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“HER VOICE WAS EVER SOFT, GENTLE, AND LOW—AN EXCELLENT THING IN WOMAN.”

—From *King Lear*

# Big TALK

From a whisper to a roar—how the “ideal” woman’s voice has gone from cream puff to street *tuff*. TEXT: GUY SADDY

On that day, now indelibly etched in pop history, the first thing anyone noticed was Marilyn Monroe’s dress. Designed by legendary Hollywood costumer Jean Louis, the flesh-coloured, floor-length gown consisted of 2,500 rhinestones and was so form-fitting that it literally had to be sewn around the voluptuous Monroe, then 35 and at the peak of her sexpot powers. But although it was the dress that initially made the audience squirm, that’s not what

most of us vividly recall from President John F. Kennedy’s 45th-birthday celebration at New York’s Madison Square Garden in May 1962.

No, it’s this: “*Happy Birthday...to...you. Happy Birthday...Mr. President.*” Men swooned. Women covered their children’s eyes. JFK shifted uncomfortably in his seat while Jacqueline Kennedy shot daggers at the stage.

It’s the voice we remember: sultry, soft and breathy—a combination of little-girl-lost fragility and pure, ▷



## Down LOW



Ivanka Trump



Demi Moore



Lauren Bacall

unfiltered sex. More than the dress, more than Peter Lawford's soon-to-be-ironic introduction ("Ladies and gentlemen...the late Marilyn Monroe"), mostly we remember the way she sounded.

Monroe's voice was as integral to her image as her ample breasts and dyed-blond hair. But it was, in a way, equal parts help and hindrance. On the one hand, it was undeniably seductive; on the other, it was almost comically sexual and may have prevented her from being considered for the meatier, more serious roles she craved. Interestingly, though, the voice was not an act. Well, it *was*—but not in the way most people think. Monroe's patented slow and breathy delivery was a technique she used to overcome a serious stutter. But this was not well known—least of all among those women (and there were many) who imitated the starlet's speech. At the time, it was simply the fashion—as current and copied as anything by Halston or Oleg Cassini.

Today, that sort of voice would get you a one-way ticket to a (now-nonexistent) secretarial pool. The voice of today's woman is embodied in, for example, Ivanka Trump, whose rumbling lower register makes her seem like a high-powered real estate baron (which, of course, she is). It is *the* modern voice, and we hear it in

everyone from Cate Blanchett and Faye Dunaway to Jill Hennessy and Marg Helgenberger. It is strong and a long way from what was once considered "feminine." But is it a trend? Does the sound of a woman's voice go up and down like a hemline?

The "ideal" female voice has evolved over time, notes Indershini Pillay, head of speech-language pathology at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver. But this voice, she says, is highly situational. "It's definitely influenced by who you're speaking to, what you're discussing and where you are," says Pillay, who adds that "ideal" can vary significantly from culture to culture. In North America, there are two "trends" in play. One is the adoption of a more "masculine-sounding" voice; it has a tone and

culture, or it may even be part of a feminist backlash," she muses. The deeper voice, however, seems to be winning out. "But the pendulum could swing at any time, depending on what becomes socially acceptable."

Throughout history, women have coloured their voices to fit in socially. From George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* to the more recent *Educating Rita* and *Pretty Woman*, it's a time-honoured trope: fictional heroines making their way up the social ladder by affecting a voice or an accent that is not their own. But this is not just the stuff of films and literature. In the mid-1900s, the so-called "mid-Atlantic" accent—a pseudo-posh style of speaking that straddled the linguistic divide between Britain and North America—was popular, used by American actors and politicians to imply a pedigreed background, often where none truly existed. For women, this was their "parlour voice": demure and refined, almost laughably articulate, and as put on as a pair of white evening gloves.

The mid-Atlantic accent was a vocal affectation reserved for what passed as American royalty. By the late 1960s, however, elitist baggage was something you didn't want to carry—even if you had a personal porter to lug all your other stuff around. Ostentation and pretence were out; feminism was in. And little-

“ DOES THE SOUND OF A WOMAN'S VOICE GO UP AND DOWN LIKE A HEMLINE? ”

register that, to our ears, convey authority, and it's often found in business. The other, oddly enough, is what Pillay calls "a little girl voice," one that is higher pitched and prone to "uptalk"—the raising of pitch at the end of a sentence. Why? "It could be that we're in such a youth-driven

girl voices were suddenly only acceptable for little girls. "I am woman, hear me roar." It was a major social movement, and it was eventually reflected in the way women spoke, right down to the TV commercials that wooed them—Brenda Vaccaro's raspy-voiced Tampax pitches come to mind. ▽



Toronto voice coach Jay Miller agrees. "It's my impression that there was a time, not so many years ago, when much of the commercial work I heard had a lot of raspiness to it," he says. "For me, it's not really a pleasant voice. But a segment of the population—more of a hip crowd, perhaps—found it appealing." But while the trend toward a raspy speaking voice may have been fleeting, the low female voice continued to hit the high notes. In her 2006 book *The Human Voice*, British author Anne Karpf notes that an Australian study comparing the pitch of young women's voices concluded that the average voice dropped about a semitone from 1945 to 1993.

What is it about a woman with a low voice? For a few decades now, she has beguiled us. In the 1944 film *To Have and Have Not*, Lauren Bacall, then just 19 years old, was encouraged to develop her lower register to be a more credible love interest for Humphrey Bogart. (She was successful; they married the following

## Powder PUFFS



Marilyn Monroe



Grace Kelly



Melanie Griffith

Today, however, most women seem to be using their lower register to up their credibility—often in what have traditionally been male-dominated professions. "On a regular basis, I have women coming into my office saying 'I want to find a voice that is more authoritative, stronger, more confident,'" says Miller. Are most on a career track? "For the most part, I'd say that's probably right,"

her natural range," says Pillay, "and in stressful situations, it got even worse." But after voice therapy, the lawyer was able to drop her pitch, improve the quality of her voice and deal with the triggers (stress, primarily) that had caused her problems. "Later, she told me that she was doing so much better in her career," notes Pillay. "Eventually, she even made partner."

There *can* be too much of a good thing. Gravel-voiced FOX-TV talking head Rita Cosby was christened "Throaty McHusky" by satirist Jon Stewart, which likely didn't do much for her career. And there is a fine line between "authority" and "flat." "You can get a voice that seems 'driven,'" says Miller. "It loses its personal connection and becomes almost a clone of what is supposedly the 'ideal' female broadcaster's voice."

But where might the pendulum swing next? Is the little-girl voice on the rise? Will we see the return of Melanie Griffith? Or, as is so often the case, will Madonna lead the way? Since moving to London, the pop diva has picked up a British accent—or, rather, a British-American hybrid that fades in and out like a lousy radio signal.

But it's also soft, gentle and low—which is, we've heard, an excellent thing in a woman. □

TODAY, HOWEVER, MOST WOMEN SEEM TO BE USING THEIR LOWER REGISTER TO UP THEIR CREDIBILITY.

year.) Janis Joplin rode to fame on the strength of her manly pipes; Nina Simone's and Stevie Nicks' low-end vocals are their calling cards. Sometimes, it's a learned thing. Margaret Thatcher explored her lower resonance to sound less shrill. Kathleen Turner's cigarettes-and-bourbon sultriness was, she has claimed, honed by speaking with pencil erasers tucked in her back teeth. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Liv Tyler took a page from Bacall's playbook: slowing her delivery and dropping her pitch lent her character more *gravitas* and made Arwen one of the more memorable creatures to inhabit J.R.R. Tolkien's universe.

says Miller, adding that not all are in business. "Certainly, women who are involved in journalism and broadcasting are interested in that aspect of their voice." For examples, Miller notes, you don't have to look far: "Flick on the news at night and you're going to hear women with strong lower resonance in their voices."

That "bottom end" can be critical to getting ahead, especially in fields where your credibility is linked to the sound of your voice. For example, one of Pillay's clients, a lawyer, was using her voice incorrectly—to the point where it may have been short-circuiting her career. "She was using a high-pitched voice that was out of