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Jasna Jovičević

Research Associate, Artist Independent Palic Serbia

ORCID: [0000-0002-0163-0261](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0163-0261)

The Other Side of Jazz Canon – Narrative Without Women

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Jazz, both as an art form and a cultural phenomenon, has predominantly been associated with male dominance, reflecting a hegemonic structure that has persisted over time.¹ Despite their integral presence and substantial contributions to the evolution of jazz since its inception, women instrumentalists have been persistently marginalized, their accomplishments frequently disregarded or relegated to the periphery within the predominantly male-centric narrative that has shaped the historical trajectory of this art form. As Angela Y. Davis states: “Women have always been inside jazz and have always helped to produce the field that we call jazz, but precisely because of patriarchy, are continually *imagined* as on the margins, outside of jazz, as having to fight to even be included within the category.”² Jazz improvisation, owing to its interactive nature in practice, emerges as a social construct through which historical linear

¹ M. C. Dobson, *Performing your self? Autonomy and self-expression in the work of jazz musicians and classical string players*, “Music Performance Research” 2010, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 42–60; W. Gibson, *Material culture and embodied action: Sociological notes on the examination of musical instruments in jazz improvisation*, “Sociological Review” 2006, No. 54, pp. 171–187; P. Oliveros, *Harmonic anatomy: Women in improvisation*, [in:] D. Fischlin, A. Heble (eds.), *The other side of nowhere: Jazz, improvisation, and communities in dialogue*, Middletown, CT 2006, pp. 50–70; J. Caudwell, *The jazz–sport analogue: Passing notes on gender and sexuality*, “International Review for the Sociology of Sport” 2010, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 240–248.

narratives and the repetition of practice ideologically delineate a male field of power.³ Within this sphere, stereotypes, norms, relational structures, practice codification, and idiom are affirmed, controlled, and fortified. It is within this framework that the dominant discourse of jazz has been shaped, primarily defined by male figures. The question of gender in jazz is rarely analyzed in the context of jazz music.⁴

Critics, historians, journalists, as well as audiences and musicians themselves, often tend to casually accept the “existing state” in the jazz scene as “normal” and “natural” when it comes to the position of women as outsiders, “the only one” and distinctive, rather than being equal. There is an underlying “him” in all scholarly assertions that have naturalized the status of female jazz artists, especially instrumentalists. The perspective of the white Western man has been unquestionably embraced as the “only” possible viewpoint in art history, musicology, and media expertise throughout history. To gain a more accurate insight into art history, it is necessary to explore the value system and the unspoken dominance of the white male subject and find a more appropriate and accurate understanding of past circumstances. If women were truly equal and on par with men in jazz, how is it possible that they are not mentioned in history and are absent from the canon?

The omission of women's contributions to jazz is not a reflection of their absence from the genre's development, but rather a consequence of the patriarchal ideologies and sociocultural norms that have perpetuated a myopic perspective, one that has systematically overlooked or diminished the roles and achievements of female instrumentalists throughout jazz history. Within the jazz world, women often face barriers and discouragement from pursuing certain training avenues such as composition, theory, brass instruments, and percussion during their education. This lack of access to comprehensive training and mentorship from the outset limits their opportunities for growth and leadership roles as they progress in their careers.⁵ While recent years have seen more female artists across various musical fields, the world of jazz still lacks adequate representation of women, often relegating them to a minority status, exceptional, or different.⁶

Jazz embodies a male collective expression of practice, irrespective of the era or contemporaneity within which the practice is performed. Musicians, within their own musical tradition and social milieu, have

² T. Lyne Carrington, A. Burrell Wood, T. McMullen, *Letter from the Guest Editors*, “Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture” 2023, vol. 27, vii.

³ T. Annfelt, *Jazz as masculine space*, “Kilden”, <http://kjonnsforskning.no/en/2003/07/jazz-masculine-space>, (accessed 10. 10. 2020).

⁴ V. Willis, *Be-in-tween the Spa[ces]: The Location of Women and Subversion in Jazz*, “The Journal of American Culture” 2008, vol. 31, p. 293.

⁵ E. Jordannah, *Jazz Organizations, Gender Disparities, and the Stereotyping of Black Women*, “Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture” 2023, vol. 27, pp. 96-98.

⁶ W. Gibson, *Material culture and embodied action...*, op. cit. ; A. A. Alexander, *Where are the girls? JAZZed: Practical Ideas & Techniques for Jazz Educators*, “Jazzed Magazine”, <http://www.jazzmagazine.com/>, (accessed 9. 11. 2021)

employed a patriarchal ideological approach, thus reproducing a social ideological pattern within jazz discourse, thereby shaping the dominant model of jazz narrative and canonization.⁷ The musical genre of traditional jazz is “embodied” through behaviour, gesturing, stylized speech, and playing (musical language) of musicians since its very beginning in the early 20th century. As a practice subject to broad cultural influences, jazz music, during its enactment, critically encompasses the processes of identity formation and performativity.⁸ Masculinity has been established as a norm, and as a hierarchical societal system built upon patriarchal ideology within jazz.

The inception of jazz as a cultural space is often associated with the rise of Louis Armstrong as appearance, a figure emblematic of the genre's early days. His ascendancy marked the beginning of a historical trajectory and the subsequent establishment of the jazz musician as a central figure. This narrative, perpetuated by historians, critics, and journalists, often revolves around male musicians, depicting them as virtuosic pioneers who paved the way for future generations. This kind of retelling mode has shaped the perception of jazz as a primarily male-dominated canonized field.

However, the emergence of free jazz and experimental forms of musical expression disrupted these conventional narratives, leading to a re-evaluation of traditional hierarchies and a more inclusive understanding of jazz as a dynamic and diverse musical practice. While the emergence of free jazz initially disrupted conventional jazz narratives, it did not immediately overturn the established patterns of male dominance. The proponents and pioneering figures most prominently associated with the origins of this avant-garde style were still men. However, free jazz's departure from rigid structures, predetermined roles within ensembles, and the confines of institutionalized performativity gradually facilitated a more egalitarian space for authentic self-expression and variable identity creation. As free jazz evolved into the broader practice of free improvised music over time, this increasingly open-ended and unscripted musical format provided female instrumentalists with an accommodating environment to explore their artistic voices without being bound by the same constraints and prescriptive gender roles that had historically marginalized them within mainstream jazz contexts. Consequently, many female musicians gravitated toward these more liberated formats of free improvisation and experimental music, finding an open canvas upon which to assert their creativity, individuality, and authentic musical identities.

The female jazz musician as a subject cannot entirely influence how she will be read, nor can she control how she will be identified within the discourse. Music is one of the places where individuals learn gender, where ideas about masculinity and femininity (intersecting with other categories such as race, class, etc.)

⁷ I. Nenić, *Guslarke i sviračice na tradicionalnim instrumentima u Srbiji*, Beograd 2009, p. 9.

⁸ G. B. Wilson, R. A. R. MacDonald, *The sign of silence: Negotiating musical identities in an improvising ensemble*, “Psychology of Music” 2012, vol. 40, no. 5, pp. 559–560.

are learned, debated, consolidated, and re-examined as part of social organization.⁹ Through the process of adopting the characteristics of the genre or the group of subjects, female identity is created as a representation of the subject within a specific referential system. The social meanings assigned to the female jazz musician in the dominant jazz discourse through jazz history created her representation in culture and the public sphere (but not her practice), but at the same time, through the same process, they establish the identity of the male as authentic. Individuals who aspire to function as professional female musicians within this realm of music are compelled to navigate between discourses of jazz music, masculinity, femininity, gender equality, and the discourse of individual music performance. This is accompanied by market and organizational control, taking into account other structures of power.

This paper does not address the “female” history of jazz, neither fosters new readings and interpretations of the past. In order to present a systematic account of the exclusion of women from jazz music practice through the historical narrative, this text illustrates the creation of male dominant, canonized music genre reproducing the image of a brilliant virtuoso male (preferably an African American or Western European) within the narrative of music history. Despite contemporary re-evaluations, our educational institutions continue to teach the history of jazz music as it was interpreted in the 1960s, perpetuating the unobstructed support and reinforcement of the canonization of the genius and virtuoso male.

The predominant recognition of female identity in jazz has been confined to the realm of vocalists, a phenomenon rooted in long-standing stereotypes that associate singing with the perceived feminine role of emotional expression, while relegating instrumental performance to the masculine domain. This gender-based division was further reinforced by socioeconomic factors that often precluded women from accessing and acquiring instruments, constraining their musical expression to the private sphere through singing, while the public stage remained a male-dominated territory for instrumental performance.

Women were and are more easily accepted into canon as singers. Consequently, female jazz vocalists have garnered greater visibility and acclaim, as their artistic contributions were deemed more appropriate and aligned with prescribed gender norms, perpetuating the marginalization of women instrumentalists within the male-centric jazz canon. In this article, the central focus is an examination of the marginalized position of female jazz instrumentalists rather than singers, although the female jazz vocalists face marginalization as well. Female vocalists’ contributions, despite their renowned presence, have been systematically disregarded and overlooked within the dominant male-centric jazz discourse. As a jazz saxophonist myself, I express an eagerly inquisitive stance to comprehend the notion of exclusion that female instrumentalists have endured within the narrative of jazz historiography.

⁹ Sh. Tucker, *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, “Current Musicology” 2002, vol. 71-73, p. 383.

Linear Narrative of Jazz History

The interpretation of jazz history admits a multiplicity of approaches. The narrative concerning jazz undeniably emanates from the United States, where the genre was conceived and diverged. The American jazz narrative has been appropriated by others and understood diversely. The interpretation of jazz history varies depending on the position of the narrator, thereby suggesting that it is shaped by cultural surrounding and temporal distance. Different interpretations emerge concerning the evolution of jazz in the United States, Western Europe (centre), Eastern Europe (semiperiphery), and other cultures not proximate to the West (periphery). The value and meanings attributed to works and their representatives of a specific period, as well as their systematization, shift and adapt from context to context and from one generation to another. New significations continually emerge and are aligned with the moment of investigation and reading. Amidst varying interpretations of jazz history, a naturalized linear chronological narrative intertwined with the dominant jazz history prevails, serving, in some regard, to perpetuate a canonical ideal. Discernible within jazz are organized ten-year periods often denoted as “jazz eras,” each period crowned by its assembly of ingenious figures and celebrated masterworks. Consequently, each successive stylistic period is promoted and lauded as a more progressive, superior, and creatively advanced stride within the evolution of jazz.¹⁰ Typical of any form of canonization – whether predicated on race, gender, class, or geography – canons invariably foreground the work and values of a particular social group or elite, sometimes implying that genius and creativity are the domain of a select few. In a subtler sense, canons cultivate a unique interpretation of works, emphasizing creative individuals as exclusive creators, as is the case within jazz music.¹¹

Canonization is an inheritance of Western cultural history, extending to other disciplines such as art, science, or philosophy. The universal subject of music within Western Europe has always been a white heterosexual male, the sole beneficiary of the privilege to compose, perform, or listen to music.¹² The canon, as an institution, is founded upon the representation of his identity, casting the world of music as a dispositive. The male composer (and performer) epitomizes universality within music.¹³ The naturalization of this phenomenon has emerged through pedagogy, followed by the acceptance of such in a historical narrative. As Linda Bouchard underscores: “How can anyone be a composer when we all learn that composers are gods, geniuses, and, of course, all white, male, and mainly dead?”¹⁴

¹⁰ T. Whyton, *Beyond A Love Supreme: John Coltrane and the Legacy of an Album*, New York 2013, p. 45.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 43.

¹² A. Sabo, *Mogućnost postojanja ženskog pisma u muzici: neki primeri iz Srbije*, „Genero: časopis za feminističku teoriju i studije kulture” 2013, vol. 17, p. 170.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Cited from: J. Novak, *Jasna Veličković: When I Try Not to Scream*, “Profemina” 2020, vol. 21-22, p. 155.

Canonization of Jazz Geniuses

The process of canonization in music allows individuals to celebrate music they deem of the highest quality within the realm of artistic expression while concurrently absorbing knowledge from the most esteemed luminaries of the past.¹⁵ The narrative of jazz history initiates the canonization and idealization of male jazz musicians with the advent of musical ensembles such as the Hot Five and Hot Seven, led by Louis Armstrong. This marks the inception of a tradition imbued with notions of brilliance. In his seminal work *Jazz History*, Collier designates a chapter devoted to the trumpeter as *The First Genius: Louis Armstrong*.¹⁶ Within this chapter, Armstrong is portrayed as an artist who, in a manner verging on the superhuman, harnessed the musical realm at a young age, exhibiting an exceptional degree of creativity, virtuosity, and the audacity to embrace novel modes of performance. Such narrative paradigms shall persist throughout the construction of the history of jazz, wherein soloists are singled out, presented as individuals endowed with extraordinary power and talent, assuming the mantle of pioneering vanguards for succeeding generations. Their musical compositions' and performances' methodologies are celebrated as emblematic masterpieces. The tradition of prodigious and virtuosic musical performers traces its lineage to the precincts of European art music during the 18th and 19th centuries.

In his opus *The Tamed Virtuoso (Ukroćeni virtuozi)*,¹⁷ scholar Žarko Cvejić delves into the phenomenon of virtuosity and brilliance within the instrumental classical music of the early 19th century in Europe. The philosophical, artistic, and scientific discourse of this epoch was fundamentally gender-biased, whereas individuals were traditionally assigned roles based on gender. Examining the conception of human cognitive capacities through the prism of philosophical theories, faculties of intellect, transcendence, and brilliance were traditionally reserved for the male gender; "Genius was a man," and "women can be very talented, but not geniuses..."¹⁸ The phenomenon of virtuosity within the landscape of instrumental music during this era was largely the domain of men, who were often portrayed as visionaries, half gods, deities, and military leaders; their exceptional power was tangible in performances that were described as evocative, vigorous, and fiery.¹⁹ Virtuosity was linked to heroism, martial prowess, and a spirit of conquest; it possessed the power to captivate and control both the medium of music and its audience.²⁰ The ethos of brilliance and virtuosity, prevalent within instrumental music, seamlessly transitioned into the narrative of jazz, wherein instrumentalists were equipped not solely with technical virtuosity but also

¹⁵ T. Whyton, *Beyond A Love Supreme...*, op. cit., p. 43.

¹⁶ J. L. Collier, *The Making of Jazz. A Comprehensive History*, New York 1979, p. 141.

¹⁷ Ž. Cvejić, *Ukroćeni virtuozi: filozofija subjekta i recepcija virtuozičeta u evropskoj instrumentalnoj muzici od 1815–1850*, Beograd 2016.

¹⁸ Ch. Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards the Feminist Aesthetics*, Bloomington 1989, p. 6.

¹⁹ Ž. Cvejić, *Ukroćeni virtuozi...*, op. cit., p. 187.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 193.

with the remarkable capacity to spontaneously improvise and compose in real time on the bandstand. It became a hallmark of elevated intellectual merit within the discourse of musical performance.

A broader contextualization of jazz canonization reveals its function in the construction of a legitimate aesthetic preference and the authenticity of experiences. This process engenders a profound reverence for both the artistic creation and its creator, emphasizing a heightened sense of tradition and fostering a perpetuation of cultural continuity.²¹ Canonization here functions as a structural framework within which critics, educators, and musicians converge to collectively ascertain the repertoire of works or performance modalities that are deemed to possess inherent value.²² This tendency creates a naturalized conception of the canon. It is incontrovertible that canons are imbued with a political and ideological underpinning, exerting an influence that transcends temporal bounds, ultimately formulating an implicit assumption of high artistic merit. Jazz musicians, clubs, compositions, and specific albums that were recorded decades ago continue to be celebrated and immortalized as legendary, irreplaceable gems within the rich cultural heritage. Wynton Marsalis, an esteemed American jazz trumpeter and pedagogue, supports jazz canonization – he asserts that traditional jazz must retain its “pure” form, interpretation, and significance, while excluding all jazz styles that have developed post-1965. It is only within the past two decades that the initial criticisms of Marsalis's stance and his endorsement of an entrenched past as an enduring quality, devoid of the necessity for evolution and continuity within the canonized realm of jazz, have begun to emerge. This has resulted in the reinterpretation of the old and the composition of new jazz narratives. It can be inferred that canons, separated from society, shape an art form that aspires to a high degree of cultural value, based on exclusion, reflecting only limited examples of cultural works and outcomes.

Sherrie Tucker, a prolific author on the subject of new interpretations within the jazz history, elucidates from a feminist perspective that jazz historians have meticulously forged a historical narrative of jazz as an organic succession wherein one stylistic iteration merges seamlessly into the next, akin to an eccentric visionary handing over a torch to next genius and their followers. The tendency of inheriting musical genius and engendering novel practices is encapsulated within the construct of “jazz tradition,” a paradigm that exerts a stronghold over both popular and scholarly treatises on jazz.²³ The “dominant jazz discourse,” in all its efficacy, bestows a sense of continuity that directs, shapes, and molds jazz narratives.²⁴ The eponymous Bix Beiderbecke, a virtuoso of the classic jazz era, is enshrined as the “first

²¹ T. Whyton, *Beyond A Love Supreme...*, op. cit., p. 43.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Sh. Tucker, *A Feminist Perspective on New Orleans Jazzwomen*, New Orleans 2004, p. 375.

²⁴ J. Jovičević, Gender Perspectives of Instrumental Jazz Performers in Southeastern Europe, “Muzikologija” 2021, vol. 30, p. 153.

great white jazz musician,”²⁵ who achieved a high position in history “side by side with their African American counterparts.”²⁶ Collier's retelling of Beiderbecke's storied musical journey appends the attributes that epitomize a master of the jazz idiom:

“...must master their instrument to a sufficient degree to clearly convey what they feel; they must possess an expressive tone amenable to nuances; and, finally, they must develop an individual conception within which specific musical ideas are not arbitrarily juxtaposed, but rather interconnected with one another, as well as each being individually linked to a larger whole of which they are a part. Out of the thousands of jazz musicians who aspired to this ideal, no more than a dozen achieved it. Biderbeck was one of them; he stood above all jazz musicians of his time except for Louis Armstrong, and few have surpassed him since then.”²⁷

As an illustration of narrative construction, I present yet another example, an account of the renowned composer, pianist, and leader of a big band, Duke Ellington: “In brief, Ellington's genius was not unambiguous but manifested itself through mastery of many facets of music.”²⁸

Naturally, the aim of this analysis is not to critique and isolate the discourse of jazz as a field where idols and stars have been unjustly forged, shining brightly even today. The entire system of shaping a 'star', or a celebrated figure, is well-documented and universally accepted across performance arts. This is particularly evident in popular music, including jazz, where the interpretation of a work is an artistic act in its own right. Here, performers, regardless of gender, articulate the aesthetics of their music performance (and not a composer). In doing so, the importance, distinctiveness, and authenticity of the performer are emphasized.²⁹ Jazz, being a music form performed and created live – a setting that accentuates unpredictability and anticipation of the musician's next note – implies that the charisma of the performer holds a significant role in shaping the star's identity. Beyond charisma, the instrumentalist showcases their skills, talents, virtuosity, and the capacity for audaciousness live in front of them. This quality distinguishes them (from the audience), aligning with a foundational principle in crafting a celebrated persona. The mechanism underpinning the formation of 'stars' is directed towards generating individualism, uniqueness, and distinctiveness, constituting a crucial feature of jazz as a performing practice.

²⁵ J. L. Collier, *The Making of Jazz...*, op. cit., p. 161.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 255.

²⁹ J. G. Cawelty, *Performance and Popular Culture*, “Cinema Journal” 1980, vol. 20, no. 1, p. 4.

While the production of authentic identities in stage performance is not standardized, it is nevertheless precisely categorized based on various variables: age, gender, race, nationality, and the star's image – a portrayal that embodies specific meaning.³⁰ As such, the constructed and interpreted identity often becomes a mediator and representation of the time within which it operates. Jazz is not perceived solely as improvised and individual music; rather, its content clearly elucidates the societal circumstances and identities that were substantial in its creation, owing to its interactive essence.³¹ In other words, many musicians, irrespective of gender, often advocated for the political stances of their communities and social groups through their music. The celebration of such artists became a precondition for their voices to be heard. The process of canonization, the system of 'star' construction, and the jazz idiom as a means of liberation from suppressed identity, with its advocates, have coalesced to shape the narrative we are acquainted with today.

Example – John Coltrane: A Legacy of Tradition

Among the pantheon of artists who have, in their own way, championed distinct jazz styles or periods, many have ignited originality that initiated the genre's ongoing evolution. Most of them possess the narratives of extraordinary or exceptional artists celebrated for their uniqueness. One of the most enigmatic, cherished figures, and beloved subjects of jazz narration is undoubtedly the persona of John Coltrane – a saxophonist and composer who, above all and everyone, transcended styles, modes of interaction, form, structure, philosophy, and the very aesthetics of jazz music. His figure, in itself, forms a jazz narrative. A myriad of books and texts have been written about Coltrane, emphasizing the “uniqueness of his being,” particularly during the last decade of his life, a period known as his spiritual epoch. Individuals in Coltrane's orbit testified to his genius, canonizing him alongside saints, and, on a religious and spiritual plane, revering his profound inner strength. Even during Coltrane's lifetime, the Saint John Coltrane Church was established, originating during one of his performances in September 1965. While playing the soprano saxophone solo of *A Love Supreme*, the audience sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit, perceiving his music as a sonic baptism. Fifty years hence, this church remains active, incorporating into its programs worship services, masses, prayers, and musical events inspired by the spirit of Saint Coltrane. John Coltrane and his album *A Love Supreme* owns a symbolic essence that permeates the mythos of jazz, endorsing a sense of a cohesive tradition and jazz canon. The enormous success and symbolic allure of the album *A Love Supreme* have gained even greater significance within the context of the “official history of jazz.” The album is uniquely interpreted, its characteristics became

³⁰ P. McDonald, *The Star System - Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities*, London 2000, p. 6.

³¹ F. Schuiling, *The Instant Composer Pool and Improvisation Beyond Jazz*, New York and London 2019, p. 69.

unequivocal within the jazz narrative, transforming the album itself into an iconic auditory artefact. The material within this album – aspects of composition, harmonization, improvisation, and performance, is frequently studied at the academic level, forming an integral part of the syllabus for all jazz program students, regardless of their instrumental focus. Aspiring jazz musicians engage in transcription (accurately notating improvisational notes or entire compositions), coupled with extensive listening to recordings, which constitutes the most pervasive educational model in jazz music. In other words, the educational system supports a canonized continuum and a tendency for perfecting technique, as well as improvisation through imitation of the “great artists.” Within the genre of jazz, an individual – irrespective of gender – garners profound respect as an iconic, ingenious figure, shaping a legacy of jazz compositions and performance practice. Such individuals often serve as guides and inspirations for subsequent generations.

Collier's history of jazz extends only until the mid-1960s, yet he concludes with a chapter titled *The Future: Some Afterthoughts*, where he strives to define expectations for new trends; fusion styles blending popular music, soul, rock, and traditional forms with the jazz genre. This, he contends, branches out and perhaps even “dilutes” progressive music. Towards the end of the book, Collier expresses his hope that the trends of canonization will continue in the same trajectory and that “some new genius”³² will emerge, crafting something “entirely novel and unexpected,”³³ akin to his predecessors. In his conclusion, the author presents the idea that the “future of jazz lies in the past,” positing that every young jazz musician will be rewarded if they return to the roots and study the styles and musicians who established strong foundations and authentic artistic expression.³⁴

This, of course, does not mark the culmination of jazz history; rather, the jazz narrative persists in the same trajectory, perpetually highlighting a select few extraordinary soloists, band leaders, or composers, with their genius and authenticity becoming parts of a new guidelines for progress and the deepening of the jazz genre.

Narrative of the Emergence of Free Jazz

Within the dominant jazz discourse, the origins of free jazz, this potent musical practice, are briefly alluded to, almost tangentially, with the mere marking of a place, as such music “did not appeal to other musicians.”³⁵ However, free jazz was not merely a marginal style or one era within jazz; rather, its

³² J. L. Collier, *The Making of Jazz...*, op. cit., p. 496.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 498.

³⁵ Ibidem, 464.

emergence heralded an unstoppable dismantling of the jazz canon. For African American jazz practitioners who were among the first to engage with free jazz, the quest for new pathways and departure from the confines of the traditional discourse became an expression of radical Black politics, a struggle against racism, and a collective articulation precisely due to the clear divisions embedded within the mainstream, as well as the distinct comprehension of race and class. A prominent saxophonist of the new style in the 1960s, Archie Shepp, regarded new forms as an act of societal emancipation: “If we continue to call our music jazz, we must continue to let them call us niggers. Well, at least there we know where we stand.”³⁶ Notably, free jazz's evolution occurred in parallel with the “black stream,” and even perhaps independently, as European free jazz, ultimately evolving into free improvised music, exhibiting progressively fewer shared characteristics with the mainstream American idiom. European musicians, too, sought to disengage from the canonized narrative and the term “jazz,” precisely due to the prevailing ideological and political stance entrenched within the genre.³⁷ Another reason proponents of the free form distanced themselves from traditional jazz was the imperative to break away from canonized expectations, rules, and stereotypes, aspiring toward an authentic, genuinely individual expression that eluded stylistic categorization. Free form provided a potential space wherein the creation of music is liberated from predetermined social constructs and genre performativity.

One of the most renowned European saxophonists of free improvisation, Peter Brötzmann, repudiated the need for ready-made, learned techniques and did not acknowledge free improvisation as a system or method for crafting music. He argued that he himself was the system through which he generated music. In the process, these musicians established a “modus operandi” that has stood the test of time, and they continued to generate original music. In free jazz, attempts at canonization and the establishment of artist categorization systems exist, but the complexity surrounding the emergence of free and experimental forms in different locations, with diverse cultural contexts, intentions, and ideas, has led to the dispersion of the jazz narrative across multiple continents, cultures, and musical genres. The expansion of improvisational practices in various directions has resulted in an open arena for new approaches and varied interpretations of musical improvisation.

End note to male canon

The discourse of the Great Artist (who challenges the sense of respect due to genius) is undeniably connected to the idea of the timeless force of that Great Artist determined by race, gender, and cultural

³⁶ V. Wilmer, *As Serious as Your Life*, London 1987, p. 23.

³⁷ F. Schuling, *The Instant Composers Pool and Improvisation Beyond Jazz...*, p. 66.

circumstances.³⁸ If such a romantic and elitist approach that celebrates individuals were eliminated, an impartial, impersonal, sociological, and institutionally oriented approach would be obtained, in which all subjects would participate equally. Not only is the construction of the canon with a man at the center evident, but the ideology of the genre itself falls under a sexualized and gender-determined discourse, although women have been present and active in jazz since its inception in New Orleans at the beginning of the 20th century.³⁹

Oh, but women players were right there in front of their eyes

While disciplines like cultural studies, social studies, philosophy, and various artistic forms have explored gender as a subject for academic discussion since the mid-20th century, gender perspectives in music have only become the focus of gender analysis and interpretation in the late 1980s.⁴⁰ This was followed by the re-examination of jazz history, marking the most recent development in this sequence. When addressing the marginalization of women, the discourse within jazz was comprehensively addressed, with a particular emphasis on re-evaluating the entirety of jazz history. Historians operated primarily on the premise that “there were also women who played.” The subsequent step in examining gender and role divisions in jazz involved questioning the system of inclusion and exclusion within the hegemonic structure.⁴¹

Constructing a narrative history that incorporates female bands and performers based on conventional jazz history standards proves to be an immensely challenging endeavour. The necessity arises to incorporate oral history from that era, given the substantial oversights present within the canonized narrative constructed by jazz historians and critics. Gender, along with various other social meanings associated with femininity and masculinity, possesses the capacity to appear natural rather than being seen as cultural and historical constructs. Traditionally, jazz was closely identified with male instrumentalists and composers; male musicians were celebrated, while their female counterparts were largely ignored and excluded from the canonized narrative (with a few vocalists being the exception).⁴²

³⁸ L. Nochlin, “*Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists*”, 50th anniversary edition, London 2021.

³⁹ R. C. Piñero, *All-Woman Jazz Bands And Gendered Beboppers: Gayl Jones And Gloria Naylor’s Jazz Fiction*, “*Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*” 2016, vol. 19, p. 14; Sh. Tucker, *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies...*, op. cit., p. 376.

⁴⁰ M. Šuvaković, *Fatalni `rod` muzike*, „ProFemina: časopis za žensku književnost i kulturu” 2000, vol. 21-22, p. 161.

⁴¹ A. Arvidsson, *Introduction*, [in:] idem (ed.), *Jazz, Gender, Authenticity: Proceedings of the 10th Nordic Jazz Research Conference Stockholm August 30–31*, Stockholm 2012, p. 16.

⁴² R. C. Piñero, op. cit., p. 14.

Tucker unveiled the “women's” history of jazz through fieldwork, oral history, and an extensive archive of life stories of jazz musicians from the United States. Today, it is known that women played instruments across various styles and eras of jazz. It is also recognized that they were active in other segments of the jazz narrative, which might not have been significant to historians – for example, members of family bands, all-female orchestras, musicians in churches, teachers, club owners, or organizers and producers.⁴³ The primary reason for this was maybe not intentional exclusion of women by authors of jazz history books. Often, as in other realms of social life, women did not have access to roles that historians deemed important in shaping criteria. Women might have been excluded from the most prestigious activities, like playing the cornet in 1920s jazz bands, but they held crucial roles in other areas – such as vocalists, non-soloing pianists in jazz bands, or cornetists at private gatherings, in women's bands, or in entertainment performances.⁴⁴

In contrast to various other artistic disciplines, jazz had the unique advantage, bolstered by the feminist movement, to facilitate the evolution of women's roles and carve out a space for female creativity. This was made possible due to jazz's simultaneous existence as both a popular and an elite discipline. Engaging with popular culture, historically, could occur equally in public and private settings, whereas the privileged domain of high culture was reserved for the public sphere and men. Traditionally, women found themselves largely excluded from the high culture. However, within the confines of the private domain, they expressed themselves through diverse means, such as music and the creation of artistic works. Regrettably, these expressions were often dismissed as not meeting the requisite standards of quality, often relegated to the category of popular music.⁴⁵ The construction that divided the public from the private sphere aligned with the character of jazz almost until the mid-20th century, allowing women to navigate between the private and public, engaging with jazz music. The process of transforming popular culture into a global phenomenon and simultaneously reevaluating the divisions between the realms of “popular” and “elite” was accompanied by the women's conquest of public space – the jazz scene – and their entrance into jazz practice.

The 1940s marked a significant period when swing music became an integral part of mass popular culture in the United States. During this era, a notable number of female jazz instrumentalists emerged. Their visible roles and their occupancy of public space served as a crucial moment. However, this transformative period was soon interrupted by the emergence of be-bop and hard-bop, both of which were

⁴³ Sh. Tucker, *A Feminist Perspective On New Orleans Jazzwomen...*, op. cit., p. 2.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 3.

⁴⁵ I. Nenić, *Matrica koja obećava? Predstavljnje i učešće žena u popularnoj kulturi*, in: *Neko je rekao feminizam – Kako je feminizam uticao na žene XXI veka*, ed. A. Zaharijević, Beograd 2008, p. 264.

considered elitist forms of art. Consequently, these genres repositioned jazz within the high culture, effectively relegating it to the public domain, a space that remained predominantly occupied by men.

This perspective casts the golden era of swing music, characterized by the presence of all-women orchestras, in a different light. It appears to be a form of light entertainment, almost kitschy, or merely a profitable endeavour for influential industries. This perspective directly impacted the “active process of creating and transmitting meaning within a particular social system.”⁴⁶ In other words, women seemed to have lost a significant battle in articulating and asserting their female identity. Throughout this period, the representation of women was molded by a patriarchal construct, and this construct endured even as the 21st century dawned.

Research into jazz and the critical evaluation of swing performances suggest that the majority of all-women bands were largely excluded from in-depth analysis by jazz journalists or critics within the mass popular culture. This omission was done with the intention of validating and legitimizing the dominant narrative of the 1940s. By leaving out female contributions in jazz, authors aimed to create a narrative that established jazz as an exclusively male domain, perpetuating a homogenous image.⁴⁷

In her book *New Orleans Jazzwomen*,⁴⁸ Sherrie Tucker sheds light on the extensive history of jazz women, dating back to 1890. The book encompasses female soloists, dancers, instrumentalists, band leaders, musicians in church orchestras, teachers, organizers, booking agents, tour producers, and club owners. Women were present in every facet of jazz history, thus bearing responsibility for the development of jazz. In a chronological fashion, the author meticulously lists events closely tied to women's involvement in shaping the narrative, genre, and jazz as a cultural phenomenon in the United States. Through her expansive work, she portrays the struggles female musicians faced – exclusion based on racial, class, and gender identification, power dynamics within the practice, the circumstances that influenced the genre's formation, and the socio-political regimes that jazz as an artistic form mirrored. Tucker's book enumerates the names of hundreds of professional female musicians who were active in this genre.

Another similar anthology on jazz women, titled *Madame Jazz*,⁴⁹ authored by Leslie Gourse, was published in the late 1990s. Unlike Tucker, who focuses on the inception of the genre (establishing women's presence from jazz's very beginnings), Gourse provides a comprehensive account of the jazz scene's evolution, particularly emphasizing a multitude of jazz women, primarily from the period after

⁴⁶ J. Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, London 2010.

⁴⁷ K. A. McGee, *Some Liked It Hot: jazzwomen in Film and television, 1928–1959*. Middletown, CT 2009, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Sh. Tucker, *A Feminist Perspective On New Orleans Jazzwomen...*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ L. Gourse, *Madame Jazz- Contemporary Women Instrumentalists*, New York – Oxford 1995.

World War II until the late 1990s. This compilation includes a list of female jazz instrumentalists spanning over fifty pages and encompassing hundreds of names. In this manner, the author promotes the female musicians who remained active until the 1990s, after which the number of women in jazz actually began to rise.

The anthologies prove that women actively participated and operated as professional musicians. They collaborated both among themselves and with their male counterparts while concurrently building their musical careers. While the rich history of women in jazz necessitates further analysis and focus, these two monographs offer a thorough and broad perspective on the integral history of jazz, with female musicians as an inseparable element in the genre's creation.

The first step in investigating the construction of a “false” narrative involves delving into the very inception of the genre. At the beginning of the 20th century in the United States, during the nascent stages of jazz, numerous associations connected female entertainers (musicians, actresses, dancers) with prostitutes, rendering them as a similar social group that coalesced and intermingled. When discussing the emergence of jazz, the standard narrative revolves around the cradle of jazz, the iconic and idyllic imagery of New Orleans and the Storyville district – a setting teeming with brilliant, relaxed, and charming male musicians surrounded by exotic prostitutes and female entertainers. This portrayal gave rise to the presentation of the “fallen” woman, in contrast to the “respectable” and virtuous woman.⁵⁰ The emergence of women into the public sphere in the early 20th century disrupted the representation of women, as they subversively ventured beyond norms. This pertained not only to their roles as female musicians and instrumentalists but also as female musicians who performed in a district considered morally dubious. Culture, during the construction of the jazz narrative, also served as a powerful battlefield for those advocating a particular viewpoint and those resisting the constructions of “coloured” women as sexually available and white women as chaste. These constructions were utilized to bolster the ideology of white supremacy and racial purity in the United States.

Employment in jazz afforded certain women the opportunity to move beyond the confines of the private sphere and expand their possibilities for agency beyond it. Often, it served as an escape from household chores, agricultural or labour-intensive work, or poverty. For other others, jazz represented a rebellion against religious, familial, or other societal constraints. For white women, engaging in jazz posed a serious risk to their class status, which could impact their life circumstances and decisions. Playing classical piano gave some African American women prestige and a higher class status, yet due to racism, employment in classical music wasn't feasible for them, leading them to choose jazz. Moreover, the economic status of the black working class necessitated earning a livelihood, making employment in jazz

⁵⁰ Sh. Tucker, *A Feminist Perspectives on New Orleans Jazzwomen...*, p. 59.

a pragmatic solution or a lesser evil. For some, participation in jazz meant being modern, engaging in new musical forms, new technologies (such as radio, recording, travel by car), and having the potential to offer new interpretations and construct gender identity.⁵¹

The aforementioned body of literature provides an extensive portrayal of active female jazz instrumentalists, who are now subjects of heightened contemporary discourse. Documentaries and media articles have been dedicated to them, thus contributing to their increased visibility. However, within the purview of this research, it is imperative to underscore the prevalence of women who performed and were present in the jazz scene during the first half of the 20th century. This era coincided with the ascension of jazz's popularity and the formulation of its traditional discourse.

In 1917, when the entire Storyville district was shut down by the police, many musicians, including both women and men, migrated to Chicago. This migration included prominent female figures such as Lil Hardin, Lovie Austin, Hallie Anderson, Mattie Gilmore, and Marie Lucas, who led and organized their own bands. Subsequently, another significant influx of female musicians occurred during World War II, famously referred to as the “wartime substitute” phenomenon. All-women orchestras flourished during the 1940s, often performing at balls and theaters. The United States had over a hundred such theatres. Despite their invisibility within the annals of jazz history, women were forming all-female orchestras from the inception of jazz. Notably, in jazz music, one could only secure a position in a band or orchestra if invited by a member of the ensemble itself, and women were largely excluded from such invitations. Only in the 1990s did women begin gaining entry into jazz ensembles. This circumstance led to women forming their own ensembles, a trend that was additionally catalyzed by the demands of the music industry during the 1940s. Among the noteworthy all-women bands and ensembles were: The Blue Belles, The Parisian Redheads, Lil-Hardin's All-Girl Band, The Ingenues, The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, Phil Spitalny's Musical Sweethearts, Helen Lewis and Her All-Girl Jazz Syncopators, The Schuster Sisters, The Milady Saxo Four, The Darling Saxophone Four, Edna Croudson's Rhythm Girls, Phil Spitalny's Hour of Charm Orchestra, Al D'Artega's All-Girl Band, Count Berni Vici's All-Girl Theater Band, The Prairie View Coeds, Virgil Whyte's Musical Sweethearts, Herb Cook's Swinghearts, Eddie Durham's All-Star Orchestra, Gloria Gaye and her Glamour Girls Band, The Darlings of Rhythm, and others.

Turning to the history of be-bop, it becomes evident that women, particularly in this segment, were notably absent from the discourse. Historians predominantly accorded prominence to male luminaries who crafted the style, such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk. Concurrently, several remarkable female musicians played important roles in shaping the emerging style, its

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 16.

characteristic features, performance techniques, and expanding repertoire. Notable figures include Mary Lou Williams, Norma Carson, Clora Bryant, Elvira “Vi” Redd, Melba Liston, Hazel Scott, Beryl Booker, Marjorie Hyams, and many others.

A significant number of female jazz instrumentalists from the first half of the 20th century was characterized within jazz as entertainers and amateurs, rather than as professional musicians. Male musicians regarded jazz as inherently masculine, perceiving women as lacking the requisite intelligence, assertiveness, and vigour to engage in such musical pursuits. With few exceptions, women remained relegated to secondary roles compared to their male counterparts until the 1980s. Long after women had gained acceptance as writers or visual artists, those in the world of jazz continued to grapple with entrenched chauvinism. Nevertheless, the jazz scene of the past three decades has witnessed the emergence of a substantial number of renowned female jazz instrumentalists. The endeavour of crafting a more contemporary narrative shall be scrutinized in the subsequent chapters.

Among a considerable number of jazz enthusiasts, the initial association with legendary jazz figures tends to lean towards men – Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Coltrane – with women, such as Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, or any female vocalist, seldom making a prominent appearance. This particular observation substantiates the imperative of gathering information about women in jazz to rectify the prevailing notion of jazz as a male-dominated cultural heritage. Through thorough research, the inevitable conclusion emerges that a re-evaluation of jazz history is paramount, coupled with a fresh interpretation. This revamped perspective should encompass a discourse that facilitates communication between male and female musicians, where their presence on the stage is inclusive, eliminating the need for gender identification, glorification, or the reinforcement of rigid distinctions between them.

The necessity to move away from the notion of the “exceptional woman” has long been intrinsic to feminist scholarship. The concept of the exceptional woman – a figure who, regardless of her gender, manages to excel in a male-dominated sphere – is both patronizing and futile. However, without a comprehensive history of women's achievements and lacking the information that enables us to trace the interconnecting threads of history, an impression of discontinuity is formed.⁵² Despite a substantial body of literature and numerous books on jazz, only a selected few are dedicated to female jazz instrumentalists.

Even as organizations attempt to promote inclusivity and diversity, creating a truly supportive environment for women in jazz requires an active, conscious, and consistent belief in their competence, as well as fostering a culture devoid of othering and indirect communication – an environment that not only

⁵² S. Bassnett, *Introduction To Part Three*, [in:] *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, ed. L. Goodman, J. de Gay, London – New York 1998, p. 88.

supports their artistic development but also their mental health and emotional well-being, acknowledging the emotional labor they contribute.

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SUMMARY

Jasna Jovičević

The Other Side of Jazz Canon – Narrative Without Women

Despite concerted efforts aimed at diversifying the jazz genre, women persistently occupy a marginalized position, often relegated to the periphery within a predominantly male-centric narrative. The historical trajectory of jazz has been profoundly shaped by patriarchal ideologies, perpetuating a discourse that predominantly exalts male musicians as virtuosic pioneers. Educational institutions persist in repeating a historical lens established in the 1960s, further solidifying the canonization of male brilliance. This narrative framework tends to spotlight individual soloists while disregarding the significant contributions of women, especially instrumentalists, engendering a sense of historical disjunction within the jazz tradition. This article advocates for a comprehensive reevaluation of jazz historiography, one that intricately examines and integrates the substantial contributions of female players. By doing so, it aims to challenge the entrenched male dominated canonized version and cultivate a more inclusive comprehension of jazz music's diverse heritage.

Keywords

jazz canon, male dominance in music, women in jazz, female jazz instrumentalists, gender in jazz