

New Orleans
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Connee Boswell

Connee Boswell dies in N.Y.

New Orleans-born Connee Boswell, a noted singer from the Big Band era remembered for such songs as "Stormy Weather" and "Whispers in the Dark," died today at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York.

Miss Boswell, 68, had been confined to a wheelchair since she contracted polio at 3. She had undergone surgery for cancer last February at Mt. Sinai.

She first came to the public's attention as one of the three Boswell Sisters. In 1936, her sisters retired and Connee forged on alone. It was about that time she married Harry Leedy, the group's manager.

Miss Boswell also made a name for herself in motion pictures, appearing in such films as "Kiss the Boys Good Bye," "The Trans-Atlantic Merry-Go-Round," and "Artists and Models," in which she sang the Academy Award-winning song, "Whispers in the Dark."

She recorded for Decca records and had a series of duet hits with Bing Crosby. Some of the best sellers were "Yes Indeed," "Basin Street Blues" and "Alexander's Rag Time Band."

With her recording of the operatic song "Martha," done in swing style, she started a trend of swing bands and singers adapting classical music for their arrangements.

She performed from a wheeled stool that could be moved about the stage. Her floor-length gowns were specially designed to hide the stool.

"I'm not trying to hide the fact on-stage," she said of the long gowns. "But I don't want the fact that I can't walk to stand between me and the audience."

Miss Boswell, who lived in New York City, was widowed in January 1975, and stopped performing about that time.

Funeral arrangements were pending.

New Orleans
James Picayune
Oct. 12, 1976



CONNIE BOSWELL

N.O.-Born Singer Boswell Dead at 68

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Connee Boswell, a New Orleans-born singer who gained her popularity during the Big Band days of the 1930s and 1940s, died Monday in Mount Sinai Hospital, New York City.

Miss Boswell, confined to a wheelchair almost all her life because of polio, had been operated on for cancer at the hospital last February. She was 68 years old.

The Associated Press reported she called her doctors to her bedside last Saturday and asked them to "let me die in peace and with dignity."

"If God wants me, I'm ready to go," she said.

Her doctors cancelled further chemotherapy and discontinued intravenous treatment. She then called her friend, singer Jane Pickens, and said good bye.

Miss Boswell was best known for her renditions of "Stormy Weather," "Whispers in the Dark," "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" and "When the Saints Go Marching In."

Early in her show business career, she sang with a sister-trio called the Boswell Sisters.

The other two retired in 1936, and Connee continued singing alone. About that time she married the late Harry Leedy, the group's manager.

Miss Boswell recorded for Decca with such stars as Bing Crosby, and appeared on radio and television and in her own show as well as with Ed Sullivan, Perry Como, Steve Allen, Bob Crosby, Arthur Godfrey and Frank Sinatra.

She appeared in such films as "Kiss the Boys Goodbye," "Transatlantic Merry-go-Round," "Moulin Rouge" and "Artists and Models." It was in the last-named film that she sang the Academy Award-winning song, "Whispers in the Dark."

When she performed, a floor-length gown hid a stool on which she was wheeled on to the stage.

"I'm not trying to hide the fact on stage. But I don't want the fact that I can't walk to stand between me and the audience," she once explained.

Locally, Miss Boswell was a favorite of Blue Room patrons in the Roosevelt (now the Fairmont) Hotel.

Eight months ago, she underwent surgery for stomach cancer but left the hospital for a time in April, complaining that her treatment "is worse than the ailment."

Finally, she decided against further surgery and asked her doctors "to take all those things out of my arms."

Her brother-in-law Ben Leedy said, "It was not the same as 'pulling the plug' because there was no plug to pull. Connee simply said, 'look, everybody tried and it's no use. Let's just stop everything and let's see how long God wants me to remain.'"

A funeral Mass will be celebrated at 10 a.m. Thursday at Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic Church in New York, with burial in Ferncliff Cemetery, Ardsley, N.Y.



CONNIE BOSWELL: a real original of American music.

Connie: a great singer

Max Jones pays
tribute to

CONNIE BOSWELL

WHEN I heard of the death of Connie Boswell — she died early last week after many months of illness — I felt more than the usual regret at the ending of a remarkable musician's life. For me it was also a reminder of one of the early idols of an incipient jazz freak.

Connie (who became Connie during the course of her solo career) was a very fine, indeed great, singer of popular music who possessed an instinctive liking and feeling for jazz.

She was the leading light of the three Boswell Sisters from New Orleans, a group which made an incisive impression on the jazz-minded youth of the early Thirties. In addition she was an innovator, though that was less clear 45 years ago than now.

Traded

We didn't, even as fledgling collectors, buy the Boswells' recordings assiduously or talk of them as out-and-out jazz figures. They were thought of as pleasant "hot style" performers who tended to surround themselves with such then-glittering names as Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Eddie Lang or Dick McDonough, Manny Klein and the still-brilliant Joe Venuti.

Thus we bought, or traded, their worthier discs as much for the instrumental contributions as for the perky, free-ranging and cleverly routinized vocalising of Connie, Martha and Vet (real name Helvetia).

All the same, the singing, and particularly Connie's thick-voiced, black-inflected style, always sounded right in a jazz setting. The rapport between these girls and their tough, talented accompanists was, in its day, extraordinary.

The players respected Connie and her sisters for their musical know-how — Connie played cello and other instruments, including saxophone, and Martha and Vet played piano and violin respectively — and the trio admired the men who could blow hot, and encouraged the recording chiefs to let them loose as much as possible. Connie did the vocal arranging and suggested many novel ideas.

Theme

None of this was standard practice, remember, in 1931 when the trio cut such excellent examples of Boswelliana as their theme song, "Shout, Sister, Shout," the jazz-orientated "When I Take My Sugar To Tea," "It's You," "It's The Girl" and "Heebie Jeebies," and ingeniously contrived "Roll On, Mississippi" and "Wha'd Ja Do To Me."

These were young, respectable white ladies who should have been crooning sweet treatments of innocuous ballads instead of messing about with tunes by Clarence and Spencer Williams, Duke Ellington and Fats Waller, blues and interesting pop-songs, making up their own swinging arrangements, and asking for half-time passages here and double-time choruses there, while advising the studio to "let the guys alone."

It was said, in a Down Beat article of long ago, that the Boswells were the first to allow white accompanists to play freely; that they

continued
overleaf

Connie Boswell

from page 45

never told soloists what to do, but that the Dorsey Brothers sometimes borrowed from the trio's parts.

These, worked out in casual fashion, were a mixture of pre-arranged intros, codas, tempo changes and solo-ensemble contrasts, and effects arrived at in rehearsal or even on wax.

"The girls faked a lot of their stuff, too," wrote Down Beat, "and often Connie began by determining the appropriate ending and then working backwards. All three took over the melody, continually shifting it back and forth among themselves. Their unorthodox harmonies . . . sometimes just spontaneous, entranced jazz musicians . . . These things tended to influence band orchestrations enormously."

Glenn Miller, it went on to state, even wrote arrangements from Connie's dictation. Another proof, perhaps, of the ancient dictum that in the realms of jazz "it all started in New Orleans."

Pioneers

Without question, the Boswells were pioneers — though not the first hot vocal trio known — and streets ahead of all rivals. Their influence spread over subsequent swing-style female groups, and I do include the Andrews Sisters and Pointer Sisters.

It is interesting now to read that as a child close-harmony trio at home (encouraged and partly tutored by New Orleans cornettist Emmett Hardy) they sought a suitable girl to make up a quartet but found no-one good enough.

Hardy and other jazzmen inspired their musical development in one direction; work with the New Orleans Philharmonic Orchestra gave them another training. But the prime influence on their ultimate group style, and on Connie's warm, flexible voice and "easy" rhythmical phrasing, was the folk-music she heard at home — provided, almost inevitably, by three black domestics who sang around the house.

Speaking personally, I was a follower of the Boswells rather than the most famous sister, though always admiring the intonation, diction and clear, deep tone of her solo moments.

It was their corporate charm and personality, the exceptional gaiety and var-

ety of their vocal routines which drew me to the London Palladium in July of '33, when they appeared here for the first time — Connie in the centre, seated in a wheeled chair from which she had always worked (as a result of polio contracted as a child).

Afterwards, the trio returned to Europe and Connie recorded with Ambrose's band in London during '35. Then, early in '36, they made their last discs together. Martha, the oldest of the three, married George Lloyd (a founder of U.S. Decca) and this broke up the singing team. Martha died in July of '58.

Films

Connie went on to international popularity via films as well as records and enjoyed many hits, including "Sand In My Shoes" and "Whispers In The Dark." She dipped early into the business of "swinging the classics," and was, in many different ways, a real original of American music.

Ella Fitzgerald has often, in conversation, acknowledged her debt to Connie and there are many singers who reflect her style and technical quality without sounding like recognisable disciples.

On the recently released MCA album, "Sand In My Shoes," several tracks of Connie's show distinctly how and where Ella was influenced. Also on this LP are the light-hearted "18th And 19th" and "Yes Indeed" duets with Bing Crosby. These, too, were successful for Connie, as were other collaborations with Bing such as "Bob White."

The Sisters, in full chanting and scatting order, are well represented on "Sweet Harmony — Hot Rhythm" (Vocalion VLP5) and "The Original Sound Of The Thirties" on a CBS import, CBS 80074.

An endearing tribute to Connie's timeless ability, the trio's advanced use of harmony and vocal interplay, and their typical tempo changes, is paid by Maria Muldaur in her version of "We Just Couldn't Say Goodbye" (featuring the Beppo Sisters). Maria is clearly familiar with the Sisters' 1932 cut of the song, and her own singing may well be touched by Connie's sound and natural phrasing.

As I say, a name from the past for me, but one which may come to outlast that of many a vocal star in the music histories of the future.

CONNIE BOSWELL, 68, popular singer and actress, died of cancer Oct. 10, 1976 in New York City. She was discovered in the late 1920's singing with her two sisters in their native New Orleans. In 1936 she became a single act after her sisters married, and her recordings sold over 75 million copies. Partially paralyzed by polio, she performed in a wheelchair throughout her career. Among the films in which she appeared are "Artists and Models," "Kiss the Boys Goodbye," "Syncopation," "Moulin Rouge," "Transatlantic Merry-Go-Round," "Senior Prom," "Swing Parade," and "The Big Broadcast." She leaves her sister Helvetia. Her husband died in 1975.



Connie
Boswell