtKdi4>

“Trade Winds,” Frank Sinatra, 1940 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhE_sjbSYsw

“Ballerina,” Vaughn Monroe, 1948 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3veIFyNGbo>

“Riders in the Sky,” Vaughn Monroe, 1949 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAPCxfuBzyo>

“Te Deum,” from *Tosca*, Lawrence Tippett, 1929 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hPfxs8UP0o>

“Di provenza,” from *La Traviata*, Leonard Warren, 1957
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvi398eccqo>

“Ciel, mio padre!” from *Aida*, George London, 1953, with soprano Astrid Varnay
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXtCTPjd1nc>