

Women in Jazz Music: A Hundred Years of Gender Disparity in Jazz Study and Performance (1920–2020)

Kaitlyn Van Vleet

Washington State University

kaitlyn.vanvleet@wsu.edu

Presently, women are still underrepresented in jazz music performance and education, with only around 10% of jazz academics being female. The aim of this paper is to analyze the reason for the gender disparity and how it has changed over time. Several questions are addressed in this paper. Why the significant disparity? Do women feel unwelcome in the jazz community? If so, what historical events have led to this perception? What can be done to correct this lack of representation? Answering these questions will shine a light on historical gender discrimination in the United States and illuminate existing problems. From examining books and peer-reviewed articles, and conducting interviews with women in jazz, this paper concludes that discrimination that began 100 years ago against women in jazz remains today, impacting the number of women who pursue jazz as a career. Nevertheless, being a woman in jazz has improved in recent years.

Keywords: jazz, gender, disparity, discrimination

KAITLYN VAN VLEET grew up in the small town of Colfax, Washington. She obtained her BA in Criminal Justice and Criminology with minors in Spanish and music from Washington State University Honors College in May of 2020. Van Vleet is a jazz saxophonist who played in the WSU Jazz Band, volleyball band, student combo groups, Community Band of the Palouse, and Moscow, Idaho's Hog Heaven Big Band. Most of her work experience is in libraries; Van Vleet worked at Whitman County Library in Colfax for four years, and she is currently employed at the Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections library at WSU, where she has worked for over four years digitizing and processing archival materials.

INTRODUCTION

Presently, women are still underrepresented in jazz, with only around 10% of jazz academics being female. In a college jazz band, it is common that out of 20 or more musicians, one to four are female. Jazz emerged in the United States in the early twentieth century as a Black, masculine music, and it seems that it has not lost this identity. This paper examines the reasons for the gender disparity in jazz and discusses what it is to be a female jazz musician in 2020.

Jazz books including but not limited to *The Big Bands*, *The Wonderful Era of the Great Dance Bands*, and *The World of Swing* omitted women from jazz history, and if they were not forgotten, they were often ridiculed (Tucker, 2000). Dominant jazz texts are by no means gender neutral. The International Sweethearts of Rhythm performed in the legendary Apollo Theatre as often as most men's bands during the 1940s, yet they are not even listed in the index of *The World of Swing*, while many of those male bands are. One factor that might account for this imbalance is men's dominance in determining approaches and methods in music. White men were often the authors of jazz histories and photographers of jazz musicians, and they dictated how women were portrayed (Koskoff, 1987). There are still significantly less women than men in jazz. However, there are numerous authors who have written about the topic throughout the late 1900s and early 2000s, including Sally Placksin, Mary Unterbrink, Angela Davis, Antoinette D. Handy, Sherrie Tucker, Jeannie Pool, and Chris Becker.

Despite there being research on the topic of female underrepresentation in jazz, resources are not so current as to address the impact of the "Me Too" movement on gender inequality in jazz. The Me Too movement arose in 2017 to promote support and empathy for women who had experienced sexual harassment or assault, beginning with the celebrity women who came out against Harvey Weinstein, but it has transformed into an international movement for justice and equity for women.

Research Questions

What historical factors have led to women in the United States being underrepresented in jazz music? How has being a female jazz musician changed since the early 1900s, and how has it remained the same? What can be done to encourage more women to pursue jazz?

METHODOLOGY

Grounded theory is presented here as the method of choice, as it is detailed, rigorous, and systematic. It also permits flexibility and freedom and is conducted to discover research questions for testing. An analysis of academic books and articles provided the basis for this research. Books and articles used range from 1980 to 2020. They provide historical context and secondary evidentiary support.

Personal interviews provided chief primary sources to accurately depict what it is to be a woman in jazz today. Eight women responded to open-ended interview questions via email, two via Zoom, and one over the phone.¹ Among those women were ethnomusicology professor at Washington State University (WSU) Melissa Parkhurst, Grammy-nominated jazz singer Roseanna Vitro, jazz pianist Pamela York, professor of jazz piano at the University of Idaho Kate Skinner, jazz violinist Regina Carter, drummer and founder of DIVA Jazz Orchestra Sherrie Maricle, DIVA bassist Amy Shook, Grammy Award-winning drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, gifted award-winning jazz trumpeter Ingrid Jensen, one anonymous trombonist and professor who used to play in the Air Force band, and a bandmate at WSU. Both Tia Fuller and Roxy Coss, whom I had the pleasure of meeting while playing saxophone in college, were contacted, as well as two other bandmates of mine, but they were unfortunately unable to participate in the interviews. IRB approval was not obtained because the research posed “minimal risk.”

The goal of these interviews was to learn about women’s individual experiences in jazz and compare those to historical accounts so that I could examine the differences of being a woman in jazz in the 1920s versus 2020. The accounts came from women of varying backgrounds, ages, and interests. The interview responses fell into six themes: appearance, sexism as to instrument type, discrimination, labeling, the drop-off of females in jazz after both middle school and high school, and role models.

Now Presenting ... Women in Jazz

Schools stress the music of Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane. These famous musicians were all pioneers of various musical styles, but they had one thing in common: they were all men. Despite there always having been incredibly gifted women performing and creating music, their existence is brushed under the rug, leaving the false perception that women did not contribute to music. Women played (and continue to play) music in classical ensembles, sports events, private gatherings, combo groups, big bands, and more. Many women made significant contributions to music from the early 1900s to today, and many young women have achieved success as jazz artists in the last ten to twenty years. The following are examples of successful female instrumentalists in jazz music, both historical and current. While not all-inclusive, each talented musician contributed greatly to the genre.

Mary Lou Williams wrote and arranged music that was performed by Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and more (Pendle, 2001). Pianist Marian McPartland writes of Mary Lou Williams in a 1964 *DownBeat* article, stating, “She has transcended the difficulties experienced by women in the music field and through several decades has held a position of eminence as one of the most original and creative of pianists” (p. 27). Mary Lou Williams could easily be the only musician to live through most of jazz history and be able to play every style of it expertly. She also wrote the first jazz Mass and hosted a salon in her

Harlem apartment where she taught many of the innovators of bebop; Mary Lou was using bebop language years before Gillespie, Parker, and Monk. However, according to composer Bill Taylor, “If Mary Lou Williams had been a man, she would have been able to do so much more for the music” (Chaikan, 2013).

Jazz pianist Marian McPartland played with many well-known musicians during her life, but most importantly she hosted the longest-running jazz program on National Public Radio from 1978 to 2011 (Becker, 2015). She was passionate about finding and introducing little-known women jazz musicians to the world. Using her radio show as a platform, she mentored a multitude of women and promoted jazz. Trombonist Melba Liston wrote music for Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, Count Basie, and more throughout her life, and she arranged and recorded music like “My Reverie.” Trumpeter Clora Bryant said to her during an interview for the Smithsonian that even if she could only play one note, she could make that note beautiful (Bryant, 1996).

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm are one of the most famous 1940s big bands. In 1944 they were named “America’s No. 1 All-Girl Orchestra” in *DownBeat* magazine, and in 1945 they were the first Black women to travel with the USO (Tucker, 1999). A headline for *The Apache Centennial* in 1944 was “International Sweethearts Will Appear Next Tuesday—America’s Most Versatile All Girl Band.” The article called the Sweethearts a “sensational 17-piece all-girl orchestra” that “boast(s) some of the hottest swing artists in the music world.” Other all-women bands, including The Ingenues and The Prairie View Coeds, were inspired by the Sweethearts (McGee, 2008).

A number of talented female jazz bands emerged with the civil rights movements in the 1950s and ‘60s, including Maiden Voyage, a Los Angeles-based 17-piece band hailed by world-renowned jazz critic Leonard Feather as “... not just the best orchestra of its sex, but one of the most rewarding bands on the present scene” (“Maiden Voyage with Ann Patterson,” n.d.). The leader of Maiden Voyage, Ann Patterson, and Peggy Gilbert took on the musicians’ union in the 1980s and, after much fighting, were able to get the union to remove sexist language from contracts and review their sexist policies (Pool, 2008). Maiden Voyage was just one all-women band that formed to give women a safe place to play great music, away from men’s potentially demeaning comments or discriminatory actions.

With a career spanning over five decades, jazz pioneer Mary Osborne was the only female guitarist to be recognized as having a significant impact on jazz in the 1940s and 50s—and many agree that her swinging style earned her validation as one of the early architects of rhythm and blues and rock and roll. *The Encyclopedia of Jazz and Blues*, published in 2001, references several women, including composers Toshiko Akiyoshi and Carla Bley, whose careers rose to prominence in the 1950s and 60s. It also mentions pianists such as Marilyn Crispell and guitarists like Emily Remler and Rory Block, who all started their music careers after 1970 (Shadwick, 2001). Leslie Course’s *Madame Jazz* contains a 52-page appendix of female artists, many of whom are still playing today, including Shirley Horn, Susie Ibarra, Rachel Z, Linda Neel, Kit McClure, Virginia Mayhew, and Maxine Roach.

Since the 1990s, more women have become vocal advocates for gender equality in jazz. Stanley Kay, former manager of the Buddy Rich band, started the DIVA Jazz Orchestra in 1992. He noticed that there were no women playing in the numerous bands he had worked with and decided to put together a new band with all women. Maricle noted she was excited not because DIVA was solely women, but because it would be a band with original compositions and talented musicians.

The number of female jazz musicians is increasing, and updated jazz histories and the public recognize a broader circle of women who have contributed to the music. Tia Fuller (saxophone) toured for several years with Beyoncé and is a successful Grammy-nominated artist, becoming the second-ever female solo artist to be nominated for Best Jazz Instrumental Album. Multiple-Grammy-winner Esperanza Spalding (bass and vocals) has played all over the world, including for President Obama. Maria Schneider has become one of the top big band composers of our time, having won multiple Grammy Awards.

With the Me Too movement, women have become more vocal about being treated equally. Sherrie Maricle, founding member of DIVA, told me that she probably would have spoken up a lot more if she had been in the Me Too generation because she ignored a lot of harassing comments that were said to her. She remembers thinking, “that is so stupid, I’m not even going to let that affect me.” Me Too has helped give women a powerful voice, and many are realizing for the first time that being discriminated against due to their gender and having degrading comments thrown at them is not acceptable and cannot be ignored.

Organizations now exist that are dedicated to empowering women in jazz. Founded by New York saxophonist Roxy Coss in 2017, the Women in Jazz Organization (WIJO) acknowledges problems of discrimination, harassment, unequal opportunities, and lack of representation facing women and non-binary people in jazz. Their website aims to level the playing field in jazz by fostering inclusivity and empowering individuals to have equal opportunities to contribute to jazz, leading to an improved and more rich, diverse, and successful art form (WIJO, 2000). This organization offers mentorship and concerts, maintains a social media presence, and participates in events like the 2018 NYC Women’s March.

After pianist, composer, and educator Geri Allen passed away, Regina Carter was appointed as the director of the Geri Allen Jazz Camp, formerly named New Jersey Performing Arts Center All-Female Jazz Camp. Carter said, “Geri Allen started this one-week intensive camp to give young women a safe space in which to hone their jazz technique, grow their confidence and build community with other aspiring performers who identify as female or non-binary.” The camp offers various workshops during the week, including a Sister to Sister talk, in which students can talk about uncomfortable and/or scary situations they have faced. There is also a therapist available during the camp.

In Washington, DC, the Mary Lou Williams Jazz Festival is held by top musicians in the field every May. In 2019, the two nights were curated by Terri

Lyne Carrington, multiple Grammy winner and drummer for Herbie Hancock, and hosted by Dee Dee Bridgewater, NEA Jazz Master. The first night, which featured numerous musicians as well as dancers, was dedicated to the late pianist and composer Geri Allen (“Mary Lou Williams,” n.d.).

Jazz in Pink is an all-female band based out of Los Angeles that, since 2008, has become world-renowned by performing and doing community outreach events (Jazz in Pink, n.d.). Monika Herzig’s band “SHEroes” features leading female jazz instrumentalists Leni Stern, Jamie Baum, Ingrid Jensen, Jennifer Vincent, Ada Rovatti, Mayra Casales, Reut Regev, and more (Lorge, 2018). The “Alive!” jazz quintet forged a path from the 1970s San Francisco music scene to the international jazz community. ARTEMIS is a new jazz group consisting of clarinetist Anat Cohen, trumpeter Ingrid Jensen, drummer Allison Miller, and more (ARTEMIS, 2020). They will release their debut album this year.

The Jazz Environment

Despite all-female performances being an integral part of the United States’ wartime culture, they were more novelties than establishments. Although they were loved by American servicemen, female swing bands were disparaged in jazz publications and in the general press with claims that they were unable to master either swing or their instruments (Baber, 2013). Though the creation of all-female bands served as a safe place for women to play music, it also led to further isolation.

The lowly social status of jazz performers made it a precarious genre for women to enter (Koskoff, 1987). If a woman valued her reputation, she would not be seen in the rough-and-tumble environments of brothels, where jazz was often played (Pendle, 2001). One interviewee discussed how it was inappropriate in early jazz (1900–1920) for “women to play in bands, to work in bars, brothels, and the places where lots of jazz musicians played,” or to work outside of the home at all. Mothers were expected to stay home and raise the kids, which they are still more likely to do than fathers.

Women also lacked opportunities to learn from established musicians. Many would simply not take the time to train a woman, and in the early to mid-1900s jazz was rarely taught in schools. If it was, university jazz bands were often male only. Although college courses are not needed to become proficient in jazz, this exemplifies women missing out on the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

Two well-known jazz critics who were major voices in jazz literature and known for being advocates for women were Nat Hentoff and Leonard Feather. Feather, who published over 300 times a year for many years, took notice when Marian McPartland began working with her own trio. He wrote in “Girls in Jazz East Saw West; Twain Met,” a 1951 *DownBeat* article, “She is English, white and a girl—three hopeless strikes against her.” Although derisive in nature, the comment reveals a lot about what it was like for women in jazz in the 50s. Even

Feather's (1951) remark that "She is one of the most talented girls in jazz" illustrates the attitude of the times.

Appearance

According to Sherrie Tucker, bandleader Ada Leonard said, "Because you're a girl, people look at you first, then listen to you second" (2000, p. 46). A woman's visual appeal is an important theme that arose for women in jazz, as it often played a part in determining their success. If a woman was not visually pleasing, many did not see the point in having her perform. According to one interviewee, "men could be over 300 pounds and ugly as sin and they would be hired, but a woman has to look a certain way." Gene Norman said on the 1950s television show *Stars of Jazz*, "It would seem from a physical standpoint that women in music do best when they play the piano. Probably because it takes less physical effort ..." (Chaikan, 2013). The picture on the cover of the album *Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five* says a lot about female jazz musicians during the 1920s. In the picture, Louis Armstrong sits at the piano with his trumpet in one hand. The other band members stand around the piano while Lil Hardin stands on the far right and is assumed to be the singer. Since Louis Armstrong sits at the piano with the band members looking to him, he is assumed to be the bandleader and composer. However, Lil Hardin composed and arranged most of the band's music.

One famous California trumpet clinician, although recognizing advantages to female brass players, discouraged his own daughter from playing trumpet "because it marks her lips" (Willener, 1994, p. 19). Alfred Willener, whose book consists of an amalgamation of interviews conducted with various musicians, wrote that when female performers enter the male-dominated performance arena, their appearance and behaviors are likely to be interpreted sexually. Women were and often still are seen as having an inherent sexuality, which was cause for some men to restrict women's musical activities (Willener, 1994). When jazz arose in the late 1800s, "evocative" body postures were not acceptable for women, nor was the physicality involved with playing the instrument. According to Willis, "White women singers were encouraged to symbolize 'True Womanhood' and appear virtuous and domestically skilled" (2008, p. 298).

According to Koskoff, even a perceived loss of sexuality could change the status and role of female musicians (1987). In other words, because a woman's identity was linked indelibly with her sexuality, sexual identity was an important factor in determining music performance quality. This led to female musicians who were requested to perform for male-dominated events and venues behaving in a way that heightened their sexuality (Koskoff, 1987). Women, if they wanted to have a career in music, often conformed to the mold, maintaining or validating the social arrangements in which a woman's musicianship was judged by her looks. One woman interviewed in the 2011 documentary *The Girls in the Band* said that you "had to have girls who [thought] more about how they looked than how they

played” (Chaikan, 2011). The consideration given to women’s appearance when performing was only one factor that served to keep many women out of jazz.

Gender-Stereotyping of Instruments

The gender-stereotyping of musical instruments is another theme that surfaced in my research. From a young age it seems that most girls play flute, clarinet, piano, or a string instrument. Boys play saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and percussion. There are distinct perceptions of the appropriate instruments that each sex should play. This perception creates a divide between girl and boy musicians from a young age.

Because jazz is primarily an instrumental music, women have been at a disadvantage. Pendle (2001) notes that women were encouraged to become proficient in vocals and piano, partly to please and entertain their husbands. They were not encouraged to pursue careers or play more “masculine” instruments. This gender-stereotyping of instruments has existed for a very long time, and it still can be seen today.

I have been privy to many instances where a parent thought a flute or clarinet was more appropriate for their daughter to play, due to the softer sound, elegance, and smaller size. I have heard many girls themselves pleading for a flute or a string instrument for the same reasons. One jazz drummer recounted how she had heard her own sister say that a flute is a girl’s instrument when her son had expressed interest in learning it. A flute, however, requires more air than any other instrument except tuba.

I was told by one interviewee how she called a well-known theater to ask for musicians (two trumpets, two saxophones, and a trombone) while she was travelling with a nine-piece version of the DIVA Jazz Orchestra, and the woman in charge at the theater said, “Oh my god, women don’t play those instruments.” This was in 2014. Another interviewee mentioned how her parents chose for her the clarinet over the saxophone because clarinet is quieter.

Parents’ stereotypes can prevent them from letting their child play certain instruments. This could contribute to the disparity in women playing instruments commonly used in jazz like saxophone, trombone, trumpet, and drums. Almost all interviewees stated that sexism in the initial choosing of an instrument is an existing issue. A study conducted by Abeles and Porter in 1978 concluded that parental or teacher sex-stereotyping of instruments influences kids, especially between ages 8 and 12, resulting in a gendered view of instruments throughout their lives. During the 2018 “Jazz and Gender” panel, Monika Herzig discussed how the “gender divide” in music starts early. She said that the first hurdle that a female jazz musician needs to overcome is picking an instrument, referencing how the “stand-up-and-play” method involved with certain instruments can be more intimidating for adolescent girls (Lorge, 2018).

Kelly Clingan (2017) wrote how she staffed men at the flute table, women at the bass table, and one man and one woman at the clarinet, sax, trumpet, and

trombone tables at the Seattle JazzED “meet your instrument” open house, and the kids chose instruments based on how they liked playing them, which ended up resulting in half boys and half girls for each instrument group. Interestingly, it seems that seeing adults playing certain instruments can change the gender stereotype of the instrument for kids. She claimed that maintaining a gender-neutral environment in the classroom is important in preventing gender stereotypes in music from forming (Clingan, 2017). Having instructors and spaces that are neutral and do not reference Black men as being the only jazz instrumentalists, but include people of a variety of appearances and backgrounds, is one step in decreasing the gender disparity in jazz.

Drop-Off of Females in Jazz After Middle School

A shared sentiment by all the women I interviewed was that there are significantly fewer women than men in jazz, which becomes especially apparent in college. After middle school and high school, a large drop in female musicians is observed. One woman said that she has “always known that being female made (her) a minority.” Another was one of only two women in her university jazz department, which had no women on staff at the time. She began to realize that it was an issue once she saw how severely underrepresented women are. Several also said that the only female musicians they knew of were vocalists; they were never provided with a female role model on their instrument. I was similarly one of three women focusing on jazz at WSU, and I never had a female instructor. Many of the interviewees referenced the drop-off after middle school as one of the largest and most observable patterns showing the gender disparity in jazz. The reasons for this drop-off is unknown, although many women attributed it to lack of support, role models, and negative experiences such as discrimination.

Another reason for the drop-off could be that most jazz educators, even now, are White males. “For a young woman in high school playing saxophone, her only exposure to making a living as a jazz musician may be white men as teachers, mentors, and professionals,” said one interviewee. Monika Herzig pointed out in the “Jazz and Gender” discussion panel that while most early-education teachers are women, the ratio of female-to-male teachers shrinks in high school and college (Lorge, 2018). I have personally experienced only White male band directors. Even though they were all supportive of female musicians, I never met any women who made a career out of music until college.

Sexism and Discrimination

“You play good, for a girl.” Every instrumentalist on the “Jazz and Gender” panel discussion with pianist and educator Monika Herzig along with five other players from SHEroes had received this backhanded compliment at some point in her career (Lorge, 2018). The panel also noted that, in some cases, they were bullied or harassed for their choice of instrument.

In 1949, Melba Liston joined Gillespie's band. The reaction from the instrumentalists was less than welcoming, but when they got only two measures into the music she had written before messing up, Gillespie said, "Now who's the bitch!" Despite widespread success, Melba Liston faced many hardships in her career, including sexual assault while travelling with bands ("Dizzy Gillespie Touring Brazil," 1956).

As the *Boston Globe* reported, after hearing undergraduate women perform Poulenc's Sonata for Horn, Trumpet, and Trombone, Rolf Smedvig, trumpet soloist with the Seattle Symphony and principal trumpet of the Boston Symphony, said, "Women have a really tough time playing brass instruments because [their] basic nature is not terribly aggressive." He continued, "Boys, I mean, we grow up at the age of 5, you know, and we're playing in the dirt and you [girls] are playing with dolls" (Fox, 2015). One male jazz pianist declared in 1973 that "Jazz is a male language ... and women just can't (speak) it" (Pendle, 2001, p. 467). In 1976, one woman passed all three rounds of auditions for an orchestra position, and when it came time to decide, the committee said that she was the best, yet they could not give her the job, since they were looking for a male player that year (Willener, 1994).

Despite being encouraged as a player and composer by professors and family, one interviewee said that as a composer she felt that she was treated differently because of her gender. "So many members of the band, predominantly male students, had severe reactions to the way I wrote or what I was writing about," she said. She recalled how she faced backlash from male graduate students and senior members of the band who made critical remarks about her work and implied that she "had to listen because [she] was a woman and they knew better." This musician also discussed witnessing the male members of the university jazz band making sexist remarks about and refusing to take instruction from the two women in the band, despite their being in leadership roles. This compromised the integrity of the band, creating a tense and ineffective work environment.

Another example in which the integrity of the band was compromised by the way women were treated was provided by a jazz pianist. In one instance where she was invited to play as a guest artist with a local big band (in another region), the director of that band was very specific when describing the concert attire for the men. "Black pants, black shirt, black tie, black jacket, black belt, black shoes, black socks," she recalled. "Everything down to their socks!" Yet for the three women he said "Ladies, wear whatever you want. I would never presume to tell a lady how to dress." She said how despite attempted respectfulness, it was offensive. Not to mention, it made the band look disorganized when the women were all dressed differently. In a world where women want to be equal to the men in their fields, making them stand out like a sore thumb is incompatible. Her statement also reflects on appearance. Isolating women by holding them to different standards than men is more often encountered today, according to the interviewees, than purposeful discrimination by appearance, yet it is still an important issue that can be remedied through education.

Women can be treated differently depending on location. One interviewee discussed how “In some regions, I’ve experienced incredibly poor treatment as a woman. I’ve lived in a few regions with deeply embedded misogynistic cultures, and sometimes the men didn’t even know they were treating women differently. It’s just how they were raised and how everyone in their life treated women (including other women!) so it doesn’t seem weird to them.” This misogyny comes in different forms, including face-to-face and behind-the-back. The musician said she has been directly “talked down to” or conversely “ignored on a gig.” She had also experienced discrimination in not being hired for certain gigs or dealing with men who spread untrue rumors that she is not gigging at the moment or does not want to “drive that far to gig.” She referenced one male musician who would only hire a woman in his band if “their abilities were markedly less developed than his.” She knew him well and believed that he felt threatened by women who could play as well or better than himself. Another woman mentioned that some men will still not hire musicians who are women. She recalled a time when she was fired from playing for comedian Rodney Dangerfield. The justification was that Rodney couldn’t work with a woman. “He curses, you’ll cry,” etc. Such sexism and discrimination were, and still are, occurrences that can deter women from pursuing jazz.

A guitarist in WSU’s Jazz Band 2 broached the subject of the danger of assault that women face. She noted that women might be more selective than men when it comes to performance locales, being less willing to take gigs in certain places due to safety concerns. Although “sexual harassment” is a relatively modern term, these types of experiences were known to women musicians throughout the 20th century and, unfortunately, continue today. Even comments that some of the interviewees have received when playing gigs, like “Hey honey, I’ll let you sit in if you take your shirt off” or “Baby can you handle this tempo?” may make women less likely to find playing worth the treatment.

One woman I interviewed attributed the occurrence of harassment as some men’s means to assert their perceived dominance in music. Another said that a combination of lonely nights on the road and alcohol could lead some men to harass women. Many women, in both my interviews and outside accounts, have stated that women did not have enough standing to be trusted if they came forward and said they were being harassed or assaulted. For example, Melba Liston was not believed when she said she had been assaulted by men in the band (Bryant, 1996). Davis (1998) discusses in her book that women started speaking publicly about experiences of rape, battery, and harassment in the early 1970s. She said that traditionally these experiences were regarded as a “fact of private life” (Davis, 1998, p. 25). The performances of blues women were one of the few cultural spaces in which this topic was broached prior to the 1970s.

A common response to difficulties stemming from discrimination was the development of all-female jazz bands. Although many of these bands were popular and successful, the fact that they were made up of only women was sometimes used to discredit them. Some said that all-female big bands were not real because

they would not have belonged to the musicians' union, but most interviewed for Tucker's (2000) book did belong to the union and drew wages. Horace Alexander Young noted that one rationale expressed for excluding women from histories is the, "Oh that really wasn't 'jazz.'" For example, if a piece written or performed by a woman was a slightly different style or from a different time period, it would sometimes be cast aside, despite similar pieces by men being accepted.

Sherrie Tucker (2000) encountered sentiments through research that all-female bands lacked an "intangible, yet crucial, 'authenticity' possessed by men's bands" (p. 1). Although many all-female bands benefitted from World War II, since it provided them more opportunities to play, groups of housewives who got together and played instruments during this time were not seen as real bands (Tucker, 2000). It was as if these women were Rosie the Riveter (armed with saxophones instead of rivet guns), simply serving as placeholders for the "real" bands comprised of men. Drummer Viola Smith (1942) published an editorial in *DownBeat* titled "Give Girl Musicians a Break!" that argued that women have equal skills and should use the opportunity during the war to take their rightful place in jazz. One man responded, "I'll tell you right now that I don't like girl musicians. (They) should leave this kind of business to persons who know what it's all about. And I mean men" (as cited in Tucker, 2000, p. 45). However, the two sexes were not always on opposing sides. One woman commented that she absolutely agreed that girls do not make good swing musicians, saying that "our place is listening and dancing to music, not sitting in with the band and blowing our brains out" (as cited in Tucker, 2000, p. 46), and many men, such as Dizzy Gillespie, supported female jazz musicians.

Willener (1994) interviewed Susan Slaughter, principal trumpet of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, who was quoted saying to her female students that they "can't be AS good as anyone else, they HAVE to be better" (p. 80). The belief that women must be twice as good to get the job is one that is echoed by numerous musicians in Willener's book. Several of my interviewees stated that "women are faced with needing to be the best in their field in order to be considered for a gig or job," a sentiment that is often still ingrained into women's daily lives. They had the perception that women in jazz must work twice as hard as any man. One interviewee said that as a female "you'll be expected to be proficient in every aspect of your musical ability just to prove you were already worth it."

Labeling

A jazz pianist recounted a situation in which she played a festival with the theme "Women in Jazz." She recalls being "paraded around like show ponies. Here are the WOMEN IN JAZZ!" This showboating made it seem that the women were there because of their gender rather than talent, which the interviewee says was "awkward and embarrassing." Another woman said that it is unfortunate that there is a need for a "Women in Jazz Festival" or a "women's stage" at a jazz festival. "Women musicians want to be invited to festivals and given accolades based

on merit, not their gender,” she said. They want their work to be appreciated, not demeaned by the label of “female music.” The label “Women in Jazz” can take away from the accomplishments of musicians who happen to be female and can result in feeling isolated from male counterparts who do not receive the same treatment. Another phenomenon that can cause this isolation is the “dressing room divide,” which happens when men and women are separated physically and therefore socially. One jazz musician mentioned how she was the only woman in a band for which there were two dressing rooms provided. Since everyone hung out in their dressing rooms before and after the gig, she was separated from all the discussions, jokes, and socializing that is an important part of fitting into a group. This illustrates how even an innocent matter can be problematic.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell whether certain actions that result in isolation are meant to discriminate against a musician based on her sex. One woman said, “It’s hard because you can’t always assume this behavior is ‘because you’re a woman.’” This is a sentiment that was echoed across interviewees. It is difficult to prove that female musicians are discriminated against in their work (Ammer, 1980). Many women ignore discrimination and derogatory comments, choosing to pick their battles, although one woman said that “anyone who did not respect me did not play with me very long.” Since the Me Too movement, these women say that there has been a marked improvement in the treatment of women, particularly given the power and encouragement that they now feel to stand-up for themselves.

Progress and Role Models

All the musicians I talked to agree that, despite women still facing social stigma and discrimination, there has been significant forward progress for women in jazz. Some women noted seeing a perceptible increase in the number of women being hired to adjudicate festivals around the United States and a decrease in the extreme roles that women used to fall into (ultra-sexy or masculine tomboy). Today there seems to be more of a middle ground now that women can be themselves in public, less sexualization and exploitation of female jazz musicians, and more visibility.

Leonard Feather was one of the pioneers of the “The Blindfold Test,” which paved the way for blindfold auditions—auditions conducted with a curtain in front of performers. Most interviewees, in addition to research I conducted, assert that there is no discernible difference between how women and men play instruments, therefore the blindfold auditions are beneficial as they rid the hiring process of gender biases. The interviewees cited blindfold auditions as being a great help in decreasing gender disparity in music.

Many of the interviewees agreed that education is one of the best ways to spur more girls into pursuing jazz. One said that the “only way to encourage anyone to play jazz is turn them on [to] the music.” If girls grow up listening to and being educated about jazz music, like many of the interviewees did, they are more

likely to develop a passion for jazz and feel that they can pursue it. Additionally, if women are taught about their predecessors, they are more likely to continue pursuing jazz. Having role models is something that all interviewees agreed was a necessity for female jazz musicians. A couple of women I talked to recalled that they were nervous about joining a jazz band because, since they did not see anyone in the band who was female, they did not know if they could do it. One woman noted that jazz is a very difficult career; you must love jazz to pursue it. "There [are] many challenges a jazz musician, regardless of sex, will face," she said. "If you take into account the challenges faced by women because of sexism and the lack of role models, it is not surprising that there is a disparity."

One interviewee added that hiring women as performers, teachers, and composers is important in both creating visible role models and in representing these women themselves. Another concurred, stating, "women need more mentors in higher education. They need to see themselves in the field. They need to see how other women are achieving excellence in jazz music and still maintaining work-life balance." This need for mentors also applies to K-12, especially since many females stop playing jazz after middle school. Although Monika Herzig and the other panelists did not speak entirely in past tense about gender bias in jazz, many acknowledged ways in which the jazz world has become more welcoming to women in recent years (Lorge, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I hypothesized that through research and analysis I would find that the reason women were not more prevalent in jazz was due to sexism and restrictions on what they could do. My research did support this hypothesis, and the interviews show that there is carryover into the 21st century that makes it more difficult for women to succeed in music. However, my research also demonstrated that women in jazz in 2020 have many more opportunities and equality than those in the 1920s.

While my research demonstrated the existence and impact of discrimination and sexualization of women in jazz music historically, the interviews demonstrated that discrimination continues to create a barrier between male and female musicians. This discrimination, which stems from over a century of sexism, can be obvious, subtle, or even accidental. Modern discrimination can be so subtle, in fact, that women do not even know that it is happening. Kelly Clingan (2017) wrote in the article "The Educational Jazz Band: Where Are the Girls?," that the current issues regarding disparity are less often due to overt sexism and more often a result of "cultural norms and habitual practices that are deeply ingrained in our American fabric." This contrasts with its overt nature during the 1900s through the 1950s, when women were discouraged from working outside the home. Fortunately, discrimination overall has greatly decreased since the early 1900s, and visibility has increased, thanks to those who write about the outstanding contributions that women have made to the jazz genre.

Through research and interviews, six different themes emerged: appearance, gender-stereotyping of instruments, drop in female participation throughout school, sexism and discrimination, labelling, and the need for role models. I also found that several women in jazz today do not experience much sexism or discrimination as far as they can tell. Some women's experiences are all positive, which shows how far gender equality has come. The Me Too movement that started in 2017 served to make women more vocal about persisting gender inequality and harassment. The sharing of experiences has increased women's confidence; the movement itself has improved the situation of women in jazz, according to the interviewees, as these women feel more confident about standing up for themselves and more supported by their communities.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing the impact of 1920s gender inequality and the recent Me Too movement on today's lack of representation of women in jazz, I hope to raise awareness for the importance of learning from history and promoting inclusion. My goal was to identify and analyze specific factors that contribute to the disparity in order to understand the influence social exclusion has on future generations. It is important to realize that there are various reasons as to why fewer women than men pursue jazz. I discovered that no two women have the same experiences in music, nor the same reasons why they continue versus quit pursuing it. The smaller scope of this qualitative research is one limitation. Increasing the number of women involved and the size of the analysis would make this research more generalizable. Additionally, race is a key factor to consider due to its significance in jazz culture. Because I was unable to delve deeply into the relationship between race and gender in jazz, it would be important to research in the future. As it is, I can only discuss *some* experiences that women go through and *some* reasons why fewer women have careers in jazz. However, it is evident that many women's experiences overlap, and while there remains a gender disparity in jazz, I believe that the gap is closing and women are closer to equity in jazz.

APPENDIX

Interview Questions

If you agree to participate in this questionnaire, you are agreeing to potentially being quoted in my paper. However, to maintain confidentiality, I can change your name. Please let me know if you do not want your name used.

Please answer the following questions the best you can. Feel free to skip those that are not applicable to you.

- How did you develop an interest in jazz? Why jazz? Briefly outline your "jazz journey." What has been your experience as a woman in jazz? How do you think that identity shaped you as a musician?

- Have you been in situations performing, learning, or teaching jazz where you were treated differently because of your gender? Please describe any such situation.
- Have you been passed up for a job/fired due to your gender? If so, please explain.
- Have you witnessed women being discriminated against in jazz? Please give examples.
- Have you ever considered concealing your gender when auditioning or applying for gigs/jobs?
- Do you feel that you have been encouraged to pursue jazz as a passion and a career?
- Are your colleagues, teachers, family members, and friends supportive of your pursuit of jazz?
- Do you think that women in jazz today still face social stigma and discrimination?
- What has prevented women from pursuing jazz or from reaching their full potentials as jazz musicians?
- How do you see that being a woman in jazz changed in recent times with the Me Too movement?
- Do you think that people of different genders play music differently?
- Has anything or anyone prevented you from developing your skills and/or career as a jazz musician? Explain.
- Is there anything that could've been different that would have made your journey as a female jazz musician easier and more positive?
- How would you encourage more women to pursue jazz?
- Do you have any other comments?

Notes

1. See Appendix for interview questions.

References

- Abeles, H., & Porter, S. (1978). The sex-stereotyping of musical instruments. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 26(2), 65–75.
- Ammer, C. (1980). *Unsung: A history of women in American Music*. Amadeus Press.
- ARTEMIS. (2020). Blue Note Records. <http://www.bluenote.com/artist/artemis/>
- Baber, K. (2013). “Manhattan women”: Jazz, blues, and gender in on the town and wonderful town. *American Music*, 31(1), 73–105.
- Becker, C. (2015). *Freedom of expression: Interviews with women in jazz*. Beckeresque Press.
- Bryant, C. (1996, December 4). *Melba Liston Interview Transcription*. Smithsonian National Museum of American History. https://amhistory.si.edu/jazz/Liston-Melba/Liston_Melba_Interview_Transcription.pdf
- Chaikan, J. (Director). (2013). *The Girls in the Band* [Film].
- Clingan, K. (2017). The educational jazz band: Where are the girls? *Voice of Washington Music Educators*, 63(1), 14–15.

- Davis, A. Y. (1998). *Blues legacies and Black feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. Pantheon Books.
- Dizzy Gillespie touring Brazil. (1956, September). *Jackson Advocate*, 4.
- Feather, L. (1951). Girls in jazz East saw West; twain met. *DownBeat*.
- Fox, M. (2015, May 1). Rolf Smedvig, trumpeter in the Empire Brass, dies at 62. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/02/arts/music/rolf-smedvig-trumpeter-in-the-empire-brass-dies-at-62.html>
- Jazz in Pink. (n.d.). *Welcome*. Retrieved August 26, 2020 from <https://www.jazzinpink.com>
- Koskoff, E. (1987). *Women and music in cross-cultural perspective*. Greenwood Press.
- Lorge, S. (2018, April 9). Monika Herzig's SHEroes addresses gender in jazz. *DownBeat*. <https://downbeat.com/news/detail/sheroes>
- Maiden Voyage with Ann Patterson. (n.d.). Laguna Beach Live. Retrieved July 21, 2020 from <https://www.lagunabeachlive.org/new-page-89>
- Mary Lou Williams Jazz Fest with Dee Dee Bridgewater. (n.d.). Goldstar. Retrieved July 6, 2020 from <https://www.goldstar.com/events/washington-dc/mary-lou-williams-jazz-festival-tickets>
- McGee, K. (2008). The feminization of mass culture and the novelty of all-girl bands: The case of the Ingenues. *Popular Music and Society*, 31(5), 629–662.
- McPartland, M. (1964, August 27). Into the sun: An affectionate sketch of Mary Lou Williams, jazz's leading female musician. *DownBeat*.
- Pendle, K. (2001). American women in blues and jazz. In M.J. Budds (Ed.), *Women and Music: A history* (pp. 460–478). Indiana University Press.
- Pool, J. (2008). *Peggy Gilbert & Her All-Girl Band*. Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Shadwick, K. (2001). *The encyclopedia of jazz and blues*. Quantum Publishing Ltd.
- Tucker, S. (1999). The Prairie View Co-eds: Black college women musicians in class and on the road during World War II. *Black Music Research Journal*, 19(1), 93–126.
- Tucker, S. (2000). *Swing shift: All-Girl bands of the 1940s*. Duke University Press.
- Wehr, E. L. (2016). Understanding the experiences of women in jazz: A suggested model. *International Journal of Music Education*, 34(4), 472–487.
- Willener, A. (1994). ... *When will the walls come tumbling down ...? An essay on women playing trumpet and other brass instruments*. Best Press.
- Willis, V. (2008). Be-in-tween the spa[]ces: The location of women and subversion in jazz. *Journal of American Culture*, 31(3), 293–301.
- Women in Jazz Organization. (2020). *About*. <http://wearewijo.org/about/>

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner.
Further reproduction prohibited without permission.