

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the twentieth 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.]

SARAH VAUGHAN

What do we know about Sarah Lois Vaughan?

- She was a wildly popular jazz singer during 5 decades of the 20th century, with several crossovers into Pop.
- She had a 4-octave (plus) vocal range; most of us can cover 2 octaves – if we're lucky!
- Sarah was nicknamed *Sassy* and *Sailor*. But why?
- She was featured in the very first *Newport Jazz Festival*, in the summer of 1954 (even though that festival was usually reserved for instrumentalists.)
- Sarah received the NEA Jazz Masters Award in 1989, from the National Endowment for the Arts, which is considered by many as the highest honor in Jazz.

But what was her life really like? What made her special?

Born in Newark, NJ on March 27, 1924 (good news for those also born under the sign of Aries), her Dad played guitar and piano, while her Mom sang in the church choir. (Note: according to those who follow Horoscopes, Aries is a uniquely naive sign. Although they are independent, outgoing and assertive they are also surprisingly trusting, often innocently walking into the lion's den at times.) It may explain some of Sarah's choices.

From her musical beginnings (piano lessons at age 7), Vaughan began venturing – illegally -- by her mid-teens into Newark's night clubs, playing piano and singing. She transferred from her high school to *Newark Arts High School*, which had opened in 1931 as the United States' first arts "magnet" high school – yep, even back then! So, Sarah the student became Sarah the performer. She was that good. Besides, she and her friends had crossed the Hudson into NYC and heard the big bands at the *Apollo Theater*. There was no turning back. She entered Apollo's Amateur Night, won a

whole \$10 and a promise of a one-week contract (which came to pass a few years' later when she opened for the fabulous Ella Fitzgerald).

Vaughan spent the remainder of 1943 and part of 1944 touring the country with the Earl "Fatha" Hines big band that also featured baritone Billy Eckstine. Eckstine left the band in late 1943 and formed his own big band, featuring an unbelievable array of talent, including Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Kenny Dorham, Art Blakey, Lucky Thompson, Gene Ammons, Dexter Gordon, and of course Sarah. Eckstine's pianist is credited with giving Vaughan the moniker "Sassy", a nickname that matched her personality. Sarah bought into this nickname and often referred to herself as *Sass* or *Sassie*. The press dubbed her *Sailor* because of her "salty" language when being interviewed.



Vaughan went solo in 1945. During the next few years, she recorded Lover Man, Time and Again, If You Could See Me Now, Don't Blame Me, I've Got a Crush on You, Everything I Have Is Yours and Body and Soul. Those early recordings established her forever in the annals of Jazz. Later on, she recorded for such labels as Deluxe, Continental, Musicraft, Columbia, Mercury, Roulette, Mainstream, and Pablo Records. Did you know that she recorded a 1977 album of Beatles songs with contemporary pop arrangements for Atlantic Records (remember – Aries??)!

Accolades abound for her body of work. Critic Gary Giddins recalled her voice "... disciplined and nuanced, it was as thick as cognac, yet soared off the beaten path like an instrumental solo." Sinatra: "Sassy is so good now that when I listen to her I want to cut my wrists with a dull razor." Sarah's wide vocal range of soprano through baritone, even later in life, demonstrated her masterful vocal control. Ironically, we lost her to lung cancer in April of 1990 at age 66.

To hear a strong sample of Sassy at her best, I recommend *Sarah Vaughan and Clifford Brown*, an Audio CD reissued in 2000 under the Polygram Records label (available on Amazon, ASIN: B00004NHCC). Her collaboration with trumpeter Brown is amazing.

For your reading pleasure, check out this website for a unique look at her work: http://us.wow.com/wiki/Newark_Light_Rail. Here, NJ Transit paid tribute to Sarah by embedding the lyrics to her *Send In The Clowns* along the edge of each station platform. Simply scroll down the page to "Broad Street Extension" for a photo.

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.