

7 | Most of My Sheroes Don't Appear on a Stamp: Contextualising the Contributions of Women Musicians to the Progression of Jazz

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In 1995 the United States Postal Service issued a new instalment in its American Music postage-stamp series. That same year I was gifted with a set of commemorative cards replicating these stamps. As I excitedly opened the package, I was surprised that the series featured no women musicians. While I was thrilled to see the beautiful images of Thelonius Monk, Errol Garner, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, and several other influential jazz musicians, I was disappointed about the lack of representation as it related to women instrumentalists. It is hard not to view such omissions as the continued promotion of a historical narrative that privileges the intellectual contributions of men. Such omissions raise many questions. What would an inclusive survey of jazz's history read and sound like? Would promoting a more inclusive historical model radically disrupt our understanding of the cultural and sonic aspects of jazz? While I cannot exhaustively address these questions, in this essay I will survey how women musicians (instrumentalists and singers) contributed to the progression of jazz during the period when it shifted from the insular environment of New Orleans' black and Creole communities to the American leisure infrastructure that propelled cultural trends in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Mapping the Culture of Jazz

Jazz, by its musical practices and subculture perpetuates an 'underground', male-dominated community, that dictates a musical hierarchy based on one's ability to play harder, faster, and longer than the next person and one's ability to generate highly creative, spontaneous musical statements or solos. The importance ascribed to the solo in a jazz performance centres the music in intellectual labour that is not generally associated with women. Because it originates with musical and aesthetical values that eschew European conventions regarding masculinity and femininity, the public

and private, black women have been able to negotiate some, but not all of the politics of jazz more stealthily. Although jazz pulls from many different cultural and musical sources, most important is its link with West Africa. The musical traditions of this region differed significantly from those of Europe, as music not only served as an extension of everyday life but was also communal in practice. While there are specific gendered aspects to certain types of ritualised music, for the most part women actively and equally engaged in musical performances. This was the opposite of European traditions, which (largely) prohibited, until the nineteenth century, women from public performance unless within the church. It was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that women had full access to musical instruction. The roots of jazz are traced back to the musical practices that evolved out of cultural engagement between African slaves and Europeans within the milieu of early America.

The music that came to be called jazz, or jass (the original spelling of the word), developed out of a number of cultural and social practices that excluded women: brass/military bands, rural blues, and ragtime. The confluence of these genres pervaded late-nineteenth-century New Orleans and quickly became an important part of the city's ritualistic life. There were a number of reasons as to why women musicians were not active in this early period. First, jazz was incubated in spaces that were generally deemed inappropriate for women of good reputation (e.g. streets, brothels, dance halls, the red-light district Storyville). The politics of respectability denoted that no self-respecting woman would perform outside of the home and for monetary profit. Second, there was the prevailing belief that women were not capable musicians or composers by virtue of their emotional and physical abilities. This also extended to gendered notions regarding instruments. Only instruments that did not compromise feminine graces (e.g. piano, harp, guitar, banjo) were acceptable. Thus, women were limited in their music making as well as in exposure to musical instruction.¹ These precepts did not, however, dissuade some women from performing in public and as the popularity of jazz increased, it provided options for working-class blacks to escape poverty.

Americans' growing infatuation with leisure culture in the late nineteenth century precipitated the mainstreaming of many forms of music that were initially heard primarily within the insular environment of Southern and Midwestern black communities. The integration of ragtime, blues, and spirituals into minstrel shows during this period enabled women performers to develop knowledge of the repertory and performance approaches that were to be identified as the early jazz aesthetic. The women who were

able to penetrate the fraternal ranks of the early New Orleans scene did so because their talent was acknowledged and promoted by established male musicians or because they performed as part of familial units. In New Orleans during the early twentieth century, bandleaders like Oscar 'Papa' Celestin were important in recognising the talents of young female musicians. For almost two decades he led the house band at the Tuxedo Dance Hall. There were a number of female pianists that worked with the band during this period including Emma Barrett, the celebrated 'Bell Gal', and Jeanette Salvant Kimball. Domestic relationships, legal and common-law, also allowed women musicians to navigate the politics of respectability and the perils of the performing life.

Vaudeville and minstrel shows offered the first opportunities for black female performers. Segregation laws in the South and Midwest kept black and white performers separated, but many of the black performers managed to sustain successful careers. The Alabama Minstrels featured Mrs Henry Hart during the 1860s and 1870s. Lisetta Young, mother of famed saxophonist Lester Young, toured first with her family and later with her husband, Billy Young, during the first decade of the twentieth century.² Isabele Taliaferro Spiller travelled with the Musical Spillers, whose personnel included saxophonists Alice Calloway, Mildred Creed, Helen Murphy, Leora Meoux Henderson, and May and Mayda Yorke.³ While these bands featured female brass and woodwind players, most of the professional female musicians during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were pianists.

As one of the primary instruments taught to women of status, the piano became the centre of amateur female music making. Most women performed only in the home, but the transition of jazz into dance halls, jook joints, and tent shows provided opportunities for many black women. These women created a stomping, strong style of piano playing that became commonly known as 'gutbucket' or 'barrelhouse' piano. This style reflected a pianist's ability to capture the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic aspects of the complete band within the full range of the piano. Gutbucket and barrelhouse piano styles were identified by their driving left-hand rhythm, which replicated the function of the drums and bass, and the improvised melodies played in the right hand. The melodies performed reflected a range of genres from the blues, to hymns, rags, and stomps.

Emma Barrett (1898–1982) was one of the first notable women to convey this style in early New Orleans jazz bands. Barrett learned to play by listening to street musicians. She became a member of Papa Celestin's famed Original Tuxedo Orchestra, and in 1923 became the first black

female instrumentalist to record.⁴ Like many of her peers, Barrett adapted a hard-driving approach to her playing that shattered the myth of a feminine approach to the piano. She bore the appellation the 'Bell Gal' because of her signature outfit; red dress, red garters, and jingling knee bells, which ornamented her playing.⁵ After Celestin disbanded his group in 1928, she played intermittently with other bands for the next decade. She was an important part of the revival of New Orleans jazz during the post-Second-World-War years, performing weekly at the Happy Landing, a nightclub in Pecaniere, Louisiana. In 1961 Riverside Records released the album *The Bell Gal and Her Dixieland Boys Featuring Jim Robinson*, which provides strong sonic evidence of Barrett's piano playing. It also reveals the eclecticism of the post-war New Orleans repertory, as the remastered version includes bawdy blues tunes like 'I Ain't Gonna Give Nobody None of This Jelly Roll', standards including 'When the Saints Go Marching In', and original tunes such as 'The Bell Gal's Careless Blues' and 'Sweet Emma's Blues'. She would go on to record three more albums before suffering a stroke in 1968. Despite being partially paralysed, Barrett continued to perform with one hand until her death in 1983.

Migrations and the Birth of New Sounds

As America entered the First World War and continued the progression of the industrial revolution in the North, Southern blacks and whites began to migrate from the South in huge numbers. A parallel migration of jazz musicians brought considerable changes to the cultural life of cities like Chicago, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, San Francisco, and New York. It was in these spaces that New Orleans musicians interacted with a growing pool of proficient women musicians. The proliferation of music education within public school systems and the emergence of American conservatories during the last two decades of the nineteenth century significantly impacted the public and private music making of women. No longer relegated to the piano, harp, guitar, and banjo, a generation of brass and woodwind players emerged. Due to the connection between jazz and disreputable forms of leisure culture (e.g. prostitution, drinking, gambling, etc.), white female instrumentalists avoided the genre, opting to focus their attention on classical music and light dinner music. But for black women, the migration of jazz and blues provided opportunities for upward mobility.⁶

At a time when most working-class black women had limited economic choices (e.g. agricultural work, prostitution, domestic work),

vaudeville circuits like the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA), speakeasies, and nightclubs provided more lucrative ways to make a living. The TOBA was the major booking agency for black vaudeville talent during the time. Despite the problems and hardships encountered by performers, it provided in most cases consistent employment and national exposure. Opportunities increased even more when Mamie Smith's 'Crazy Blues' in 1920 initiated a recording boom that fuelled America's thirst for black music during the height of the Jazz Age. While black women dominated this genre as singers, they also provided instrumental accompaniment.

The young black women that came to prominence in this historical period came from similar backgrounds. Most showed some musical promise at an early age and either developed that talent through formal training or on their own. The majority were born in the South and had either remained there or migrated to the North with their families during the years that preceded the First World War. They were raised in fundamental churches and left home during their adolescence to make a better life for themselves or to support their households. Regional music scenes such as those in Kansas City, St Louis, Memphis, New York, and Chicago boasted a roster of several active young women like saxophonist Irma Young and trumpeter Dolly Jones, who played in bands that performed in a variety of settings.

Chicago as Jazz's Second City

Chicago-based musicians took the foreground in introducing New Orleans jazz to Northern audiences. The genre became an important connection to home for many of the migrants, who discovered that the urban North was not as progressive in its social politics as they had hoped. Despite documented resistance against the proliferation of Southern culture in the North, jazz came to dominate the music scene in 1920s Chicago. One of the leading bands of the era, Joe 'King' Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, included one of Chicago's most talented musicians, Lil Hardin (1898–1971). Known as 'Jazz Wonder Child', Hardin's ability to read and write music made it possible for the unwritten 'head' arrangements that dominated the early New Orleans jazz aesthetic to be written down and preserved. Her piano playing, although sometimes very subtle, was featured on many of Oliver's early recordings, including the famous 'Dippermouth Blues', which became an early jazz standard.

In 1924 Hardin changed the course of jazz history when she married a young Louis Armstrong, urged him to pursue a solo career, and instructed him in music fundamentals. Although Armstrong would later deny the impact Lil had on his career, evidence of this influence can be found in his early post-Oliver band recordings. Lil composed a number of the group's repertoire including the celebrated 'Struttin' With Some Barbeque', 'Brown Girl', and 'Hotter Than That'. These arrangements, as well as Louis' performances, were significant in shifting the performance aesthetic of jazz in the late 1920s. They served as a template for the music produced by the generation of musicians who were increasingly privileging solo improvisation over the collective improvisation of the early New Orleans style. As musicianship increased, the repertoire that musicians played widened beyond the standards of the previous generation. Lil Hardin's arrangements became an important part of a new canon of songs. After the two separated in the 1930s, Lil continued to perform, recording with various all-female and male groups. Unfortunately, she would disappear from national attention during the height of the big band era, only to remerge during the Dixieland Revival of the 1950s.

Hardin's talent as an arranger was unmistakable, but she was not the only prominent female musician working Chicago's early jazz scene. Famed bandleader, arranger, and pianist Lovie Austin (1887–1972) started her career playing the vaudeville circuit of the 1920s. Later she led her own group, Lovie Austin and Her Blues Serenaders, directed her own musical shows, and served as the house pianist at Paramount Records. Her stint at Paramount earned her a place in both jazz and blues historiographies, as she provided accompaniment for and wrote arrangements for singers such as Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Ethel Waters. She worked with noted jazzmen such as Louis Armstrong, Johnny Dodds, and Kid Ory during these years. A number of historic recordings from the period bear Austin's name as pianist or arranger, including 'Downhearted Blues' and 'Travelin' Blues', which made her one of the few jazzwomen to profit from the growing popularity of jazz.

Jazz in a New York State of Mind

By the late 1920s New York was replacing Chicago as the city of music, and many musicians migrated east. The Harlem Renaissance and the proliferation of black dance bands and nightclubs drew musicians to New York. The popularity of these bands also marked the beginning of a new 'age' in jazz,

cultivated by a new generation of players who attempted to validate the black experience with their music. Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Don Redman, and others gave America new sonic representations of jazz, sparked new dances, and provided new visual images of the jazz musician. Some of these bands consisted of black female musicians, not only as pianists, but also as brass and woodwind players.

The Fletcher Henderson band, which set the standard for thirties big band music, occasionally featured the bandleader's wife Leora Meoux (1893–1958). Leora played not only the trumpet, but also the saxophone. She met Fletcher while working on a riverboat and credits him and Louis Armstrong with teaching her how to play jazz.⁷ She married Henderson, 'the architect of swing', in 1924 and took an active role as arranger, and road manager for the group. Occasionally she played sax and second trumpet in the band, but she was permanently aligned with the Musical Spillers, The Negro Women's Orchestral and Civic Association, Lil Armstrong's All-Girl Band, and her own group the Vampires.⁸

Kansas City, Here I Come: The Sound of the Southwestern Jazz Scene

Kansas City, Missouri, just like Chicago and New York, became an important cultural centre due to a burgeoning infrastructure of nightclubs, dance halls, brothels, and bars. The city quickly earned the distinction of being the 'Casbah of the Midwest' and served as the de facto 'capital' of the Southwestern jazz scene. In this region, which stretched into Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and as far west as Denver, Colorado, territory bands, along with pianists playing both ragtime and a blues-based piano style known as boogie-woogie supported a vibrant musical scene that catered to black and white listeners. A number of musicians, singers, and performers traversed this region, with many opting to remain in the city. Pianist Mary Lou Williams (1910–81) moved to the city in 1928 after her husband, saxophonist John Williams, was asked to join Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy. She was one of a number of women musicians that worked in this vibrant scene. Williams, in her account of these early years, referenced two particular musicians; pianists Julia Lee and Mary Colston Kirk.⁹

Born in 1902, Julia Lee (1902–58) started piano lessons as a child. Her career included stints with groups that extended out of her family. She first worked with her father's string band, but came to prominence working in her brother's group, George E. Lee's Singing Novelty Orchestra. The

band served as the training ground for a number of influential musicians, including Lester Young and Charlie Parker.¹⁰ In 1933 Lee started a twenty-year residency at the Tap Room. There she cultivated a diverse repertory that included barrelhouse and boogie piano music, blues standards such as 'Trouble in Mind', and bawdy blues songs such as 'Gotta Gimme Watcha Got' and 'My Man Stands Out', which became her signature. For a time, she led her own band, Julia Lee and Her Boyfriends, which included musicians like Jay McShann, Vic Dickenson, Benny Carter, and Red Norvo. Unlike a number of her peers, Lee stayed in Kansas City all of her life, leaving only for recording sessions with Capitol Records in the 1940s.

Mary Colston Kirk (1900–90) studied music with Wilberforce J. Whiteman, the father of famed bandleader Paul Whiteman, during her formative years.¹¹ She displayed considerable talent, which eventually led to a stint with George Morrison's Jazz Orchestra. She was one of two female pianists that performed with the band. In 1925 she married tuba player Andy Kirk, and they moved for a short time to Chicago. After the birth of their son, Colson stopped performing publicly except for in church. Andy Kirk joined the band of Terrance T. Holder in the late 1920s, which brought the family back into the Southwestern jazz territory. By the time Mary Lou Williams arrived in Kansas City, Andy Kirk had assumed leadership of the group. Mary Kirk resumed her performing career in Kansas City, forming a trio, which included drummer Paul Gunther and a young Charlie Parker.¹² Later when the Kirks relocated to New York, Mary began teaching at a nursery and elementary school.

Mary Lou Williams was a consummate professional when she arrived in Kansas City in 1928. At a time when most young girls were playing with dolls, Williams, born Mary Burley, was travelling throughout the Midwest with some of the most notable bands of the period including McKinley's Cotton Pickers. She came to national prominence in 1929 when Kirk's regular pianist could not make an audition with an A&R man with Brunswick Records. Mary, at the urging of her husband John Williams, played the audition and aided the Kirk band in gaining a recording contract. She made her first solo recordings – the two original stride piano works 'Night Life' and 'Drag 'Em' – during these sessions. It was also during this session that the appellation 'Lou' was added to her name, largely because the engineer thought Mary was too common a name.¹³ Her role in the band extended beyond that of pianist, as she became its primary arranger. Williams' arranging style was defined by her ability to synthesise the blues and other black folk practices like boogie-woogie into polished, swinging performances (such as 'Little Joe from Chicago').¹⁴ She was also

known for her unique instrument pairings (as exemplified, for example, through ‘Walkin’ and Swingin’”) and innovative harmonic approaches (such as in ‘Mary’s Idea’). Williams remained with the band until 1942, but by that time her reputation of being an innovative arranger was set. Most of the big bands of that time had at least one of her pieces in their repertoire and she provided arrangements for some of the biggest bands of the period, including Benny Goodman (‘Camel Hop’, ‘Lonely Moments’), Duke Ellington (‘Trumpets No End’), and Jimmy Lunceford (‘What’s Your Story Morning Glory’).

Women and the Globalisation of Jazz

In the years following the First World War, Europe offered some women jazz musicians opportunities that they were denied in the United States. For black musicians it offered freedom from the racial, economic, and cultural oppression they experienced daily in both the North and South. For black women that migrated there, Europe also presented some freedom from gender discrimination, as European audiences seemed enamoured with ‘good’ music regardless of the performer. Singer-dancer Josephine Baker, who arrived in Paris in the 1920s, set the stage for the migration of black women artists. Baker, with her audacious manner and highly charged performances, has come to personify what the French called *les années folles*.¹⁵

Following Paris’s acceptance of jazz, other European cities began cultivating the genre. Trumpeter Valaida Snow (1905–56) was one of the many jazzwomen who found fame and a cultured life in Europe. She arrived in England in the late 1920s, having already earned a reputation performing on Broadway. From 1926 until 1928 she toured the Far East, and returned to America in 1928. As she alternated between the United States, Russia, Europe, and the Middle East over the next few years, Snow’s popularity increased. In the United States she recorded with Earl Hines’ band, performed on Broadway, and appeared in several film shorts. In 1936 she settled in Europe (Paris and Scandinavia) and became a staple of the European jazz scene. The ‘Queen of the Trumpet’ or ‘Little Louis’, as she was commonly called, came to symbolise glamour and success. The latter was a reference to her musical prowess, which by testimony matched that of Louis Armstrong.¹⁶ She is rumoured to have travelled ‘in an orchid-coloured Mercedes Benz, dressed in an orchid suit, her pet monkey rigged out in an orchid jacket and cap, with the chauffeur in orchid as well’.¹⁷

While Europe offered a positive environment for black jazzwomen, it was not without its problems. The widening radius of Hitler's invasion of Europe prompted many black and Jewish performers to return to America, but Snow believed her celebrity would shield her. In 1940 she accepted an engagement in Denmark, which shortly thereafter fell to Nazism. She was imprisoned for eighteen months. The circumstances of that imprisonment were debated for many years, as Snow claimed to have been captured by the Nazis. Mark Miller, author of *High Hat, Trumpet, and Rhythm: The Life and Music of Valaida Snow*, believes she was taken into custody before the invasion to ensure her safety.¹⁸ Although she attempted a comeback upon her release in the mid-1940s, Snow never fully regained the success she had before. In 1956 she died of a cerebral haemorrhage following a performance.

Jazz and the Making of the 'Girl'

As the popularity of big bands continued to grow, these larger aggregations became the defining paradigm in jazz from the mid-1930s until the mid-1940s. Although a number of women would find roles as instrumentalists in these groups, the female vocalists would greatly influence jazz traditions during this time. Before the 1930s the female jazz vocalist was an anomaly. That is largely because, before the late 1920s and early 1930s, there had not been a discernible jazz vocal tradition. However, when Louis Armstrong began singing wordless improvisations that extended his horn lines, a new vocal practice was born. The emergence of female jazz singers in the late 1920s and early 1930s paralleled the rise of the 'girl' as the persona situating the place of women in jazz. 'Girl' was a term used to market a context of youthfulness; a vibrancy that correlated with the politics of respectability, and destigmatised jazz. It was used to characterise female instrumentalists and singers regardless of biological age. The rebranding of jazz during this period significantly progressed the mainstreaming and whitening of its culture during the Depression years. The white female vocalist was essential in the early promotion of the image of the 'girl'.

As the big band rose in popularity many bandleaders sought ways in which to create diversity in their sound and image. At the centre of this change for many was the addition of the female jazz vocalist. Mildred Bailey (1903–51) first manifested this phenomenon when she joined Paul Whiteman's band in 1929. Bailey was born Mildred Rinker in Tekoa, Washington, but spent her formative years on the Coeur d'Alene

Reservation in Idaho. As a teenager she worked as a song demonstrator at Woolworth's department store. Bailey's sound was initially influenced by the shouting, percussive sound of vaudeville blues women, but it later evolved into a more nuanced, subtle aesthetic. During her career she was known by many different nicknames; 'The Rockin' Chair Lady' (a reference to a popular blues song she recorded with Whiteman) and 'The Queen of Swing'. Unfortunately, Bailey's career was hampered by health challenges, as well as her insecurities surrounding her weight. As the girl singer became more and more a part of the big band aesthetic, Bailey faded into obscurity.

The role of the early girl singer morphed into that of musical cheerleader and eye candy during the 1930s. Singers were often chosen more for their physical attributes than their musicianship, causing a rift between the male musician and the female vocalist. Most musicians viewed vocalists as 'canaries' or 'chirpers' who had no real knowledge of the music and were a waste of time. Bandleaders were no different in their assessments, as the early girl singer aesthetic developed into what I refer to as the 32-bar aesthetic. Most big band arrangements mirrored the 32-bar AABA formula that defined popular song form. Following the statement of the melody (AABA), most arrangements transitioned into cycles of melodic variation between sections, or the entire band and individual solos. Singers were generally restricted to singing the melody only, with the remainder of the performance focusing on the instrumentalists. Those 32 bars generally contained no improvisation or variation of melody or harmony. The replication of this formula by a number of bandleaders perpetuated the notion of a 'gendered' space for the girl singer that did not obstruct the 'real' work of male instrumentalists. It also reinforced the notion that girl singers lacked the intellectual and musical ability to perform jazz. The engagement between black bandleaders and black girl singers significantly shifted this paradigm. Billie Holiday (1915–59) and Ella Fitzgerald (1917–96) were significant in expanding the repertoire and agency of girl singers.

Holiday, born Eleanora Fagan (1915–59), learned to sing the blues listening to the records of Bessie Smith. When Count Basie hired her in 1935, it began a musical relationship that transformed the way in which she interpreted and performed the music. Holiday was significant in redefining the performance aesthetic of jazz. She modelled the performance approaches used by instrumentalists like her close friend, saxophonist Lester Young. The genius of Holiday's musicianship rested not so much in the size of her voice, but in her interpretation of the text and her ability to manipulate the melody in a manner that virtually milked the lyrics of every bit of emotional content. She expanded the jazz singer's

repertoire to include original songs like the modern blues 'Fine and Mellow' or torch songs like 'Don't Explain' that reflected the often-troubled nature of her personal life. In 1938 Holiday reflected the growing connection between the black civil rights struggles and jazz when she debuted 'Strange Fruit', a song about the Southern practice of lynching, at the New York nightclub Café Society.

Ella Fitzgerald continued this progression of the girl singer aesthetic with her extensive range, amazing vocal control, and ability to create long, intricate vocal improvisations through scatting. Ella's career was launched when she won the Amateur Hour at the Apollo Theater and was adopted by 'Harlem's King of Swing', drummer and bandleader Chick Webb. Her first big hit was an interpretation of the famous nursery rhyme 'A-Tisket A-Tasket'. She would go on to be one of jazz's biggest selling artists, making a number of significant recordings, including a series of 'songbooks' that focused on the compositions of some of America's greatest songwriters (e.g. George Gershwin, Duke Ellington, and Jerome Kern). As the girl singer found more and more acceptance on bandstands and amongst the critics that served as the 'cultural gatekeepers', the female instrumentalist continued to battle for relevancy.

A Woman's Place Is in the Groove: The Birth of the All-Girl Band

The 1920s also marked the emergence of several all-female bands. Two major black women bandleaders that worked during this period were Marie Lucas (1880–1947) and Blanche Calloway (1903–78). Marie Lucas was the daughter of minstrel performer Sam Lucas and enjoyed wide recognition. Ellington, in his early career, saw her perform on various occasions at Washington's Howard Theatre, and later wrote of her band's abilities in his autobiography *Music Is My Mistress*.¹⁹ Blanche Calloway, known as the 'Queen of Swing', was well known in many early jazz circles.²⁰ However, she never achieved the success of her younger brother Cab, who was backed by promoter Irving Mills and his promotion machine. Blanche's career, however, did consist of some successful stints with various all-female and all-male bands including Andy Kirk's Twelve Clouds of Joy, Chick Webb's Orchestra, and her own Blanche Calloway and Her Boy Toys.

Despite the successful stints of Mary Lou Williams, Lil Hardin, and a number of other women with all-male bands during the late 1920s and

early 1930s, as the 1930s progressed, most women instrumentalists began to find it increasingly difficult to become members of the more established bands. All-girl bands provided an alternative, but some women resisted this format, believing male musicians would have to recognise their talents if they were juxtaposed with mediocre male players. Others believed the creation and success of all-girl bands would lead to true integration and acceptance of women into male bands and the mainstream jazz scene. As if gender was not limiting enough, race also impacted the treatment that all-girl bands received. White female bands generally received the more lucrative and prestigious jobs at theatres and hotels, but black bands were limited, for some time to the TOBA. White bands such as Phil Spitanly's Hour of Charm or Ina Ray Hutton and the Melodears received the attention of agents and record companies, while black bands were sustained economically through live performances. Despite these differences, neither kind of group were ever paid the same or as much as the most mediocre male groups. Many of the manufactured white bands relied on gimmickry and tricks to draw audiences. Unfortunately, this led to all-girl bands in general being viewed as novelty groups by critics. The seminal black bands of the thirties, the Harlem Playgirls and the Dixie Sweethearts, mirrored the performance aesthetic and repertory promoted by male bands. The popularity of these two groups served as the impetus for the creation of subsequent bands in the forties, which moved beyond the novelties and gimmicks.

In the book *Swing Shift: 'All-Girl' Bands of the 1940s*, scholar Sherrie Tucker explores how the 1940s became the 'golden age' for female jazz musicians as America's entrance into the Second World War and the diminishing number of available male musicians provided more performance opportunities for them. Colleges and secondary school music programmes became important aquifers for all-girl bands. The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, the Swinging Rays of Rhythm, and the Prairie View Co-Eds all evolved out of the segregated educational system of the South. Many high-school-aged girls left school and their families to join the professional bands that passed through their home towns.

The most famous of these groups was the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, which started as a fundraising initiative for the Piney Woods School for Girls in Piney Woods, Mississippi. The band's success was halted momentarily when its members defected from the school and resettled outside of Washington, DC. The next incarnation of the Sweethearts consisted of a number of important professional musicians including trumpeters Ernestine 'Tiny' Davis (1907–94) and Jean Starr,

tenor saxophonist Viola 'Vi' Burnside (1915–64), and drummer Pauline Braddy (1922–96). This period marked the band's transition to a professional dance orchestra. Historically the Sweethearts were noteworthy not only because of their musical ability, which matched that of the most popular male bands, but also because they were one of the first interracial bands. They boosted members of white, Native American, and Asian descent, and were the longest functioning all-girl band (c.1937–48).

From their premiere as a professional band at the famed Apollo Theatre in 1941, the Sweethearts distinguished themselves from other all-women bands of the time. In the 1940s they were frequently pitted against male bands in the 'Battle of the Sexes' series, toured Europe by invitation of Armed Forces radio, and were named one of the best bands of the period. The organisation, like many of the all-girl bands, had its share of problems. Hampered consistently by changing personnel and financial difficulties, the Sweethearts disbanded in 1948. Those members who chose to continue performing did so with regional, national, and international success.

Conclusion

By the time the Sweethearts split in 1948, the American jazz scene was shifting in sound and culture. The emergence of bebop aesthetically represented the black male's reclamation of jazz. For many, swing diluted the music, cutting off of its creative nature and making it possible for the most mediocre musician to circumnavigate their way through a jazz performance. Bebop, with its complex rhythmic and harmonic approaches, wove a musical language commensurate with the post-war male consciousness. The jazzwomen who had kept Americans entertained and dancing during the swing era quickly found themselves being forced back into the margins as bandleaders replaced them with returning male musicians, and all-women bands dissolved. These efforts to reclaim what had previously been a male terrain extended to every facet of life. The next seventy years of jazz's history were marked by fragmentation into various stylistic 'schools', ideological debates regarding what constitutes jazz, and the emergence of new influential voices. While you will find women musicians actively representing each of these substyles and cultural trends, there has been no significant change in attitude amongst critics, listeners, and musicians. Jazz continues to be equated with male intellectual work. Twenty-plus years after the release of the jazz postage-stamp series I referenced at the beginning of this essay, a number of women vocalists have been featured on

stamps, but there has yet to be a stamp of a female jazz instrumentalist. The title of this chapter is a nod to a line from Public Enemy's 1990 song 'Fight the Power', during which rapper Chuck D references how the conventional narrative of the American hero is centred on the heteronormative lived experiences of white males. Black men, especially the radical and transgressive ones that Chuck D idolises, are excluded from this heroic framework. But through jazz, as well as blues, funk, soul, and hip-hop, black men found ways in which to insert their self-actualised sonic identities into this narrative. We have yet to see this with women musicians. However, like Chuck D's, my efforts to 'fight the power' involve challenging the perpetuation of this paradigm by 'decentring' the canonic presentation of jazz history in textbooks, museum exhibits, and anthologies with narratives such as the one presented here, that contextualise how women musicians collaborated *with* their male counterparts and each other to further the progression of jazz.

Notes

1. These views are discussed in detail in Judith Tick's chapter 'Passed Away Is the Piano Girl: Changes in American Life, 1870–1900', in Jane M. Bowers and Judith Tick (eds.), *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 325–48.
2. Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazz Women* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1984), 10.
3. D. Antoinette Handy, *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 219–21.
4. Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 16.
5. Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 16.
6. Sally Placksin, *American Women in Jazz: 1900 to the Present: Their Words, Lives, and Music* (New York: Seaview Books, 1982), 69.
7. Handy, *Black Women in Bands*, 172.
8. Handy, *Black Women in Bands*, 172–3.
9. In 1954 Mary Lou Williams wrote a series of articles for the jazz periodical *Melody Maker* that surveyed her vast career and experiences. The eleven instalments have been coalesced in many different anthologies. They can easily be accessed through www.ratical.org/MaryLouWilliams/MMiview1954.html (accessed 11 December 2020).
10. Placksin, *American Women in Jazz*, 49.
11. Placksin, *American Women in Jazz*, 49.
12. Placksin, *American Women in Jazz*, 50.

13. Tammy L. Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 62.
14. For a full study of Williams' arranging style and arrangements, see Theodore E. Buehrer (ed.), *Mary Lou Williams – Selected Works for Big Band*, Music of the United States of America, vol. 25. Recent Researches in American Music, Vol. A74 (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2013).
15. *Les années folles* means the 'crazy years' in French. It is a reference to the cultural and artistic collaborations that took place during the 1920s. These were similar to those taking place in the context of the cultural movement that defined the Jazz Age in America.
16. Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 81.
17. Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 82.
18. Mark Miller, *High Hat, Trumpet and Rhythm: The Life and Music of Valaida Snow* (Ontario, CA: The Mercury Press, 2007), 116–22.
19. Handy, *Black Women in Bands*, 59.
20. Handy, *Black Women in Bands*, 61.

Further Reading

- Taylor, Jeffrey. 'With Lovie and Lil: Rediscovered Two Chicago Pianists of the 1920s', in Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (eds.), *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 48–63.
- Tucker, Sherrie. 'Nobody's Sweethearts: Gender, Race, Jazz, and the Darlings of Rhythm.' *American Music*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1998), 255–88.
- Tucker, Sherrie. *Swing Shift: 'All-Girl' Bands of the 1940s* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).
- Tucker, Sherrie. 'Telling Performances: Jazz History Remembered and Remade by the Women in the Band', *The Oral History Review*, vol. 26, no. 1 (Winter–Spring 1999), 67–84.