

FAMILIARITY AS STRANGENESS

Jimmy Scott and the Question of Black Timbral Masculinity

What are the hallmarks of vocal masculinity? Or, more accurately, how do we recognize culturally coded signals of masculinity in a person's voice? Most people would say the determining factor is *pitch*; they would report that a feminine voice is higher in pitch than a masculine voice. In addition some would report that they find deeper male voices attractive and higher-pitched male voices less attractive. These sentiments are reproduced in everyday practice in various ways. For example, in schematic terms, composers of four-part choir music arrange voices vertically, starting at the bottom with male basses and moving upward to male tenors, female altos, and female sopranos.¹ Scientific literature concurs with this notion of the masculine voice. It explains masculine signaling in evolutionary terms, detailing how a deep voice can indicate reproductive fitness, authority, social dominance, and intelligence, ultimately serving a key function in terms of reproducibility.² Both the cultural and the evolutionary explanations often focus on one aspect of voice: pitch. Through a close reading of Jimmy Scott's voice and self-identification, as well as audiences' and producers' ideas about and presentations of him, this chapter complicates assumptions about the relationship between pitch and gender, pointing to another potent but undertheorized factor in gendered (and other) readings of voices: timbre.

Whereas the previous chapters showed that all voices are entrained within a given set of values, this chapter expands upon the idea that play, and the practices in which vocalizers engage, can overcome even such gravitational forces. Specifically I show that vocalizers can use entrainment as a starting point to

fashion expressions beyond dominant cultural cues. Furthermore, whereas Marian Anderson and her predecessors' stories exposed dynamics of racial listening and the segregated society within which female African American opera singers and their audiences were entrained, in considering Scott's story we gain more insight into the ways in which blackness is configured in gendered terms in a musical-cultural context where "blackness was a powerful symbol of the masculine."³ On the one hand, studying Scott confirms that this black masculinity is highly constructed and limited compared to the range of experiences of the black men who had to perform these aesthetics. On the other hand, Scott exemplifies a vocalizer who refined techniques and attitudes in order to resist labels.

I see Scott as a musician-activist who carries out the micropolitics of voice by bringing unexpected timbral content (non-falsetto) to a form (black masculinity), thereby challenging that form's very definition. Through Scott's critical performance practice, the limits of essence and meaning-making and the utility of entrainment and culturally constructed presentations of black heterosexual masculinity are contested and subverted. Though it may be uplifting in its utility as an academic case study, it should not be forgotten that Scott's story also exemplifies the hardships artists and vocalizers at large experience when listeners are challenged by the way they choose to define their vocal art and, indeed, themselves.

While Scott's biography was uniquely determined by his physical condition, the dynamics that shaped his career involved conceptions of timbre, gender, and sexuality that determined a culturally and historically situated idea of the African American male jazz artist—a model Scott did not fit. Artists who fail to fit neatly into a recognizable social category tend to disappear into obscurity, and for several decades this seemed to be Scott's fate. But the sheer strength of his voice and artistry, combined with a long-overdue turn in his luck, led to sounds so compelling that, against all odds, audiences did engage. However, to make sense of Scott as a male African American jazz singer, listeners needed to devise ways to engage with his voice. This chapter considers how timbral listening and practices of consumption around Scott fall into a limited number of discrete social categories. In order to manage these categories, listeners participated in the interactive co-creation of Scott's voice and overall gender identity by projecting familiar stereotypes onto a complex artist.

This study shows that Scott, whose physical development made his voice similar to that of a castrato, transcended gender distinction, thus becoming uncanny, transgressive, and ripe for projection, misidentification, and dismissal as theater or play. What I wish to draw out in this chapter is the way that cultural

constructions of timbre are gendered, as well as addressing how issues around masculinity are complex and sometimes unexpected when intersecting with issues of race and with particular music repertoires. In the previous chapter I discussed issues of race and gender in the context of opera; these dynamics were played out in the realm of opera vocal character types and social relationships. In popular music genres, however, where male and female singers share much of the same vocal range, a large part of the concern regards signaling masculinity. The complex reception of Scott shows that this reading is less about the pitches men or women can sing than about *how* these pitches are sung and timbrally mediated. What follows are some examples of this process and its multifarious results.

Introducing Jimmy Scott

June 12, 2014, was the last day of Scott's extraordinary life. Major newspapers and media outlets, including the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and the *Washington Post*, marked the occasion with admiring and beautiful obituaries that outlined the life and professional story of Jimmy Scott, an artist whose "star," as the *Times* put it, "rose late."⁴ Noting "the triumph of Jimmy Scott (1925–2014)," *Rolling Stone* made a similar implication.⁵ After a long life and a career that saw early success followed by seemingly endless, hopeless oblivion and at long last by recognition from the music world and its audiences, Scott died at the age of eighty-eight. While his long eclipse was due partly to shaky business deals, the sonic particularities of his life and career are interesting and complex.⁶

Known for most of his career as "Little Jimmy Scott," the jazz singer James Victor Scott was born with Kallmann syndrome, a hormonal condition that prevented his voice from changing at puberty.⁷ Both Scott's life and his career were shaped by his congenital medical condition, which kept his voice higher in tessitura than that of a man who had gone through the hormonally induced vocal changes that typically take place during puberty. The condition also stopped Scott's body from growing after the age of twelve.⁸ He lacked some adult traits, such as facial hair, and he failed to go through other, more significant physical changes that visually mark the transformation from boy to man. Although people mistook Scott for a masculine woman, an effeminate man, a homosexual, or a transsexual throughout his life, the singer consistently described himself as a "regular guy," maintaining that the most unusual thing about him was his "obsession" with music.⁹

Scott's intense interest in music led him to keep up with the new popular vocal repertoire while, from the age of sixteen, he spent most of his time working

odd jobs. He first tried to obtain a position that would allow him to hear live music and meet musicians, and in 1942 took a job as usher at the Metropolitan Theater in Cleveland. The Metropolitan Theater featured movie musicals as openers for the era's major jazz acts, including Ella Johnson, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Erskine Hawkins. Working at this job allowed Scott access to live music that he could not otherwise afford to hear. He developed a side hustle offering extra dressing room preparation services to artists. Scott's "janitorial service," as he called it, allowed him to get close to artists. This ultimately led to an offer to join tap dancers Lem Neal and Dickie Sims on tour as a traveling valet, or what we would refer to today as a "personal assistant."¹⁰

Scott's first public performance opportunity took place at the age of eighteen, during his second month touring with Neal and Sims. In Meadville, Pennsylvania, Neal and Sims shared a weekend bill with a group that included Ben Webster and Lester Young. So moved was he by the music, Scott managed to convince the musicians to let him sit in on a few pieces. Shortly after he began to sing, he recalled, the audience stopped dancing and gathered around the stage to listen—and then, out of the blue, he heard someone call out, "That boy sounds like a grown woman."¹¹ This performance, framed by that comment, began his career. Due to his small stature and ambiguously gendered voice, Scott was initially booked as a teenage novelty act. He worked as a freelancer around Cleveland for some years before Caldonia (Estella Young), a contortionist, invited him to join her tour in 1945.

Touring with Caldonia brought Scott to New York City, where his career began in earnest at Harlem's Baby Grand. There he impressed Billie Holiday and Doc Pomus, whose early interest foreshadowed the role Scott would play as a "singer's singer." Although Scott's career as a professional singer spanned about six decades—from the mid-1940s until his death in 2014—it was only during a short period in the late 1980s that he managed to achieve mainstream commercial success. He had been on the brink of large-scale fame a number of times, but something—family issues, trouble with contracts, producers pulling out because they were afraid that Scott was too different—always interfered with the breakthrough one might expect from an artist of his caliber and continued exposure.

Scott's 1962 album, *Falling in Love Is Wonderful*, seemed, at the time, like it might be his big break. Produced by Ray Charles for Tangerine Records, it marked a pivotal career point for Scott. But his former label, Savoy Records, refused to release him from his contract, and the album was withdrawn, as was his subsequent album, *The Source* (Atlantic, 1969).¹² Scott then fell off the music

world's radar and turned to nonmusical work. Decades later, in 1984, live appearances on Newark's WBGO put him back on the map.

In 1988 Jimmy McDonough published a piece about Scott in the *Village Voice*. This article reached a different, hip, urban audience. It coincided with a chance appearance at the Blue Note: Scott happened to be in the audience for the eighth anniversary celebration in honor of Cab Calloway and was asked to sing. These two events led to renewed interest, culminating in Scott's appearance on the twenty-ninth episode of the television series *Twin Peaks*, "Beyond Life and Death." Director David Lynch said he was drawn to Scott's energy and gave him the uncanny role of Death. A few artists who had their first major successes in the 1980s also used Scott to underline some element of uncanniness. Madonna used him in her "Secret" video (1993), and Lou Reed took Scott along as the opening act on his *Magic and Loss* European tour (1992). Scott's otherness is manifest in the strong emotions he triggers: "Jimmy Scott's voice," Madonna said, "makes me weep," and Reed testified, "He has the voice of an angel and can break your heart."¹³ Five years after the WBGO appearances, his 1991 performance at Doc Pomus's funeral led to a contract with Warner Brothers. The resulting album, *All the Way* (1992), earned a Grammy nomination.

After that release Scott maintained an international profile, re-releasing old albums and recording new works: *Dream* (1994), *Heaven* (1996), *Holding Back the Years* (1998), and *But Beautiful* (2002). As a singer Scott has been celebrated not only by the hipster fringe but by the jazz establishment, receiving the National Endowment of the Arts' Jazz Master award (2007), the Kennedy Center "Jazz in Our Time" Living Legend Award (2007), NABOB's Pioneer Award (2007), the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Jazz Foundation of America (2010), and the R&B Hall of Fame Induction Award (2013). Having attained a cult following for his one-of-a-kind voice, Scott scored TV and film appearances and, as the obits show, was celebrated at his death.¹⁴

"That Boy's Alto Voice"

Arguably because Scott's self-described identity as a heterosexual male vocalist evaded basic recognition, his career went through a number of distinct phases that included framings and presentations that he himself did not perform in private life.¹⁵ In other words, manifestations of measurable and symbolic aspects of masculinity, conveyed through visual representations and discursive descriptions of Scott, were defined by the cultural and historical context within which his career took place and reflected the limited performative roles available. Hence in his journey from obscure newbie to established National

Endowment of the Arts honoree, Scott, who insisted on his heterosexuality and normativity, was never presented as such. Instead, over the length of his career we find three general methods of presentation. He was first hired as a novelty act, or as a singer marked by difference. He was then recorded as an unnamed vocalist, sometimes paired with images of other people, which suggested gender ambiguity. Finally, he was framed by identities reaching beyond the human. Even after his comeback, when he was presented under his own name and image, his identity was entangled with and made potent by previous complex representations.

Scott's first and only chart hit was recorded during a session with Lionel Hampton in January 1950.¹⁶ Of the four songs released, "Everybody's Somebody's Fool" remained on *Billboard* magazine's rhythm and blues charts for six weeks, reaching number 6. While this success might have brought Scott's name to audiences' radar, the cut was labeled simply "Lionel Hampton, Vocalist with Orchestra."¹⁷ This mode of presentation exemplifies the first stage of the way Scott was presented—namely, as an unnamed and unidentified singer. A 1988 reissue did not rectify the error but amplified it, crediting one of Hampton's female vocalists, Irma Curry.¹⁸

During the same period, Scott also recorded for Charlie Parker. His recording of "Embraceable You" (1950) exemplifies the first and second patterns symptomatic of the neglect he suffered throughout his career. Scott's biographer, David Ritz, retells the story of the singer's missing credits on this record. Initially, bootleg versions were distributed without a vocalist credited. In 1977 Columbia Records commissioned the critic Gary Giddins to annotate a reissue of *One Night in Birdland* and hired Dan Morgenstern, the director of Rutgers University's Institute of Jazz, to write the liner notes. In these notes Morgenstern misidentified the voice on "Embraceable You" as female vocalist Chubby Newsome. Ritz called both Giddins and Morgenstern decades after the reissue; Morgenstern was already aware of the error and "graciously acknowledged his mistake." Giddins, however, was made aware only through Ritz's phone call. Scott's biographer reports that Giddins listened to the recording again and agreed that the vocalist had to be Jimmy Scott. Furthermore Giddins was "amazed" that the error had gone undetected for so long. For Ritz, the fact that two experts had mistaken the singer and even his gender was symptomatic of the misunderstanding and neglect Scott suffered. Ritz's indignation over the situation leaps off the page, and he ends with the report that a 1990s CD reissue, *New Bird*, included the track, but that Scott was *still* unnamed.¹⁹ Whether due to deliberate action or sloppy oversight, the implication in each of these two scenarios is that Scott was not seen and treated as an artist worth crediting.



FIGURE 3.1 Jimmy Scott, *The Source*, Atlantic Records, 1969.

So far we've seen that Scott's recordings were, at times, uncredited. At other times credit was mistakenly given to other vocalists, almost always to women. Ironically, when Scott was finally able to record under his own (masculine) name, he himself was not associated with it. That is, while his name was indeed used, Scott himself was still not identified or identifiable. For example, the headshot on the cover of the album *The Source* features a young, beautiful woman with a large Afro—a model (see figure 3.1). On *Falling in Love Is Wonderful* a photo of a man and a woman, presumably two lovers, graces the cover (see figure 3.2).²⁰ "I understood what they wanted," Scott says about the photo for *The Source*. "Naturally I would have preferred to see myself somewhere on the cover, but if they thought that would help sell the thing, I could only hope they were right." Describing his reaction on seeing the cover of *Falling in Love Is Wonderful*, he says, "[Of] course it hurt. . . . It's your record and you want to see your picture."²¹

In designing the record sleeve for *The Source*, Atlantic Records' marketing team responded to, and played directly into, the perception of Scott's voice as female, setting up a feedback loop between listeners and the way an imagined identity or image is reproduced, elaborated, and strengthened. Joel Dorn, producer of *The Source*, confirmed that after seeing the record packaging featuring the female model's photo, most listeners believed Scott to be a woman with a man's name.²² Thus the packaging for *The Source* suggested two possible readings of Scott's voice and (presented) look: "Jimmy Scott" might be a man mak-

FIGURE 3.2 Jimmy Scott, *Falling in Love Is Wonderful*, Tangerine Records, 1962. (Reissue by Rhino, 2002.)



ing his voice sound female and dressing in drag, or “Jimmy Scott” might be a woman with a man’s name. Jimmy Scott did not identify with either of these powerful presentations.

With *Falling in Love Is Wonderful* the imposture only deepens. The cover art depicts a man and a woman—both unrelated to the recording—in a stereotypical romantic encounter. Both could pass as either white or black.²³ In other words, the cover can be read as an attempt by the producers to sidestep any (gender) confusion and avoid the resulting distress and disengagement. By implying a drag performance on the cover of *The Source* and a performance featuring a possibly mixed-race couple who conform to essentialist heterosexual roles on the cover of *Falling in Love Is Wonderful*, Scott’s record label preempted audience recoil from his idiosyncratic performance of heterosexual masculinity. Listeners are thus free to hear Scott’s voice as either man or woman, black or white.

Moreover the photo of a couple embracing on the floor could also suggest that the voice singing was detached from any particular gendered body. That is, perhaps Jimmy Scott is not cast as the guy with the movie-star looks seated on the floor. Perhaps he is not cast as the man for whom the woman in the picture fell. And perhaps Scott is also not cast as the woman, lying on the floor, arms stretched out and above her head in a position that suggests surrender. Instead the cover suggests a scenario during which the music within might be played. Center stage, two glasses of wine are half full, and the woman’s gold slippers lie nonchalantly next to the Ray Charles LPs scattered across the floor. The fire

is roaring, creating heat behind the two people; it probably accompanies the sound of their voices engaged in romantic murmuring. Does the cover image suggest that Jimmy Scott might be the presence *not shown* in the image, a voice we assume is playing as background music to the scene—a “neutered” voice that does not represent a threat to the image’s male protagonist?

It was Ray Charles’s manager, Joe Adams, who conceived of the cover photo with the Cesar Romero look-alike and his female counterpart in front of the roaring fire.²⁴ If he wanted *Falling in Love Is Wonderful* to be a record guys could put on when they were with a girl—one they could make out to—it might be the case that the man in the cover photo does not replace Scott but instead represents what men might be empowered to carry out in Scott’s *presence*. Is Scott’s voice so genderless, and therefore so unchallenging to another man—either as competitor or distraction—that it is deemed unintimidating company in such situations? Does Scott’s voice offer a perverse intimacy due to the very difficulty of locating it in terms of gender? Does Scott, in this album cover scenario, partake of both sexes because of his ambiguously gendered sound? Or is his uncanny voice that of *la petit mort*, the mutual orgasmic peaks toward which the evening’s play is bent?

Sex and death are states that, in the words of Bonnie Gordon, “involv[e] a physical transformation and flux that threaten[s] the unity of the body,” and both have occupied a space of liminality since early modern times.²⁵ Sex, or the question of sex—in terms of both sexual organs and the sexual act—tends to be at the forefront of people’s minds when encountering any sexuality not directly linked to the possibility of fertilization. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century castrato singers, with their inability to inseminate, exerted a tremendous sexual draw on female (and male) audiences.²⁶ While the ability to have sex without insemination does not itself threaten patriarchal control in the way it did before the advent of birth control, and though Scott very openly talked about the infertility linked to Kallmann syndrome, a eunuch’s mystique still surrounded his sexual abilities (or disabilities).

This potential analogy between the voice of orgasm and of death was realized later in Scott’s career. Indeed, after his resuscitation it was the character in which he was most frequently cast. These topics—curiosity and mystery around and suspicion and fear of sexual life, death, and also contagion—come together in the 1993 movie *Philadelphia*.²⁷ In “Streets of Philadelphia,” the main single from the film’s soundtrack, Bruce Springsteen recorded Scott’s voice as a cry-like song.²⁸ The soaring voice resembles lyrical moaning, set within the confines of defined pitches. It is a cry that is uttered when the main character, a homosexual lawyer named Andrew Beckett (played by Tom Hanks), is wrong-

fully fired for having contracted HIV/AIDS. Here Scott's voice is cast to express the inexpressible: a feeling of betrayal and loss resulting in vulnerability and, ultimately, for Beckett, death. For Beckett, being asked to leave the company represents more than being fired from a job, for this was a firm in which he had been groomed to become a partner in the near future. At a pivotal moment he steps out on the street after having been rejected by the lawyer he had asked to take his unlawful termination case. As the camera moves into a close-up of Beckett's face, Scott's voice accompanies his despair, drawing the range of human emotions into an uncanny sonic space that signifies extreme emotional range, the dark tenor of Beckett's affective state, and the fragility of both human relationships and human life.

In the last episode of season 2 of the television series *Twin Peaks*, created by Mark Foster and David Lynch, Scott is again cast as a liminal figure from the beyond. His is the plangent voice heard in the Red Room, located within the Black Lodge, an extradimensional place that materializes in dreams and (perhaps) in reality. The main character, FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper, walks through a maze walled by red curtains. The heavy fabric and the deep color allude to the brothel Cooper thinks he is about to enter; it is also material that would muffle any potential cries for help and can signify royalty as well as blood. A chair appears through a curtain opening, and a dwarf with a twisted body begins to dance around Cooper. Scott's voice is at first nondiegetic, seeming like any mood-creating television music. Then the camera pans out and Scott appears, dancing a lonely dance against a red-curtain backdrop while singing Lynch's composition "Under the Sycamore Tree," which refers to twelve sycamore trees that hold clues about the murder that drives the plot of the series. The episode ends here, in limbo, where the dwarf and Scott signify, or even *are*, death. Scott provides the ominous music about which the dwarf says, "Where we come from, there is always music in the air."²⁹

Recall that, from the beginning of his career, Scott struggled simply for appearances and credits under his own name. Ironically, later in life, when he finally reached the point where he did appear under his own name, his unique identity was doubled by identities and significations not his own. In a strange way, then, Scott has sometimes been presented under his own name and sometimes with his own image—but, as if in a kaleidoscope, both name and visual representation have consistently been twisted or morphed into something that does not connect to the identity by which Scott knew himself.

What caused this incoherent experience for audiences and producers? What underpinned listeners' projections of their own social categories onto Scott?

These manifestations—such as, for instance, labeling him a “boy” performing as a “grown woman”—can be understood as a kind of *audience drag performance*. Unlike, for example, the vaudeville star Frankie “Half-Pint” Jaxon, who in the 1920s and 1930s relied explicitly on vocal drag and female impersonation as part of a “novelty” act, Scott merely performed what he understood to be his real-world identity: a heterosexual male jazz singer with an unusual voice. Why, then, did record companies and other promoters repeatedly present Scott’s voice within gendered performances with which he himself did not identify? In short, why did listeners find Scott’s voice incoherent in relation to social and cultural expectations of normative masculinity and, specifically, of normative black masculinity?

This Is a Man’s Voice

“For many of us,” the sociologist Herman Grey writes, “jazz men articulated a different way of knowing ourselves and seeing the world through very different ‘structures of feeling’ they assumed, articulated and enacted.” Despite their very different view and treatment of the women in their lives, the two iconic figures to which Grey points, Miles Davis and John Coltrane, played public roles of unambiguous masculinity and heterosexuality. Grey argues that Davis’s and Coltrane’s “black masculinity . . . not only challenged whiteness but exiled it to the (cultural) margins of blackness—i.e., in their hands blackness was a powerful symbol of the masculine.”³⁰

Not only did such popular contemporary jazz figures, who were Scott’s own acknowledged heroes, provide powerful models for heterosexual men; they also offered African American men a space that turned blackness into hypermasculinity. In this environment, where “black masculinity is figured in the popular imagination as the basis of masculine hero worship,” it is “the same black body . . . onto which competing and conflicting claims about (and for) black masculinity are waged.”³¹

Within such a framework, what do we require to arrive at the affirmation *It is a man* as a response to the acousmatic question? How is the thick event that is voice sliced and framed so that we recognize it within the societal and cultural norms that guide us to hear a masculine voice, or a man’s voice, or a masculine man’s voice? In Scott’s presentation as an artist, he was recognized neither as masculine (whether as a masculine female or a masculine male) nor as a man. Besides his smaller body frame and potentially shortened vocal tract caused by his small stature, in which ways may Scott’s voice have differed? And how did a

given listener's response to the acousmatic question *Who is speaking?* yield these extreme pairings of images and identities with Scott's voice?

As I mentioned at the outset, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that these rewritings—for example, Scott's presentation as a "female voice"—were due to a high vocal range that signaled femininity. When the acousmatic question was posed about Scott's voice, audiences answered that they heard a "feminine [vocal] range."³² Listening for queerness, Judith Halberstam notes that Scott "is a male vocalist whose high countertenor voice causes him to be heard as female" and that "Scott has a high voice for a man."³³

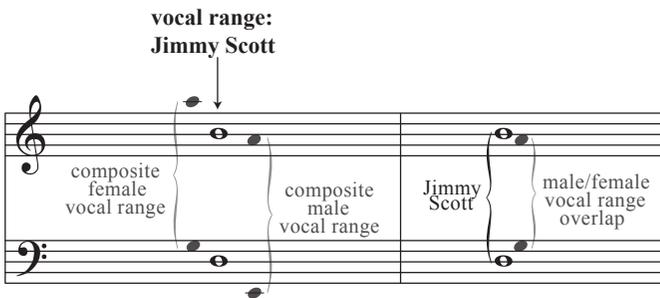
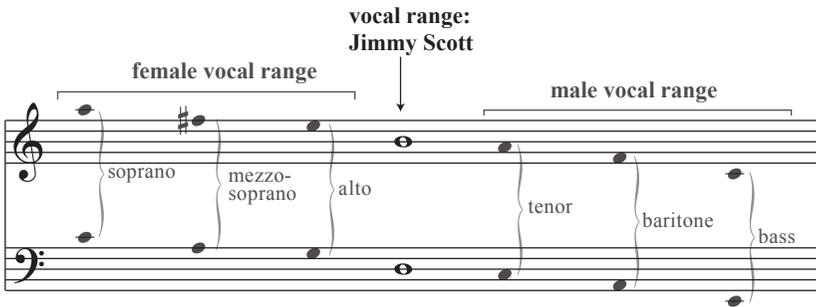
It is true that when voices are discussed in terms of gender, one of the concrete factors presented is pitch. It is standard in any text, from vocal pedagogical and performance resources to music theory and instrumentation references, to show the difference between genders by plotting their pitch range (see musical example 3.1). While the pitches given can vary slightly, they tend to fall within the same general ranges:³⁴

Soprano C₄ to A₅
 Mezzo soprano A₃ to F[#]₅
 Alto G₃ to E₅
 Tenor roughly C₃ to A₄
 Baritone A₂ to F₄
 Basses E₂ to C₄

These indications are given in order to stress difference between the voices. According to the chart, male voices occupy the first octave and two notes (E₂ – F₃), then for another octave and two notes (10 semitones) (G₃ – A₄) male and female singers occupy a range together. This is followed by an octave (A₃ – A₂) that is indicated as the female range. These guidelines highlight differences, showing the parts of the vocal range that are occupied purely by males or by females. There is an overlap of 10 semitones, or about one third of the overall human vocal range, between men and women. In short, while these indications of vocal ranges are undoubtedly accurate, they stress divergence rather than commonality. We therefore cannot say that pitch is an absolute defining factor in gender signaling.

By way of trying to solve the question of pitch, I compared Scott's vocal range with those of a number of his contemporaries. In musical example 3.2, I show the results of comparing three of Scott's biggest hits with comparable artists performing around the same period. The list shows the entire range used in the songs, from the lowest to the highest note.³⁵

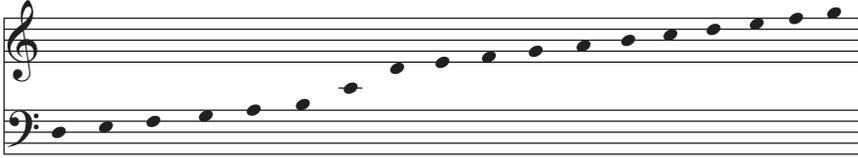
EXAMPLE 3.1 Standard voice type range compared with Jimmy Scott's vocal range on *The Source*.



- Jimmy Scott, *The Source* (B₃ – D₄)
- James Brown, “I Feel Good” (G₃ – D₅)
- Sam Cooke, “A Change Is Gonna Come” (F₃ – B₄)
- Marvin Gaye, “Trouble Man” (A₃ – D₅)
- Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, “Ooo Baby Baby” (A₃ – G₅)
- Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, “I Second That Emotion” (B₃ – D₅)
- Otis Rush, “I Can’t Stop Baby” (E₃ – G₅)
- Swan Silvertones, “Brighter Day Ahead” (A₃ – C₅)
- The Temptations, “Get Ready” (A₃ – D₅)
- Frankie Valli, “Big Girls Don’t Cry” (D₃ – E₅)
- Stevie Wonder, “Uptight” (B₃ – D₅)
- Stevie Wonder, “For Once in My Life” (G₃ – F₅)

The simplest interpretation of Scott’s slow career start is that against the backdrop of performers who fell into recognizable (African American) male categories, his high tessitura—not the complete range of the voice but the part of the vocal range that is most comfortable and most *utilized*—was so high that

EXAMPLE 3.2 Comparison of vocal ranges between Jimmy Scott and some of his contemporaries.



Jimmy Scott <i>The Source</i>	D3—B4
James Brown "I Feel Good"	D4—D5
Sam Cooke "A Change is Gonna Come"	F3—B ¹ / ₄
Marvin Gaye "Trouble Man"	A3—D5
Smokey Robinson "Ooo Baby Baby"	A3—G5
Smokey Robinson & The Miracles "I Second That Emotion"	B3—D5
Otis Rush "I Can't Stop Baby"	E3—G5
Swan Silvertones "Brighter Day Ahead"	A3—C5
The Temptations "Get Ready"	A3—D5
Frankie Vallie "Big Girls Don't Cry"	D3—E5
Stevie Wonder "Uptight"	B3—D ⁵ / ₅
Stevie Wonder "For Once in My Life"	G3—F ⁵ / ₅

he sounded like a woman and thus was difficult to market as himself. However, as we see, Scott's higher range is not much higher than his colleagues'. In fact Scott's highest note is B₄, which is seven and eight semitones below Stevie Wonder's F#₅ and Smokey Robinson's G₅, respectively. Scott occupies the same range as the tenor vocal range specified in *Grove Music Online*: his top note is B₄, while *Grove* indicates that tenors go to A₄. That is, Scott's pitch range—one note above the average tenor voice—is not the main distinguishing factor between him and his contemporaries.

A closer analysis of the mean F₀ (the vocal sound's fundamental frequency) of Scott and three of the singers from the list, Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson, and Frankie Valli, yield surprising results.³⁶

Mean F₀:

Marvin Gaye, "Trouble Man," 382.62 Hz

Smokey Robinson, "Ooo Baby Baby," 412.44 Hz

Frankie Valli, "Big Girls Don't Cry," 416.19 Hz

Jimmy Scott, "On Broadway," 263.77 Hz

Jimmy Scott, "I Wish I Knew," 248.18 Hz

Jimmy Scott, "This Love of Mine," 325.48 Hz³⁷

This comparison shows that Scott's mean F₀ average is significantly lower than that of the three other artists. Gaye's, Robinson's, and Valli's mean frequencies are similar to each other.³⁸ For our case, then, Scott is neither higher in the overall pitch range or frequency range nor in mean frequency compared to key colleagues who were read as masculine. What, then, contributed to the reading of Scott as nonmasculine while his colleagues were read as masculine? I'd like to consider the question of audiences' readings of Scott in a roundabout way.

Signaling Vocal Masculinity with Timbral Scare Quotes

How is gender signaled vocally? For most people who fall within traditional gender norms, this question does not require attention. Vocal norms are naturalized. However, the question of gender signaling is an urgent one for transgender individuals, a population that deals with this issue on a very practical level. First, pitch is considered in terms of the physical vocal apparatus and hormonal state. From an anatomical point of view, vocal range is tied to the length of the vocal folds: longer folds yield a deeper pitch, and shorter folds yield a higher pitch. However, a body's hormonal environment can also greatly modify the voice and lower pitch while maintaining the same vocal fold length. Therefore, for female-to-male transition, steroid treatment is often used successfully

to lower vocal pitch.³⁹ For male-to-female conversions, hormone therapy does not alter pitch.⁴⁰ Instead surgical interventions are used, but they pose risks, and their success varies.⁴¹ Second, research on the perception of transgender voices shows that F_0 is only one of many cues on which speakers and listeners rely.⁴² In fact even a voice with a very high F_0 can be perceived as male or masculine if other aspects of the thick vocal event signal male parameters. To adopt Jody Kreiman and Diana Sidtis's terminology, the voices of some male-to-female transgender individuals are interpreted as "unambiguously male" even if pitched within a stereotypically "female range."⁴³

Third, besides pitch, a number of additional vocal characteristics contribute to the signaling of masculinity and femininity, a fact that many transgender individuals use to their advantage. Parameters and characteristics that have been identified as gendered markers include word choice, precise articulation (clearly pronounced consonants and endings of words), uptalk (ending declarative sentences with a rising intonation, or a pitch contour associated with a question), more upward shifts in F_0 , fewer downward shifts in F_0 , variable intonation contours, and longer word durations.⁴⁴ In singing, during which many of these variables are not engaged, feminine vocality can be signaled with increased breathiness, a limited dynamic range, a less dynamic variable, particular articulation, and vocal timbral manipulation.⁴⁵ For example, when Deborah Gunzberger compared the female and male voices of six transgender people, she observed that, when speaking in their female voice, most speakers increased the mean F_0 , the overall range of F_0 , and the time durations of each increase. In moves relevant to singing, most of the speakers retracted the corners of their lips (as in a smile) and/or raised their larynges, shortening the vocal tract.⁴⁶ These two relatively simple movements drastically raise the formant frequency, which signals femininity.⁴⁷ However, Gunzberger also reported that, while one of the speaker's utterances was not differentiated in F_0 and dynamic patterns were coded neither male nor female, the speaker was still classified correctly 74 percent of the time. The overwhelmingly correct classifications were based on listeners' ability to compensate for a lack of F_0 signaling and misleading intensity cues by focusing on articulation and resonance cues.⁴⁸

In short, scholarship from music, the sciences, and medicine confirms that there is significant overlap between male and female voices as we interpret them, but that timbre is also a strong factor that can override even pitch information in pointing unambiguously in a single direction. While music literature stresses the divergences between male and female pitch areas, if we read the data we can easily and accurately stress the overlap. However, we also know that human identification of gender based on voice patterns tends to be fairly

accurate. In the words of Kreiman and Sidtis, “These patterns confirm that a male or female voice quality depends on a constellation of static and dynamic cues, and not simply on mean F₀.” Moreover a “female voice cannot be created by simply scaling up male vocal parameters, because culture-, accent-, and dialect-dependent cues to a speaker’s sex can be essential to a successful transformation.”⁴⁹ Thinking back to work around the transgender voice, we recall that while men may speak in a pitch range that is marked female, they still may not be read as female.⁵⁰

What, then, was the strong differentiating factor between Scott and his contemporaries? Remember, Scott’s contemporaries vocalized in pitches associated with women but were read as male or even hypermasculine. Yet Scott, who vocalized in a range that is within the traditional male vocal spectrum, was read as ambiguous in gendered terms. In terms of cues that are often used in gendered signaling, such as pronunciation, Scott does not offer apparent gendered cues. Overall Scott’s pronunciation is clear, while, specifically, the endings of his words are less clear. The male singers listed earlier also have very clear pronunciation.

However, one differentiating factor is the use of what I call timbral scare quotes—the use of a portion of the voice that is set apart timbrally from what the singer deems to be the normative part of his or her voice. The specific vocal technique used by Scott’s contemporaries to create a different timbre was *falsetto*.⁵¹ By enlisting falsetto, a vocal technique and recognizable timbral shift, male performers can utilize larger portions of their voices while maintaining an image of masculinity. Indeed, the most recognized and recognizable African American male vocalists of the 1960s, the decade that could have included Scott’s mainstream breakthrough, made liberal use of falsetto technique as timbral mediation.⁵² Applying this particular technique and timbre to a high vocal range signaled hypermasculinity.

While falsetto can indicate both a vocal function and a technique, most people experience or know it through timbre. A strong *timbral* shift marks its separation from the vocalizer’s “natural” voice. Falsetto occurs when the vocal muscle relaxes, and the cricothyroid muscle is able to create further longitudinal tension upon the vocal ligaments. By increasing this tension, the pitch can be raised beyond the vocal cords’ maximum possible length. This takes place in a process of thinning the vocal cords, so that the vibration is located almost entirely in the ligaments (akin to thinner strings on a stringed instrument).⁵³

Thus male singers can engage the upper vocal register while holding that part of their voice at arm’s length.⁵⁴ Even Prince, in his carefully crafted gender-ambiguous presentation, marks off some of his falsetto singing, performances

that are pitch-shifted even higher by speeding up the tape. He identifies this type of vocal performance with a different name: *Camille*.⁵⁵ In effect, by timbrally marking the otherness of this vocal range in relation to their so-called true voices, male singers' masculine personae are held intact while singing high notes. Accessing that part of their vocal range through falsetto marks off the area in a form of timbral scare quotes. Therefore, contra the commonly held belief, it is not pitch that is the distinguishing factor of Scott's voice, but rather timbre.⁵⁶ And it is a specific timbral expression that serves as the comparison to normative masculine vocal performance against which Scott is measured.

While, as I explained, a clear set of parameters are performed during speech, timbral scare quotes can take different forms in the singing voice. For example, those who exhibit what is experienced as gender-ambiguous vocal presentation can deflect the gender-ambiguousness of a sung performance through their spoken presentation. Putting timbral scare quotes around a high vocal range may also take place outside the act of singing. Alisha Jones has reported that countertenors—male singers who sing entire repertoires in falsetto—within the black church negotiate what could be understood as queerness by framing their sung vocal performances, which are understood as feminine or queer, with strong masculine cues in their *spoken* interactions. Jones considers male singers with conservatory training as they sing countertenor repertoire within the context of the black church service, and addresses the pressure they experience to conform to “longstanding heteronormative constructs in gospel” and “the socio-cultural anxieties” around gender. Discussing this practice through a sensitive ethnography with the singer Patrick Dailey, Jones draws a distinction between these countertenors and singers who sing in noticeable falsetto, describing the countertenors and their style as “singing high.”⁵⁷ Jones and I both look to draw this distinction as a sign that falsetto is marked as outside the normative voice.

As did Scott, the countertenor Dailey maintains an integral voice throughout the vocal registers. Dailey's timbral integration of the falsetto with his rare use of the lower part of the vocal register sets him apart from soul and gospel performers, who use falsetto in the upper range of the voice and modal voice in the medium and lower ranges. However, while Dailey generally sings in a higher vocal range than male soul and gospel singers, and maintains falsetto throughout, he puts scare quotes around the entire range with spoken framing that performs traditional male masculinity.⁵⁸ Dailey pitches his speaking voice slightly lower than his singing voice, a strategy that he believes establishes an “aural baseline” and demonstrates what he refers to as “neutral,” that is, a voice that offers the cues expected from a male singer. In his words, in order to

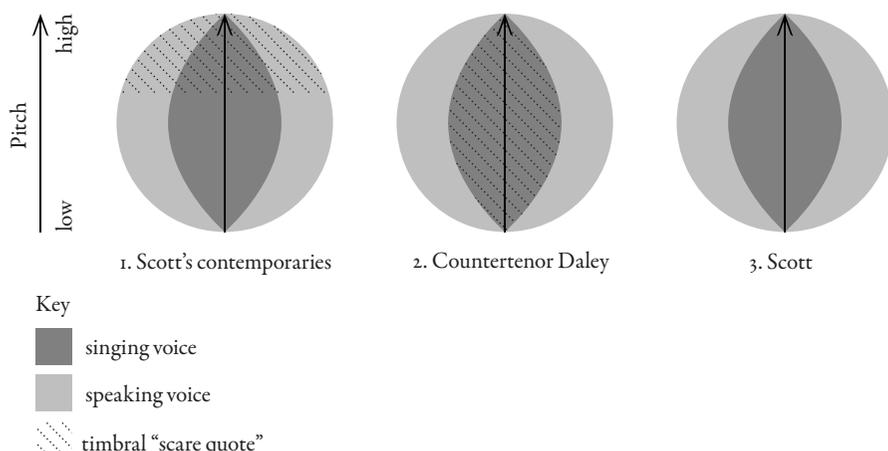


FIGURE 3.3 Timbral scare quotes. 1: Jimmy Scott's contemporaries, who sing in falsetto and perform hypersexuality; 2: countertenor Patrick Dailey, who sings in falsetto but marks with speech; 3: Scott, no marking.

stave off “professional hassles” because his musical performance is not “consistent with hegemonic perceptions of ideal masculinity,” Dailey carefully frames his singing voice by demonstrating “competency” and “‘ideal’ black Christian manhood” within the church service context. This includes maintaining strict protocol around formal salutations.⁵⁹ Dailey believes it is absolutely necessary to take such measures to “frame his masculinity,” saying he is “keenly aware that black congregations deplore effeminacy in black men and easily become suspicious of mannerisms that fall outside of a heteronormative ideal.”⁶⁰

Figure 3.3 illustrates the ways in which nonnormative vocal timbre is bracketed. Soul and gospel singers bracket off the higher part of the range by singing it in a different timbre, namely falsetto. Countertenors such as Dailey bracket off the entire performance by speaking in a low voice and performing other masculine ideals when not singing. Scott, on the other hand, sings in a consistent timbre throughout his musical numbers, and this timbre does not change when he is speaking.

Scott's assertion of agency was performed through a precise, microscopic arrangement of overtones; while the beauty of his artistry was his smooth and seamless transition from top to bottom, it was precisely his avoidance of falsetto and his refusal to bracket off parts of his voice that yielded timbral consistency throughout the vocal registers, marking him as different. In other words, Scott was othered not because of his higher voice but because of his consistent timbre, evidencing his inability or unwillingness to delineate a so-called real masculine

vocal range from its so-called false upper extension. Moreover he maintained this consistency in his spoken voice, not only sonically but also in his assertion that this was his voice. This consistency, and the lack of scare quotes around any parts of his voice, disqualified Scott from the category of male jazz singer and also from the category of female jazz singer; his timbral evenness across vocal registers and his self-presentation together created a significant timbral ambiguity. It was that ambiguity, which did not lend itself to easy gender categorization, that opened a space within which, instead of dealing directly with the complexity of Scott's voice, we take an easier route, projecting onto it the representations we want to hear.

Timbral Performance as Radical Resistance

Within this construction of black vocal masculinity how—if at all—may Scott negotiate his desired identification as a black heterosexual man? What did the acousmatic question yield in our engagement with Scott? Within this timbral framework, is Scott simply read as female, or beyond-human, while men using falsetto or framing their singing voice in masculine-timbral code are read as masculine men? Did the acousmatic question tell us only that each timbral performance begins and ends with listeners' projections—addressing my third corrective to misconceptions about voice (voice's source is not the singer; it is the listener)? And that these projections, materialized through imagery, descriptions, characters, and the female voice, are the legacy associated with Scott? I'd like to push the reading of Scott's case further.

José Esteban Muñoz, a theorist of queer performance, suggests that there is at least one additional layer to the observations that can be made by listening to listening—that is, by paying attention to various groups' interactions with and responses to the acousmatic question. Muñoz's concept of *disidentification* provides a useful framework through which to deal with the complex dynamic arising between an artist's positionality and the material performed. Especially poignant is the play between audiences' preconceived notions of a character and the way such notions are castrated through juxtaposition with unlikely material. In this way the very success of the performance depends on the dynamic between a commonly held notion and the revelation that results when a character is presented in a new context. What these performances highlight, Muñoz notes, is "the fiction of identity." The "cultural performers" he considers "negotiate between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects."⁶¹ By identifying disidentification as a positionality,

Muñoz recognizes that performance need not only consist of identifying with or reinscribing existing essentialized roles (including guerrilla fighter and drag queen) but that creative play with social roles, and even essential identities, can prove politically and semiotically productive.

While Scott insisted on heterosexuality and normalcy, he also availed himself of career opportunities that compromised that gender identity—yet he filled those feminine, queer, or beyond-human roles with his heterosexual identity. Like the performers Muñoz discusses—who show layers of identity rather than perfectly passing from one normative identity to another (say, from male to female, as in the case of the drag performer Vaginal Creme Davis)⁶²—Scott neither militantly insisted on a masculine identity nor catered to the alternative identities fashioned for him by producers and audiences.

While they differ on the surface, there are strong resonances between Scott's power and the power of political drag found in the performance of the theater group the Mirabelles, whom Muñoz describes to flesh out his explanation of disidentification:

The Mirabelles are experimenting with a new type of militant theater, a theater separate from an explanatory language. . . . They resort to drag, song, mime, dance, etc., not as different ways of illustrating a theme, to “change the ideas” of spectators, but in order to trouble them, to stir up uncertain desire-zones that they always more or less refuse to explore. The question is no longer whether one will play feminine against masculine or the reverse, but to make bodies, all bodies, break away from the representations and restraints on the “social body.”⁶³

While Scott, in contrast to the Mirabelles, does not himself “resort to drag,” an audience that cannot make sense of him has done so, over and over again.

Each listener responds to slightly different aspects of performance and, reifying his or her own listening experience, adds another layer of meaning to the sound. Using his or her own set of experiences, each listener makes sense of the singer's voice. This process is not static; individuals define the meanings of things through interactions.⁶⁴ Therefore the listener's *impressions* of the singer's voice and identity are formed through the listener's own active contribution. Each audience member is deeply involved in the formation of what he or she perceives to be the singer's voice.⁶⁵ Thus it was his audience, rather than Scott himself, who actively produced the drag performance. And what seemed like quiet acceptance on his part may also be understood as an extraordinary pedagogical move. In Scott's words, “I saw my suffering as my salvation. Once

I knew that, I understood God had put me in this strange little package for a reason. All I needed was the courage to be me. That courage took a lifetime to develop.”⁶⁶

Scott’s act of disidentification took place by simply not fighting audiences’ and producers’ projected and manifested drag performances. “For a long time,” one of his colleagues said, “the joke was that Jimmy wasn’t a fag, he was a lesbian.” Another colleague remembers, “People were harsh with Jimmy. You’d go to his show and hear someone yell out, ‘He sounds like a freak, he looks a freak, he *is* a freak.’ But Jimmy was a gentleman. He just stood there and took it.” In contrast, Scott recalls from this period, “Funny, but I saw myself as a normal guy looking for normal happiness. A home. A wife. A nice income.”⁶⁷ The performance setting, and existing ideas of physical and vocal masculinity and femininity, defined Scott’s performance work as liminal and drag.

It is precisely his calm self-representational insistence on normalcy that challenges producers and audiences alike. Scott performed disidentification. His performance, which largely rolled with other people’s ideas about gender while maintaining a steadfast assertion of agency through timbral performance, exhibiting a solid self-identity throughout, constitutes a kind of haphazard beauty that is true to most people’s lives: a continuous negotiation between what others project onto our voices and the strength to counter it, more or less, with our own ideas. To me, Scott’s lifework exemplifies the type of critical performance that I took as inspiration for this book’s methodological approach. This theoretical and performative strategy, which I call critical performance practice methodology, can help articulate the polyphony of what can sometimes seem to be the oxymoronic modalities of race, gender, and sexuality at work within any identity.

Despite his “unusual voice” and ambiguous gender identity making him a “hero for the margin” and “a cult figure only,” I suggest that Scott’s performance offers radical resistance on a much deeper epistemological level. Scott shows us what cannot be subsumed within the current “mainstream” paradigm of vocal timbre, hence exposing the paradigm itself.⁶⁸ That is, if we listen to our own listening to Scott, he offers us the opportunity to confront the *habitus* of that listening, that choir of voices to which we compare every new voice. He does this by sonically foregrounding a truism: that existing language cannot capture the voice *itself* beyond clichéd categories into which it is forced and with which it re-creates timbral meaning. Rather than hearing Scott’s voice and (fooling myself into believing that I am) forming a description of that voice only, I hear it through and toward the traces of not-quite-erased voices and the socially mediated ways I categorize them. In fact it is through Scott’s continued quiet activ-

ism in performance, which seems to fold into hegemonic projections, that he shows us the scare quotes around other male singers' timbral signaling. In this instance the politics of listening require that we listen beyond pitch and that we carefully attend to the multivalent capacity of timbre.

The lesson of Jimmy Scott is not unlike one taught by John Cage. In his infamous piece *4'33"*, Cage instructed a pianist to sit silently in front of an open piano for the given duration, teaching audiences that whatever they listened to *as* music indeed *became* music for them. By allowing the full range of interpretations of his sexual and gender identity to flourish, and by doing nothing to accommodate or frame them, Scott shows us that while every listener brings historically and culturally situated conventions to an instance of listening, the artist invents with that very material. Thus, while not operating within and being interpreted independent of his given context, Scott nonetheless disrupts easy readings and conclusions by playing and creating, as an autonomous artist, with the techniques made available to him through enculturation. Scott's challenging career exemplifies that audiences create whatever meaning they please and that the artist can make his own meaning. While Scott (like all of us) is entrained through informal lessons that seek to pin him down in terms of the intersection of gender and race, as well as through more formal lessons as a working musician, he composes something new and different out of this entrainment.⁶⁹ In other words, even though audiences hold on to entrainment and its limited meanings, for himself Scott is able to escape the static meaning to which most of the world around him clings.