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“Playing Like a Man:” The Struggle of Black Women in Jazz and the Feminist Movement

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Abstract

Ella Fitzgerald and Mary Lou Williams are two names that are firmly associated with the jazz idiom. This paper details the lives of these two women and their struggles with both race and gender throughout their careers. As the women moved through the jazz scene, they experienced prejudice not just for their race, but for their gender as well. In this paper I show the way the women addressed these issues and how they subverted the tensions, most likely subconsciously without their knowledge. When I first began the research project I expected to find an inextricable link between the jazz idiom and feminism. However, as I delved further into the topic I found that there was not one completely construed, and so had to begin from scratch to elevate the feminist conversation in terms of jazz and music. After my research I have firmly established that Ella Fitzgerald and Mary Lou Williams serve as exemplary role models for any woman in a jazz or music career. Ella Fitzgerald and Mary Lou Williams accomplished on their own what the women’s movements of their time sought to accomplish.
Beginning with an interest in gender studies and a love for music, I combined these topics to further investigate the relationship between music and women specifically during the twentieth century as seen through the music genre of jazz. By exploring the lives of two exemplary female musicians and their contribution to their field, I hope to place the women accurately in culture to reveal the impact they had.

The first woman I researched was Ella Fitzgerald. A singer, monumental figure, and inspiration to many, her life and music serves as a window to the type of power a woman could achieve based on musical ability. The second woman I researched was Mary Lou Williams. A prominent piano player, she performed with Duke Ellington and had strong connections with Louis Armstrong. As a woman in a very male-dominated world, I explored the struggles she had in the music business and how she handled her difficulties.

Two movements at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States created waves that impacted women in politics and music. In politics, women sought after rights to increase their equality with men. Literary works by women such as Kate Chopin and the work of political activists such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton helped to bring greater equality to a fuller realization. These political gender movements mainly aided white women in achieving voting and property rights. Black women, however, were excluded from these political advancements. Moving parallel to the political movements, a new form of music was also beginning. The swing era and jazz began to emerge in full force from the blues tradition, establishing a voice for the black community that had existed on the fringes
of society. However, while these two events co-exist in the history of the United States, they do not interact directly with one another.

While one might suspect that women working in the jazz industry would latch on to any number of the women’s movements spread across the twentieth century, it turns out they operated very separately from one another. By exploring the life of Ella Fitzgerald and Mary Lou Williams, I hope to expose the dominance of masculine power in the jazz world as well as show lack of participation in an organized women’s movement. Despite a lack of participation in the women’s movements, Mary Lou Williams and Ella Fitzgerald still operated as women who dominated within the patriarchal system.

Ella Fitzgerald, born in 1917, though affected a great deal by misogyny and controlling men, did not participate in the women’s movement. Part of the lower socio-economic class and only moved off the streets when she went to be a vocalist for the Chick Webb Orchestra, Ella did not have exposure to political women’s movements. Women’s issues were not a concern for Ella as she was mostly consumed by her career and the singing business. She did not have much time to become politically active outside of her musical life.

Mary Lou Williams, born in 1910, was more affected by race issues than she was by gender issues in the jazz world, which she often argued, did not exist.1 Even though Mary Lou was a woman, she was an expert at her instrument (the piano) and whatever she apparently ‘lacked’ for not being a man she made up for on the

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bandstand. Her musical ability allowed her to gain the respect of many men, both inside and outside of the jazz community. Because of this, the difficulties of being a woman were somewhat lost on Mary Lou. Rather, Mary Lou focused on the plight of her race and mourned the loss of the jazz heritage, and even later in her career tried to educate young blacks of the next generation about their jazz heritage. Mary Lou’s concerns and activities were noble, but were based on her preoccupation with race rather than her preoccupation with her plight as a woman.²

Despite Ella Fitzgerald’s and Mary Lou Williams’s lack of participation in the gender movements of the twentieth century, it will still prove beneficial to consider them through a feminist lens. In using the false cultural notion that men are superior to women, men would often “keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power.”³ Yet both Mary Lou and Ella rose above the cultural stereotype for women and together gained economic and social power. By simply being strong female figures in the world of jazz, Mary Lou and Ella infiltrated the patriarchal society of music and established a female discourse. In the lifestyle choices Mary Lou and Ella made, these women were able to live and operate as women in a man’s world separate from the white women’s movement taking place in the greater area of culture.

The feminist movement stands as one of the most influential movements of the twentieth century. Feminism addressed not only the lack of equality between men

and women but also the imbalance of power. Attempting to serve communities of women across France, Britain, and the United States, the feminist movement began as a campaign for suffrage rights and continued to grow into a movement that eventually embraced ideas such as equal pay, “sisterhood,” and an overall broader view of feminism. Unfortunately, in its early stages, feminism was a movement exclusively for white, middle-class women, leaving women of lower socio-economic statuses and other races out of the picture of equality. Many critics believe racism and sexism to be inseparable issues and believe the white feminists to be at fault for even attempting to separate the two.4

Sadly, “much of feminist philosophy remains conceptually white-centered and Eurocentric, and most feminist philosophers are white.”5 While the official feminist movement afforded neither Ella Fitzgerald nor Mary Lou Williams with a political group with whom they could associate, the feminist movement did produce ideologies and concepts that may still be applied within the discourse of black women in jazz.

To further the conversation of feminism, it is important to begin with an understanding of gender and to realize the difference between gender and sex. Sex, according to Claire Colebrook, is a natural state—one determines the sex according to means of reproduction.6 Gender is culturally constructed. An individual’s gender identity “is the result of social and historical forces,”7 therefore many argue that the differences between men and women are not biological, but rather arise “from deeply

5 Ibid., 261.
6 Claire Colebrook, Gender (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2004), 9.
7 Peta Bowden and Jane Mummery, Understanding Feminism (Trowbridge: Acumen, 2009), 84.
embedded social practices and traditions.\footnote{Ibid., 97.} Derived from the culture’s ideology of gender, then, come prescribed and socially constructed, traditional gender roles—the duties women (or men) must fulfill in order to be fully identified with their appropriate gender. These traditional gender roles show men as “rational, strong, protective, and decisive” whereas they present women as “emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive.”\footnote{Lois Tyson, \textit{Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide} (New York: Routledge, 2006), 85.} Dorothy Marcic presents an example of these prescribed gender roles in her book \textit{Respect: Women and Popular Music}. According to a Gallup poll taken in 1932, 82 percent of the United States population believed that if a woman’s husband was employed, she should not work.\footnote{Dorothy Marcic, \textit{Respect: Women and Popular Music} (New York: Texere, 2002), 29.} Culture predetermined that married women were ineligible for work; therefore, businesses and institutions of employment made it difficult for women to find work. Marcic continues to describe women during that era as they were “pushed out of the economy” to make room for men, unable to earn the same wages as their male colleagues, and suffering at the hands of discrimination.\footnote{Ibid., 29.}

The largest detriment to women concerning these gender roles is the way society uses them to validate inequality.\footnote{Lois Tyson, \textit{Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide} (New York: Routledge, 2006), 85.} These traditional gender roles are now so ingrained in culture that many men and women accept them without questioning their legitimacy. Men must win the bread and butter and women must stay home with the children to raise the family and protect them from the harshness of the outside world. However, according to June Hannam, there is an escape from the trap of traditional
gender roles. Hannam sees this idea of gender roles as central to feminist ideology, emphasizing a need to see that “women’s conditions[s] are socially constructed, and therefore open to change.”

It is the specific women who attempt to challenge these socially constructed gender roles that present a model for the rest of the community of women to follow. These women must be elevated and remembered in history in order for the movement, feminism, and equality to progress.

Ella Fitzgerald and Mary Lou Williams were affected by these cultural conceptions of gender roles, but rose above them. For Mary Lou in particular, she often had to legitimize her place on the bandstand through a demonstration of her musical ability. Simply because she was a woman, the men in her field did not expect her to have abilities equivalent to that of a man. The culturally appropriate place for Mary Lou was not on the bandstand, but rather in the home. Mary Lou broke the culturally appropriate gender roles by pursuing her music rather than motherhood.

In addition to the complexity of traditional gender roles, the separation of social spheres and the restriction to the private sphere created further difficulties for women. This idea stems from the nineteenth century. Hannam notes that this idea of spheres furtherted the concept of gender roles, assigning to both men and women tasks culturally appropriate to biological differences. This ideology determined that men belonged in the public sphere, where work and business transactions took place. Conversely, women belonged in the private sphere, raising the children and

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14 Ibid., 24.
participating in “emotion, nurturing, and passive” activities. This spherical concept becomes difficult to maintain when it arbitrarily assigns men and women specific roles. Eventually, groups of individuals become discontent with the expectations that culture provides for them. In the case of women, confinement to the private sphere and discrimination in the workplace led to an eventual gathering of a group of women with the intent to express their need for equal treatment, a gathering that hoped to prompt a sense of sisterhood.

A sense of sisterhood is integral to the success of the women’s movement because it successfully binds people of like minds and allows for the common interest to be heard. In order to successfully promote ideologies a group must stand together on the issues at hand—for such a group of women, the word “sisterhood” serves as a useful term. For women in particular, this binding together is essential—women, unlike other subjugated groups such as classes or races, do not have a shared, consolidated culture nor do they have a shared, consolidated history. So for women in the twentieth century, sisterhood proved difficult to attain. Not only were many women operating under the hands of their husbands or family members and subsequently leaving a shaky foundation for a sense of sisterhood, but many women were also influenced by factors outside of the women’s movement such as class, religion, and race. These outside factors created even more barriers for common bonding. As Tyson points out, “white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists [...]”

15 Ibid., 29.
18 Ibid., 35.
have always held the most visible portions of leadership in women’s movements in America."19 Because white women and black women did not share social interests, sisterhood became less important, widening the gap between the two groups of women.

As black women were excluded from the sisterhood of white middle-class feminists, Ella Fitzgerald and Mary Lou Williams lacked the benefit of the voice of a community. Rather, they were left on their own to develop as women without the aid of an organized women’s movement. Yet while they may have been somewhat alone as women, they were not completely alone as musicians; I will later examine the importance of the community of jazz musicians.

However, at the same time these political gender movements were taking place, a lot was also congruently happening in the music world. Jazz and swing took off during this time, becoming the dominant form of music for a number of decades. Jazz not only provided the United States with its own musical style, but it also provided a voice for the black community.

Jazz is a very American art form in that its creation has its roots in the United States, and its development occurred in the United States. Jazz, according to William Banfield, is an “urban American music form” connected with “Western European harmonic developments.”20 Jazz is not a music that came straight from Africa and planted itself in American tradition. Mary Lou Williams points out “I don’t really like

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the idea of relating jazz to Africa because jazz was not created in Africa […] and has nothing to do with African music.” Jazz grew as an African American art form directly rooted in the traditions and cultures of the United States. Therefore, jazz may offer special insight into the unique plight of American black women.

Further, jazz “grew directly from [b]lack inquiry, need, and experimentation,” making it an art form perfect for black expression, but jazz also experienced the influence of many more communities of people such as African American, Western European, and African. Jazz grew out of the blues, whose origins led all the way back to Africa, the Southern United States, and the black sharecropper experience. Despite widespread racism in spheres musical or otherwise, jazz music belonged to blacks. A great community developed from the jazz movement, where ideas were exchanged freely from band to band and even across race lines. Gigging and jamming together led to an overflow of ideas for improvisation and soloing, resulting in a very fluid form of music that changed constantly, but that fostered a great sense of community that brought together many musicians on many different occasions. This community among jazz musicians mirrors the ‘sisterhood’ of the women’s movements.

In its early years, jazz was a music of mobility, many bands touring through the southern states. As the bands toured, the musicians were granted mobility and

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22 Ibid., 124.
publicity, bringing many artists into the spotlight that might not otherwise have been noticed. Through the mobility and a myriad of other factors, jazz served as a form of empowerment for blacks, as it “allowed [b]lack accomplishment to be exported internationally.” Many bands not only toured in the south but also embarked on European tours, bringing the music of the United States to countries such as England, France, and Germany, and Italy. The beauty of the development of jazz comes from its incorporation of many different people groups throughout the history of its evolution. Marian McPartland sees this beauty, “all of us—whether we are BLACK, white, male, FEMALE, European, or American—have added our particular contributions to the music. Each of us is an individual—unique, different—and thus we draw musical ideas from our own personal environment.” Black females have a particular place in the development of this unique form of music, and it is with both the origin and nature of jazz and the feminist lens in mind that we approach our first woman of study: Ella Fitzgerald.

Ella Fitzgerald was a black female jazz musician who received a lot of honor and gained economic power not previously afforded to women, and especially not black women. Her career proved extremely successful 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. Figure 1 relays a review of Ella’s singing given by

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Variety, noting her “effortless” skill and incomparable interpretations of specific tunes.\textsuperscript{27}

However, Ella did not begin successful. As a young teenage girl, Ella was living on the streets of New York City, and only found reprieve by participating in amateur nights held at many clubs in New York at that time. The Apollo Theater

\textsuperscript{27} Ron Fritts and Ken Vail, \textit{Ella Fitzgerald: The Chick Webb Years & Beyond} (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 37.
Amateur Night in particular landed Ella her big break with the Chick Webb band. Taking first prize, she made a reputation for herself on the streets as a singer, such that when Charles Linton had to find another singer for Chick Webb’s band, he was directed to Ella.\textsuperscript{28} This was a “landmark event” for Webb—Ella joining his band gave Chick Webb the success and fame he always sought, but could never obtain.\textsuperscript{29} It was Ella’s voice and musical ability that essentially moved her from a place of destitution to a place of privilege in a man’s world. Ella empowered herself through her raw musical talent.\textsuperscript{30} Ella Fitzgerald caused Chick Webb’s band to rise to a place of popularity and fame (Figure 2)\textsuperscript{31}, and soon Ella was “included on almost every number that Webb performed, live and on record.”\textsuperscript{32}


\textsuperscript{29} Norman David, \textit{The Ella Fitzgerald Companion}, (Westport: Praeger, 20014), 71.


\textsuperscript{31} Ron Fritts and Ken Vail, \textit{Ella Fitzgerald: The Chick Webb Years & Beyond} (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 45

\textsuperscript{32} Norman David, \textit{The Ella Fitzgerald Companion}, (Westport: Praeger, 20014), 72.
However, it is also important to note that while Ella may have empowered herself through her musical ability, she was still victim to patriarchal standards of appearance, standards that “continually exerts [sic.] forces that undermine women’s self-confidence and assertiveness.” At first, Chick Webb was unwilling to even hire Ella as a singer, not because he thought she lacked quality as a musician, but because he “didn’t like her physical appearance at all.” In order to sing onstage, women were expected to look a particular way: appearance and voice were equally important. As a “link” between the listeners and the musicians onstage, the vocalist had to look “appealing according to her type,” whether that meant sexy, innocent, or in a floor-length ball gown. Ella Fitzgerald, however, did not have the benefit of a stellar appearance when she first joined Chick Webb’s band. Fresh off the streets, Ella’s appearance was one of her biggest obstacles because “she didn’t have the standard good looks of a singing diva.”

Even though she was a phenomenal musician, much of the music she sang afforded her commercial success at the expense of respect within the greater advancing jazz community. Many of the songs Ella sang, in fact, held up traditional gender roles as an ideal, the lyrics of her commercial songs elevated the male, bemoaned the loss of a man, and taught women to cope with being alone. This commercialism may stem from Ella’s position as female vocalist with the band—

36 Ibid., 122.
38 Ibid., 33, 57.
often vocalists were used to simply “strengthen a band’s commercial appeal.” It can be said that Ella Fitzgerald focused more on success than on progressive musicianship. Yet it was this economic success that sets her apart from other women of her day. Towards the end of her career, the use of her voice in an advertisement earned her as much as $500,000. In a day when the “average woman band singer […] received less pay per week than the average band instrumentalists,” Ella’s economic success stands out as a phenomenal achievement.

After the Chick Webb Band dispersed, Ella Fitzgerald became leader of “Ella Fitzgerald’s Famous Orchestra” in name only (leaving another band member to handle the actual managing, booking, and finances) (Figure 3). This may have seemed like the perfect opportunity to take over arrangements and tunes, but she chose not to. Ella’s prowess as a black female musician stems mainly from her singing ability, yet she expressed some interest in composing when the song had a personal affiliation. Ella’s compositional creativity can be seen through the production of one particular number through Chick Webb’s Orchestra.

Ella Fitzgerald was mainly responsible for the writing and recording of “A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” a major tune associated not only with the Chick Webb Orchestra, but with Ella herself. A nursery rhyme that Ella was partial to, she worked with arranger Van Alexander to pull together a piece for Chick Webb’s band and her on vocals. “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” was so successful on the radio that it soon became a standard tune performed while the Orchestra was on tour. “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” was an innocent song that incorporated participation not just from Ella as the vocalist, but from the entire band, as a little girl who lost her yellow basket asks where it could have gone (Examples 1-2). “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” became a public favorite, and afforded Ella Fitzgerald a lot of recognition as a vocalist. She continued to perform the tune for the remainder of her career, and despite being “dated” she continued to give it fresh interpretation, making the audience fall in love with the tune time and time again (Figure 1).

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43 Ibid., 78.
44 Ibid., 79.
Ella’s place in the Chick Webb band trumped that of stereotypical female jazz singers. While oftentimes the woman singer was “the lone woman in the band, conspicuous in her party clothes against a field of serious, suited males,” Webb afforded Ella the spotlight, making Ella a prominent part of the band, a very unusual move for Webb but one that ended up being pivotal in shaping Ella’s career. Oftentimes people preferred Ella over other performers. For instance, after

Example 1

Example 2

\[\text{Example 1}\]

\[\text{Example 2}\]
performing at the Newport Jazz Festival, many of the attendees were unhappy because Louis Armstrong stole the show. Critics complained because there was “too much Louis [and] not enough Ella.”

Contrary to Ella Fitzgerald, Mary Lou Williams sits as a black female figure in jazz who often worked against the patriarchal system by never ceasing to excel and create during her career. While this oftentimes spelled out financial disaster, it also granted her a position as one of the most prolific jazz pianists, arrangers, and composers. Mary Lou Williams’ life not only displays her open concern for people of her own race, but also the dominant role gender issues played during her life.

Mary Lou was privy to many race issues throughout her life and time as a jazz pianist. Race and gender combined to make life as a composer difficult for Mary Lou. Not only was Mary Lou Williams a woman, but she was a black woman, and black women in the first part of the twentieth century were not afforded many rights. Critics had a difficult time responding to Mary Lou’s music and classifying her as legitimate. While working for and touring with Andy Kirk’s band, the Clouds of Joy, Mary experienced first-hand the difficulties of segregation. Travelling even to a ‘northern’ city such as Kansas City, the effects of segregation remained rampant; even musicians’ unions were segregated. Luckily for Andy Kirk and the band, this did not prevent them from performing at many different venues. Conversely, later in her career, Mary Lou worked at Café Society Downtown, a club in New York City.

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48 Ibid., 69.
that practiced full integration and treated blacks and whites equally.\textsuperscript{49} Both blacks and whites performed and both blacks and whites attended the club as patrons. In addition to working at the Café Society Downtown, an establishment that practiced integration, Mary volunteered her time playing benefits for the NAACP as well as for the Committee for the Negro in the Arts.\textsuperscript{50}

Race continued to be at the forefront of Mary’s concerns, especially during the 1960s when widespread violence and Civil Rights became true realities. Mary herself never practiced segregation, associating herself with both whites and blacks, finding friends of both races and serving as a bridge to the two communities. Yet her greatest burden with race dealt with people in her own black community. In the circle of jazz musicians especially, Mary was privy and witness to the rampant abuse of illegal drugs, namely heroin. She saw many wasted talents as the musicians sunk deeper into addictions. In the time after her conversion to Catholicism, Mary took the abuse to heart and established the Bel Canto Foundation to help struggling musicians. The Bel Canto Foundation helped rehabilitate both male and female musicians addicted to illegal drugs.\textsuperscript{51} Funding the project through a thrift store she owned and operated as well as through performances, Mary Lou wanted to help the artists of her own race return to their full potential. These actions reveal a preoccupation with race concerns rather than with her plight as a woman.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 80
Despite Mary Lou Williams’ personal focus of bringing blacks back to a realization of jazz, the woman question remains central to her life. And even though Mary Lou rejected the idea that she suffered discrimination because of her gender, it is essential to realize this was not completely accurate and that in being a woman she was viewed differently by her colleagues. Mary reportedly claimed that “No one ever rejected [her] or [her] music” because of her gender, yet a closer look at her life will reveal this was not the case.\textsuperscript{52} Women players were rarely hired by men to be in the bands. The women who were hired tended to be singers, a pretty face used solely for marketing purposes and a stereotype Mary Lou definitely did not fit.\textsuperscript{53} In addition, sadly, one of the only ways for a woman to get ahead in show business in the first part of the twentieth century was for her to be married to a musician of a prestigious band. Therefore, in order for a woman to be an instrumentalist and infiltrate the fraternity of jazz players, she had to be not only an excellent musician, but also had to have a die-hard attitude and the ability to navigate through the social obligations and difficulties of being a member in a band.\textsuperscript{54}

Even in Mary’s earliest years when she was working for the show Hits n’ Bits, Mary proved herself to be a trendsetter for women. At a time when many women were not a part of traveling acts, Mary Lou participated in the act and did so while

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 80.
looking the part of a woman.\textsuperscript{55} Many times women would dress up like men while onstage so as to make the audience more accepting to the idea of a woman onstage. Yet Mary Lou wore dresses onstage and her presence as a woman drew a bigger crowd than ever before.\textsuperscript{56} Mary Lou represented and asserted herself as a woman rather than a man both on and off the bandstand as she, perhaps unintentionally, pushed cultural expectations and limits.

Yet for all her dressing as a woman, Mary Lou Williams’ playing was rarely considered womanly in her playing. Many times Mary Lou Williams’ playing is likened to that of a man’s.\textsuperscript{57} Mary Lou herself claimed that she “got her reputation” from playing like a man.\textsuperscript{58} She furthered this idea in saying “You’ve got to play, that’s all. They don’t think of you as a woman if you can really play.”\textsuperscript{59} She received praise for her style of ‘playing like a man,’ Mary Lou remembering “When I started playing, the house would go in an uproar, because although I was so tiny, I was playing heavy like a man.”\textsuperscript{60} And in a world where playing strongly was everything, it happened that all successful women jazz pianists “played like men.”\textsuperscript{61} However, Mary Lou’s “playing like a man,” according to Linda Dahl, “laid bare […] the whole dilemma for women artists who must perform not as women but as men in order to be

\textsuperscript{55} Linda Dahl, \textit{Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams}, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 49.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{58} Roland Baggenaes, \textit{Jazz Greats Speak: Interviews with Master Musicians}, (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2000), 47.
\textsuperscript{60} Antoinette D. Handy and Mary Lou Williams, “First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard,” \textit{the Black Perspective in Music} 8, no. 2 (Autumn 1980): 200.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 204.
taken seriously.”

Even when considering the musicianship of the individual, male superiority rears its head—it was not enough for Mary Lou Williams to be a woman and “play like herself” as Sharon Pease notes; rather she had to be compared to a man, a more pleasing analogy to many of Mary Lou’s colleagues. Because playing like a woman gathered negative connotations ‘playing like a man’ simply became a term for good, strong playing. If people referred to Mary Lou as ‘playing like a woman,’ the term was manufactured as such that it would not give a clear or accurate representation of her playing style.

More than just her playing, however, simply being a part of the band and taking her seat on the bandstand often caused men to have a negative reaction. Her former husband, John Williams relates the account of when he first encountered Mary at the piano and his preconceived notions of having a woman play with the band. He reports being “disgusted” and truly believing that “women really couldn’t handle it at the time.” He was surprised by Mary’s skill, though, saying that she “outplayed any piano player” he’d ever played with. Mary often received this reaction from her male colleagues; many men would stereotype her before hearing her play and believe her inadequate a player simply because she was a woman. It would require Mary proving herself at the keyboard before the men in the band would accept her. And even after she had proven her talent, many male musicians were often upset because she was a woman, Delilah Jackson saying “[Men] didn’t want women to be in the band.”

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63 Ibid., 77.
64 Ibid., 44.
65 Ibid., 44.
band and the musicians would get really upset; seemed like the musicians were jealous. Mary Lou had to employ her talent not just on piano, but also as arranger and composer in order to prove herself ‘worthy’ before the male-dominated subculture of jazz.

Despite the discrimination against her because of her gender, Mary persevered and turned her career into a very productive and pervasive one that provided headway for women and blacks alike. Mary was the first black woman to join the ASCAP corporation (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) and started her own music publishing company (Mary Records—the oldest label owned by a black artist). Mary Lou Williams was also influential in organizing a jazz festival in Pittsburgh—an event where Mary’s innovation really shined as she was the first black woman to produce a jazz festival. It was furthermore the first instance of a commissioning for sacred music for a jazz festival and it was the first time the Catholic Church was involved in such an endeavor. All of these accomplishments, however, only increase Mary Lou’s remarkability as she was also the first person to promote spiritual jazz.

After converting to Roman Catholicism in 1956, Mary Lou changed both her lifestyle and her music. The nightlife that Mary had previously lived no longer

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66 Ibid., 80.
interested her and her life became more pious and self-contained. Mary Lou saw religion as an essential and necessary part of being a jazz musician, saying “God has quite a bit to do with jazz.” According to Mary Lou, jazz is an art form given to black Americans to work through the struggles of race. Yet even beyond that, Mary Lou saw jazz as an art form not just for the black American, but a gift to everyone from God to show His love—everyone plays jazz and can participate in the art.

Mary Lou’s Mass in particular stands as her most important work, a fluid combination of the traditional mass form and liturgical text in the jazz idiom. Incorporating texts from the Votive Mass for Peace and the Ordinary of the Mass, Mary “draws upon elements of both services that hold a particular meaning for her.”

Mary Lou’s Mass continued to be an important composition for the remainder of Mary Lou’s career, being adapted for many different choirs and capabilities. In Examples 3-5, the jazz idiom is clearly evident through instrumentation and syncopated rhythms. The use of guitar, bass, and drums indicate a group unaccustomed to being heard accompany masses. In addition, the drum player is instructed to use “brushes” and then lays down a groovy pattern that bears no relation to a typical mass structure. Meanwhile, the horn, while not directly being left room for improvisation (a key aspect of jazz), is given the instruction to play “very freely—

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72 Ibid., 45.
73 Ibid., 45.
75 Ibid., 388.
76 Ibid., 389-391.
quasi ad lib” giving the horn player more freedom than he would have in other styles of music.
Ella Fitzgerald and Mary Lou Williams both expanded their identity as women in the jazz community without the aid of an organized women’s movement. Although they were unable to participate in the ‘sisterhood’ of a feminism designed for white middle-class women, they achieved many of the similar goals of feminism by breaking out of the public sphere into the private sphere, by challenging traditional gender roles in their careers, and by achieving social and economic success with their music. Even though these achievements might not have been conscious acts against patriarchy, they remain as significant accomplishments as such in the lives of these women.

Oftentimes women are prevented from branching out into fields previously not penetrated by females because of an absence of proper female role models. Especially for women in jazz, the “dangerous atmosphere,” the “lack of encouragement,” and the “male reluctance to take women seriously as musicians” all matched with the absence of proper female role models in the field has led to a lack of women able to participate “fully and equally in jazz.” Yet Ella Fitzgerald and Mary Lou Williams serve as proper female role models, displaying the power that can be gained through art.

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