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Swing It, Sister: The Influence of Female Jazz Musicians on Music and Society

Female musicians tend to go unrecognized for their contributions to music. Though this has changed in recent years, the women of the past did not get the fame they deserved until after their deaths. Women have even tried to perform as professional musicians since ancient Greek times. But even then, the recognition did not go far. They were performers but were not seen as influences on music or social standings like male composers and performers were. They were not remembered like male performers and composers until past their time, and the lives of these women are not studied as possible influences in music until far past their times as well. However, in spite of all of this, women can be and have been great influences in music and also society as performers. One era in which women were such influences is the jazz era. Female jazz vocalists, both as soloists and in groups, and instrumentalists, both as solo artists and in ensembles, of the jazz era influenced music and society in their own times and in later times. They added new musical concepts, added new vocal styles, worked to change the society they lived in, and worked hard to find their place in music no matter what got in their way, making them inspirations for future generations of women striving to succeed in the world.

Female instrumentalists are less famed and recognized than singers. There is little written historical information on female jazz artists. Much of the history is transmitted orally. This history comes out differently than the common parade of stars and recordings that most jazz historians explain. This history is laid back and realistic. In instrumental jazz, gender and race merge in complex dialogues that involved authenticity, belonging and career advancement. There are some women who excelled in their talent. The Queen of the Trumpet, Valaida Snow, was compared often to Louis Armstrong. Her trumpet playing was so amazing, that she was called "Little Louie." Another female artist is Nona Hendryx, a vocalist, saxophone player,

producer, musician, songwriter, and author. She has recorded with many artists in multiple genres of music such as Hip Hop and Jazz, worked with many notable performers such as Prince and Living Colour, and gained Grammy nominations for her collaborations and a Grammy for “Best Jazz Vocal Album.” Memphis Minnie and Rosetta Tharpe were two pioneers of the electric guitar. Minnie recorded for three decades and “was one of the first to use a National resonator guitar and one of the first to plug it in.” Her recordings in December 1941 were “among the earliest signposts to the electrically amplified [postwar] ensemble blues style.” Tharpe was the “undisputed queen of gospel blues in the 1930s and 1940s.” She played the electric guitar with unmatched authority and percussive power. She played in multiple genres and influenced performers with her confident style.

Sherrie Tucker, writer of “Telling Performances: Jazz History Remembered and Remade by the Women in the Band,” in explaining a story from performer Vi Wilson, stated:

“Jazz is a place where women instrumentalists take pride in their work, play just as good as men, and win converts. It is also a world where women are well aware of the powerful belief systems which work against them: the widespread skepticism about their abilities, their reputations as “novelties,” and the classic paradoxes of what it means to cross the gender division of labor. [W]omen know that what they do is considered a ‘man’s job,’ and when they walk in, men (and sometimes women) will say (or think) ‘woman musician, she can’t play.’ And they also know that if they do the job well, they will be said to be good “for girls,” or that they ‘play like men.’ And they know that even if they ‘make believers of them’ today, the same battles will have to be fought tomorrow.”

But these instrumentalists have helped to make this constant battle a little easier, a little better, for female instrumentalists. This inequality is not as harsh in the bands and orchestras of today. Some of these women influenced future musicians with their styles and impressive playing. All of these paved the way for future generations of female instrumentalists to have better equality and opportunities for their own careers.

Vocal female jazz artists tend to be remembered far more than female jazz instrumentalists. Ella Fitzgerald is one such vocalist. . A rags to riches story for the ages. But that is exactly her story. Fitzgerald, born on April 25, 1917, lived a poor childhood. Her biological father left her and her mother and her mother remarried. Her family lived in poor conditions in both the north and south. She gained some music theory knowledge through piano lessons and grew familiar of jazz musicians and the music of jazz as the musical style developed as she grew up.

After her mother died, her home dynamic changed as her stepfather became abusive and her aunt paid no attention to her. In response, she ran away from home by leaving school, hitting the streets, and doing whatever she could to survive. She was caught by authorities and sentenced as a truant, ran away from a reform school, danced on street corners for tips, and kept persisting no matter what happened.

She tried her luck at various amateur nights but was always turned down due to her ragged, homely appearance and larger size. Her big break came when fortuitous circumstances caused her to become the girl vocalist in Chick Webb's Orchestra in 1935. She sang swing, bebop, and other musical styles. She sang with many jazz singers including Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong, Nat "King" Cole, and many others. Her vocal improvisation is the most accomplished in vocal music. Ella Fitzgerald received large amounts of honor and gained economic power that no other women had been afforded, and especially not black women. She had an extremely successful career "as she sang her way into the hearts of the people in the fanciest supper clubs of New York City, the American people, and all across Europe."

Ella Fitzgerald's life is her legacy and an inspirational story. Her life story of poor little runaway to rich and famous singer shows that hard work, dedication, and not giving up can keep

one going and help one succeed, even if one is a woman and/or a person of color. Concerning her music, her singing tone is characteristic of jazz vocals in its clarity. She used Louis Armstrong's concept of scat and used it prominently in her music. Her tone and prominent use of scat singing influenced jazz music and became recognizable characteristics of jazz.

Another great name in jazz is Bessie Smith. Smith worked on the streets as a child. There, she discovered her natural talent for singing as her brother played guitar and she sang. Eventually worked in minstrel shows, or travelling road shows. She moved to various states and after trying out for various record companies and being fired from one, she got her album debut with Columbia Records in 1923. She was a top star for eight years. Her music brought people together in a time of segregation. Her music spoke to all people through the emotions of love, heartache, gloom, and others. Her voice was unique in the world of blues by having a power like no other. It was gruff and rough and she had incredible control over it. Other blues singers sounded like they were shouting, but Smith did not. She was confident and fearless on stage and her songs were as bold as she was. She was passionate when she sang, and her audiences could hear this passion.

Bessie Smith was a successful blues singer who influenced blues singers and fought social ideas. She brought a new, unique way of singing to the blues and made music that touched all kinds of people. It flew over racial segregation and brought people together. Her story is an inspiration to those who are struggling, that they can use what they are best at and become something great. It also shows that things will get better. Bessie is another woman of jazz who is an influence of music, society, and women.

Another great voice and influence was Billie Holiday. Billie Holiday, born Eleanora Gough, was born out of wedlock. Her real father was possibly a man named Clarence Holiday,

but he was not part of Billie's life. She worked hard along with her mother Sussie Gough, or Sadie as she preferred to be called. Eleanora had an attitude and knew what she wanted. She wanted to sing. So she changed her name to something more appealing. She took the Christian name of Billie Dove and appropriated her father's surname and created the name Billie Holiday. She sang at various gigs and eventually made a name for herself. She started to gain success after she met John Hammond at Monette's Supper Club on 133rd Street in Harlem. After attempted recording sessions, she got a gig at the Apollo. This led to more recordings and more fame. Holiday was a talented and beautiful young woman. A critic of the time, who is unnamed, described her voice as "[M]agnificent...a searching, sobbing, exciting voice that whispered along the heart strings when she sang." Her voice was filled with emotion. She did not have a wide range, but her voice had an intimate style that made fantastic use of the microphones and recorded well. New innovations in microphones ended the need for performers to belt, and Billie's voice worked well with these new microphones that picked up every whisper and sigh. Her voice also had unadulterated intention. She was open and willing to be completely human in front of the microphone, which made her sound even more unique. She had a raw sound of emotion in her voice which was characteristic of blues. Her voice "exerted a great influence on future generations of singers, showing them a way to reinvent music as a quieter, subtler experience that with the big stages of vaudeville and Broadway." Her nontraditional softness and feathery tone set the stage for future singers of various genres to use their soft or raw voices in their genres.

Billie Holiday is a woman who wasn't afraid to be herself. She influenced future music with her unique vocal style to take their own unique voices and apply it to their own genres. She is also another inspiration to women to keep working past hard times to achieve their dreams.

All of these women of jazz, either with instruments or voice, influenced music in different ways. They fought against the social norms and did what they could to perform the music they loved. They inspired future generations to fight for their dreams and inspired future artists to apply their unique musical abilities and talents in the music they love.

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