



The Teddi King Story

By Richard Vacca

In September and October 2013, I wrote a three-part series on Teddi King for my blog, dividing her career into an early jazz period, a middle pop period, and a late renaissance. I've made a few updates for 2016, but the material is essentially the same.

Boston and the Storyville Years

Theodora "Teddi" King, born in Revere, Mass. on September 18, 1929, was all of 22 when Nat Hentoff proclaimed in *Down Beat* that she was "the most gifted vocalist this city has ever produced." There weren't that many great pop voices from Boston then, and big-band singer Frances Wayne could rightfully dispute Hentoff's claim, but his definitive statement resonates.

Teddi was still in high school when she won a Dinah Shore sing-alike contest at the RKO Theatre in February 1945. Trumpeter Georgie Graham approached her backstage and offered her a job singing with his band at the Ritz Plaza. She accepted. After Graham, she moved on to the bands of Gene Jones, Jack Edwards, Ray Dorey, and finally Nat Pierce, who led Boston's best big band.

King made her recording debut in May 1949 with the Pierce Orchestra, on "Goodbye Mr. Chops" (Motif M003A), a record she never liked. It wasn't her kind of tune, or Sarah Vaughan's, either, and Vaughan was King's inspiration in those days. It was the first of five records she made with the Pierce Orchestra, although only one other, "You Don't Know What Love Is" (Motif M006A), was released while the band was active. It would be almost 30 years before we heard the other three.



King may not have liked Mr. Chops, but he did open doors for her. In 1950 she sang at the upscale Darbury Room, and with Nick Jerret (Frances Wayne's brother) at the Bostonian Hotel. She was the staff singer on two television shows. And she was with Pierce whenever his band worked, and that spring the Pierce band worked weekends at the Symphony Ballroom. In May, George Shearing's Quintet made its Boston debut there, opposite Pierce, and Shearing was knocked out by King's singing.

King worked as a single in 1951, and sang with Shearing for the first time late that year. In early 1952, he invited her to join his group, the only singer ever to ever receive such an offer. She toured with the Quintet for two years, but recorded precious little with them. Four King tunes are included on Shearing's 1953 LP, *When Lights Are Low* (MGM E3264).

In Boston in November 1953, at Storyville, King shared the bill with Beryl Booker's trio. During that engagement, King recorded her first LP, for George Wein's Storyville label, in the club after hours,

accompanied only by Booker on piano. Titled *Round Midnight* (STLP-302), it was released in early 1954 without much notice. But King's next effort for Storyville was widely heard, and widely praised.

Miss Teddi King (STLP-314) was recorded in April 1954. Everything about this record worked. From the musicians (cornetist Ruby Braff, pianist Jimmy Jones, bassist Milt Hinton, and drummer Jo Jones), to the songs (numbers she'd sing for the rest of her life, like "I Saw Stars," "Love Is a Now and Then Thing," "I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan," and "Our Love Is Here to Stay"), to Burt Goldblatt's cover, *Miss Teddi King* was a winner. *Down Beat* gave it a four-star review that December.

In January 1955, *Metronome* made the unusual decision to review it in both the jazz and pop categories. Jazz reviewer Barry Ulanov called King a major vocal talent and said the album was one that "admirers of jazz singing of quality should not miss." He gave it a B+, while George Simon, the pop reviewer, gave it an A-: "Here is one of the best vocal LPs to come along in ages. Teddi King emerges here as a truly topnotch gal singer who phrases wonderfully, has great rhythmic sense, a sensuous and musical timbre and just about all the attributes required of a great vocalist."



Bill Simon (no relation to George) at *Saturday Review* wrote that King sang ballads "with more warmth and feminine appeal than we've encountered in several dozen new vocal "finds." What's more, she's intensely musical without getting tricky."

Various tracks from this LP are on YouTube, for instance [Love Is a Now and Then Thing](#) accompanied by Jimmy Jones, Milt Hinton, and Jo Jones.

King sang at Newport in 1955, was named a New Star in *Down Beat's* Critics' Poll that same year, and was named *Metronome's* Female Singer of the Year for 1956. These were high accolades, and 1956 would mark the high-water mark of King's rise in the jazz world.

King recorded her final album for Storyville, *Now in Vogue* (STLP-903), in July 1955. Hentoff reviewed it in *Down Beat* on Feb 8, 1956, but it did not impress him: "As usual, Teddi's voice quality *per se* is of crystalline beauty and freshness. But her use of that voice on this set is neither deeply moving nor especially swinging." She was accompanied by a New York session group led by Nick Travis and Bob Brookmeyer, who played "with taste but little fire."

Pop Singer at RCA

There were two Teddi Kings. The first was the singer of jazz and ballads, the one who worked with Nat Pierce and George Shearing, and recorded for Storyville. The second was the major-label pop singer with show business pizzazz.

Teddi King became an RCA Victor recording artist in 1955, and jazz listeners weren't pleased with the change in direction that followed. First came the series of recordings made for release on 45 rpm records. King was whisked into the studio to work with Hugo Winterhalter, who scrapped simplicity in favor of a full studio orchestra and strings. There were songs of questionable merit. But there was also advertising, and touring with the RCA Parade of Stars, and the result was King's biggest commercial hit, the syrupy "Mr. Wonderful," which made it to number 18 on the Billboard Hot Hundred chart in March 1956.

Next came the LPs. In 1956–57, King recorded three albums for RCA: *Bidin' My Time* (LPM-1147),

To You (LPM-1313), and *A Girl and Her Songs* (LPM-1454). All followed a pattern. Each included a few Storyville-type tunes sung with a small group. But then there were big pop arrangements that were too lush, and ballads that were too sweet. Each album, though inconsistent, had its high points, and King never failed to sing well.

Finally there was King's nightclub act, presented at the nation's top night spots, like the Fontainebleau in Miami Beach, Mr. Kelly's in Chicago and the Blue Angel in New York. She was a dynamic, Lena Horne-inspired performer.



Teddi King in the RCA years

Singing what one writer called “commercial jazz” had a price—King's core jazz audience started falling off. Less than a year after her appearance on the Newport stage, Nat Hentoff, in a March 1956 *Saturday Review* article titled “The Vanishing Jazz Singer,” praised King's sound as cool and clear and her intonation as flawless. But he was disappointed in her recent work. King, who “once gave promise of having the capacity to transform her voice into a warmly improvising, swinging instrument, is now a careful polisher of quality show tunes in supper clubs and a not-so-careful belter of penny-dreadfuls in recording studios.”

But King was determined to make it singing both jazz and pop, even if jazz opportunities were few. She was “Caught in the Act” by *Down Beat's* Cal Kolbe in December 1956, who wrote: “Singing at Storyville for the first time in almost two years, Teddi King had no trouble convincing anyone that she belonged there. Although she has a delicacy of sound uncommon among jazz singers, one would do well to think twice and listen again, harder, before dismissing her from the field. Her vocal orientation is unmistakably and consistently jazz centered. On up-tunes, she swings potently, and her ballads are studies in effective sensibility well beyond the reach of the nonjazz singer.”

King was still a jazz singer to reckon with, and Hentoff needn't have worried. But the jazz audience was small, certainly not large enough to satisfy RCA, and King parted company with them in 1958. She made one more of those mixed-bag albums, *All the Kings' Songs*, for Coral in 1959 (CRL 757278), and then she

stopped. She didn't record again for 14 years.

King made her mark with ballads, but she wasn't above a bit of satire in her nightclub act. In 1960, King was a guest on the *Playboy Penthouse* television show, singing “[The Tennessee Williams Blues](#),” by Bill Heyer, who wrote for King's nightclub act and later achieved some notoriety as a composer of off-Broadway revues.

Late-Night Teddi

Teddi King's career faded in the 1960s, but the improving prospects for interpreters of the American songbook revived it in the 1970s.

In 1977, King told *The New Yorker's* Whitney Balliett that despite the sequined gowns and Las Vegas stage act and RCA Victor contract, “I was doing pop pap, and I was in musical despair. I didn't have my lovely jazz music and the freedom it gives. Elvis Presley got bigger and bigger, and rock arrived, and

I got very depressed and thought of quitting the business.” King didn’t quit, but she labored through the sixties in near-anonymity.

While working on Nantucket in summer 1970, King contracted lupus, the debilitating disease she battled for the rest of her life. Weakened by illness, she changed her approach to singing. King always liked Billie Holiday for her depth of feeling, but other influences changed over time. As a young band singer, she liked Frances Wayne and Helen Forrest. There was a strong Sarah Vaughan influence in King’s jazz material, and Lena Horne inspired her RCA years. In the seventies, she concentrated on lyrics and telling stories in song, and Mabel Mercer became, as she told Balliett, “her goddess.” (Balliett, an avid King fan, dedicated his 1979 volume of essays, *American Singers*, to her.)

The climate improved for King in the early 1970s with the renewed interest in the American songbook. She was well enough in 1971 to spend the summer with Dave McKenna at the Columns on Cape Cod. In 1973 King was part of the “Jazz Salute to the American Song” at Newport/New York, singing Cole Porter and accompanied by Ellis Larkins. Later that year she teamed with Marian McPartland and Alec Wilder in a concert that McPartland recorded (it was released in 1981 as *Marian Remembers Teddi*, Halcyon HAL 118). She worked when her illness allowed it, in singers’ rooms like the Cafe Carlyle in New York, Blues Alley in Washington D.C. and the Merry-Go-Round in Boston.

In 1976, King sang with the Loonis McGlohon Trio on several installments of the public radio program, *American Popular Song with Alec Wilder and Friends*. These programs yielded enough material for two albums on Audiophile, *Lovers and Losers* (AP 117) and *Someone to Light Up Your Life* (AP 150).

On October 20, 1977, King and Dave McKenna recorded eight of a planned thirteen Ira Gershwin songs. The duo worked quickly and recorded most tunes in a single take; they were being recorded for demonstration purposes, and producer Sam Parkins (another Bostonian and an old friend of both King and McKenna) planned to shop the tape to interested record companies.

The session went well, and the participants looked forward to the actual recording session. But a month later King was dead. She died of spinal meningitis, at age 48, on November 18, 1977.

McKenna recorded the five remaining Gershwin selections as solo piano pieces in January. Parkins took the music to Inner City Records, who released it in 1978 as *This Is New* (Inner City 1044).

Maybe this 1970s iteration is “late-night Teddi,” a singer of poignancy and emotional depth, still with flawless phrasing, still telling lyrical stories late in the night of her own life.



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If you’re looking for more Teddi King than can be found on YouTube, Fresh Sounds Records reissued *Miss Teddi King* and *Now in Vogue* on [The Storyville Sessions 1954-1955](#) (FSRCD 747), while King’s RCA and Coral albums have been collected by Avid Jazz on [Four Classic Albums Plus](#) (Avid AMSC1059). Inner City Jazz has also reissued the 1977 set [This is New](#) on CD (IC 1044).

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