

Gender Discrimination in Jazz and Jazz Historiography: Women Instrumentalists Post WWII

Research Study

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The view of women as outsiders to jazz culture has been perpetuated for nearly a century. Attempts to resolve such an issue are usually approached by emphasizing the past and current lack of prominent female jazz musicians accompanied by an uncertainty of how to move forward. Although jazz has always been a male-dominated art form, the absence of women from jazz narratives is historically inaccurate and must be addressed. Without knowledge of the many distinguished women in jazz history, the current and future generations of jazz will fall prey to the cyclical notion that women require the help of their male predecessors to earn their place in jazz. An equitable future of jazz must include the histories of the non-male jazz pioneers. This essay will explore the stories of a few prominent women jazz instrumentalists from the postwar era, focusing on their accolades, struggles, musical strengths, and overall resilience. If the marginalization and

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erasure of women in jazz is to eventually cease, musicians, audiences, and critics must begin with the acceptance of and admiration for women of the past.

Keywords: women, jazz, marginalization, erasure, gender discrimination, Melba Liston, Norma Carson, Willene Barton, Vi Redd

INTRODUCTION

“In a sense, you weren’t really looked upon as a musician, especially in clubs. There was more interest in what you were going to wear or how your hair was fixed—they just wanted you to look attractive, ultra feminine, largely because you were doing something they didn’t consider feminine. Most of the time I just fought it and didn’t listen to them. Only in retrospect, when you start looking back and analyzing, you can see the obstacles that were put in front of you. I just thought at the time that I was too young to handle it, but now I see that it was really rampant chauvinism.”

—Marjorie Hyams in an interview with Linda Dahl

To better understand the history of women in jazz and their experiences, we must first understand the culture of jazz. An incredibly complex art form—jazz takes on many names. It is sophisticated, danceable, political, spiritual, and communal. The jazz musician is often exceptionally detailed in their knowledge of the many aspects of jazz, like memorizing chord changes, historical chronology, recording details, and more. To lack such knowledge usually deems one naive or inexperienced, as indoctrination into jazz society requires awareness of intimate details. The highly competitive and ever evolving genre enlists only those who are truly entrenched in the art form. Young jazz musicians begin their education with giants like Woody Herman, Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis. Yet, it is often the assumption that there were hardly any women in both early and mid-century jazz due to the overwhelming generalization of jazz as a male art form and the persistent erasure of historically notable women in jazz. To simply highlight a few successful jazz women during this time without delving into why this aspect of jazz history continues to be neglected would be insufficient in rectifying this cycle. Beginning with the end of the swing era, this article will highlight a handful of selected notable women instrumentalists while evaluating the dominant discourse surrounding them and analyzing its effects on jazz historiography today.

THE ERA OF ALL-WOMAN BIG BANDS

The dawn of WWII changed everything in the United States. Civilians were hurled into a radical state of patriotism, the threat of battle on home grounds loomed heavy, and labor conditions were drastically altered. Like many industries, the swing industry experienced a supply and demand crisis as millions of American

men left home for military service and millions of families moved for other reasons influenced by the effects of the Great Depression (Tucker, 2000). Such a shortage of male workers in combination with a newfound demand for entertainment and distraction from the turmoil of war meant that American women musicians became celebrated like never before (Tucker, 2000). Despite common assumption, however, the emergence of World War II did not introduce women to jazz, nor did it produce the first ever “all-girl” bands. The draft simply influenced a sudden increase in public awareness and necessity of women workers that “lent itself to the illusion that all women were ‘Swing Shift Maisies’—1940s lingo for temporary substitutes for the ‘real’ workers who were off in combat” (Tucker, 2000). This public perception of all-woman bands as amateur, inauthentic, and temporary was an obstacle that drastically stunted the acceptance of women in jazz despite their existence in the genre for decades both prior and after. So much so, that the women of the post-swing eras were adamantly excluded and often frowned on as the return to the nuclear family postwar became radically pushed.

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm was one accomplished all-woman jazz big band among several that produced a few notable women of the bop and post-bop era. As enthusiasm for big band swing waned in the postwar years with the dawn of rock and roll sweeping American attention, jazz experienced its own head turning shift. Unlike the craze of rock and roll, however, jazz was no longer for the masses; its loss of popularity and commercial currency yielded to creative freedom to try new approaches (Tucker & Jackson, 2020). This meant a massive variety of new compositional and improvisational techniques, but it also empowered jazz musicians to communicate and explore the rich repository of African American vernacular idioms (Tucker & Jackson, 2020). Bebop was the dawn of spirituality, reparations, and political protest for the jazz musician, yielding to a general sense of intellectualism and elitism in the community due to a newfound advanced approach to playing. Although it may have been perceived as harsh to the untrained ear, Bebop was culturally and intellectually significant to those who were its pioneers. This was the era of giants like Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Dizzy Gillespie, J.J. Johnson, and many more—all celebrated rightfully so. This new genre was almost exclusively instrumental and was practiced in late-night clubs—both “hindrances to non-male participation in the 1940s and 1950s when ‘traditional’ societal gender roles were more prevalent” (Reddan, 2022). When researching the women of this era, the mentions seem to come to a halting stop. Since women musicians did not cease to exist, one must deduce some correlation between this rise of elitism in jazz music and the marginalization of women in jazz and jazz historiography. While all-woman jazz orchestras from the swing band era were often noted as novelties or acknowledged as “pitching in for the war effort,” the women musicians of the postwar generations were afforded little to no recognition (Tucker, 2003).

GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN JAZZ HISTORIOGRAPHY

The anomaly of gender discrimination in jazz and jazz historiography requires an analysis of the way women were talked about and presented in the media and

dominant swing discourse. One very clear shortcoming of this discourse then and now is how the majority of jazz history books, references, and critiques are written by the white male—oftentimes being a non-musician, as well. This inevitably prompts the question of how the white male's subjectivity molded jazz history and our limited knowledge of women in jazz today (Tucker, 2000). Several major jazz history texts either completely omit the inclusion of women or ridicule them altogether. Drummer George T. Simon in his book *The Big Bands*, in which he details an astounding four hundred biographies highlighting the personnel of many swing bands, chose to dismiss, ridicule, and sexualize the era of all-woman swing bands. In his very brief mention of Rita Rio's band, he describes them as "a bunch of rather unattractive girls who looked as stiff in their imitation tuxedos as their music sounded, thereby setting off Miss Rio's undulating torso all the more dramatically" (Simon, 1974). Leo Walker's book, *The Wonderful Era of the Great Dance Bands*, refrains from detailing any personnel after mentioning just two all-girl swing bands and defines them as part of a "substantial number of all-girl orchestras enjoying the success of the war years" (Walker, 1990). Ira Gitler's book *Swing to Bop* completely omits a surplus of accomplished female jazz musicians of the bop era, including Willene Barton, Vi Redd, Barbara Donald, Mary Osborne, Marjorie Hyams and many more. Similarly, Gitler's book titled *Jazz Masters of the Forties* heavily details the accomplishments of Art Tatum, yet mentions nothing about decorated players like Hazel Scott or Dorothy Donegan. Such rhetoric must come from a more deeply embedded societal belief regarding gender and sex—something that would require more depth than this article will provide. However, what is imperative to understand is that the women being neglected or erased in this respect are women who enjoyed massive success and were an active part of the jazz community.

WILLENE BARTON—TENOR SAXOPHONE

In her interview with Linda Dahl, saxophonist and bandleader Willene Barton described playing with the likes of Ben Webster, Illinois Jacquet, Sonny Stitt, and Gene Ammons, as she would sit in with them, or they would play with her group. (Dahl, 1996). A native of Oscilla, Georgia, her earliest musical experiences were playing along with her church choir and imitating the broad tone of saxophonist Freddy Martin (Placksin, 1982). After high school, Barton opted without hesitation to be a professional musician over attending college, and instead studied independently with Walter "Foots" Thomas, Eddie Durham, and Louis Arfine in New York (Placksin, 1982). Her career propelled forward after she joined Anna Mae Winburn and a small Sweethearts unit in 1952, touring all over the United States with the group. Barton's first experience as a bandleader was with an all-woman group she formed herself called the "Four Jewels." The group was rather successful, appearing publicly at the famous Crawford Grill, several clubs in Pennsylvania, and in *The Pittsburgh Courier* in May of 1954 (Suzuki, 2011). She also joined Melba Liston's all woman group in 1958 which toured throughout Bermuda (Placksin, 1982).

Any public recognition Barton received during the prime of her career was almost exclusively found through Black magazines. Barton did not begin to get any publicity or recognition in major jazz magazines like *Downbeat* or *Metro-nome* until the eighties after she was involved with a group called the Jazz Sisters (Placksin, 1982). This was despite having won the respect of such formidable musicians as Johnny Hodges, Charlie Parker, and Eddie Durham. Although she regularly performed at venues like the Purple Manor and the Shalimar in Harlem, the media exclusively highlighted only Barton's participation in all-woman events. Barton's 1979 appearance at the Universal Jazz Coalition's "Jazz Salute to Women" and the Women's Jazz Festival in Kansas City sparked the type of public recognition she deserved, and in 1982 she landed a gig with trombonist Al Grey (Kochakian). Willene Barton prided herself on her rich and big tone, something that led Eddie Durham to believe:

"None of 'em was as good as Willene. Willene's got that tone that touches the soul for some reason. Ben Webster had it, and Lester had it, and Coleman Hawkins had it, and Herschel Evans had it. And Louis played it on his trumpet"—Eddie Durham (Placksin, 1982).

Barton's sound can be heard on the recording she made with organist Dayton Shelby in 1957, *The Feminine Sax* (Suzuki, 2011). Regarding her experiences bandleading with men, Barton described:

"In the old days, with the guys, it was like this: It was still the old chauvinistic kind of thing. I would sort of lay back and appoint one of the guys, let him call the numbers. That way it didn't seem that I was the overbearing female. I'd make it a group kind of thing; we'd all make decisions. That's how you had to work with those guys in those days. But then you had the responsibility of getting the job, and toward the end—the groups I had later—you had people you worked with, and if somebody gave them a couple of dollars more, they'd split" (Placksin, 1982).

Despite her many accomplishments in the field and having worked professionally for over forty years, Willene Barton's career and life are rarely mentioned.

NORMA CARSON—TRUMPET

Trumpeter Norma Carson, historically neglected despite her hard blowing style with resemblance to Dizzy Gillespie and Fats Navarro, played with Ada Leonard's all-woman big band, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, Vi Burnside's Quintet, and on Leonard Feather's album with Clark Terry and Terry Pollard. Born 1922 in Vancouver Washington, Carson began playing early on, stating in an interview that she knew she was going to be a musician from the time she was young (Placksin, 1982). Her first major career stint was with Ada Leonard's all-woman orchestra in 1944. Carson mostly identified as a lead player at this time with little knowledge surrounding improvisation. That being said, the band was very young after undergoing several personnel changes, leaving Carson the

responsibility to learn the craft of improvisation (Placksin, 1982). She later joined the International Sweethearts of Rhythm in 1949 and credited the ensemble for much of her growth as a musician. Despite the obvious benefits of playing in an all-woman group, Carson described the women as “exploited and underpaid, although they never knew it until they began to talk to male musicians” (Placksin, 1982).

In 1954, Carson was featured on Leonard Feather’s album titled *Cats vs. Chicks*, which gave listeners a side-by-side comparison of Carson and trumpeter Clark Terry (Dahl, 1996). The album initiated a “jazz battle of the sexes”, juxtaposing the improvisational voices of not just Norma Carson and Clark Terry, but also musicians like Mary Osborne versus Tal Farlow and Terry Pollard versus Horace Silver. In their recording of “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better,” Carson and Terry trade choruses in what is frequently described as a battle for supremacy, both players displaying their firm grasp on swing and the blues (Gould, 2019).

Although her time with all-woman big bands brought success, Carson felt limited by them and later complained that as a woman she had fewer opportunities to jam or experiment in jam sessions (Placksin, 1982). Despite her obvious knowledge of bebop language and control over her sound and ideas, Norma Carson remains in obscurity among many others. She spoke bluntly in 1951 regarding this disadvantage:

“I’ve never found it an advantage to be a girl. If a trumpet player is wanted for a job and somebody suggests me, they’ll say “what, a chick?” and put me down without even hearing me . . . I don’t want to be a girl musician. I just want to be a musician” (Dahl, 1996).

After working with the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, Carson worked frequently with Vi Burnside’s Quintet in New York, often playing at the first racially integrated jazz club, Cafe Society (Motto, 2024). Her career began to dwindle in 1952 after starting a family, although she continued to play for as long as she could, gigging until she was 7 months pregnant. In her interview with Sally Placksin, Carson elaborated that she “learned to accept the fact that I wasn’t gonna have all that much of a career. I wasn’t free to go on the road; I wasn’t free to even go into New York anytime” (Placksin, 1982). Many women in jazz during this time were met with a similar fate of domestic importance; something that may have limited the extent of their musical careers but was not able to limit their intellectual and emotional understanding of jazz music. Carson elaborated in an interview on her own approach to jazz, saying:

“I never wanted to be an imitator. Maybe there’s some flavor of somebody else that you’ve been influenced by more than others, but I think that what really makes a good player is when you can have everyone’s influence. That’s a part of your whole musical experience—to be able to play, you know, with that flavor, but still your own soul comes out” (Placksin, 1982).

MELBA LISTON—TROMBONE

Another early formidable instrumentalist is trombonist, composer, arranger, and bandleader Melba Liston. Born in 1926, Liston's talents were clear from a young age to her peers and listeners, and was for several years the only woman in America to play the jazz trombone competitively with her male counterparts. Right out of high school, she landed her first professional gig in the pit for Lincoln Theater in Los Angeles which quickly opened a variety of professional doors (Wilson, 2008). Liston played with prominent musicians like Dizzy Gillespie, Randy Weston, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Gerald Wilson, Quincy Jones, Clark Terry, Dexter Gordon, John Coltrane and more. Her work as a soloist blossomed in the 1940s when she joined a group with Dexter Gordon. Liston became a desired section player, performing with Gerald Wilson's Big Band, Quincy Jones' Orchestra, Count Basie's Orchestra, and Dizzy Gillespie's Big Band (Wilson, 2008).

However, playing was not Melba Liston's only strength. After meeting pianist Randy Weston in the 1950s, a creative partnership bloomed into what would become a long-term collaboration and well of professional opportunities. She arranged several of Weston's albums including *The Spirits of Our Ancestors* and *Volcano Blues*, and began writing for other musicians such as Duke Ellington and his orchestra, Tony Bennett, Quincy Jones, Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, the Motown label, and many others (Wilson, 2008). Although Liston recounts that many of her male peers "carried her all the way," she also notes that her musical involvement was otherwise not very popular among audiences and, on occasion, bandmates (Dahl, 1996). In an interview with Linda Dahl, Liston reminisced upon her time in Dizzy Gillespie's Big Band, exclaiming that "the first thing, all the guys in the band said . . . 'Goddamn, Birks, you sent all the way to California for a bitch?'" (Dahl, 1996).

Liston's playing, however, was natural, adaptable, and satisfyingly swinging. The trombone seemed to be an extension of herself, playing in the vocalist style that was so common throughout early jazz. During her year-long tour with Gillespie's Big Band, Liston took what is frequently considered her best known recorded solo on the tune "Cool Breeze" recorded live at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1957 (Vernier, 2023). Her improvisational and sectional style can also be heard in her 1958 album titled *Melba and Her Bones*, as well as on a few records by Randy Weston, the Art Blakey Big Band, and Quincy Jones. Although *Melba and Her Bones* was the only album she recorded as a bandleader, it is certainly a monumental one with renowned musicians like Jimmy Cleveland, Al Grey, Slide Hampton, Bennie Green, Ray Bryant, George Tucker, and a few others. The album highlights both her ability to play in the upper register and her more than impressive arranging skills, as well as her ability to really sing through her instrument and adapt her sound to any style or environment.

From 1973 to 1979, Liston taught at the University of the West Indies and the Jamaica Institute of Music in Kingston before returning to the U.S. The last

four years of her playing career consisted of her work band-leading her own group “Melba Liston and Company” which performed at several venues internationally while she continued to teach abroad (Vernie, 2023). Liston received the NEA Jazz Masters Award in 1987, something well deserved for someone who broke so many barriers in jazz history.

ELVIRA (VI) REDD—ALTO SAXOPHONE

There was also Elvira (Vi) Redd, a bop oriented alto saxophonist whose blues entrenched and preaching style led critics to compare her to Charlie Parker (Dahl, 1996). Redd was born into a musically inclined family in 1928—her father and jazz drummer Alton Redd having worked with greats like Kid Ory, Dexter Gordon, and Wardell Gray (Suzuki, 2011). Her involvement with music began in her church choir (a common origin story) when she was just five. Although she began performing in the late forties, her career entered its prime during the sixties when she began weekly gigs with drummer Richie Goldberg at the Red Carpet jazz club (Suzuki, 2011). Redd played with musicians such as Max Roach, Roland Kirk, Dizzy Gillespie, Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis, Dave Holland, and Count Basie. She recorded her albums *Bird Call* in 1962 and *Lady Soul* in 1963, and recorded as a side woman on Al Grey’s 1965 album *Shades of Grey* (Placksin, 1982).

Redd was impressive and powerful on the bandstand, which was not always received well. After her performance at the Las Vegas Jazz Festival in 1962, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported, “Another first for the Las Vegas Festival on July 7 and 8 is achieved when Vi Redd, an attractive young girl alto sax player, becomes the first female to be one of the instrumental headliners at a jazz festival. As a matter of fact, Miss Redd may well be the first ‘gal’ horn player in jazz history to establish herself as a major soloist” (Suzuki, 2013). At the time, Redd was thirty-four with three children and was certainly not one of the first female instrumental headliners at a jazz festival nor the first woman to excel as an improviser. This type of erasure was quintessential to keeping jazz as a male dominated field by labeling a woman’s success as a phenomenon.

However, Redd’s career remained formidable along with many women who were not just excellent players, but also forward-thinking musicians seeking the same universal communication and expression as players like John Coltrane, Herbie Hancock, and Miles Davis. After taking a decade off from performing to raise her sons, Redd returned to the scene around 1976 feeling like she had something to offer and a message of love and understanding to convey (Placksin, 1982). Upon returning, she immediately recorded as a side woman on Marian McPartland’s *Now’s The Time* and was appointed in 1977 as a Consultant Panelist to the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities in Washington, DC (Suzuki, 2013). Redd exemplified an unrelenting devotion to jazz throughout each phase of her career, and continually broke barriers for women in jazz. When prompted about adequate recognition in an interview, she responded that “the sacrifices these musicians [women] have made—these musicians killed on

the road; the black musicians denied service, denied lodging, denied medical care . . . But they kept forging ahead, and they made a sacrifice to jazz, let's face it" (Placksin, 1982).

ERASURE AND MARGINALIZATION

What traps women in jazz in such a cycle of erasure and marginalization? What is contributing to this inability to accept the "feminized" areas of jazz history as valid? The answers cannot be found solely within the vacuum of the jazz community, but instead require a necessary evaluation of societal values and discourse surrounding women. Music critic for the *New York Times* Harold C. Schonberg asserted in 1962 that "playing any instrument is a conflict in which the instrument must be dominated and, generally speaking, men are better dominators than women, if only by virtue of their size and strength" (Dahl, 1996). Such misogynistic remarks about gender are not sparse. They affect how jazz is defined, practiced and remembered to a greater degree than is generally acknowledged. Ethan Iverson's infamous and since deleted interview with Robert Glasper received urgent attention after Glasper elaborated on why he believes women don't "like a lot of soloing" and how groove is "a musical clitoris to women" (Reddan, 2022). An anonymous critic in *Down Beat Magazine* declared that "outside a few sepia females the woman musician never was born capable of sending anyone further than the nearest exit" (Tucker, 2000). With such rhetoric persistently painting the perception of women in jazz culture, men simply are not held to the same expectations as non-male musicians. Even formidable giants like Mary Lou Williams are subject to reviews published in popular magazines like *Metronome* exclaiming how "one almost forgets she's a woman" (Tucker, 2000).

The frequent appearance of so-called "gender-free" texts in jazz historiography, which claim to be unbiased but will often exclude women entirely or briefly mention female vocalists only, clearly indicates that women are being systemically overlooked and erased in the history of jazz. In an analysis of three different jazz history textbooks, Ramsey Casteneda and Amanda Quinlan suggest that "the general lack of photographic representation of women is the result of a systemic dismissal of women's contributions to music and a traditionally unwelcoming or even hostile educational environment for women and girls' participation in secondary and post-secondary jazz education" (Reddan, 2022). Many gender biased jazz history texts were even published after Linda Dahl's *Stormy Weather*, Sherrie Tucker's *Swing Shift*, and Sally Placksin's *American Women in Jazz*, suggesting their research and integration of accomplished female figures was dismissed.

The lack of research on women in jazz outside the era of all-girl swing bands along with the surplus of discriminatory rhetoric circulating throughout jazz culture provides more than enough evidence of disproportionate treatment. Women had (and have) to think differently about networking, where they were able to record, where they were safe to perform, how much

compensation they might receive, and the way their music might be perceived. In retrospect, there were numerous women who fell victim to obscurity simply because of society's inability to accept their success as valid. Challenging this marginalizing routine requires not only a deeper understanding of the weight that ideas surrounding gender, race, sexuality, class, and nation have, but also a desire to alter the trajectory of dominant discourse in jazz culture. Women in jazz can no longer exist within their own historical vacuum—we must begin to integrate their stories into jazz historiography alongside their male counterparts. These people were pioneers who survived an unfortunate number of firsts and who paid penalties of disapproval, ridicule, and ostracization all while accepting a massive pay disparity and the possible threat of danger in the workplace.

MOVING FORWARD WITH PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS:

The mitigation of such erasure can be approached through the comprehensive inclusion of women in jazz throughout all academic discourse. By consistently including women in all facets of jazz studies—from history to improvisation and more—academia can dismantle the notion of women as mere anomalies or rare occurrences to the genre. This approach requires a deliberate and sustained effort to highlight the achievements and influence of various female jazz musicians, composers, and bandleaders. By doing so, jazz educators can reshape the mental image of jazz history to reflect a more accurate depiction, thereby fostering a deeper appreciation for the diverse voices that have shaped the genre throughout history. For example, by integrating Vi Redd into a discussion surrounding bebop improvisational styles, an educator can relay an accurate academic point while conveying the notion that Vi Redd's contributions were of value and relevance to jazz culture at the time. Similarly, integrating Hazel Scott into a discussion on jazz and the Civil Rights Movement or Melba Liston into a discussion on arranging would foster a more realistic and inclusive depiction of jazz history. Oftentimes, an educator might approach the issue by devoting an individual classroom presentation on women in jazz. Unfollowed by any further discussions, this approach can unintentionally influence the marginalization of women in jazz by reinforcing their "otherness." If such a presentation were coupled with a sustained integration of women into further discussions, however, an educator could avoid the mental isolation of women from jazz culture. This concept applies to researchers and historians, as well. By weaving women's contributions into the broader narrative of jazz history—highlighting their achievements alongside their male counterparts—historians can ensure that the significance of women's contributions is recognized and valued in the proper context. That being said, acknowledging the discrimination that women experienced is still both necessary and useful, if it is supported with this sustained integration of their accolades into all facets of jazz history.

CONCLUSION

Including women in discussions on jazz history is imperative to discontinuing the erasure of their experiences and impacts within the genre. The overwhelming generalization of jazz as a male art form coupled with the persistent erasure of historically notable women in jazz perpetuates the assumption that there were hardly any women in both early and mid-century jazz. Without acknowledgement of prominent women throughout jazz history, current and future generations will inevitably become complicit in maintaining the narrative that women do not belong in jazz. While male musicians comprise the majority of jazz players, an equitable future of jazz includes the histories of non-male jazz pioneers. Through an awareness of intersectionality and a dedication to deconstructing outdated narratives, we can better acknowledge and understand how women in jazz history have been minimized and erased. As these various forms of inequality can persist over time, acting toward inclusivity is vital to the avoidance of inhibiting the art form. The incorporation of practical solutions will enrich both the practice of the art form and our understanding of it. Most importantly, jazz women like Melba Liston, Willene Barton, Norma Carson, Elvira (Vi) Redd, Hazel Scott, and several others teach us that women have always had and will always have a place in jazz music.

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