

Are We Being Heard?: Reflections on being a “woman in jazz”

Author

Denson, Louise

Published

2010

Journal Title

Music forum

Rights statement

© 2010 Music Council of Australia. This is the author-manuscript version of this paper. Reproduced in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher. Please refer to the journal's website for access to the definitive, published version.

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/40725>

Link to published version

<http://musicforum.org.au/backIssues/>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

Are We Being Heard?

Reflections on being a “woman in jazz”....

In 1999 I moved from Montreal, Canada to the other side of the world - Brisbane, Australia, to take up a lecturing position in Jazz Studies at the Queensland Conservatorium. I was delighted to discover that the jazz bass tutor was a woman, Helen Russell, and not only was she a fine musician, she was the first call player on the scene with an impressive resume and a solid reputation. This was something new, something unexpected, encouraging and exciting - a woman playing a not-traditionally-female instrument, making her living from it, functioning on the professional music scene without any apparent barriers. It was a breath of fresh air!

Brisbane's most promising young jazz composer/arranger - still a student at the time - was a young trumpet player named Laura Kahle, now based in New York City, but there were not many other woman jazz instrumentalists on the scene. However I soon started to hear, and hear about, Melbourne and Sydney musicians such as bassists Belinda Moody and Anita Hustas, pianists Cathy Harley, Judy Bailey, Jane Rutherford and Andrea Keller, saxophonists Sandy Evans, Gai Bryant and Fiona Burnett. Notable Australian women jazz musicians outnumbered their Canadian counterparts by a wide margin and it seemed to me that the prospects for women jazz musicians in Australia must be relatively promising. Certainly the here and now of Australian jazz was radically different from the time-honored story of “America's classical music” which I knew well from years of reading and listening.

When I first started listening to jazz and falling into intense fascination with it, I would go to the public library in Regina, Saskatchewan, and take out armloads of records. Some of the names I recognized because they had been recommended to me by other musicians and jazz aficionados, and some I didn't. I wanted to know who everyone was, what they sounded like, why they were famous, why their music was so well-loved or so controversial, and whether or not I liked it.

I would also bring home books by the famous, classic jazz photographers, full of striking, soulful images of the music's greatest artists in full flight. John Coltrane, eyes closed, lost in spiritual meditation. Dizzy Gillespie, cheeks puffed out, a look of feigned surprise at the dazzling idea he's just played. Fats Waller, eyes twinkling, hamming for the camera. The emotion, the intensity, the commitment, the artistry and the beauty of it all: I was drawn by the powerful romance of the jazz underworld as strongly as I was drawn by the music itself.

I started reading about the history of jazz, how Dixieland morphed into big band swing, which was rejected by a generation of young firebrands who developed bebop, which morphed into hard bop with its various sub styles, and so on up to the state of play at the time of the books' publication. These histories were principally the stories of great men, men who moved the music forward, who in many cases triumphed over extreme adversity to rise to the peak of their profession. A few women's names were occasionally mentioned: Lil Hardin Armstrong who played piano in Louis Armstrong's Hot Five; Mary Lou Williams who played piano in Andy Kirk's 12 Clouds of Joy. And of course there was one all-women swing band during WWII, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, established because so many men had been drafted and sent overseas to fight. The only women jazz musicians who were written about at any length were singers: Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald....I didn't see me anywhere.

But strangely, although I was a pianist and had a reasonably raised feminist consciousness, it did not occur to me at the time to question the almost complete absence of women instrumentalists in these photo journals and narratives. But the eventual discovery of two important histories of women in jazz, *Stormy weather* (Dahl, 1984) and *Jazzwomen: 1900 to the present* (Placksin, 1982) made me finally realize that perhaps I wasn't being shown the whole picture. There always had been women instrumentalists in jazz, and some very good ones: but Placksin and Dahl recorded stories of overt discrimination, denied opportunities, ghettoization into all-women groups, lack of access to agents, managers, venues, recording studios and media, and harsh, sexist treatment in articles and reviews. They also told stories of courage and determination, of friendship and sharing, humility and good humor. Some women gave up playing out of frustration and bitterness, or to raise families, but many had such a strong love of the music that they kept playing no matter what.

This was 25 years ago. In the last ten years, the prevailing jazz narrative with its overwhelming focus on black American men and the mythology which surrounds them is being challenged by scholars in various fields. The Afro-American roots of the music are irrefutable, as are the contributions of such monumental musicians as Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and John Coltrane. But these iconic narratives have never told the whole story, and with jazz being practiced in every corner of the globe in the modern day, this is now more true than ever.

Women have become slightly more visible in the narrative and the discussion as the study of jazz as a socio-cultural phenomenon has gathered momentum. American researcher Sherrie Tucker has made an enormous contribution to the literature with her book *Swing shift: "All-girl" bands of the 1940s* (2000) in which it is revealed that The International Sweethearts of Rhythm were only the best known of hundreds of all-women bands which criss-crossed America in the 1930s and 40s, playing the same venues as the all-male bands. The publication of *Big ears: Listening for gender in jazz studies* (2008) is a landmark - a collection of essays dealing exclusively with the question of women in jazz.

But are women becoming more visible on the scene? And is it becoming easier for a woman to succeed as a jazz musician? What sorts of barriers are in her way?

After I completed my undergraduate jazz degree, I moved to Montreal, Quebec, reputed to be a "good" city for jazz. Montreal in the 1990s was already much more open to women instrumentalists than what had been described in Placksin and Dahl. We weren't numerous, but we were present on the scene, occasionally attending the Monday night jam session at Biddles Jazz and Ribs, and gigging in local night spots. There were two other pianists, two excellent saxophonists and one less excellent, a very promising bassist who soon moved to New York, and numerous singers in my immediate professional and social circle. I formed the first incarnation of the Louise Denson Group (LDG), and we worked on and off, in between money gigs, which for me were with salsa and merengue orchestras. (In the latin world there was also a lead trumpet player - the only trumpet player I met on that circuit who did not complain about her lip, and a percussionist). In the last half of the '90s, I formed a latin jazz quintet, A Comer!, which did both money gigs and art gigs: we teamed up with a singer to do salsa parties, but our artistic interest lay in exploring the marriage between Afro-Cuban rhythms and jazz, which opened the door to a number of festival and concert gigs for us.

I was typical of the other women jazz instrumentalists I knew in that we all ran our own groups. In fact, it finally dawned on me that with very few exceptions, women always

appeared with their own groups, and not as members of groups headed by male instrumentalists. The experience of hiring male sidemen and never having the favour returned is one which is described repeatedly in both *Madame Jazz* (Gourse, 1995) and *Jazzwomen* (Enstice & Stockhouse, 2005), both more recent collections of interviews and portraits of women in jazz. This is part of what innovative saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom, among many others, describes as “covert discrimination.” She says, “It’s not *spoken*. That’s what’s so insidious about it. It’s the phone calls that you *don’t* get” (Enstice & Stockhouse, 2005, p. 9).

I also played for a few years in a group which was all women except for the drummer, Lezimpoly (“The Impolites”). It was the drummer’s project, a jazz-fusion outfit with two keyboards, which he put together for both musical (we played his tunes), and marketing reasons (the novelty factor). We were all happy to have the work, and for me these were some of the first jazz gigs I did in Montreal. But like so many other women in jazz, I was ambivalent about being in a group with other women just because we were women. This theme recurs throughout contemporary literature on women in jazz: we want to play with other musicians for musical reasons, not because because we are female, or blonde or brunette, or short or tall. In the end, Lezimpoly never did gel as a unit since our musical affinities were really too disparate.

My years in Montreal were professionally formative and important. I played hundreds of gigs, from community parties to the Montreal International Jazz Festival, I discovered and became quite proficient at Afro-Cuban, Haitian and Brazilian music, and I learned to speak Spanish along the way. I gained experience writing arrangements and transcriptions, directing and rehearsing bands, I memorized hundreds of tunes and arrangements.

By the time I left Montreal there were at least two more young women studying saxophone in the jazz program at McGill and gigging on the latin scene, and there was a very good pianist who eventually opted for the Hammond B3. And Christine Jensen, sister of internationally renowned trumpeter Ingrid Jensen, was planning her highly acclaimed big band tribute to Wayne Shorter, *A Shorter distance*.

To a large extent the barriers women faced were the same ones that all jazz musicians faced in Montreal (and elsewhere): few venues and stiff competition for gigs, competition for the entertainment dollar, a public which was reluctant to pay a cover to hear live music, (and which perhaps understandably preferred to stay home on cold winter nights than to make the trip out to a jazz club), and terrible pay. Jazz musicians in Montreal lived on the fringes of an economy which was not functioning very well, and it was not uncommon for our friends to be literally penniless in the dead of winter. So it was hard work - jazz is always hard work! But for the women, while we were not shut out, we had to continually call attention to ourselves to make sure that we were heard - by venue owners and by our peers.

I am now half way through my twelfth year of lecturing in jazz studies at the Queensland Conservatorium, and the jazz scene in Brisbane has changed dramatically over the past decade, as has the city itself. When I arrived in 1999, there was one fortnightly jazz gig at a hotel in South Brisbane, and trad gigs every weekend at the Brisbane Jazz Club. Now, the Jazz Queensland gig guide lists multiple gigs every night of the week with new venues appearing regularly. There is a biennial Valley Jazz Festival, and an annual Brisbane Jazz Festival, as well as Jazz Sundays in the Spiegeltent as part of the annual Brisbane Festival. There are jazz residencies at the Brisbane Power House of the Arts and the

Judith Wright Centre, as well as regular student and professional concerts at the Con, the Queensland Centre for the Performing Arts and Jazzworx!

The “Con” has contributed in large measure to the evolution of the jazz scene by graduating a class of at least competent and at best really fine young players every year. They are keen to work and go about creating their own opportunities.

And where are the women? They are out there, being heard. There have been female graduates from the Jazz Studies program on every instrument in the past eleven years, with the exception of vibraphone, the latest addition to the suite of offerings. Upon graduation, some have gone overseas to continue their studies, some have gone into teaching, and some have changed professions or started families, leaving music to the side. But those who want to play can be heard in local venues holding their own with the blokes, playing jazz or more lucrative styles of popular music: Katie Dauth, Gemma Farrell, Kellee Green, Parmis Rose, Myka Wallace, Georgia Weber, Miranda Deutsch, Bec McLeay, Paula Girvan, Angela Gadd, Youka Snell....

From my perspective, it appears that at least the immediate local prospects for a young female jazz instrumentalist in Brisbane are not any better or worse than for a male one. Brisbane is a small pond, but many of the world’s greatest musicians have come from even smaller ponds, and feeling acceptance and respect from one’s colleagues goes a long way towards giving one the courage to try moving to a bigger pond. And it goes an equally long way for a young woman to look at what’s happening in the world of music around her and to be able to see herself.

Dahl, L. (1984). *Stormy Weather*. London: Quartet Books.

Enstice, W. & Stockhouse, J. (2004). *Jazzwomen: Conversations with twenty-one musicians*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Gourse, Leslie. (1995). *Madame Jazz: Contemporary women instrumentalists*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Placksin, S. (1985) *Jazzwomen 1900 to the present: Their words, lives and music*. London: Pluto Press.

Rustin, N. & Tucker, S. (2008). *Big ears: Listening for gender in jazz studies*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Tucker, S. (2000). *Swing shift: “All-girl” bands of the 1940s*. Durham: Duke University Press.