

Italian Jazz: Scat Is Fundamental

Enzo Capua (December 01, 2014)



Let's do an experiment. Those of you who don't make a habit of singing—or are afraid to alarm the neighbors—try intoning a song that you know under the shower or in the tub—without the words.

Forget the lyrics, even if you know them by heart. For those who, on the other hand, usually sing in the bathroom, try singing a little louder— but again, without the words. Don't be shy, it doesn't matter if you're tone deaf.

In the span of a few minutes you'll notice your relationship to your body changing: the emission of pure sound, conducted by your sense of melody (however on or off it may be), will lead you to create a symphony between body and spirit.

What you're doing, in musical terms, is singing a capella, i.e., without the accompaniment of an instrument.

And you might also say that you are attempting what jazz musicians call scat, singing without words, riffing on a melody. The voice was called the first instrument for good reason. It is the primordial mode of communicating emotions with the body. Our ancestors may have tried to find a link between the sounds of our voice to communicate.

So it's not incorrect to think that maybe they were singing (in their crude and guttural way) before learning how to define what we now know as words. At heart, it's possible they were doing scat



without even knowing it! If you try this experiment every day, I guarantee that your relationship with your body will be improved decisively.

You will move more harmonically. Why? The voice is a physical vibration that expresses feelings. So this experiment is really serious. You'll realize in no time that you can access and communicate your inner desires, or your frustrations, in a more direct mode, without constrictions. Sometimes you'll even succeed in dispersing the shadows clouding your life.

But let's get back to scat. In the jazz world, they say the first musician to scat was [Louis Armstrong](#) [2], on February 26, 1926, during the historic recording of "[Heebie Jeebies](#) [3]." Supposedly, while Armstrong was singing, his sheet music fell to the ground. So as not to lose the rhythm, Armstrong continued to improvise with apparently meaningless, inarticulate words.

This may be more legend than history. Many people say that [Don Redman](#) [4] and the Fletcher Henderson orchestra invented scat two years prior. But what's important for us is to understand why that simple invention later became so important to jazz and why song is so closely related to the expression of our emotions.

In Italy, we know it well, thanks to opera, the peak of passion in music. But it's no less so in jazz. That's why scat is fundamental. It's jazz musicians' way of giving a more intimate, more physical sense to what words can only caress. We'll investigate this topic further in one of the next issues. In the meantime, get under the shower and sing. Please. It'll only do you good.

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[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Armstrong

[3] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heebie_Jeebies_\(composition\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heebie_Jeebies_(composition))

[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Redman