

## CONSCIOUS INCLUSION OF WOMEN MUSICIANS

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the vast divide between performance opportunities and income earned by male and female musicians. Although female singers are quite visible on the world's stages, few female instrumentalists are employed on a regular basis and even fewer women composers have their music commissioned for programs or films funded by private and public monies. Several proficient female jazz musicians are identified, and how and why women are omitted from performance is discussed. The need for everyone—producers, promoters, funders, and bandleaders—to consciously choose to include women musicians in programming, especially where public funding is involved, is emphasized.

**Keywords:** musicians, women, men, composer, performance, inequity, inclusion, jazz, classical

*Music, the sound of the spheres, begins in the womb! ~ Diva JC*

People first experience music is in the womb. The sound of blood rushing through the mother's veins is like the sound of strings. The heartbeat is the drum, while mother is singing and humming. However, out of the womb, women instrumentalists are omitted, particularly in Jazz. Although women comprise only 35% of classical orchestras because "culturally constructed differences between women and men have always been present, typically restricting women's music-making while preserving the most profitable musical careers for men" (Phelps 14), women are employed by symphonic orchestras on strings and woodwinds, while but few are in big bands. The National Endowment for the Arts study entitled *Changing the Beat: A Study of the*

*Worklife of Jazz Musicians* examined the lives of jazz musicians in New York, Detroit, San Francisco and New Orleans found that 84.1% of jazz musicians were male (Jeffri 2). For decades, big bands neglected to engage women, except for singers, and the occasional pianist. Sarah Vaughn worked in Billy Eckstein's band and Marylou Williams arranged for Duke Ellington and worked with the Mighty Clouds of Joy.

The Lincoln Center Big Band led by Wynton Marsalis has no women. The Carnegie Hall Big Band led by Jon Faddis is defunct but only one woman performed in that band, trombonist Janice Robinson, who performed and recorded with Dizzy Gillespie, Billy Taylor, Marian McPartland, Thad Jones/ Mel Lewis, Slide Hampton, The Jazzmobile All Star Big Band, Gil Evans, McCoy Tyner, George Gruntz and Mercer Ellington. Her seat was not filled by another woman, when she became pregnant.

Trombonist Melba Liston led a 16-piece all-female band in the 1970s. She was an important jazz arranger in a field dominated by men. She recorded with classmate Dexter Gordon in 1947. When Gerald Wilson disbanded his orchestra on the east coast, Melba joined Gillespie's big band. She toured with Billie Holiday in 1949, but disliked the rigors of touring. She took a clerical job, supplementing her income as an extra in Hollywood, where she appeared in "The Prodigal" and "The Ten Commandments." Liston toured with Gillespie for the US State Department to Europe, the Middle East and Latin America in 1956 and 1957, and her best known solo is recorded on Gillespie's "Cool Breeze" at Newport Jazz Festival. She formed an all-women quintet in 1958, and toured Europe with the theatre production "Free and Easy" in 1959, then worked with the show's musical director, Quincy Jones. In the 1960s, Liston worked with Milt Jackson and Johnny Griffin, and began her long association with pianist Randy Weston. For four decades, Liston arranged and performed Weston, whose song "Mischievous Lady" was composed for her. In 1973, she taught in the West Indies at the Jamaica School of Music. Upon her return in 1979, she formed Melba Liston and Company.

Tenor saxophonist Kit McClure led a 19-member band but few venues could pay a big band. Her five-piece ensemble with Leticia Benjamin on alto sax, Jill McCarron on piano, Kim Clarke on bass and Bernice Brooks on drums performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and JVC Jazz Festival in New York. McClure's big band did a tribute to the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, an all-female big band formed in Mississippi, in 1937, and renowned by 1940. *American Legacy Magazine* (Summer 2008) featured the Sweethearts in an article entitled

*The Ladies Who Swung The Band*, along with the Diva Jazz Orchestra. Nat Hentoff wrote, “From the earliest days of jazz, women were excluded from the all-male club. But somehow they kept on swinging, and today we celebrate their names.” Bassist Carline Ray (81) still performs in New York City, long after the demise of the Sweethearts that was comprised of highly talented females who remain obscure.

Organizations like International Women in Jazz in New York, Fondazione Adkins Chiti: Donne in Musica in Rome, Italy, and Women in Jazz South Florida, Inc. struggle to present female musicians and composers. Revealing statistics on the disparity of music programming of women’s music in Europe reported that,

Only 1% of [women’s] music (traditional, popular, classical, and contemporary) is programmed by public funded institutions; and 89% of public arts and culture institutions are directed by men. Throughout Europe, [women] composers are unable to earn a living only from their musical compositions and performing.” (WIMUST 3)

Women in Jazz in Texas and Instrumental Women in California presented several talented females like violinist Karen Briggs, guitarist Lois McMorris (Lady Mac) and bassist Nedra Wheeler. Each of these organizations suffer from budget cuts for the arts in the US.

In 2008, drummer Alvin Queen, who lives in Geneva, Switzerland, led a band designated as Jazz Ambassadors to the United Nations. Queen defended his choice to not have women in his band. I thought it was important to have at least one woman in a band that represented the United Nations. But Queen did not agree. How can this omission by male band leaders of women instrumentalists in the field of jazz be rectified? It takes a conscious effort on the part of all musicians to understand the importance of including women instrumentalists. Even female musicians will not work with other women. One singer said she would never hire women, again, when a female drummer took another gig, after agreeing to perform with the singer. The drummer said she would help the singer out but did not consider the date a real job. A female horn player said she does not work with female musicians at all!

Since 1984, I’ve worked as a leader with bassists Carline Ray and Kim Clarke, Bertha Hope on piano, and Paula Hampton and Bernice Brooks on drums in New York; pianists Tina Schneider and Mariette Otten in Europe; and in Florida with pianists Melody Cole and Alison Weiner, bassist Te’ja Veal, Rochelle Frederick on tenor sax and Renée Fiallos on flute. An adept

jazz pianist Joanne Brackeen was with Freddie Hubbard and the Kool Jazz All-Stars of 1983, when they recorded my composition *Sweet Return* on Atlantic Records. Brackeen scored the tune for the quintet, brilliantly! But there are no adult, female drummers or bassists in Florida, so my own band *Jazz Hotline* is comprised of men because they know my music and are happy to work with me.

Many women instrumentalists do not know standard songs like men do. Distracted by studying, teaching, mothering, homemaking, working a job or volunteering in the community, women have less time to practice. Women resist rehearsal and may be argumentative and unprofessional, when following another woman. Even though men omit them from the “good ole boy” club, women contradict the authority of woman leaders. Pianist Melody Cole had a tough time with men, who worked against her. Yet, she resisted me, when I paid her. Mistrust, resistance and contrariness are reasons for omitting women from the playing field. Still, there should be conscious inclusion of women musicians to counter the all-male musical environment.

The middle school jazz band I volunteer with has seven girls in the saxophone section. They are 13, and have less enthusiasm than the boys. The two female bassists are into the music because they play throughout the score. But the saxophones sit out on many measures. Some are there only to fulfill a requirement. Encouraging girls to play *hard*, practice and care about performance is what community musicians can do at schools.

Legendary blues pianist and vocalist Jeannie Cheatham (84) was the *first* woman to induct anyone into the Smithsonian Jazz Hall of Fame. Her friend pianist Dorothy Donegan was that musician. Cheatham said it is a choice to be a musician. “Professional musicians, men and women must be conscientious about their decision to live that lifestyle. They must promote, book, schedule, rehearse, do the accounting and take responsibility for their career,” said Cheatham. Each member of Cheatham’s *Sweet Baby Blues Band* had their own band and worked with musicians they liked. Cheatham worked with trumpeter Clora Bryant from Texas, saxophonist Vi Redd in Los Angeles and drummer Patty Patton in San Diego, where she resides.

Besides being co-leader with her husband Jimmy Cheatham of Ellington Band fame, Jeannie accompanied Cab Calloway, whose sister Blanche had her own big band in the early twentieth century. “Sidemen want to be called, hired, have fun and go home,” said Cheatham. “Agents may like to book all-female bands. But most touring bands do not hire women because of rooming arrangements. Since it is easier to sleep four men to a room, a woman in the band

means an extra room must be arranged,” said Cheatham, who believes women have it much easier, today. “When I was young, a woman had to put a man’s name on her music to get it played.” Cheatham insisted that women who choose to be professional musicians must work just as hard as men and have equal success, if they apply themselves.

For Kim Clarke, “women musicians must be tenacious and cultivate a following, unless they’re with a major record company that builds their fan base.” Men have no problem being sidemen but women must have what Clarkes calls, “The look--the right age and the right size.” If she’s not good looking, she accepts gigs men will not take or she’s a Diva, throwing her weight around.” Clarke said gay women work more often in the gay arena. Clarke worked with Kit McClure in a wedding band for several years, until McClure tired of that kind of gig. Also, Clarke works with Bertha Hope on piano and Paula Hampton on drums in Jazzberry Jam, a dynamic group whose spectacular ability to communicate with each other produces the best in musical improvisation, and informs the audience of their humor and humanity. Clarke said, “Grace Kelly is a Korean alto saxophonist whose father owns a candy factory. Grace works the big festivals because her father pays to promote her. But without a sponsor, most female musicians are on their own, and club owners are about the money. You must hustle to get people interested in your music.”

Vocalist and composer Beverly Lewis lives in Italy and said, “You do not find female musicians on the level we have here.” She said there are no female drummers in Italy because “there are no drumming schools in Europe, except in Amsterdam and at the Swiss Jazz School in Berne, Switzerland. Women drummers are rare and in such demand that they usually work with famous singers, making them unavailable for gigs with local artists. The biggest problem for Lewis is that “musicians are not acting out of authenticity but out of a program. They will go where the money is rather than be loyal to a musical genre.” However, drummer Terri Lyne Carrington is a professor at Berklee College of Music in Boston and Cindy Blackman Santana is at the top of the charts in the jazz world, along with Brazilian bassist Esperanza Spaulding.

In New York City, where *pay-to-play* is policy, women musicians stay away. Cheatham said musicians must meet people and let other musicians and club owners know they are musicians. “If you’re not willing to socialize, you will not work,” she insisted.

When pianist/vocalist LaVelle lived in Paris, she was grossly under-appreciated. In Switzerland, she’s a big fish in a little pond. She performs in Russia, France, Switzerland and

other European countries with organist Rhoda Scott. The two make a dynamic duo and enjoy working with each other.

Online social media helps musicians expose their music to a wider audience. Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, CDBaby, YouTube, iTunes and Reverbnation are sites for music promotion. The world consists of men and women. So, the jazz scene should consist of men and women. However, women are left out so often that it is “normal” to omit them. What are some of the reasons women musicians are overlooked?

Women do not get to work in ensemble as men do, so their “chops” are weaker. They are soloists because they only get to play solo. Women’s menstrual cycle results in mood shifts, body pains and ailments that make them irritable. They may be untrusting, insecure, critical and selfish, wanting to be the headliner rather than accompany a singer or horn player, while males do not mind being sidemen. Women do not support each other the way men do. Men are better team players. This is based on the fact that, in secondary school and college, boys work with each other in sports, while girls learn run households, where they are in charge. Boys engage in teamwork, while girls learn to clean, cooking and sew, all solitary endeavors.

Dr. Malcolm Black, 20-year big band leader at Broward College said girls who play instruments in middle and high school drop music in college because “their priorities change to fashion, romance and other studies. This is proliferated by the belief that music is traditionally a male field. Lugging a saxophone or contrabass is a male thing and does not fit in with the girl’s outfit,” said Black. Bassist Kim Clarke said, “Girls believe it is fashionable to wear make-up, weaves, high heels, short skirts and hate on other women. So, it is boys versus music. If her boyfriend is insecure and does not like her to be in the band with other boys, she drops the instrument, abandoning music. Women quit sooner than men, if they feel threatened by competition.”

Recently retired vocal instructor Lorna Lesperance said, “Girls take up an instrument at performing arts schools to get credit for that class. But they’re interested in singing, dancing or theater. Once the class is finished, they forget about the instrument.” Peer pressure dictates that, if a girl’s friends are not interested in music, she discontinues music studies to be with her friends, even if she has talent. Parents, teachers and community mentors must encourage girls to stick with music and groom them for music careers. Girls must transcend the stigma that musicians are not respected like teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers and other

professionals. Although most musicians study from an early age, they are said to be *playing*. Parents do not encourage children to be musicians, fearing they will not be able to provide for themselves and their families in the future. Other deterrents in the music industry are drug abuse and alcoholism, especially in Jazz and Rock.

But women musicians excel and are leaders in their own right.

- Renowned pianist Junior Mance told this author that, “Melba Liston is one of the best jazz musicians, not just one of the best women in jazz.”

- Pianist, composer, and educator Gerald Price told this author that, “Organist Trudy Pitts handled herself formidably in an arena of musicians made up mostly of men.”

- Pianist Tania Maria “The Lady from Brazil” was an attorney in her homeland. She suffered from omission in that field to the point that she left Brazil and came to the United States, where she pursued a musical career that brought her great notoriety.

If there is no female bassist, pianist or drummer, a band leader can invite a woman to join as a singer, percussionist or woodwind player. Since women pay taxes, it’s only fair that women are represented, globally, on the Jazz Scene, especially when bands are funded through federal, state and local grants. Wanda Wright, President of Bethune Cookman’s Alumni Marching Band said, “People just do not want to change the all male tradition of the marching band.” Perhaps, that is across the board. But, in this high-tech world, where information is disseminated, rapidly, inequities like this can be rectified, rapidly. For five years, our grant awards have funded concerts, featuring women musicians at least twice a year. We engage students and adults to perform original compositions of members of both genders.

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