

# ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



## ANITA O'DAY

[This is the eighth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Her real name was Anita Belle Colton, born October 18, 1919. She changed her surname from Colton to O'Day, which is "pig Latin" for "dough," slang for money, which she hoped to make a lot of as a singer. But, in the long run, her life experiences turned out to be more valuable than the dough.

O'Day made her mark because of her sense of rhythm and dynamics and her ability to improvise, singing "scat" like Ella Fitzgerald. She told others that, during a childhood tonsillectomy, the surgeon's accidental removal of her uvula left her incapable of vibrato, and unable to maintain long phrases. It forced her to develop a more percussive style based on short notes and rhythmic drive. But, as one at the frontlines of bebop, it served her well.

Anita took the chance to leave her unhappy home at age 14. She became a contestant in the popular Walk-a-thons as a dancer, touring the circuits for two years and often got to sing. In 1934, she toured the Midwest as a marathon dance contestant, but left the endurance contests for a pro singing career.

While performing at the Off Beat in Chicago, she met Gene Krupa, who promised to call her if his current vocalist ever left his band. It took two years for that call to come. Then Krupa had her do 34 sides, including "Let Me Off Uptown", a novelty tune that became her first big hit. That same year, *Down Beat* named O'Day "New Star of the Year". Finally!! Unfortunately, because of Krupa's drugging, the band folded. So in 1943, O'Day joined the Woody Herman band for bookings at both the Hollywood Palladium and the Orpheum.

Her gigs with several big bands changed the traditional image of the typical "girl singer". Always feisty, O'Day presented herself as a jazz musician, cool and trendy, wearing a band jacket and skirt instead of the usual evening gown. She related, "I said to Krupa, 'When you get new suits for the band, can I get one with a skirt?' He said, 'We don't wear it at the Paramount Theatre, but we can wear it in Milwaukee!' And so, the next thing you know, all the girls with the bands had that."

She did not want to go on tour with another big band, so she left Herman and went solo. Although their musical styles were different, she and Stan Kenton joined forces in April 1944. O'Day spent nearly a year with the Kenton band. During that time, she recorded 21 sides, including "And Her Tears Flowed Like Wine," which became a huge hit for her and for Stan.

She also appeared in one "soundie" with Kenton, performing "I'm Going Mad for a Pad" and "Tabby the Cat". What's a soundie, you ask? Long before MTV's videos and YouTube's ubiquitous presence on the Internet, Soundies were an early version of the music video: usually two- or three-minute musical films, produced in NYC, Chicago, and Hollywood between 1940 - 46, often included a short dance sequence. The completed Soundies were generally released within a few months of their filming; the last group was released in March 1947. The films were displayed on a coin-operated film jukebox known as a Panoram in nightclubs, bars, restaurants, and amusement centers. Today, Soundies are recognized as an archive, preserving rare performances of African-American artists who had fewer opportunities to perform in films, like Fats Waller, Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne and Louis Armstrong, to name a few.

What nailed O'Day's place in jazz, however, are the 17 albums she recorded for the Norgran and Verve labels between 1952 and 1962. Check out Norgran's first LP, *Anita O'Day Sings Jazz* (reissued as *The Lady Is a Tramp*), MGN 1049.



Benny Goodman invited O'Day to tour Europe with his band in 1959, when she became even more popular. O'Day later wrote in her 1981 autobiography, *High Times, Hard Times (Limelight Editions, ISBN-13: 978-0879101183)*, that when Goodman's attempts to upstage her failed to weaken the audience's enthusiasm, he cut all but two of her numbers from the show.

Her popularity was revived when she spoke candidly about her heroin addiction in her memoir, and that led to a string of TV appearances, another tour of Europe and a 50th Anniversary Concert at Carnegie Hall.

On Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 2006, at age 87, O'Day died in her sleep. For those who heard her in her heyday, they might now see her as a woman who made some bad choices, had to live with them, but still was able to carve out a superb singing career. And hopefully, she'll be remembered for the latter.

*Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at [www.JustMeLiveMusic.com](http://www.JustMeLiveMusic.com). See them on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic](https://www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic)*