

The Representation of Female Instrumentalists in the Jazz Canon

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Introduction

Asserting that women are excluded from the jazz canon, or the series of works and recordings commonly studied in jazz education, would be an inaccurate statement (Rustin and Tucker, 2008). In fact, female vocalists are represented widely in the classroom, with most textbooks discussing influential singers such as blues matriarch Bessie Smith, skilled vocalist Sarah Vaughan, and many others. However, female instrumentalists are often overlooked in the canon. If they are addressed, they are confined to "women in jazz" panels or treated as a unit "other" from their male counterparts.

In this work, we:

- Analyze the functions of the jazz canon itself, and how they may be related to the minimal representation of female instrumentalists.
- Transcribe and study noteworthy musical excerpts, and catalog important works composed by female instrumentalists.
- Review common study materials and list the female instrumentalists who are already noted; we also further suggest influential musicians to be included.
- Suggest real world adjustments to ameliorate this issue in jazz education today.

Methods

Analyzing the nature of the jazz canon: setting a biased precedent

Many of the instructional techniques utilized in jazz education programs fit a very institutionally-focused narrative. That is, the record of jazz history written by early jazz scholars and program founders is often told in a perspective that favors the institution as a catalyst for change in jazz history, inherently neglecting certain time periods and dismissing early traditions that came before the first jazz school in favor of its own "institutional narrative (Prouty)." It is safe to assert that the jazz canon's narrative is prone to biases of the specific educators who first "standardized" the instructional materials still used today.

Recordings and the jazz canon/ Biases in the recording industry

Much of the jazz canon is founded on recordings (Taylor, 2008). Those widely recognized as cornerstone records by jazz scholars are rightfully deemed so - however, with such an emphasis on recordings, female instrumentalists up until the 1980s are largely overlooked (Suzuki). For an artist to be recorded during the mid-20th century, especially as a group leader, the record label had to deem them "marketable." Many female instrumentalists confused label executives and were often rejected. This led to a lack of recordings from female instrumentalists, in turn setting them up for a degree of exclusion from the jazz canon.

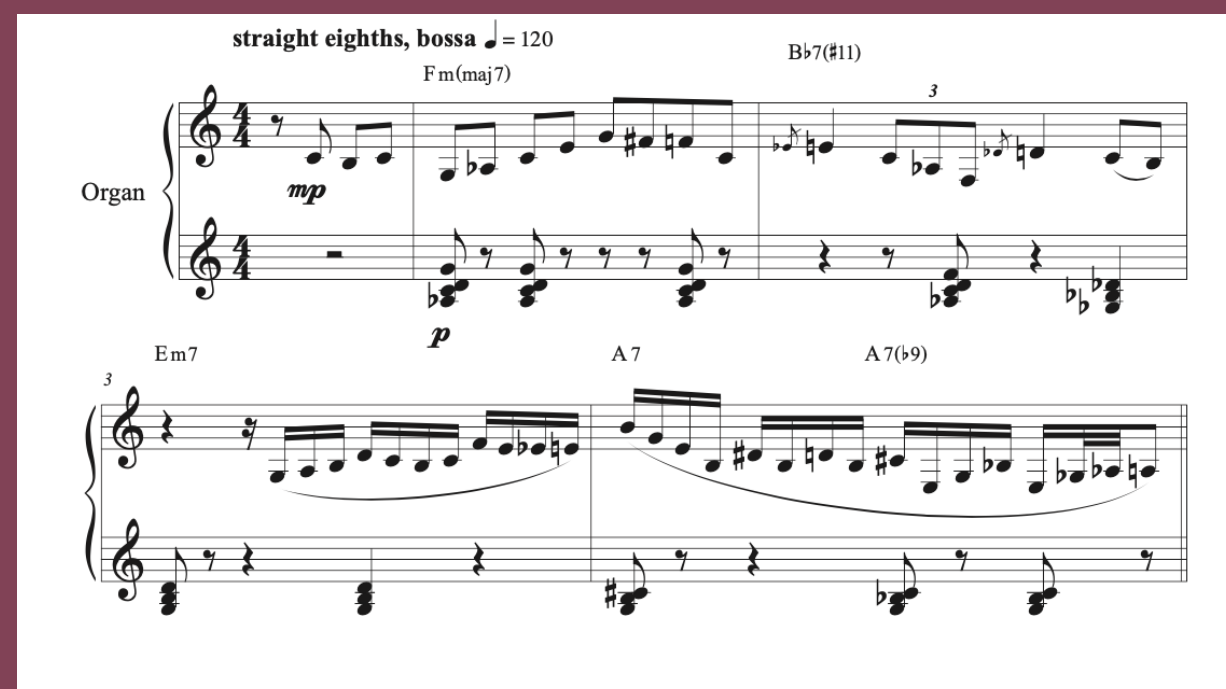


Figure 1, Shirley Scott's improvisation over "Corcovado" from *On a Clear Day*. (1:43-1:52)

In Figure 1, Scott utilizes the organ in a unique way, accompanying herself ("comping") on one keyboard and soloing on the other. This is a technique commonly heard from jazz pianists, but uncommon for an organist.

In addition, her bluesy, lyrical approach may be a precursor to the new jazz movement happening today, with many young musicians taking a soulful, funky approach to jazz. Scott's laid back, assertive feel here would make a great case study for students interested in the jazz of 2021, but in need of building block improvisatory language and knowledge of established jazz idioms.



Melba Liston and Her 'Bones' (1959).

While Liston often recorded as a sideman, she recorded only twice as a leader (National Endowment for the Arts). This record would make a fantastic case study for horn arranging, specifically for trombones. This is also a relatively unique concept for an album, with seven trombonists and a rhythm section making up the instrumentation.



Fig. 3.2. Ida Cox, accompanied by Lovie Austin, "Graveyard Dream Blues," fourth chorus, mm. 5-8. Chicago, October 1923.

Figure 3.2. Excerpt of Lovie Austin and Ida Cox, showcasing Austin's adept accompaniment style (Taylor, 2008). This early recording simultaneously takes influence from ragtime and stride piano styles while keeping the focus on the vocalist at all the right times. This recording is a great example of tasteful accompanying.

Discoveries: Important Women

Female Instrumentalists Currently Featured: Case Study

Overview of representation in three common jazz history textbooks today

Frank Tirro's *Jazz: A History*

Tirro includes important female jazz musicians, many of them vocalists, and a few of them instrumentalists. Notable instrumentalists include Mary Lou Williams, Lil Hardin and Lovie Austin. Other mentions of female instrumentalists include the International Sweethearts of Jazz big band; however, this group is confined to a "women in jazz" page and represents the majority of female instrumentalists in the book.

Mark Gridley's *Concise Guide to Jazz (5th edition)*

The only women mentioned in this book are vocalists.

Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz*

Women as a whole are incorporated into the text as opposed to confined to their own sections. The representation is more comprehensive than Tirro and Gridley's works.

Female Instrumentalists Often Left Out

- Vi Redd (saxophonist and vocalist)
 - often dismissed as a saxophonist because she also sang.
 - toured with the Dizzy Gillespie big band (sax) and worked as a sideman on many other recordings
- Melba Liston
 - Trombonist and arranger
 - In the 1940s, worked in the Count Basie big band and with Billie Holiday
 - Joined Dizzy's bebop big band in the '50s, started an all-female group in 1958, toured with Quincy Jones from 1959-1961 as one of two female players
- Important Musical Works (NPR)
 - Mary Lou Williams: *The Zodiac Suite (1945)*
 - her previous arrangements were written and recorded under the big band leader Andy Kirk's name
 - Leonard Feather's *Cats vs. Chicks: A Jazz Battle of the Sexes (1954)*
 - Culturally important record showcasing female instrumentalists as equally proficient musicians to their male peers

Today: Educators

- Esperanza Spalding (bass and vocals): Harvard University
- Terri Lynne Carrington (drums): Berklee College of Music
- Ingrid Jensen (trumpet): Manhattan School of Music
- Joanne Brackeen (piano) Berklee College of Music

Implications

Talented female instrumentalists have been a part of the jazz scene since the advent of the genre. However, due to biases of the recording industry, and therefore the jazz canon, they are easily mistaken as a "new" phenomenon. More female artists are attending jazz school today: this is a sign of the cultural progress. It is also a sign that the educational materials used today need to accurately reflect history. If we continue using a biased method, we set students up for a biased outlook and therefore a more unpleasant culture. In addition, refraining from further study of the female instrumentalists before us sends a message to students that these women are an anomaly. Maintaining the obscurity of these artists' names also sends a message to female students that they are somehow less entitled to the music, sometimes discouraging them from pursuing jazz at all. It should not be up to the female students to include themselves in a space closed off to them. In fact, conscious effort to question deeply rooted biases by those in leadership positions makes a difference in creating a more culturally accurate and inclusive space. Overall, discovering new artists is universally a learning experience for every musician- male, female, and non-binary- and should be treated as such. With the recordings these artists have produced, we encounter unlimited possibilities for inspiration and creativity otherwise hidden.

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