

“My Man:” The Vocal Signature of Fanny Brice

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Abstract

One of the leading comediennes of the early twentieth century, Fanny Brice was well-known for her physical humour. Indeed, she relied heavily on her body. She mocked the grace and beauty of ballet with perfectly awkward movements, and her Jewish mannerisms became synonymous with many of the characters she portrayed. When she introduced the torch song “My Man” into her repertoire, however, she found her voice more useful than her body.

Brice’s performances of “My Man,” beginning with her debut of the song in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1921 and continuing through subsequent recordings and the rendition seen in the 1936 film *The Great Ziegfeld*, demonstrate her increasing reliance on the vocal rather than the physical. By the late 1920s, she was using variations in rhythm, articulation, and vocal timbre that show a heightened understanding of the voice as an instrument of expression. Moreover, she had adapted the style, range, and tempo of the song to emphasize her interpretative choices.

This presentation traces the evolution of Brice’s vocal technique through her performances of “My Man.” It explores her development as a singer, the aspects of the song that facilitated her growth, and the likely reasons it became her vocal signature.

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Fanny Brice began her career as a singing comedienne on the vaudeville and revue stages of New York in the 1910s. She rose from relative obscurity to considerable fame with her appearance in Florenz Ziegfeld’s *Follies of 1910*. Her success, facilitated largely by a song entitled “Lovie Joe” by Joe Jordan and Will Marion Cook, was due to her willingness – and uncanny ability – to use her face and body as tools for comic expression. Though one critic suggested that her “eccentric facial expression and queer vocal interpolations were largely responsible” for the appeal of the number (Review of *Follies of 1910*, *New York Times*), the former seems to have played the most important role; other critics referred to her humorous movements with little or no mention of her voice. Even Brice recalled her performance as primarily a physical one. In a 1936 interview with *Cosmopolitan*, she described it this way: “The last roar that met my ears came when I pulled my skirt up over my knees and then, peering down on legs that looked like two slats, put my hand over my eyes in one despairing gesture and stalked off” (Brice, 1936, p. 139).

Brice would never leave physical comedy behind, and her pratfalls and rolling eyes have earned her a place as one of the 20th century’s leading comediennes. As a singer, however, it is a tragic ballad, “My Man,” that has long been considered her signature song. The reasons for this are numerous, including the widely prevalent notion – in her own time and since – that Brice sang it so well because she felt a personal empathy for the song’s protagonist, a woman desperately in love with a bad man. Indeed, shortly before she introduced the song in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1921*, Brice’s husband Nick Arnstein was arrested and incarcerated for illegal business dealings. I should like to suggest, however, a more fundamental reason why this song

played such a central role throughout Brice's career and, more specifically, why it became a standard component of her singing repertoire. More than any of the comic songs she popularized, it demonstrates her *vocal* signature, enabling – or perhaps forcing – her to rely on her voice rather than her body as her primary communicative tool. My evidence for this assertion lies in three different versions of "My Man" recorded by Fanny Brice between 1921 and 1936. Even the earliest represents a departure in vocal style from her comic songs, but each subsequent one shows Brice becoming more comfortable with her voice and increasingly aware of its expressive power.

In order to understand this trajectory, it is necessary to begin with an example from Brice's comic repertoire. For this purpose, I have selected "Becky Is Back in the Ballet," written by Blanche Merrill and Leo Edwards and performed by Brice in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1916*. The song recounts the story of a woman who is determined to dance but struggles to do it well. Such lyrics all but demand a physical performance, enabling Brice to do her utmost as she had been doing for several years prior. Indeed, when she rendered the song in the Follies, she seems to have added a parody of Anna Pavlova in *Swan Lake*. In his review of the production, critic Sime Silverman referred to the number not as "Becky Is Back in the Ballet" but as "The Dying Swan," (Silverman, 1916) and an extant film clip reveals some of Brice's humorously awkward movements that, in all likelihood, were part of her 1916 performance in the Follies.

In her 1922 recording of "Becky," Brice sings in a Yiddish dialect. Noteworthy for numerous reasons, from its reflection of the culture in which Brice thrived to the connection it establishes between her and her character, it also affects her singing. Indeed, it seems to replace other modes of vocal expression. Although her singing is far from uninteresting, she does not add much inflection or nuance to any of the lines. She largely performs the song as written, with the exception of a few notes that are spoken rather than sung and some slight variations in rhythm.

In her first recording of "My Man," made shortly after her performance of it in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1921*, Brice's voice takes on a naturalness that is absent from her comic songs. Not only does she shed any notion of dialect, she also incorporates a number of expressive sighs and adjusts her intensity with crescendo, diminuendo, and rubato, techniques used little if at all in her rendition of "Becky." Though her broken phrases indicate some continued reliance on her comic song technique, she clearly recognized, even in her early performances, that "My Man" demanded something more from her vocally than she had given before.

By 1928, "My Man" had become so strongly associated with Fanny Brice that she starred in a film of the same name based on its protagonist. Though the film was largely unsuccessful and does not survive, the recording she made demonstrates a more powerful vocal performance of the song than she had given in 1921. In all likelihood, she had been experimenting with the song vocally for some time, using audience response to her interpretation as a guide. In this rendition, she sings at a markedly slower pace, allowing for only one verse and chorus in the time in which she had previously sung two. She also sings in a different key – a fourth lower than in 1921. She uses rubato more extensively, and she speaks a number of lines as though she is too choked up to sing them. These musical markers of heightened emotion indicate that Brice had become as comfortable using her voice as she had her body.

In 1936, Brice portrayed herself in MGM's *The Great Ziegfeld*, recreating her role in the Follies. Not surprisingly, she reprised "My Man" as part of her performance. Notably, she did

not return to the style of her 1921 recording – the one she most likely used in her original stage appearance. Instead, she built on her 1928 recording, using a slow tempo, low key, and additional dramatic vocal techniques. Notably, the film purports that Brice adopted this style much earlier and as a result of Ziegfeld’s actions. On screen, she emerges to rehearse the song dressed in an elegant evening gown, with the orchestra playing the introduction at approximately the same tempo used on the 1921 recording. Ziegfeld immediately responds by asking the costumers to tear her dress and replace her feathered boa with an old shawl so that she will appear as tragic as the song’s protagonist. She then proceeds to perform the song in the manner of her 1928 recording, full of pathos and tears in her eyes. Notably, she also appears relatively still throughout the performance; even her facial expressions are subdued.

It is hardly surprising that Brice would recreate her more recent performances of “My Man” in the film. Because *The Great Ziegfeld* is situated in a historical context, however, her 1936 rendition has naturally led to misconceptions about her earlier performances of the song. Brice must have known this, of course, which suggests that she may have sought to reshape popular memory of her history with the song. Indeed, she even had some help; Eddie Cantor recounts much the same story seen in the film in his memoir of Ziegfeld, suggesting that he recalled her original rendition in this way as well. Perhaps Brice had become so frustrated with biographical readings of her performances that she took pleasure in attributing her stylistic choices to Ziegfeld rather than to her empathy for the protagonist. Perhaps she simply felt so strongly that her later performances were better than her earlier ones that she wanted the public to recall every performance of “My Man” she had given in a similar manner. We cannot know her motivations for participating in this revisionist history, but the recordings she left behind do tell a different story. They suggest that Brice’s performances of “My Man” were shaped by a gradually increasing awareness of her voice as an expressive vehicle for dramatic song. She realized that a song such as “My Man” could be more effectively sung with a vocally-rigorous interpretation rather than a physically-driven one. As a result, Brice is well-known today not only as a comedienne but also as a torch singer.

Bibliography

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