Gender Discrimination in Jazz and Jazz History:

Post World War II

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"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 her 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 - memorizing chord changes, historical chronology, recording details and more - as to lack such knowledge usually deems one naive or apathetic. Indoctrination into jazz society requires awareness of intimate details like knowing that Coltrane locked himself away for weeks to write *A Love Supreme* or how Louis Armstrong learned to play trumpet while he was in jail. 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 little to no women in both early and mid-century jazz due to the overwhelming generalization of jazz as a male art form. To simply highlight a few successful jazz women during this time asserting that there were in fact professional non-male jazz musicians without delving into why this very real aspect of jazz history continues to be neglected would be insufficient and likely fall on deaf ears. Beginning with the end of the swing era, this article will both highlight a handful of selected notable women and dive into the dominant discourse surrounding women in jazz and how it affects jazz historiography today.

Although she may be of a slightly earlier generation, it is necessary to begin with pianist, jazz pioneer, composer, and arranger Mary Lou Williams. Born May of 1910 in Georgia, jazz to Williams was a lifeline from the very beginning. Even at the early age of six she would wander to her white neighbors' homes and exchange private concerts for them to stop throwing bricks into her family's windows (Dahl). Undoubtedly a prodigy deserving of recognition and compensation, Williams was on the road full time at the age of fifteen in 1925, making a name for herself as the "little piano girl of East Liberty" (Dahl, 61). Despite the immense amount of financial, social, and racial obstacles as a Black woman in the United States, Williams managed to establish herself as a jazz great by the 1920s and later heavily influenced Kansas City Swing, the bop movement, and even mentored artists like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk (Dahl). Williams often played with a very active left hand on each beat, melodic and harmonic lines in the right, and later in her career integrated bop innovations like fast tempo, improvisation, and complex harmonies.

Williams began sculpting her skills as a composer and arranger and eventually was sought after by some of the best bandleaders of the swing era, such as Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, and Jimmie Lunceford (Dahl). Some of her early popular tunes include "Roll 'Em," "Froggy Bottom," and "Little Joe from Chicago." As her career progressed, Williams adapted to each style rigorously in her own authentic manner–her constant growth always deeming her relevant. Her 1977 album *My Mama Pinned a Rose on Me* is an excellent example of William's enduring artistry, as it exemplifies her passion for the blues, dedication to stylistic growth, and overall fortitude.

Mary Lou enjoyed much of this success before the beginning of World War II, however (Dahl, 65). 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, 35). Such a shortage of male workers in combination with a newfound demand for entertainment and distraction from the turmoils of war meant that American women musicians became celebrated like never before (Tucker, 37). 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, 37). This public perception of all women bands as amateur, inauthentic, and temporary was yet another 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 upon as the return to the nuclear family post war 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 post war years with the dawn of rock and roll sweeping American attention, jazz experienced its own head turning shift. However, unlike the craze of rock and roll, jazz was no longer for the masses; its loss of popularity and commercial currency yielded to creative freedom to try new approaches (Tucker and Jackson). This meant a massive variety of new compositional and improvisational techniques, yes, but it also empowered jazz musicians to communicate and explore the rich repository of African American vernacular idioms (Tucker and Jackson). Bebop was the dawn of spirituality, reparations, and political protest for the jazz musician, yielding to a general sense of elitism in the community due to a newfound advanced approach to playing. Although it may have been perceived as harsh to the untrained ear, it meant everything to those who were its pioneer. This was the era of giants like Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, J.J. Johnson and many more–all celebrated rightfully so. However, when researching the women of this era, the mentions seem to come to a halting stop. Since women musicians certainly did not cease to exist, one must deduce a correlation between this rise of elitism in Jazz music and the marginalization of women in jazz and jazz historiography. Although the all woman jazz orchestras of the swing band era were mentioned as novelties or patronized for simply “pitching in for the war effort”, at least they were mentioned at all (Tucker).

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 dominant swing discourse then and now is how the majority of jazz history books and references are written by the white male. 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, 8). 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, 510). 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, 101). Ira Gitler's book *Swing to Bop* completely omits a surplus of accomplished female jazz musicians of the bop era, including those like Willene Barton, Vi Redd, Barbara Donald, Mary Osborne, and many more. 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 taunted in this respect are women who enjoyed massive success and really were an integral part of the jazz community.

In her interview with Linda Dahl, saxophonist and band leader 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, 200). A native of Oscilla, Georgia, her early musical experiences were playing along with her church choir and imitating the broad tone of saxophonist Freddy Martin (Placksin, 228). Although she began her career in the fifties playing with small Sweethearts units and other all-woman combos, Barton did not begin to get any sort of publicity or recognition until the eighties after she was involved with a group called the Jazz Sisters (Placksin). This was despite having won the respect of such formidable musicians as Johnny Hodges, Charlie Parker and Eddie Durham. Barton's appearance at the Universal Jazz Coalition's Salute to Women in Jazz 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 lead 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 Hershal Evans had it. And Louis played it on his trumpet" -Eddie Durham (Placksin, 227).

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 hung heavy on a Leonard Feather produced album in 1954 called *Cats vs. Chicks,* which gave listeners a side by side comparison of Carson and trumpeter Clark Terry (Dahl). 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). 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, 85).

Another example 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 many other professional doors (Wilson). 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 quite the demanded section player, performing with Gerald Wilson's Big Band, Quincy Jones' Orchestra, Count Basie's Orchestra, and Dizzy Gillespie's Big Band (Wilson).

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 such as *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 several others (Wilson). 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 (Dahl, 45). In an interview with Dahl, Liston reminisced upon her time in Dizzy Gillespie's Big Band, saying "the first thing, all the guys in the band said… 'Goddamn, Birks, you sent all the way to California for a bitch?'" (Dahl). Liston's playing was natural, adaptable, and definitely swinging. The trombone seemed to be an extension of herself, playing in the vocalistic style that was so common throughout early jazz. Her soloistic and sectional style can be heard in her 1958 album *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 others. The album highlights 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 a style or atmosphere.

Tenor saxophonist Vi Burnside, also an alumni of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, began bandleading in 1949 and was described by Willene Barton stating "..every manager, everybody in New York was after [her] Vi Burnside, so she easily got herself a group and traveled all over. I have never seen a woman command that much attention as far as a horn is concerned. I mean, she showed up in every big city in America" (Dahl, 199). Burnside performed in many all-woman big bands before her career as a bandleader began in 1949, such as Bill Baldwin's group, the Dixie Rhythm Girls, and the Harlem Play-Girls. The mentions of her career that successfully continued onward outside of these ensembles, however, dwindled post war and still remain sparse.

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, 86). Redd played with the likes of Max Roach, Roland Kirk, Dizzy Gillespie, Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, and Count Basie. During the early sixties, she recorded her albums *Bird Call* and *Lady Soul*, but also recorded as a side woman on Al Grey's 1965 album *Shades of Gray* (Placksin). 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 femme 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). At the time, Redd was thirty four with three children and was certainly not one of the first 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.

But these women were not just excellent players, they were forward thinking musicians seeking the same universal communication and expression that players like John Coltrane, Bill Evans, and Miles Davis were so known for. After taking around a decade off from performing to raise her sons as they were growing up, Redd returned to the scene around 1976 feeling like she had something to offer and a message of love and understanding to convey (Placksin). Redd was another example of a jazz musician's unending devotion to the art. When prompted about adequate recognition in an interview, she responded in a broad sense 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, 260).

Jazz pianist, vocalist, actress, and saxophonist Hazel Scott, for example, was well known as a civil rights activist who refused to sign any contracts for a segregated audience (Provost). Scott attended the Juilliard School of Music at age eight, and in 1950 she became the first African American woman to host her own television show with the premier of *The Hazel Scott Show,* on which she played piano and interacted with her audience for forty five minutes each week (Provost). The show was quickly deprogrammed, however, after right wing journalists accused her of being a communist sympathizer supposedly for her involvement with the political Café Society and multiple civil rights causes (Provost).

Another former student of the Juilliard School of Music is formidable vocalist and Civil Rights activist Nina Simone, whose music became anthems for her people and the Civil Rights movement. Nina was someone who actively wove her identity as an African American woman in the United States into her music in an incredibly authentic manner that spoke volumes to those that listened. Her song "Mississippi Goddam" scorned Jim Crow America with scathing complaints after the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama (Neal). Simone had been strong as an advocate for equality from a young age and continued to spread her message across distinguished venues like Carnegie Hall, Village Vanguard, Apollo Theater, Playboy Jazz Festival and Downbeat Club among several others (Overfield).

What traps women like these in such a cycle of erasure and marginalization? What is contributing to this an inability to accept the "feminized" areas of jazz history as valid? The answers cannot be found within the vacuum of the jazz community and instead require a painful but 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). Such misogynistic remarks about gender are not sparse and affect how jazz is defined, practiced and remembered more than we believe. The number of "gender-free" texts in jazz historiography that either omit the inclusion of women altogether or briefly incorporate only the singers is proof that women are actively being neglected in jazz. Many of these texts were even published after the likes of Linda Dahl's *Stormy Weather,* Sherrie Tucker's *Swing Shift*, and Sally Placksin's *American Women in Jazz,* suggesting their research was dismissed. Just a small amount of research could provide ample examples of misogynistic remarks regarding women in jazz, yet it would yield meager academic information regarding their careers. An anonymous critic in *Down Beat Magazine* ranted about how "outside a few sepia females the woman musician never was born capable of sending anyone further than the nearest exit" (Tucker, 7). With such rhetoric persistently tainting the perception of women in jazz culture, men simply are not held to the same expectations as 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).

The lack of research on women in jazz outside the era of all-girl swing bands along with the surplus of discriminatory rhetoric littering jazz culture provides more than enough evidence of disproportionate treatment. Women had (and have) to think differently about who they networked with, 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 an understanding of the weight 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 more regularly. These people were pioneers who survived an unfortunate amount 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. Regardless, their accolades precede them and the discussion of their experiences is imperative to avoiding further erasure of their impacts. Without knowledge of these prominent women role models, the current generation of jazz will fall prey to the cyclical notion that women have always needed their help to have a place in jazz. Women like Mary Lou Williams, Vi Burnside, Willene Barton, Norma Carson, Vi Redd, Hazel Scott, Nina Simone, and ample others teach us that women have always and will always have a place in Jazz music.

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