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“Satan in High Heels”: Representation of the Feminine in the American Popular Songbook and Its Impact on Performance, Interpretation, and Audience Reception

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In this research, I explore the representations of the feminine and the female voice in the “American Popular Songbook.” The “American Popular Songbook,” or APS, from which most jazz and cabaret singers draw, encompasses jazz standards or anthems, Broadway show tunes, musical numbers, movie theme songs as well as popular tunes. Unfortunately, the APS has not received as much attention for its representations of the feminine as other areas, most notably those of opera, visual arts, and literature. Representations of femininity vary wildly throughout the jazz vocal canon, from songs such as “I Said No” and “But Baby, It’s Cold Outside,” songs that both illustrate the reluctant girl scenario, to lesser known songs, such as “The Female of the Species is More Deadly Than the Male,” a song about the female domination of men from the 1962 sexploitation film, *Satan in High Heels*, and “I Wanna Be Evil,” a song that addresses the need to openly embrace the seedy side of life.

In this presentation I differentiate the categories of feminine representation in some of the most requested songs from the APS, as well as discuss a few of the obscure songs that feature a strong or unorthodox female voice. This discussion also includes the impact of feminine representation and audience expectation on performance choices, arrangements, compositions, and audience reception.