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## Music; Ethel Merman: The Clarion Call

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**PICTURE THIS:** Britney Spears, Mariah Carey, Bjork and Ethel Merman are all on stage, side by side, at roughly the same age -- a dewy-eyed 20. Which of them sounds better to you?

O.K., stop laughing. The question is well worth exploring. What is it that we listen for in a female pop singer today and how does this differ from what we once loved to hear? Or, to further personalize the matter, why is Ethel Merman, one of the most distinctive female singers of the 20th century, now viewed by many as perhaps the uncoolest singer ever, simply because she sang with a natural power and sheen that today seem the antithesis of contemporary pop style?

The recent release of selections from two Merman Broadway star turns, Irving Berlin's "Call Me Madam" and Cole Porter's "Panama Hattie" (Decca Broadway 0881 105221-2), alongside the reissue, in 2000, of the original cast album of Berlin's "Annie Get Your Gun" (Decca Broadway 012 159 243-2) occasion a re-examination of this neglected icon, the leading Broadway musical comedy performer of her day and a singer of timeless gifts but less than eternal appeal. (She died in 1984 at 76.)

Listen to her as Annie Oakley in "Annie Get Your Gun." The voice is brassy, jaunty, clarion, yet unexpectedly lilting. It is a sound that seems to embody much of what has been lost in our musical life over the last quarter century; a quality of unapologetic, all-American moxie that our culture as a whole has largely abandoned since the 60's.

Simply stated, Merman possessed the same innate vocal prowess as Ms. Carey, the same girlish buoyancy as Ms. Spears and the same mesmerizing assurance as Bjork. She was just about Ms. Spears's age when she first became a sensation, introducing "I Got Rhythm" on Broadway in the Gershwin brother's 1930 musical comedy "Girl Crazy." And Merman was very much thought of as "hot" at the time, though her offstage persona was about as tame as, well, Ms. Spears's (notwithstanding the latter's well-publicized visits to strip clubs to study dance moves).

Unlike Ms. Carey, though, Merman's vocal talent was fearlessly idiosyncratic, an unabashed expression of her boisterous personality, as was her exuberance. Neither characteristic was the product of media handlers of any kind. Her self-confidence was also of the irony-free variety, a kind of clueless state that makes her seem laughable to many today.

In fact, Merman's gifts are now prime reasons for her fall from pop grace. Take her blaring, almost

garish, individuality. Ever since the dawn of rock 'n' roll, the pop marketplace has placed a premium on original voices, but it can be fickle, perversely so at times. An iconoclastic voice like Bjork's is embraced. But it better not sound as classically legitimate as Merman's or suspicions will arise. Yes, a legitimate voice like Ms. Carey's is embraced. But it better not sound as individual as Merman's in-your-face instrument or listeners are apt to grow antsy. And yes, a fresh, young presence like Ms. Spears is more than embraced, not because she possesses an iconoclastic or legitimate or even rudimentary voice but merely for being infinitely malleable.

Malleable, Merman was not. As a young woman, her vocal style and even her sexuality were very much about a sense of inner strength that was marvelously womanly. Sure, everyone from Madonna and Janet Jackson on down affects a kind of feminine militancy today. But truly Mermanesque strength? Hardly.

Certainly, she had idiosyncracies that hardened into mannerisms -- the hair-sprayed harridan image of her later years. Listening today as a hugely talented young singer like Macy Gray confuses emotional honesty with eccentricity verging on grotesquerie, one can't help but think of Merman, after she had lost her youth.

In their 1959 Broadway musical "Gypsy," the composer Jule Styne and the lyricist Stephen Sondheim channeled the emotional neediness underlying Merman's mannerisms to revelatory effect, and Merman was more than up to the challenge, plumbing the depths of her own persona with incandescent results. Honesty was always what she was after, ultimately.

One young singer who has studied Merman closely and comprehends the subtleties of her seeming contradictions is the cabaret artist Klea Blackhurst. Her extraordinarily nuanced Off Broadway homage to Merman, "Everything the Traffic Will Allow," received much critical acclaim this past season. "What eventually got remembered about her is what she looked like and sounded like late in life," Ms. Blackhurst said of Merman in a recent interview. "People aren't really listening; they're remembering her hair style on Ed Sullivan, which she shouldn't be memorialized for."

It's almost a relief to point out that Ms. Blackhurst doesn't sing exactly like Merman at all. Her rhythmic sense is more fluid (though Merman was not entirely the rhythmic stiff some accuse her of having been). Her tone is gentler, her phrasing more thoughtful and her droll sense of humor far more suited to the moment.

In fact, Ms. Blackhurst is the perfect answer to the question: Should we even want singers to sound like Ethel Merman anymore? The answer is a qualified no. Ethel Merman was unmistakably of another time. But it sure wouldn't hurt to listen to her.

Photo: Ethel Merman in the 1930's, when she was the leading musical-comedy performer on Broadway. (Norman Taylor)

